

Understanding the popularity and affordances of TikTok through user experiences

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the affordances and popularity of the short-video app TikTok from an audience studies point of view. I do so by drawing on findings from ethnographic fieldwork with young adult TikTok users based in the United Kingdom that was conducted in 2020 and 2021. I trace how using the app, specifically scrolling through the TikTok For You Page, the app's algorithmic content feed, became a fixed part of the everyday routines of young adults. I show how TikTok appealed to them as a convenient means of escape and relief that they were unable to find elsewhere during and beyond times of lockdown. Further, I highlight the complex nature of TikTok as an app and the active role that users play in imagining and appropriating the app's affordances as meaningful parts of their everyday social life. Closing the paper, I reflect on future directions of TikTok scholarship by stressing the importance of situated audience studies.

Keywords

algorithms, audience studies, digital culture, scrolling, TikTok

Introduction

TikTok is an app that allows people to create, share and consume short-video content. It is the international version of its Chinese sister app, Douyin, both of which are owned by tech company ByteDance. While Douyin has been available since 2016, TikTok only launched in 2017. Despite this relative newness of the app, TikTok has seen remarkable growth in the last years. By now TikTok has more than 1 billion active users worldwide (TikTok, 2021) and can be understood as a major landmark of the global social media landscape. Early coverage on the app described TikTok as 'brining the fun back to social

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media' (Roose, 2018), referring here to the fun and joyful content the app has come to be primarily known for. This fun atmosphere mediated on the app has often been accredited for TikTok's accelerated growth during the Coronavirus pandemic and its many states of lockdown (cf. Kale, 2020).

In this paper, I investigate this early phase of TikTok's short but fast-paced history. Drawing on one and half years of fieldwork, I explain TikTok's popularity through the stories of UK-based young adults who first picked up using the app in late 2019 and early 2020. Through their stories I show how they formed habits of using the app. More specifically, I outline how scrolling through the app's algorithmically personalised content feed, the so-called For You Page, became a fixed part of their everyday routines, as well as how such habits broke down over time in some cases. In this way, the paper provides an ethnographically situated description of how TikTok became popular among young adults living in the United Kingdom.

The paper is structured in the following way. After a brief discussion of the conceptual and methodological framework, I outline the appeal of TikTok in three steps. Firstly, I discuss what made TikTok appealing to my participants in their given life circumstances and how TikTok stood out in comparison to other apps with similar affordances. Then, secondly, I outline how people imagined and interacted with the TikTok algorithm in order to create a personalised feed of entertaining and relatable content. Finally, I show how scrolling through TikTok enabled not only a personalised entertainment experience but also provided opportunities to engage with peers through sharing TikTok content and memes. Closing the paper, I stress the importance of situated audience studies to understand phenomena of global social media culture like TikTok.

Literature review

In this paper I understand affordances as the features and properties of social media apps that do not dictate but configure the ways in which people engage with them (cf. Boyd, 2010). As such, I see affordances as relational properties in the sense that the same feature of an app, such as a 'like' button, will have different meanings and afford different things to different people in different settings (cf. Bucher and Helmond, 2018). Furthermore, I follow the view that affordances are not fixed but ultimately imagined properties whose meaning and function emerges 'in the wild' through how people perceive and make sense of technologies, what they enable and make possible, and what their limitations are (cf. Nagy and Neff, 2015).

Of my central interest in this paper are TikTok's content consumption affordances. However, questions of consumption have drifted somewhat out of analytical focus over the past years in social media scholarship. As Livingstone (2003) observes, the affordances of the internet have prominently made visible that media consumers are 'active' in the sense of interpreting, commenting, discussing, or producing media content themselves. Hence is why scholars such as Jenkins et al. (2013) have prominently argued that even those who still just 'lurk', that is, primarily consume content online, would now experience the internet and social media with a constant 'awareness of their potential capacity to participate and recognition of lower barriers to contribute'. (Jenkins et al., 2013: 159). Without a doubt, TikTok stands in strong relation to such a tradition of social

media culture marked by user participation and creativity (compare Boffone, 2021; Kaye et al., 2022; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Zulli and Zulli, 2020).

Not denying the significant ways in which TikTok affords creativity and self-expression, I here follow the observation of Burgess (2015: 283) who notes that social media apps, as they try to attract ever more people, rely on being seen as the enablers of both creativity and consumption. In the case of TikTok, this is backed by studies like that of Jang (2021), Omar and Dequan (2020), or Scherr and Wang (2021). Their findings support the view of TikTok as an entertainment focussed platform. For example, in her study Jang (2021) compares the motivations of people that actively create content on TikTok to those that primarily tend to consume the app. Jang (2021: 25) found that the former showed stronger desires for interaction and community than the latter. However, a common ground between users groups were shared escapist and entertainment motivations. These findings are in line with that of Omar and Dequan (2020), as well as those of Scherr and Wang (2021). Additionally, however, Scherr and Wang (2021) stress the importance of contextual determinants and show that motivations for and ways of using TikTok differ across time of day, for example.

The escapist and entertainment experience afforded by TikTok has to be understood in relation to the app's algorithm. Bhandari and Bimo (2022) contrast TikTok to social media platforms like Facebook which have been prominently theorised as social network sites (cf. Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Where on social network sites people engage with content from people of their various social circles, Bhandari and Bimo (2022: 9) argue that on TikTok people are continuously confronted with content displaying an algorithmised representation of their self. Lee et al. (2022) make a similar argument. They conceptualise TikTok, and its algorithm in particular, through the metaphor of the 'algorithmic crystal'. According to Lee et al. (2022), when people engage with TikTok they are confronted with a multi-faceted, but also partial, representation of their self. Doing so, Lee et al. (2022: 17) argue, TikTok enables self-making not just in the form of introspection but also by means of identifying the self within the various TikTok communities and aesthetic styles exposed to on the For You Page.

A parallel can be drawn here to the work of Ang (1985: 20) who, in her famous study on the soap opera *Dallas*, has shown how popular pleasures are pleasures of recognition. The crucial difference to the soap opera genre, however, is that TikTok does not have a set narrative that can be interpreted to recognise the self within the characters' stories on screen. On TikTok it is an algorithm which assembles an array of videos addressing parts of people's interests, tastes and identity. Simpson and Semaan (2021) and Karizat et al. (2021) highlight in this context crucially how the TikTok algorithm can silence parts of some people's identity. Moreover, Siles and Melendez-Moran (2021) stress that people's relationship to algorithms like that of TikTok change over time and thus should be seen as contingent. In another study, on the Spotify algorithm, Siles et al. (2020) further underscore this by showing how people, based on how they perceive the purpose of an algorithmic system, enact a different experiential modality in their engagement with it.

Put differently, Siles et al. (2020) underscore the active role played by people within algorithm-user relationships. Like other affordances, algorithmic systems vary in their consequences based on how people imagine and engage with them 'in the wild' (cf. also Bucher, 2017). I contribute to this scholarship on TikTok's and similar algorithmic

personalisation systems. I understand the TikTok algorithm through an affordances lens as something that shapes but never fully determines user behaviour. As such, in this paper I do not take for granted that people engage with TikTok for means of personal relaxation and entertainment. Instead, I take an ethnographic audience studies point of view and seek to qualify these interactions through an ‘analytical double focus’.

Morley (1989) and Silverstone (1994) define the ‘analytical double focus’ of ethnographic audience studies as investigating the points of contact between people and media yet also the wider contexts in which media consumption unfolds. Within the existing body of TikTok scholarship reviewed here, wider socio-material contexts have remained somewhat overlooked as determinants of TikTok consumption practices. Hence is why I propose to utilise the methodological repertoire of ethnographic audience studies to gain a richer understanding for people’s experience of the TikTok app and algorithm. The next section outlines how I operationalised this ethnographic audience research approach to study TikTok.

Fieldwork and methodology

Fieldwork took place in two stages. In the first stage, over the course of 6 months starting in early 2020, I conducted a digital ethnography of the TikTok For You Page. During that time, I explored different TikTok communities and followed various trends and memes unfold on the platform to gain a deep and contextual understanding for the app’s communicative dynamics (see Schellewald, 2021). In the second stage, starting in the summer of 2020, I then conducted fieldwork with 30 young adult TikTok users based in the United Kingdom, talking to them over video call and staying in touch via email and other means. People were recruited using a promoted tweet targeted at Twitter users interested in TikTok, living in the Greater London area, and being between 18 and 24 years of age, as well as through subsequent snowball sampling. I focussed on young adults because, back then, TikTok was still mostly seen as a ‘kids app’ while young adults already formed the biggest group of users in the UK (Loose et al., 2020). Fieldwork with that group of young adults ended after roughly 1 year, in the summer of 2021.

Methodologically, my project is located in the tradition of ethnographic audience studies (cf. Ang, 1985; Morley, 1986; Radway, 1984; Seiter et al., 1989). Ethnographic audience studies is marked by a strong opposition to the ‘tendency to presume that the media can be understood independently of the cultural contexts in which they operate’ (Morley, 2015: 28). As such, it is a qualitative approach that is not ‘satisfied with the sporadic inclusion of disembodied, decontextualised observations of behaviour’ but seeks to ‘engage with audiences meaningfully in and across contexts of their lives’. (Livingstone, 2019: 179). More specifically, in my research I followed the ‘analytical double focus’ that has marked ethnographic audience studies. This analytical double focus seeks to investigate both the points of contact between audiences and media yet also the wider contexts in which media consumption is situated (cf. Morley, 1989; Silverstone, 1994).

Following this approach, the initial interviews in the summer of 2020 were focussed on three themes: general questions on people’s everyday routines and media use habits; their use of the TikTok app and interaction with the TikTok algorithm; their perception

of the TikTok app and evaluation of its meaningfulness on both a personal and cultural level. Prior to the initial interview participants completed a media mapping task in which they were asked to sort apps and devices based on how important they are to them on a personal level. These media mappings were used to guide initial conversations and understand the significance of TikTok in people's wider media use routines. Furthermore, during the initial interview I asked people to show me content they referenced as well as asked them to scroll through TikTok, describe to me what they see on their For You Page, and how they would interact with the given content.

Following this initial conversations in the summer of 2020, participants were reached out and talked to at roughly 3 months intervals. Follow-up interviews and conversations were specific to each participants life circumstances, media use habits and the role of TikTok in their life. Interviews were anonymised during transcription and participants were given a pseudonym. The study received ethical clearance from an institutional review board. The body of data generated through interviews and fieldnotes was analysed thematically with the aim to identify and explain habits of TikTok use. Habits of content consumption in the form of scrolling emerged as the dominant use of TikTok from that analysis and resultingly is the central focus of this paper.

Through this ethnographic and long-term approach I was able to gain a deep and contextual understanding for the role of TikTok within people's lives. I was able to see how people imagined TikTok as their personal 'feel good space' and how they contrasted TikTok's content consumption affordances to that of other social media apps. Moreover, the long-term perspective of my study in particular provides valuable insights on the formation and stabilisation of TikTok use habits. In the remainder of this paper I outline in more detail how exactly TikTok was imagined and enacted as 'feel good space' by my participants in their given life circumstances.

Enacting TikTok as a 'feel good space'

The appeal of TikTok in and beyond lockdown life

I first started talking to people in the summer of 2020. Back then, all the young adults I met had already been using TikTok for at least a few months, some even longer, since late 2019 or earlier. Most had initially picked up using the app around March 2020 though, the time in which the first lockdown was announced in the United Kingdom to slow the spread of the Coronavirus. Around this time public debates on TikTok were discussing the app as something in-between a 'national security threat' and 'parenting problem' (cf. Sanger and Barnes, 2020). In relation to the former aspect, the security risks, many commentators were concerned about the Chinese origins of TikTok. This sentiment, however, was not shared at all by my participants. Instead, they felt that debates on TikTok privacy concerns were inflated due to its association with China. Often I was told things like the following: 'I think all social platforms have the same sort of risks. It's just because TikTok is a Chinese company there is a lot more concern about it' (Rhea).

In terms of privacy and security risks, for my participants TikTok appeared comparable to its Silicon Valley counter parts like Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube. However, especially at the start of my project the latter element, TikTok's public image as a 'kids

app', still set the app apart from others. In fact, many of the young adults I met at first still felt somewhat embarrassed for using TikTok. Some even told me that they felt a bit relieved to finally be able to talk to someone about their use of the app. These people often described their TikTok consumption as 'a secret guilty pleasure thing' (Jade). Over time, people had become more confident in their use of TikTok though. Key to that was differentiating their TikTok experience from the kids and teenagers using the app. Tanja, who worked in a day care during the pandemic, said the following in this context.

'I think the kids definitely follow the trends. They want to know what the new trend will gonna be. They wanna be on top of it. They wanna be creating content. Whereas I just want to join in on the fun but not have that viral ecstatic'. (Tanja)

The mood that Tanja described was one that I noticed across many other conversations. People acknowledged that TikTok, and the For You Page in particular, is an online space that affords the kind of creative dynamics that have led commentators to describe TikTok as 'the internet's hottest meme breeding ground' (Martin, 2019) and a 'relentless chaos' that is hard to grasp and keep up with at the source (Spanos, 2019). However, my participants were not really invested in TikTok's viral trends or its top creators like Charli D'Amelio. The way in which they engaged with TikTok consistently over the course of the year that I followed them was by scrolling through the For You Page. They enjoyed the app in how it afforded them convenient access to a personalised content feed that they could just scroll through when they were bored, stressed, tired, or simply wanted to have a laugh and pass time. Bea, a master's student and freelance writer, described the appeal of TikTok as such site of rest and escape in the following words.

'On TikTok time is kind of paused. It's just an effective way to avoid your responsibilities without really thinking about them. I'm never thinking "oh man, I need to finish this paper or go make dinner". It's like a true kind of 30 minute escape that you can't leave once you're there'. (Bea)

This 'addictive' quality of TikTok that Bea refers to is one that I noticed across all conversations with participants. However, what was interesting about stories like that of Bea was how they rendered it a much more complex phenomenon than it is portrayed in public debates. In such debates, TikTok is drawn on in broader discussion on how digital media supposedly are wasting people's time and withholding them from doing more meaningful things with their life (cf. Odell, 2019). Yet, as scholars such as Paasonen (2016) have already noted, the distraction afforded by digital media can be both wanted and unwanted. While my participants did at times struggle with regulating their use of TikTok, they also actively wanted to get carried away and distracted when they engaged with the app.

Often this desire to get carried away was related to mundane everyday activities. As Bea says in the quote stated above, TikTok appealed to her as an effective tool to regulate the pace at which she would take care of her various responsibilities, like preparing dinner or working on her studies. We can take the story of Josh, a university student, as another example to see how TikTok's appeal emerges in relation to people's

socio-material life circumstances. When I first met Josh he was living back home with his family in South London due to the Coronavirus pandemic. During our initial meeting, I immediately noticed why he really enjoyed using TikTok. Josh's younger brother would burst into his room multiple times during our conversation, something which Josh seemed very annoyed by and apologised for every time. Getting carried away on TikTok was something that appealed to Josh in his particular condition of being stuck in a small flat with his family. This changed when a couple of months later Josh moved back to his university accommodation. During this time, Josh slowly stopped using TikTok, on the one side because there appeared less a need to create space for himself, on the other because he felt that TikTok's 'addictive' and distractive nature was undermining his ability to focus on his studies.

Many of my participants had an experience similar to that of Josh. They found TikTok appealing in the context of lockdown yet dropped the app once restrictions had started to ease. Many others, however, reported how their use of the app had become much more defined and, in return, occupied a fixed part of their daily routines. One of them is Sunder. When I first met Sunder he was fairly opposed to TikTok and found the app quite dumb, in fact. However, in the months that followed Sunder had started working full-time in a supermarket. This, as he told me, has made him 'really appreciate this kind of mindlessly scrolling'. In return, TikTok had become a fixed part of his daily routine, occupying 'this spot right at the very end of the day. It's almost like a bridge between living room and bed'. (Sunder). TikTok had become a tool that helped Sunder to 'digest' his day by being able to clear his head after a busy day of work.

Locating TikTok in the social media landscape

As I have described in the previous section, the young adults I worked with in my project engaged with TikTok primarily in the form of scrolling which allowed them to pass time, relax, unwind, and clear their head when needed. However, TikTok is not the only app that enables escapist practices of scrolling. A lot of other apps, too, afford easy and convenient access to endless streams of content that can be scrolled through. In this section I discuss what set TikTok apart from other apps and rendered TikTok a 'feel good space' to my participants.

In popular debates a dominant explanation for TikTok's popularity is that it simply has the better technology, that it is just better at getting people hooked than other apps. This, so do the stories of my participants suggest, is true to at least some degree. Often I was told that TikTok is 'very unlike every other app I've used. I definitely can spend hours on it without even realising' (Joyce) or that the TikTok algorithm 'works exceptionally well . . . really understands me and knows what to show me' (Bea). However, during my project I found that looking at TikTok's technology alone provides only insufficient answers to the question of its appeal. While the TikTok algorithm appears to be good at what it does, which is observing and reinforcing consumption preferences, it relies on the right framing and right engagement by users to materialise as that specific escape site which people find both appealing and hard to leave once there.

Scholars like Radway (1984: 90) have prominently outlined that the fulfilment of escapist desires relies not just on a medium that helps people withdraw from their life in

the here and now but also carries them into a more pleasurable experiential space. Like other mobile phone apps, TikTok was very easily picked up and allowed people to withdraw from a given situation and setting leaving them empty. However, in comparison to other apps, only TikTok seemed to constitute that kind of experiential space that also made the act of withdrawal induce pleasure, relief and relaxation. The reason behind this is that other apps had already been given a variety of other social functions by people, extending beyond that of entertainment and escapism alone. Bea described this by contrasting TikTok to her experience of scrolling through Instagram and Twitter.

'I prefer TikTok instead of going to Twitter where I'm just gonna read about how doomed the world is or going to Instagram to get mad at my friends that are at restaurants or jealous about people that are up in some cottage in the countryside. When I go on TikTok I can just watch videos of cute dogs and stuff. It's more of an escape than Twitter or Instagram for me, especially right now'. (Bea)

Being a relatively new social media app, TikTok had been purposefully appropriated by my participants to fill this gap left by other social media. As the comment from Bea above shows, for TikTok to have a 'feel good' quality, and thus affording relaxation and fulfilment of escapist desires, stemmed especially from the kind of content present on the app. What exact content people would see varied but was always described as being 'close to home' and 'relatable'. Belna, for instance, enjoyed seeing 'Cottagecore' videos on TikTok. 'Cottagecore' is a genre of content that portrays rural life and crafts in a particular aesthetic style (cf. Brand, 2021). This specific style of videos resonated with Belna because she is a person generally outdoorsy and connected to nature. For example, she works in a garden centre and spends as much time as possible hiking and visiting the countryside. However, during the pandemic Belna found herself trapped in a small apartment in London. What we can see here is how TikTok is no mere 'mindless entertainment'. Scrolling through TikTok mattered to Belna not just because it helped her unwind and pass the time. Much rather, it materialised as a 'feel good space' in that the content she would be served by the TikTok algorithm resonated with central parts of her identity, namely her affinity for the outdoors and country life.

All my participants described the content they would see on their For You Page as very 'relatable', 'authentic', or 'close to home'. In other words, they perceived it as showing a high degree of closeness to their idea of self, taste, and current life situation. However, TikTok's escape quality stemmed not just from what TikTok had, but also what was crucially absent. Judith, a 22 years old working as copywriter, described her experience of scrolling through TikTok to me in the following way.

'It's just nice going somewhere where you don't know anyone but also the people there aren't all established influencers or like super polished and super presentable. It's kind of just like seeing what your friends are up to if your friends were all kind of cool and you didn't have any obligation to them'. (Judith)

As Ang (1985) has prominently discussed for the case of soap operas, the pleasure of watching them is often a pleasure of recognition, of being able to put one's own life in relation to the characters and stories one is engaging with. In the case of TikTok, I was

able to make a similar observation. As the story of Belna or comment of Judith stated above illustrate, what people liked about TikTok was how it afforded a social media experience that was relatable yet, at the same time, stripped of social obligations, rendering it a form of escapist entertainment at heart.

Barta and Andalibi (2021) have discussed this aspect of relatability, of TikTok content being 'authentic', more extensively. They show how TikTok, in comparison to other apps, is perceived as being 'for fun' as well as affording senses of privacy, for instance through allowing the use of pseudonymous user names. This, they argue, creates a condition in which users feel comfortable posting content of themselves that is more 'raw' and emotional in comparison to what they would share on other platforms. However, approaching TikTok from an audience studies point of view, we need to look further. Namely, we need to look at how the experience of relatability is also produced in how people navigate the For You Page and consume content on the app.

Reading for personalisation on the For You Page

In the previous section I have discussed how TikTok's relatable content set the app apart from other social media platforms as a site of escapist consumption. In popular debates it is often the TikTok algorithm which is accredited as making TikTok 'for you', that is, feel relatable. However, as I will show in this section, people play an active role in enacting such a 'for you' feeling when they scroll through the app.

Being young adults, my participants had grown up using social media and already gained lots of experience interacting with algorithms. They were not only aware for the principles of how algorithms like that of TikTok curate content, yet also the underlying mechanisms of surveillance and datafication. For example, Benjamin told me that he has 'enough awareness to know that if I'm going onto an app where it has a "For You Page" that I'm going to expect that it tracks certain things' (Benjamin). Put differently, for my participants algorithmic personalisation was a very normalised facet of their digital media experience.

As mentioned earlier, people experienced TikTok and its algorithmic system as very efficient and effective. The personalisation offered by the app's algorithm being a key affordance that made the app appealing to them as an escape site and standing out from other platforms. However, speaking to my participants about their experience of interacting with the TikTok algorithm, as well as observing them scroll through the app, I noticed that they themselves are a dominant driver of personalisation. I describe this active role as people 'reading for personalisation', that is, navigating through the For You Page with the expectation of it showing an accurate representation of their self. We can take the case of Lisa to understand how this 'reading for personalisation' looks like in practice.

In our first meeting, Lisa showed and talked me through a couple of videos on her For You Page. After opening TikTok on her phone, the first video that she was shown was a sketch comparing partying in the UK with partying in holiday destinations typical for 'lads holidays' or 'girls holidays', as she explained to me. Arguably, it made quite a lot of sense that she was shown that video. Lisa is from the UK, she is a young adult, and the interview took place in the summer, a time that normally many groups of young people would travel to such typical holiday destinations with their friends. Lisa, however,

responded to the video by saying that ‘it’s a bit too basic for like my taste and humour [laughs] and I would probably just scroll past that one’ (Lisa). The next video was another sketch, one that Lisa found a little bit more appealing than the prior clip. The third video was what she described as a ‘hit’.

‘It’s just someone playing guitar and the caption says ‘if you know this riff then you’re wlv music taste exceeds the expectations of so and so’ . . . and wlv means women who like women . . . so this is like an example of the niche specific sort of thing that would come up on my feed. I don’t actually know that song but I probably would ‘like’ that because that’s an example of a very sort of specific part of my music taste’. (Lisa)

It is not the video itself that is interesting here but the fact that it was preceded by two TikTok clips that felt ‘basic’ to Lisa. Following the logic of the TikTok algorithm, all three videos can be considered personalised. However, only the third video was generative of an experience of TikTok being ‘for you’. What we see here is how personalisation relies on a user actively interpreting content based on their idea of self. Only through ‘reading for personalisation’ – skipping past ‘basic’ videos, navigating towards ‘hits’, and tagging them with a ‘like’ – an experience of personalisation comes to matter. One of my participants, Will, reflected on how he ‘reads’ the For You Page in the following way.

‘Once you use it enough . . . I can see when a video is it and when it’s not . . . when I know it’s gonna be a bad video, I scroll straight past it. So the time I spend on bad videos, even though I might have 10 bad and 1 good, the two times will be exactly the same with how quickly I’m scrolling’. (Will)

In short, for TikTok to exist and function as an escape site relies on a specific way of imagining the app’s affordances and engaging with them accordingly. It might appear trivial that users approached TikTok with the expectation of seeing a personalised content feed given the app’s ‘for you’ branding. Yet even though branding and user perceptions appeared overall inline amongst my participants, it is nonetheless crucial to understand that this specific modality of personalisation is neither fixed nor inevitable. Instead, it is contingent, could be otherwise, and thus it is in need of active and continuous construction. Making this observation is crucial because it acknowledges the vital role of cultural contexts and user agency, which includes a capacity to negotiate being acted upon by algorithms. Seen this way, the ‘for you’ quality of TikTok that renders it appealing as ‘feel good space’ is nothing inherent to the app as such but rather actively constructed in situated practices of reading TikTok for personalisation.

From personal pleasure to enriching social interactions

In the previous sections I have outlined how people actively engage with TikTok and its algorithmic personalisation systems for purposes of personal relaxation and entertainment. From this angle, I agree with the observation of Bhandari and Bimo (2020: 3) who argue that ‘the experience of using TikTok is one of repeatedly engaging with one’s own

self'. However, I disagree with their argument that, in consequence, scrolling through the For You Page enables 'intra rather than interpersonal connection'. My participants turned to TikTok to have a moment of 'me time', enjoyed the app because it was 'for you'. But scrolling through the app and 'reading for personalisation' often enriched less their own identity work than that on existing social relationships. This was especially the case because what felt 'for you' to my participants often overlapped with what their close friends would also relate to and enjoy. Velta described this overlap of interests in the following way.

'I have two friends who also use TikTok and our common interests are One Direction and Harry Styles, and that kind of music, and there's so many TikToks about them. Like, inside jokes in the fandom that would come up and I'd find that hilarious and send that to them, and they'd send me some'. (Velta)

Talking with Velta about her experience of using TikTok during the pandemic, she mentioned that she feels having 'mostly grown a lot closer to my existing friends'. (Velta). What we can see here is the phatic nature of sharing TikTok content. For Velta, sharing TikTok videos was less a way to communicate their friends a specific message of share a specific piece of information. Instead, sharing videos enabled Velta and her friends to come together as a group, for example on the grounds of a shared interest in One Direction and Harry Styles. All of my participants said that they would share TikTok videos with their friends and other close social ties. They would see something on their For You Page that reminded them of someone they knew and would just send the video to them using messaging apps like WhatsApp, for instance. Manu described this practice of discovering and sharing content in the following way.

'I mean, it definitely has been an hour before [laughs] but it's normally twenty minutes or something, I think . . . it might be like twenty minutes to half an hour and then I'll send a few videos to my friends as well like, you know . . . I'll see one and think "oh that friend will find that funny" or "this group of friends would find it funny"'. (Manu)

The meaningfulness of sharing practices as phatic communication appeared especially accentuated during times of lockdown. Sending funny TikTok videos enabled people to create a form of what Madianou (2016) has theorised as 'ambient co-presence', that is the peripheral yet still intense awareness for the presence of distant others. Sharing funny TikTok videos did not necessarily spark conversations but it allowed people to remind friends of their presence and relationship, communicating in the act of sharing the message of 'thinking about you'. As Tanja explained to me, for her TikTok is 'personal but also interactive with how you can just . . . without directly messaging someone, you can just let them know that you are thinking of them'.

In this way, we need to understand the popularity of TikTok not just as an entertainment and escape source. As I have discussed in the previous sections, people primarily approached TikTok for purposes of personal entertainment. Similarly, TikTok was appealing as a personal entertainment source in comparison to other apps. However, its popularity was also boosted in how TikTok content could be used as a resource to

facilitate social interaction. A case in which I was able to observe this strongly was that of Joyce. She described TikTok getting weaved into her social life in the following way.

'I share videos with my sister the most because she just enjoys them but doesn't really use TikTok. She's a bit older. I send her any TikTok that . . . usually stuff related to our childhood, something that's funny, something that she mentioned or said yesterday and I will be like "oh, this TikTok literally speaks on that" . . . I usually send it to my sisters. And then my friends also tag me stuff, that's how we communicate'. (Joyce).

What I found interesting about Joyce's quote, during fieldwork and later stages of my analysis, was the last bit where she says, 'that's how we communicate'. What Joyce meant was that a primary way of staying in touch with her friends and expressing certain feelings would increasingly be done by sharing TikTok clips via messaging apps. Especially towards the end of my project, when many of the students I worked with returned to campus, I was often told that referencing TikTok memes, trends, or phrases had become a common way of relating to people. Even though TikTok mostly remained an effective means to fulfil escapist desires to my participants, stories like that of Joyce and others show the growing role the app and its content plays as a resource people draw on to facilitate their everyday social life, within and beyond the boundaries of the platform.

Conclusion

In this paper I have given a situated explanation of TikTok's popularity by telling the stories of young adult TikTok users based in the United Kingdom. Taking an ethnographic audience studies approach, I have shown how TikTok, as a company and technology, has done a lot to pave and ease the way towards its service, standing especially out in the global social media landscape through its 'for you' branding and mission to 'bring joy'. However, I have also underscored that users still had to walk the way paved for them, that they were not 'magically' drawn to the platform beyond their individual control. In that course, I have demonstrated how people imagined TikTok as affording convenient access to relatable content that catered to their escapist desires and needs yet also proved useful as a resource to facilitate social interaction.

Amongst my participants, the popularity of TikTok appears thus best explained through a 'right place, right time' answer. For them, TikTok entered the global social media landscape at a time in which existing apps had already been given very defined meanings and roles in their social life, with that of escapism not being one of them. The context of the pandemic has, initially, been a booster of these escapist desires, and thus also TikTok's popularity. However, as the pandemic carried on, I rather observed how it had an opposite effect with TikTok appearing less exciting in itself and slowly turning into a more 'normal' social media app to people. In that course, TikTok managed to stay a fixed part of some but not all people's media use routines.

Moreover, as much as user experiences need to be understood as situated and contingent, so has TikTok itself to be seen as changing over time. My explanation for its popularity is not only particular the specific group of people I worked with, young adults

living in the United Kingdom, yet also to the particular time I conducted fieldwork. After all, as scholars such as Ang (1985: 19) have prominently argued, ‘any form of pleasure is constructed and functions in a specific social and historical context’. While TikTok still appears a ‘feel good space’ for many, the reasons why it appeals to them as such are constantly changing. Likewise, the way in which people locally enact the platform as their ‘feel good space’, too, is continuously adapting to ‘global’ changes concerning, for instance, the format of TikTok content.

Hence is why I want to close this paper by stressing the importance of situated audience research. I see this significance materialising in the following way. Presenting an ethnographic and long-term perspective on TikTok users, I have shown how a variety of factors and contexts shape the meanings and consequences of TikTok consumption. This appears especially crucial in light of current trends in social media scholarship where we can observe a growing interest in understanding how people interact with algorithmic systems. Ethnographic audience studies can add crucial depth to such inquires by reminding us to look beyond the points of contact between algorithms and users. Doing so will allow us to offer more nuanced explanations of how exactly apps like TikTok and their algorithms appeal to people, what consequences they have for people’s lives, as well as how these consequences are negotiated over time.


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