

Songs by Taylor Swift, Drake and more are starting to disappear from TikTok. Here's why

February 1 2024, by Wyatt Grantham-Philips



Drake appears at the Billboard Music Awards in Los Angeles on May 23, 2021. TikTok may look (or sound) a little different when you scroll through the app going forward. Earlier this week, Universal Music Group — which represents big-name artists like Taylor Swift, Bad Bunny and Drake — said that it would no longer allow its music on TikTok following the expiration of a licensing deal

between the two companies, Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2024. Now, the takedown of UMG-related music has begun, ByteDance-owned TikTok confirmed to The Associated Press. As of early Thursday, a vast roster of popular songs were disappearing from the social media platform's library. Credit: AP Photo/Chris Pizzello, File

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Now, the takedown of UMG-related music has begun, ByteDance-owned TikTok confirmed to The Associated Press. As of early Thursday, a vast roster of popular songs had disappeared from the social media platform's library.

The complete removal of UMG-licensed music might not be immediate—but chances are, avid TikTokers are already seeing the effects. Here's a rundown of where things stand.

WHAT MUSIC IS GETTING REMOVED FROM TIKTOK?

The songs getting pulled from TikTok are those that are licensed by UMG—which carries an enormous reach across the music industry and, consequently, our digital diet today.

"Universal Music Group is literally the largest record label... in the

history of the music industry," said Andrew Mall, an associate professor of music at Northeastern University. An "uncountable number of tracks and sounds" would be impacted on TikTok, he added, significantly limiting options for creators.

TikTok users signing on Thursday will see that they are no longer able to search for many popular songs—including music from Ariana Grande, Justin Bieber, Olivia Rodrigo and more—under the "sounds" tab.

In addition to users no longer having the option of adding these songs to next dance craze and other trending content, past videos featuring UMG-licensed music will also be scrubbed. According to a UMG spokesperson, whether these existing videos are muted or taken down entirely will be up to TikTok.

Artists will also not be able to post the audio of their UMG-licensed songs on TikTok. If the music has a UMG license, it should be muted, the spokesperson said—noting the company will protect its copyrights.

Tour clips of artists could also be affected, if those songs are represented by UMG, a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press. This can become tricky if there are multiple songwriters, as recordings from other labels could also be affected, the person added.

Complete removal will likely be a process, so it may take a few days for TikTok users see the full effects. It's also important to note that music licensing is a complicated business and artists often have different songs that move through different labels. While a singer's UGM tracks will be removed, songs licensed exclusively with other music giants (like Warner and Sony-owned labels, for example) shouldn't be impacted.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The expiration of licensing between UMG and TikTok arrived after the two companies were unable to reach a new agreement—and soon shared heated exchanges.

In a Tuesday letter addressed to artists and songwriters, UMG said that it had been pressing TikTok on three issues: "appropriate compensation for our artists and songwriters, protecting human artists from the harmful effects of AI, and online safety for TikTok's users."



Taylor Swift performs at the Monumental stadium during her Eras Tour concert in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Nov. 9, 2023. Universal Music Group, which represents artists including Taylor Swift, Drake, Adele, Bad Bunny and Billie Eilish, says that it will no longer allow its music on TikTok now that a licensing deal between the two parties has expired. Credit: AP Photo/Natacha Pisarenko, File

UMG said that TikTok proposed paying its artists and songwriters at a rate that's a fraction of the rate that other major social platforms pay, adding that TikTok makes up only about 1% of its total revenue. The music giant also took issue with TikTok's promotion of AI music creation—which UMG says poses risks to human artists—and the platform's record with what it says is hate speech, bigotry, bullying and harassment.

TikTok pushed back against claims by UMG, saying that it has reached "artist-first" agreements with every other label and publisher.

"It is sad and disappointing that Universal Music Group has put their own greed above the interests of their artists and songwriters," TikTok said.

WILL IT LAST?

Despite the licensing deal's expiration, experts note that we're still a moment of negotiation between UMG and TikTok—and it probably won't last forever.

"We've seen this movie before. It's a wonderful, theatrical stand-off between two very major corporations... who are wanting to assert their authority on the landscape," said former president of UMG's Virgin EMI Records Ted Cocker, who now runs music advisory company called Mussel Music Management.

Users will likely find ways to adjust in the meantime, Cocker added, but he and others doubt that such a standoff will last long—noting that a partnership between UMG and TikTok is significantly beneficial to both parties. Historically speaking, Mall said, gaps for other licensing

agreements in the 21st century's digital era have typically lasted just a day to up to a few months.

There will also likely be added pressure from TikTok creators, artists and their fans.

"This is a platform that's really important for artists," said Alexandra J. Roberts, a professor of law and media at Northeastern University. "It might not affect established artists as much, but some of them are going to lose revenue streams. And I think we're going to see frustrated fans, right? Users who don't understand or are angry about the fact that they can't use or access or engage with some artists' work."

Representatives for several artists with UMG-licensed music—including Taylor Swift, Bad Bunny, SZA, Drake, Ariana Grande and Billie Eilish—did not immediately respond to The Associated Press' requests for comment.

Mall stressed the overall consequences of pulling music from social media platforms like TikTok—particularly for younger developing artists. In this situation, UMG's revenue mostly comes from well-known artists who will probably be "just fine" if their music is no longer on TikTok, he said, but "smaller labels, smaller artists (couldn't) afford to do something like this."

Content creators and marketing experts are already preparing to pivot as needed. Jessica Henig, founder and CEO of music marketing firm Unlocked Branding who works on campaigns involving UMG-licensed music, said it's not ideal, but that her team has grown accustomed to working through delays across the social media landscape.

Still, Henig, who previously headed influencer marketing at Virgin EMI, said time will tell.

"If this is going to be a longevity thing, then we might have a different conversation," she said.

TikTok's standoff with Universal isn't the first time a recording label has gone head-to-head with a social media company over licensing terms. In late 2008, Warner Music Group pulled all of its music from YouTube, saying the payments it received from the video-sharing site did not fairly compensate the label, its artists or songwriters. Warner agreed to return songs and music videos months later after reaching a new deal with YouTube.

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