



Rise of Explicit Content in Songs

Research and findings led by [Parth Sinha](#) and [Pavel Telica](#)

Background

The music industry has gone through substantial changes within the last decade, both in terms of our consumption habits, as well as the creation and production approaches, variations and innovations on behalf of the artists. One of the approaches in question is the use of explicit lyrical content within the songwriting process, which from the first sight has seemed to grow in use quite significantly.

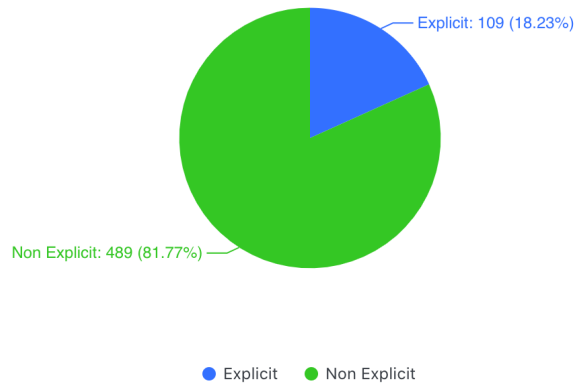
As a result we really wanted to check whether having explicit lyrics has any considerable effect on the overall popularity and virality of the track. Is there an observable difference between trend-setting capabilities of a song with explicit content as opposed to a song without it? And if so, is there a potential for establishing a clear strategy which optimises the use of this explicit content in order to maximise the chances of becoming “viral”?

We decided to approach these questions by looking at the progression of the share of explicit content songs within the biggest hits for a particular period, and compare it with the nowadays dynamic to better understand the future trajectory.

Explicit share in biggest hits of 2010-2015

To start with, we have taken a dataset of 600 biggest tracks by the number of streams on Spotify within a period of 2010-2015. The tracks without any vocal information haven't been included and we have thus focused on checking what was the share of the explicit lyrical content, which was 18.23 % of the overall TOP 600. The next step was to look at the progression of this share within the next five year period in order to see whether there was a substantial upwards or downwards movement (chart depicted on the next page)

2010-2015 Explicit Share

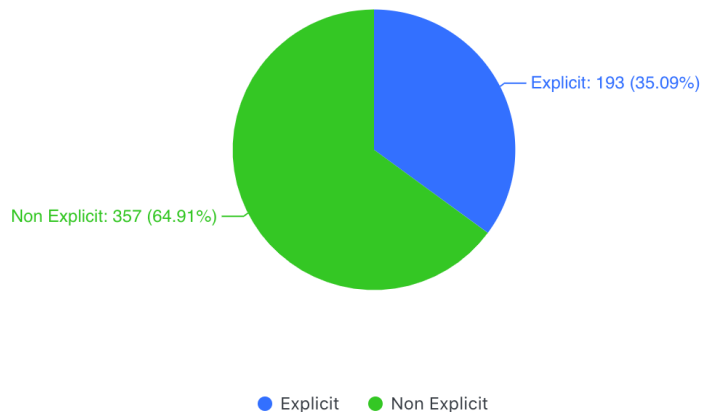


Explicit share in biggest hits of 2016-2020

For the period of the next five years a similar dataset of Spotify's most streamed hits has been collected, this time comprising 550 songs (as a small number of duplicates from the previous period has been eliminated). As can be seen from the chart below, the share of explicit content has practically doubled from 18% to 35% within the period of the last five years. That has certainly underlined an upward progression, showing that there definitely is a rise in the use and popularity of explicit lyrics.

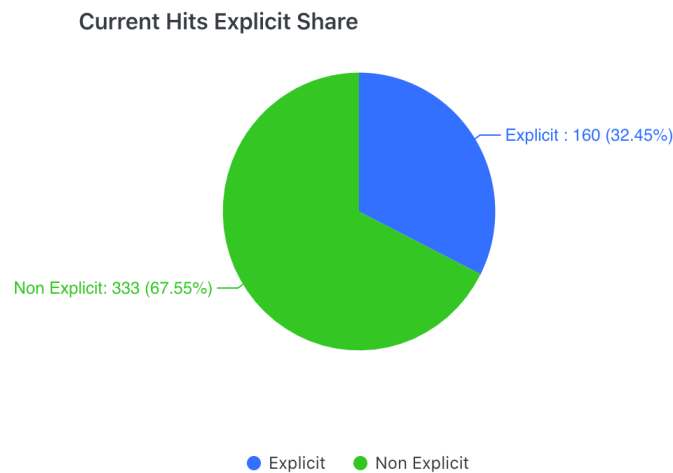
However, at the same time, we really wanted to get at least some kind of glimpse on what is the most probable progression of this share for the period of the upcoming five years. Is it going to continue a steep increase observed within the last ten years or will there be diminishing marginal returns at some point? The only way to allow for any predictions was to analyse the most recent and mire short-term share of explicit content and try to identify the trend.

2016-2020 explicit share



Explicit Share in the biggest viral & trending hits currently

In order to get the most realistic snapshot of the current trends and dynamics we have combined the data for the top 250 biggest songs on Spotify in 2021, as well as the top 250 tracks on Tik Tok. We have taken down an average of the explicit share between both platforms and have obtained a result of an explicit share of 32.45 %, which is practically the same as the previously obtained average of 35% within a five year period between 2016-2020. That in turn clearly portrays that the trend is continuing in an upwards fashion, suggesting that the use of explicit content is both becoming much more normalised, as well as actively becoming a part of the virality dynamics. We have consequently analysed the songs with explicit content on Tik Tok to see any more extra possible insights.



Summary

As a conclusion we can certainly underline the fact that explicit lyrics are rising in use and popularity. Apart from the aforementioned charts it becomes especially evident after analysing the Tik Tok trending song charts, where 40% of all the songs from the all time Tik Tok hits actually have explicit lyrics. This increasingly popular use of explicit lyrics can be associated with the rise of hip hop and rap music which have historically been much more uncensored, but at the same time even the pop music genre has seen a robust increase in the use of explicit content.

Flo milli, Doja Cat, Meghan The stallion, Cardi B are all perfect examples of how explicit lyrics got established as a trend on Tik Tok, and now have put these artists on the map as the emerging stars in the hip hop viral categories. This in turn suggests that having explicit lyrical content could (and probably should) in fact be a part of the Tik Tok and Spotify virality & trend maximisation.