



The effects of shortening attention spans on the music industry

by Sergey Bludov / DataArt

Do you realize that popular music songs are getting shorter?

Well, they are, and the shift is dramatic. Between 2013 to 2018, the average song on the Billboard Hot 100 decreased in length by 20 seconds. Additionally, while only 1 percent of hit songs were 2 minutes and 30 seconds or shorter in 2013, this number rose to 6 percent in just five years. And this change goes across

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genres. From rappers to pop stars and country singers, the average length of hit songs is decreasing.

Is Streaming Making Songs Shorter?

In 2018, 75 percent of all US music revenues to rights holders were derived from streaming services, up from only 21 percent in 2013. And here's the thing: music rights holders are paid per song play by streaming services, regardless of the length of the track, whereas traditional media pays based on the length of a song. Therefore, the payment for a song on a streaming service is the same, whether it's short or long. By releasing shorter tracks, artists are able to create a larger number of songs that have the potential to earn revenue from streaming platforms.

So is the growing popularity of streaming the reason that artists are releasing shorter hit songs? Or are people's attention spans short-

ening and as a result, so does our music?

The idea that we have increasingly short attention spans is quite popular these days, with many citing the growing number of choices in the digital age as the cause of this general shift. Researchers at the Technical University of Denmark believe that they have data to back up this concept.

In a study published earlier this year in the scientific journal *Nature Communications*, researchers analyzed a range of media consumption from a variety of sources, such as movie ticket sales over the past 40 years, Twitter data from 2013–2016, 2017 Wikipedia attention time, Google Trends from 2010–2018, and much more. By creating a mathematical model to predict the popularity of each topic, the manner in which each topic progressed through the public sphere, and the amount of time before people shifted their interest to a new topic, the researchers concluded that people focus on things for a shorter period of time now than they did in the past.

This shift is likely due to the increasing quantity of information available at our fingertips. As much as a story, song, or TV show may interest us, the temptation to see what else is available often results in people moving along before they've fully exhausted the first option. And this continues throughout the days of many people who are drawn to shift to something else swiftly.

The Convergence of Social Media, Video, and Music

In the music industry, it appears that the increasing percentage of music that is consumed through streaming services is at least part of the reason for the decreasing length of hit songs. One other reason for shortening attention spans may include the popularity of social media, which inherently results in moving through topics at a rapid pace.

Look at the incredibly popular video app TikTok. With over one billion downloads and 500 million active monthly users, TikTok is now used more than Twitter or Snapchat. Music is an integral component for the large majority of content posted on the social media platform, resulting in TikTok becoming a major influencer in the music industry. So the convergence of video and social media platforms is likely another reason for the shift to shorter songs.

For example, TikTok-focused playlists have tens of thousands of followers on streaming platforms, such as “tiktok songs that are stuck in my head” with more than 87,000 followers on Spotify. Since TikTok content exists in a 15-second video format, its effect on the length of music tracks being released is

significant.

Producing More Revenue from a Shorter Song

We all know that streaming services pay notoriously low rates to rights holders per play, so artists and music industry leaders are searching for alternative revenue sources to fill in the gap. One of the newest concepts is exploring the viability of earning money from licensing music stems — the individual tracks

“It seems that the allocated attention time in our collective minds has a certain size but the cultural items competing for that attention have become more densely packed.”

— Professor Sune Lehmann, Technical University of Denmark.

that make up a recording, such as an isolated vocal performance or drumbeat — to delve into a previously untapped asset that exists in music recordings.

When it comes to placements in films, ads, and other media, there may be times when stems are the perfect match for a music requirement instead of the full mix of a song. For music rights holders, licensing stems would greatly increase the potential number of revenue sources being derived from a single song, while not interfering with the usage of the original mix for other placements.

Although our attention spans are shortening, the options for music to listen to and platforms on which to consume it are skyrocketing. As the music industry continues to search for new ways to generate revenue, it appears that shorter songs are here to stay. And that means we get to listen to more of them each day! ■



DataArt is a global technology consultancy with 20 locations in the US, Europe, and Latin America. Its media & entertainment practice focuses on complex legacy system modernization, music software development, UX/UI design, systems integration, business consulting, and team augmentation. The company is a member of the Music Business Association.

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