

Semiotics on music charts: The signification of late-blooming hits in contemporary popular music

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ABSTRACT

Eliseo Verón's approach to circulation focuses on the gap between production and recognition and the consideration of texts in relation to their contexts of production and consumption. In this paper, we employ Verón's concepts of *grammar of production* and *grammar of recognition* to examine popular songs that reached their peak of success several years after their release. Drawing our case studies from the Hot 100 American singles chart, we combine social semiotics and semiotics of popular music to examine the contexts of the initial songs' release and their eventual commercial peak while considering changes in the media ecology and how these songs re-entered popular culture. The corpus of songs examined is split into three major categories: Songs that re-entered popular culture after their performer's passing, recurring Christmas-themed songs, and hits featuring in audiovisual productions like films and television series.

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Introduction

In 2022, *The Atlantic* published an article on songs released more than 18 months ago, representing 70 percent of the U.S. music market, while the demand for 'new' songs was shrinking. The article's central claim was that popular culture, which usually focuses on 'what's happening right now,' shifted towards older material. In 2021, the 200 most popular new tracks

accounted for less than 5% of total streams, with the rate being two times higher in 2018 (Gioia 2022, Inside Radio 2022). Another article in *The Economist* (2021) argued that the rise of streaming in recent years made the Billboard Christmas charts redundant as it would be easier nowadays for many songs to enter the Hot 100 singles chart. This means that research focusing on ‘living’ or ‘re-living’ the musical past could provide valuable insights into how society and the popular music industry operate nowadays.

Over the years, different disciplines have tried to demystify the subject of popular music utilizing diverse approaches. Semiotics broached the subject only recently, mainly through critical discourse analysis and social semiotics (McKerrell and Way 2017:1). The need for using popular music as raw research data has been long discussed among researchers; Dunbar-Hall (1991:13) has pointed out that popular music suffers from the lack of musical analysis, and a method to carry it out. Through its development as two broad streams covering an analytical and an interpretative approach, semiotics can be considered both a method and a model to solve emerging problems (ibid).

Especially for younger generations, old songs are memory conduits that allow them to access music periods they do not have first-hand experience with, while for older people, they’re a way to relive their formative years. For the recording industry, however, such songs mainly target the latter, more affluent groups (Bennett 2009, Holbrook and Schindler 1989, Van der Hoeven 2014). In all cases, we need to consider Pickering and Keightley’s suggestion that audiences do not engage with the past passively but through various forms of meaning-making processes (2006: 933). Eliseo Verón applied this idea to media studies, while subsequent studies have also utilized his methodology in marketing and film studies (e.g., Kotler 1987, Triquell 2000, Verón 1992, Verón 2014).

1. Literature review

Nostalgia has been generally related to homesickness, while in popular music, it is often associated with a feeling of loss in the face of a society that favors the present over the past (Grainge 2000, Pickering and Keightley 2006, Sedikides et al. 2008:304, Van der Hoeven 2014:318). Nostalgia in music has been extensively researched, usually in psychology and literary studies. In semiotics, Hakanen (1998:97) stressed the need to study “the structural meanings of the charts per se.” Communication scholars have used music charts to investigate the impact of MTV on award-winning records or the presence and influence of women in the music industry (e.g., Cooper 1985, Hesbacher et al. 1977, Phillips and Schattmann 1990, Schlattmann 1991, Wells 1986 and 1991).

1.1. Nostalgia in popular culture

The subject of nostalgia has a long tradition, with Jameson (1991) discussing its impact on popular culture, especially as it concerns the construction of a ‘utopia’ in popular

cinema. Nostalgia's impact on popular music has been studied by music critic and historian Simon Reynolds (2011), who noted several nostalgia-infused pop cultural events in the early 21st century (i.e., band re-formations, reissues of 'classic' albums) and a massive music retromania fuelled by the digital availability of pop history's archive. Still, this was not entirely unprecedented. Reynolds (2020:4) names several trends, such as the 1950s rock & roll revival and Beatles nostalgia in the 1970s. In the 1980s, this phenomenon of retro pastiche was seen as a symptom of 'postmodernism,' a term coined to describe the broader shift to recycling and referencing cultural heritage.

Pop culture's fascination with science fiction and technology has allowed the melding of visions of the future with the past, reflecting art's obsession with the recuperation of modernism and the former's inability to transcend historicism (Aguirre 2011:125–126). Postmodern artists are reluctant to innovate, instead settling for the creation of various forms of pastiche; such an inclination creates an endless recycling of modern cultural products and potentially leads to the exhaustion of invention (ibid: 130, Bove and Funcke 2009: 92–93). Putting the theories above in the context of popular music, these phenomena are apparent in the ties between nostalgia and dance music, which have received their fair share of attention, with recent research pieces and news articles focusing on 1990's-themed Eurodance parties, on the rise of conceptronica in the late-2010s, and on the 21st-century disco revival (e.g., Rees 2021, Reynolds 2019, van der Hoeven 2014).

The subject of 'nostalgia' in popular music resurfaced in public discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bashirat 2020, Richards 2021). Related phenomena included large amounts of people streaming old 'classic' songs; this was reported to be a result of the excessive stress people endured throughout the pandemic, paired with a notable rise of music streaming through platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music (Sinker 2021). This led to algorithms being delegated the duty of curating the music through vast omni-archives (ibid). The pandemic also coincided with the rapid rise of TikTok, an application that, by reinforcing phenomena of 'virality,' quickly became sought-after in the music industry (Smith Galer 2020). Since 2020, TikTok often worked to remember old songs, like Phil Collins's 'In the Air Tonight' and Fleetwood Mac's 'Dreams' (CBC News: The National 2020, Respers France 2020).

This could be considered the peak of a phenomenon that started at the beginning of the 'new' millennium. It has been pointed out that the music industry seemed to be 'looking towards the future' both musically and style-wise before 2000. However, this phenomenon ceased in the early years of our century (E.R.T. Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation 2021). This could be partly attributed to technology delivering the future in an undramatic way (Sinker 2021). After 2000, we noticed a shift in visual and musical styles, which used signs referring to previous decades and already published bodies of work (E.R.T. Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation 2021). Therefore, the current problem with nostalgia is that it hinders our efforts to experience the present (Richards 2021).

1.2. Music charts as documents of consumer activity

As our primary focus is popular music, music charts have provided a relatively straightforward image of the popularity of singles and albums for decades. Throughout the years, national music charts have utilized algorithms, including sales of vinyl records, cassettes, CDs, and digital downloads, radio airplay, requests to radio DJs, and the number of streams on specific streaming platforms.

The *Billboard* magazine has been the primary source of music charts in the United States, with its first chart being published on July 27, 1940 (Billboard 1940:11, Trust 2022). The Billboard Hot 100 songs chart premiered on Aug. 4, 1958, with Ricky Nelson's 'Poor Little Fool' being the first song to reach the summit (Billboard 2021, Trust 2022). The chart was an effort to cater to the music industry's need to find a "hotter, quicker way of getting chart information," according to Seymour Stein, one of the people who helped start the chart; up to that point, there were several different charts with their methodologies (Billboard 2021). Recently, many consider streaming responsible for most of the charting songs' points, followed by radio airplay, with sales figures coming last. This indicates a shift in how the public consumes music, with the magazine altering its rules on 'recurrent songs'¹ in 2015 (ibid.).

The *Billboard* magazine is one of many places to find the chart template. Plenty of charts in television and radio top-hits programs function as a marketing tool in the music business, influencing many of its aspects (i.e., the composition of playlists and determination of stock ordering) (Hakanen 1998: 96 - 97). Moreover, popular music charts are complex signifiers of relationships among businesses, musicians, consumers, and the music itself (ibid). For most consumers, charts directly represent the music business and define what is 'popular' and 'popularity' (ibid). Focusing on the intermediality of the music charts, Straw (2015:129) emphasized that a music chart is essentially "a list that both presumes and constructs a certain simultaneity," meaning that it "processes a set of events" that consists of the various measurable acts by which a recording is consumed.

Like the Recording Industry Association of America, the Billboard music charts – and charts in general – have shifted the way they operate (Phillips and Schattmann 1990:87). This type of alterations concerning how chart points are estimated for a song include modifications on the calculation of streaming numbers,² an element which potentially makes the charts more prone to manipulation, pushing artists' fanbases to take advantage of loopholes in Billboard's methodology; up to that point, record labels were responsible for driving up a song on the charts (Billboard Staff 2018, Leight 2023).

¹ According to Billboard's rules, descending songs are removed from the Billboard Hot 100 after 20 weeks if ranking below No. 50, or after 52 weeks if they rank below No. 25; the latter rule went into effect in the week ending December 5, 2015 (Billboard n.d., Trust 2015).

² According to Billboard's methodology, a greater emphasis is given to paid subscription streams, with ad-supported streams and streams on non-paid tiers of hybrid paid/ad-supported services being of lower value for both the Billboard Hot 100 chart, as well as for the Billboard 200 albums chart (Billboard Staff 2018).

Nowadays, social media have reduced the distance between the production of popular musical culture and people's actual needs and desires, as they have given the latter a potentially false sense of having real-time contact with their creators of choice and their cultural products. Overall, social media and streaming convey a feeling of immediacy and instantaneity (Jones 2021: 148 - 149). Streaming, however, is not the only format prone to manipulation that Billboard has tried to crack down on; other recent regulations include restrictions on the incorporation of digital downloads on the main singles chart, with the latest one concerning the disqualification of song downloads from artists' websites (King 2023).

Streaming was a product of the expansion of technology in favor of the audience desiring to listen to music without the need to make an actual transaction. This phenomenon coincided with the popularization of DIY production techniques for aspiring musicians, with the former challenging the established routines and traditional promotional cycles imposed by the music industry (Jones 2021:38). Although there is no consensus over DIY practitioners' preferred practices, some of the creators above choose to release their output at a much higher rate than they would (*ibid.*). These factors have led to a relative 'temporal' tension, with a cluster of such creators expressing concern over cultural production being a priori commodified and exploited (*ibid.*). The demise of gatekeepers in the music industry may lead to the oversaturation of the market and the life of relevant cultural products significantly reduced or extended.

1.3. Semiotics and popular music

Before explaining Verón's grammar of production and grammar of recognition methodologies, we should mention some notable relevant works. The field of music semiotics can be traced as far back as the 1970s (Dunbar-Hall 1991:127). Nattiez and Ellis (1989: 23) suggested that the term 'musical semiotics' can be interpreted in diverse ways, and it is up to the analysts to clarify how they define it. According to Dunbar-Hall (1991:128), approaches to 'musical semiotics' can be divided into two broad groups: the analytical (e.g., Molino Underwood and Ayrey 1990, Nattiez 1990, Nattiez and Barry 1982, Pople 1983, Ruwet and Everist 1987) and the interpretative (e.g., Lewis 1982, Noske 1977, Tarasti 1979, Tarasti 1986). Van Leeuwen's (1999) semiotic approach to sound qualities has also been very influential in the field, as well as Cooke's (1959) and Tagg's (1990) work on the language of classical music and the social meanings of sounds, respectively. In addition, Stefani (1987) analyzed the different forms of popular melodies, while Tagg (1999) emphasized listener feedback in music communication.

All these works have significantly influenced later investigations, like those by Machin (2013) and Inskip, MacFarlane, and Rafferty (2008). Still, they do not offer us a clear image of issues such as the social processes reflected in popular music. This area of research has long yet to acknowledge the relations between musicology

and popular culture (Dunbar-Hall 1991:127, McClary and Walser 1990:280, Middleton 1990:172). Researchers have been reluctant to combine these two fields due to lacking a suitable method (Dunbar-Hall 1991:128, Račić 1981, Taylor 1985, Wicke 1982). Several alternative approaches have been proposed over the years (e.g., Middleton 1990), all stressing that popular music is different from art music and does not offer itself to analysis based on functional tonality, melody, and harmony (Dunbar-Hall 1991:128).

1.4. Migration metaphors, political cartoons discourse and metaphor research

Verón's approach to examining the social life of discourses is primarily built on the terms of the 'grammar of production' and the 'grammar of recognition'; these are never identical (Verón 1993:20–21). The 'grammar of production' is essentially a complete description of the rules of production of a particular type of discourse under the light of the specific conditions according to which the production process took place (*ibid.*). We couldn't interfere with this description, and the process is solely determined by the final product's reception (*ibid.*). The concept of 'circulation' carefully designs the process according to which the system of relations between the conditions of production and those of reception is socially produced; thus, 'circulation' is the combination of mechanisms that form the system, refining the relations between the grammar of production and the grammar of recognition (*ibid.*). However, Verón distinguishes the discourses in mass media as a particular category characterized by an 'instant' process of consumption-circulation.

The distinction between the concepts of production and recognition is a foundation on which it is hypothesized that discursive circulation is a non-linear process; the hypothesis above is equally in accordance with hypotheses of the semiological school of Ferdinand de Saussure, as well as with Peirce's pragmatics (Verón 2019a:165). However, Peirce's theories were significantly more influential in developing Verón's grammars (*ibid.*). Peirce's perspective emphasizes the notion of 'reality,' which is based on the idea of 'community' and put forward by the concept of 'truth'; in other words, the processes above are, on one hand symbolic, but on the other hand they are also social and temporal (Verón 2019b: 97). Aside from Verón's methodologies, we must also note Dunbar-Hall's (1991:131) reflections on Eco's theories relating to codes. Eco (1979) pointed out the link between a musical event and its significance. This aspect is potentially crucial for musical semiotics, as it questions how signification occurs.

2. Methodology

Having explained Verón's theories, we will attempt to apply them to several songs that reached the peak of their success or significant levels of pop-cultural relevance several years after their first release. Our research question is how this musical 're-emergence' or 'late blooming' phenomenon reflects changes in how music has been consumed in

the past thirteen years and how this process has been altered with time. The qualitative aspect of this investigation aims to create a set of phenomena by grouping cases to locate the contexts in which a song’s popularity can be significantly increased.

The time frame of our choice emphasizes the 2010s decade, when streaming on platforms like YouTube and Spotify gradually replaced digital downloads and was subsequently incorporated into Billboard’s methodology. Although we could use the Billboard Global 200 chart, accounting for the 200 best-performing songs worldwide every week, as the chart officially launched in September 2020, our sample would not be sufficient for the conduct of this research; thus, we selected the Billboard Hot 100 chart because it reflects the popularity of songs in one of the largest music markets worldwide.

Table 1. The corpus of 18 singles examined for this research.

	Song Title	Artist(s)	Release Date	Week of Hot 100 Top 10 Entry
1	A Holly Jolly Christmas	Burl Ives	Nov. 1964	Jan. 5, 2019
2	All I Want for Christmas Is You	Mariah Carey	Oct. 29, 1994	Dec. 30, 2017
3	The Christmas Song (Merry Christmas to You)	Nat King Cole	Nov. 1946	Jan. 7, 2023
4	Die for You	The Weeknd	Sept. 19, 2017	Jan. 14, 2023
5	Feliz Navidad	José Feliciano	Nov. 9, 1970	Dec. 19, 2020
6	Good as Hell	Lizzo	Mar. 8, 2016	Nov. 9, 2019
7	It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year	Andy Williams	Oct. 14, 1963	Dec. 29, 2018
8	I Will Always Love You	Whitney Houston	Nov. 3, 1992	Feb. 25, 2012 (re)
9	Jingle Bell Rock	Bobby Helms	Nov. 28, 1957	Jan. 5, 2019
10	Last Christmas	Wham!	Dec. 3, 1984	Jan. 2, 2021
11	Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!	Dean Martin	1959	Jan. 2, 2021
12	Purple Rain	Prince & the Revolution	Sept. 26, 1984	May 14, 2016 (re)
13	Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree	Brenda Lee	13	Oct. 19, 1958
14	Running Up That Hill (A Deal with God)	Kate Bush	Aug. 5, 1985	Jun. 11, 2022
15	Run Rudolph Run	Chuck Berry	1958	Jan. 2, 2021
16	Safe & Sound	Capital Cities	Jan. 6, 2011	Aug. 17, 2013
17	Sleigh Ride	The Ronettes	Nov. 22, 1963	Jan. 1, 2022
18	When Doves Cry	Prince	May 16, 1984	May 14, 2016 (re)

Our criterion for a song to be included in the corpus is whether it reached the Hot 100 top 10 at least two calendar years after its first release as a single, having appeared in the region from the first tracking week of January 2010 up to the final week of August 2023. In the case of remixes, we only included them provided that the songs' core sound was kept intact, and we did not include complete re-recordings of songs released several years after the original recordings' first release as these have their proper grammar of production and recognition. Having filtered the relevant singles, we will apply Verón's theories to them to try and locate their common characteristics. This means that emphasis would be placed on the context surrounding the songs' releases and commercial peaks while considering the media ecology of the time, the way that these songs entered popular culture, as well as how the shift in formats and chart methodologies favored older songs to succeed in several instances.

However, to fit the two grammars in the context of this research, we will slightly modify them by reformulating their terminology; this means that in our case, the 'grammar of production' will refer to the period when a song was first released to the public, while the concept of the 'grammar of recognition' will refer to the period around which a song received the peak of its attention and subsequent commercial success. At this point, we should clarify that there is no specific duration for any of the grammars, with each one ranging from a few weeks to a few months.

3. Analysis

3.1. Posthumous entries

According to the table featured in the previous chapter, we observe three songs that re-entered the top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100 chart. The first out of these songs is Whitney Houston's cover of 'I Will Always Love You,'³ released on November 3, 1992 (Music Week 1992: 21). The song was very successful upon release, breaking the record for most weeks on top of the chart above, with 14 weeks (Bronson 1994). It became the most successful single of the year in the United States in 1993 and the 7th most successful single of the 1990s while massively successful worldwide (Billboard 1993: YE-20, Billboard 1999: YE-20). 'I Will Always Love You' was reported to enter the real-time iTunes charts only hours after Houston's death on February 11, 2012, resulting in the single re-entering the Hot 100 chart in the week ending Feb. 25, 2012, at No. 7, reaching No. 3 the following week.

A similar case – albeit with two singles simultaneously – happened after Prince's passing. 'When Doves Cry' and 'Purple Rain' were the first and the third single,

³ Originally performed by country singer-songwriter Dolly Parton.

respectively, off the album *Purple Rain*. Both the album and the singles above were released in 1984, with 'When Doves Cry' reaching the top of the chart for five weeks and 'Purple Rain' reaching No. 2 for two weeks, like Houston's single, 'When Doves Cry' was the best performing single of 1984 in the United States (Billboard 1984:14). After Prince's death on Apr. 21, 2016, 'Purple Rain' re-entered the chart at No. 17 and 'When Doves Cry' at No. 20 on the week ending May 7, 2016; the songs rose at No. 4 and 8 respectively in the following week.

Applying Verón's grammar of production in this group of instances, we should note that all these singles belong to the so-called 'physical era'⁴ of music. This means that a limited number of vinyl and CD copies of the singles would be manufactured, as record companies focused on album sales. This phenomenon is apparent if we take into account the Platinum certification for 'When Doves Cry,' awarded for the sales of 2.000.000⁵ copies sold in the United States on August 21, 1984, and compare it with the most recent update concerning the digital sales of the single in the country, which shows more than 1,7 million downloads sold up until 2017 (Recording Industry Association of America, n.d., Nielsen SoundScan 2017:2).

Moving on to the grammar of recognition, looking at the Billboard Digital Songs chart, we find that digital sales drove the first half of the 2010s decade. The latter, along with streaming, which essentially replaced the former in the latter part of the decade, allows a potentially large group of people to create a 'trend' by buying a song on services like iTunes or by streaming it on repeat on platforms like Spotify; as the services above have their charts which are updated at a much higher rate than their Billboard counterparts, it is significantly easier for music fans to discover what is 'hot' in real-time.

3.2. Christmas classics

Eleven out of the 19 songs included in our corpus are Christmas songs. The most successful is Mariah Carey's 'All I Want for Christmas Is You,' which showcases how Christmas songs surge in popularity during the holiday season (Greene 2019). It reached No. 1 on the Hot 100 chart dated Dec. 21, 2019, 25 years after its original release in 1994, breaking an array of records, becoming the first holiday song to top the chart since 1959 and second overall (Molanphy 2019; Trust 2019b). However, this was

⁴ The term 'physical era' refers to a period of time when physical sales (in vinyl or later in CDs) were the driving force of sales; we can assume that this era's demise came around the 2000s, especially if we take into account the debut of the Billboard Digital Songs chart on the week ending Jan. 22, 2005 (Billboard 2005: 57). The chart was created to keep track of all versions of a song sold from digital music distributors (ibid: 6).

⁵ Gold certifications were awarded for sales surpassing 1.000.000 from 1958 until 1988, and 500.000 from 1989 until today (Whitburn 2010:15). Platinum certifications were awarded for sales surpassing 2.000.000 from 1958 until 1988, and 1.000.000 from 1989 until today (ibid).

merely the first time the single topped the Hot 100, not the first time it entered the Top 10; this was when it reached No. 9 on the chart dated Dec. 30, 2017 (Trust 2017).

According to the single's grammar of production, we should note that the song did not receive a commercial release as a physical single, which made it ineligible to chart on the Hot 100 due to a relevant rule preventing radio-only singles from entering the main singles chart; this rule lapsed in 1998, and the song was able to chart at No. 83 on the chart dated Jan. 8, 2000 (Trust 2019b). Five years later, in December 2005, the song topped the Billboard Digital Songs chart, but as the single was considered 'recurrent,' it was not able to chart on the Hot 100; it topped, however, the Hot 100 Recurrents⁶ chart every December from 2005 to 2008. This means the song had multiple 'phases of recognition' throughout its run.

It was first recognized when Billboard modified its chart methodology in 2012 with the addition of streaming numbers; that year, the song re-entered the chart at No. 29 and has been appearing on the chart every year since (Trust 2019b). A vital element in the song's grammar of recognition is the fact that Carey promoted the single in 2019 due to its parent album's *Merry Christmas*' 25th anniversary; in the weeks preceding the holidays, Carey released an anniversary edition of the album above, a music video featuring previously unreleased footage and a new CD single, with the latter being the song's first-ever release as a stand-alone commercial single (Trust 2019b).

Another song with similar success was Wham!'s 'Last Christmas,' initially released in 1984. Like the abovementioned song, 'Last Christmas' was unavailable as a commercial release in the United States until November 2014. The single eventually debuted on the Hot 100 after George Michael's passing on Christmas Day 2016, on the chart dated Jan. 7, 2017, and five years later, it reached its peak of No. 4 on the chart ending on Jan. 7, 2023 (Trust 2023a; Trust 2018c). Another element that potentially contributed to the song's success in recent years is the release of its 4K Ultra HD resolution music video on Dec. 13, 2019 (Post 2019).

Examining the rest of the Christmas singles, we ought to take into account the increasing number of holiday songs making up the chart's top 10 in the weeks preceding and following the holiday season; in the 2018-2019 holiday season, three songs entered the Hot 100 top 10 for the first time,⁷ four in the 2020-2021 season,⁸ one in the 2021-2022

⁶ The Hot 100 Recurrents chart collects the songs that have gone 'recurrent' on the Hot 100 chart; weeks on chart and the song's peak are counted from the start. It is possible for a song to re-enter the Hot 100, particularly re-releases and tracks receiving sudden resurgences in popularity that have taken a very long time to gain mainstream success (Trust 2019b).

⁷ 'It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year' by Andy Williams entered the Hot 100 top 10 for the first time on the chart dated Dec. 29, 2018, and 'Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree' by Brenda Lee, 'Jingle Bell Rock' by Bobby Helms and 'A Holly Jolly Christmas' by Burl Ives did so on the chart dated Jan. 5, 2019 (Trust 2018a and 2018b).

⁸ 'Feliz Navidad' by José Feliciano entered the Hot 100 top 10 for the first time on the chart dated Dec. 19, 2020, while Wham!'s 'Last Christmas,' Dean Martin's 'Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!' and Chuck Berry's 'Run Rudolph Run' did so on the chart dated Jan. 2, 2021 (Trust 2020a; Trust 2020b).

season,⁹ and one in 2022-2023.¹⁰ In the latter holiday season, eight holiday songs appeared on the Hot 100 chart's top 10 on the week ending Jan. 7, 2023, with this being the first time holiday songs occupied the entire top 7 of the chart (Trust 2023a). Of these songs, Brenda Lee's 'Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree' is the most successful, having peaked at No. 2 on the Hot 100 for nine weeks, from December 2019 to January 2023 (Trust 2023a).

The production grammar of 'Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree' entails multiple releases of the single in 1958 and 1959, although it didn't prove successful until 1960 when it peaked at No. 14 on the Hot 100 (Thanki 2015). The song experienced a significant resurgence in 1990 due to its use in the film *Home Alone*. Still, the essential element we have to note when examining Lee's single, as well as other Christmas songs, is the shifts in technology and public perception and the extent to which the charts took these into account (Golsen 2022, Molanphy 2019). Consequently, it would not be unusual for other Christmas songs to be placed highly on the charts since they can benefit from this advantage. Likewise, on the chart dated Jan. 2, 2021, Chuck Berry's 'Run Rudolph Run' broke the record for the longest climb to the top 10 since its first release in December 1958. Ronettes' 'Sleigh Ride' entered the region in 2022, a few years after its parent album *A Christmas Gift for You from Phil Spector* received retrospective acclaim¹¹ (Dolan 2019, Pitchfork 2017, Trust 2020b).

3.3. Hits featured in shows

It is widespread for songs featured in audiovisual products to receive renewed attention. A significant case of such a hit was Ben E. King's 'Stand by Me,' initially released in 1961 and peaking at No. 4 on the Hot 100, which re-entered the chart in 1986, reaching No. 9 after being featured in the film the same name. This phenomenon was relatively common in the 2000s, with several songs gaining traction due to being featured in TV shows, a trend that continues to this day, with examples including TLC's 'Waterfalls'¹² being featured in *Scream Queens*, Bronski Beat's 'Smalltown Boy'¹³ in *Euphoria*, and 'Running Up That Hill (A Deal with God)'¹⁴ by Kate Bush being featured in *Stranger Things* (Brown 2022, Rai 2023).

The latter song made a significant impact following its appearance on *Stranger Things*. By applying Verón's grammar of production, we discover that it was initially the lead single off Bush's fifth studio album, *Hounds of Love*. It originally peaked at No. 30 on the Hot 100, her biggest hit then, but it was part of an album that emphasized its experimental nature and was not a commercially focused body of work. The single's

⁹ The Ronettes' 'Sleigh Ride' entered the Hot 100 top 10 for the first time on the chart dated Jan. 1, 2022 (Trust 2021).

¹⁰ Nat King Cole's 'The Christmas Song (Merry Christmas to You)' entered the Hot 100 top 10 for the first time on the chart dated Jan. 7, 2023 (Trust 2023a).

¹² Originally released in 1995.

¹³ Originally released in 1984.

¹⁴ Originally released in 1985.

relative underperformance was probably also hindered by the fact that Bush didn't perform it live until 1987 at the Secret Policeman's Third Ball, along with Pink Floyd guitarist David Gilmour (Miles and Mabbett 1994).

Moving on to the grammar of recognition, we have to note that after the premiere of *Stranger Things'* fourth season, Spotify (2022) reported a 9.900% increase in the track's streams, and a snippet of the song was used in over 500.000 videos less than a month after the season's premiere (Kaye 2022). Thus, Kate Bush became known to a young audience that wasn't familiar with her music, with the phenomenon leading to the song re-entering the Hot 100 chart at No. 8 on the week ending Jun. 8, 2022, eventually peaking at number 3. We also must note a difference in how the song was promoted, as this was the first time it received a CD single release (Campbell 2022).

3.4. Miscellaneous cases

'Running Up That Hill,' however, was not the first song to peak after its inclusion in an audiovisual production; Lizzo's 'Truth Hurts' was featured in the Netflix film *Someone Great* and became a viral sleeper hit on TikTok, eventually reaching No. 1 on the Hot 100 (Trust 2019a). Although 'Truth Hurts' didn't qualify for this research, its follow-up, 'Good as Hell' did. Like 'Truth Hurts,' the single was released in 2016 as part of the promotion for her *Coconut Oil* extended play. The single's grammar of production shows that it received a full rollout upon its original release; it was part of the original soundtrack album for the film *BarberShop: The Next Cut*; it received its first music video on May 11, 2016, which was related to the film, and a remix extended play was released the following month.

However, by applying the grammar of recognition for the single, we observe that it received a second full rollout following the success of 'Truth Hurts,' which consisted of the inclusion of the single in a medley performed by Lizzo at the MTV Video Music Awards in August 2019, a high-profile remix with pop singer Ariana Grande in October of that year, a second music video with a new concept released on December of the same year, and two more live performances of the single on *Saturday Night Live* and at the 2020 Brit Awards (Hughes 2019; Payne 2020; Weatherby 2019). This rollout was an apparent attempt to capitalize on a performer who had one of the biggest hits in the country at the time. The MTV performance was defining for the success of the single 'Truth Hurts' which topped the Hot 100 on the week ending Sept. 7, 2019, with 'Good as Hell' debuting at No. 52, eventually peaking at No. 3 on the week ending Nov. 30, 2019.

The penultimate song we studied is The Weeknd's 'Die for You.' Applying Verón's grammar of production, it is evident that the song had distinct runs in public memory. 'Die for You' was released as the sixth single in September 2017 off his third studio album, *Starboy*, released on Nov. 25, 2016 (Navjosh 2017). The single peaked at No. 43 on the Hot 100 during its original run. Concerning the grammar of recognition, the single's second run

took off in late 2021 when the song started gaining traction on TikTok, which continued in 2022, eventually helping the original version peak at No. 6 on the week ending Jan. 21, 2023. Unlike 'Good as Hell,' however, the single did not receive a music video during its original run, with the latter debuting on Nov. 25, 2021, coinciding with the fifth anniversary of its parent album (Navjosh 2021). The release of the song's original remix with Ariana Grande on Feb. 24, 2023, was a defining moment, with the single finally reaching the top of the chart on the week ending March 11, 2023, on the track's 31st week in total (Trust 2023b).

The last song we analyzed was 'Safe and Sound' by indie pop duo Capital Cities. The song's grammar of production includes its release as a single off their eponymous debut extended play in January 2011. Capitol Records, however, serviced the single to the modern rock station format in the United States on Nov. 27, 2012; this was almost two years after its original release, and, therefore, from that point on, we have moved from the grammar of production to the grammar of recognition (Friday Morning Quarterback, Inc 2013). Additionally, the song was featured on a Vodafone commercial in Germany, leading to the former's entry on the country's singles chart in April 2013 (Offizielle Deutsche Charts n.d.). According to its chart history, we can reach a consensus that the single was a sleeper hit, entering the Hot 100 chart on the week ending May 18, 2013, and peaking at No. 8 almost five months later, on the week ending Sept. 7.

4. Discussion

The effect of songs experiencing a 'late blooming' on the charts is not limited to the cases we examined above, given that we haven't covered several minor cases. Verón's approach enabled us to examine pop cultural events through the lens of 'delayed pop cultural significance.' Through this lens, including the partial modifications we made to Verón's model, we can distinguish the times when the song's success was a bottom-up process, as opposed to the industry's top-down practices of promoting the music and manipulating its success.

We claim that the posthumous re-entry of songs into the charts follows the bottom-up model. This is corroborated by the instantaneity of these songs' success and that the latter is driven mainly by digital sales. This leads us to the following conclusion: Since the era of digital downloads, the music industry does not have to deal with the issue of scarcity interfering with a song's success. According to an anecdote, Shania Twain's country-pop hit 'You're Still the One' peaked at No. 2 on the Hot 100 in 1998 instead of topping the chart due to stores running out of physical copies. This story provides us with the prospect of a music format's limitations potentially hindering a record's commercial success; digital sales and now streaming pose virtually no restrictions on the number of copies a music consumer can buy or the number of times a person can stream a song.

In the case of songs or artists gaining mainstream exposure due to their affiliation with other cultural products, we can easily observe that their early success functions as a sign for the music industry to push their success further by creating physical editions of these singles or relevant albums – e.g., CD single release of ‘Running Up That Hill (A Deal with God)’, – *I Will Always Love You: The Best of Whitney Houston* – greatest hits album release in November 2012 – or releasing remixes to renew interest – e.g., the remixes of ‘Good as Hell’ and ‘Die for You’ both featuring Ariana Grande. Additionally, we should note that once an artist or a song is viewed as capable enough to generate income, the industry strives to expose them as much as possible on mass media, usually through television performances (e.g., Lizzo, Mariah Carey), potentially leading to a top-down-leaning approach for mainstream success.

Nevertheless, we should highlight a shift in how we experience music, indicated by the reappearance of holiday songs at the top of the charts every Christmas. Until recently, music charts demonstrated that the public experienced the production of relevant cultural products linearly. Since the dawn of the era of musical downloads, the average consumer has been liberated from a condition of ‘scarcity’ since music consumption is no longer dictated by the number of physical copies manufactured or radio playlists. Consequently, for the past few years, we have witnessed the Billboard charts materializing a ‘full circle,’ with the latter starting and ending around Christmas.

However, it isn't certain if this is a recent event, given that the Holiday 100 chart has been running since 2011. It seems that the function of weekly music charts has shifted from calculating commercial success and all this entails, to calculating records' popularity. Although these two concepts are close, we should remember that the focus on radio-only songs in 1998 was a pivotal moment for the Hot 100's identity. Once both radio airplay and streaming were incorporated into its methodology, public perception of a song's popularity was significantly altered since someone could consume music legally without actually buying a music product. Billboard reflected the above changes to keep up with the ever-changing power relations between contemporary society and the music industry.

5. Conclusions

To answer our main research question, we have made some observations: First, as the concept of ‘musical consumption’ has changed through the years, with scarcity no longer being an issue and the industry seeking ‘virality’ nowadays, we should not be surprised to see older material enjoying an extra 15 minutes of fame. Second, we should acknowledge that the industry tends to follow the trends created in social media to capitalize on the virality of videos utilizing snippets of songs. However, the industry fares better when it can predict potential consumers' activity in specific periods, like

Halloween or the Christmas holiday season. The industry needs long-term planning to prepare a product's rollout, especially if they need to book live performances or order the manufacturing of physical copies of records.

Verón's grammars of production and recognition are especially helpful for assessing popular culture phenomena through a socio-temporal lens. Besides music, other popular culture sectors that can benefit from such an approach include those that have fallen victim to 'cancel culture,' especially audiovisual media, as well as singular cultural events or trends that have moved beyond time and space restrictions to achieve worldwide success, such as K-pop music.

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