Communicative forms on TikTok: Perspectives from digital ethnography

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Abstract

TikTok is an app that allows people to create, share, and consume short-video content. Although only available internationally since 2017, it has already been downloaded more than 2 billion times and has around 800 million active users. Public interest in the fleeting and seemingly random video clips that TikTok hosts is high. In fact, it has grown steadily since the time of the Twitter-owned short-video app Vine that ended its service in 2016 with only a quarter of TikTok's current userbase. However, despite this steady growth in popularity, observations and theorizations of short-video apps like TikTok remain lacking. In this article, I thus seek to address this lack by critically discussing how to study short-video communications from the bottom up and by presenting the results of an exploratory investigation into TikTok and its communicative forms. Doing so, this article contributes to opening a space for serious engagement with this burgeoning yet understudied element of digital culture in the future.

Keywords: TikTok, short-video, forms of communication, digital ethnography, digital culture

Introduction

TikTok is an app that allows people to create, share, and consume short-video content. Available since 2017, it is the international version of its Chinese sister app, Douyin, that has been available since 2016. Despite its newness, TikTok has already been downloaded more than 2 billion times, which makes it one of the most downloaded apps of the last decade (SensorTower, 2020). It is because of this rapid growth and its origins outside of the Silicon Valley that TikTok has become not only a central element of popular culture but also an object of public scrutiny in recent times. This scrutiny, however, has led to only minor advancements in our understanding of short-video communications as the likes TikTok afford them. Public perceptions seldom go beyond reductionist views, seeing TikTok as mere "childish" or "simple" entertainment. TikTok is known for hosting viral dance and singing trends, as well as "silly" video clips only a few seconds in length (Roose, 2018). TikTok and the communication it facilitates is seen as something lacking depth and complexity.

TikTok can easily be (mis)read as yet another symptom of modern life marked by the logics of short-lived consumption, the self-interested drive from one momentary pleasure to the next. Many in the public discourse discuss TikTok and its algorithmic content feed as "digital crack cocaine" (Koetsier, 2020). They render it a time-wasting machine, distracting people from more meaningful matters (Odell, 2019). One is confronted with patronizing voices addressing TikTok either as a "parenting problem" or a "security threat" (Sanger & Barnes, 2020). Such commentaries are appealing. Digital detox initiatives and their calls to reclaim time and autonomy from addictive technology are growing in popularity (Sutton, 2020; Syverten, 2020). However, it is worth noting that others in the debate around TikTok remind us that "the most downloaded app . . . is barely understood by anyone above the age of 25" (Hern, 2019, para. 1). Critical observations of TikTok are made mostly from the top down.

They emphasize aspects of the app, such as privacy concerns, whose importance is not always shared to the same degree by those using the app (more generally, see Kennedy, 2016; for TikTok-specific, see Ohlheiser, 2019).

Media scholars have long been critical of such top-down perspectives and patronizing commentaries on social media. Phenomena like the selfie and other practices of online self-documentation are emblematic for that. Public commentary often renders them as narcissistic, mindless, or inconsequential—a position that media scholars have long opposed by emphasizing how seemingly "simple" and "shallow" communicative practices have always come to matter, not in and by themselves, but for their embeddedness in everyday and community life (see Abidin, 2016; Humphreys, 2018; Rettberg, 2014; Tiidenberg, 2018). TikTok is no expectation from that trend. Many assumptions about TikTok that fuel current debates are neither backed by evidence nor enunciated by actors appearing to have a serious interest in understanding the platform. This article is therefore aimed at addressing this lack of knowledge and serious interest. It does so by providing a detailed description of the form of communication on TikTok to explain what lies both behind and beyond assumptions of the app merely being home to "silly fun" entertainment.

There exists a growing body of academic literature on TikTok already. However, the primary concern of it appears to be understanding the larger political economy of the app (Chen, Kaye, & Zeng, 2020) and discussing communications on the platform through the lens of the public sphere. It focuses, for instance, on topics like U.S. politics (Guinaudeau, Votta, & Munger, 2020; Serrano, Papkyriakopoulos, & Hegelich, 2020), on youth political communication and activism (Abidin, 2020; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick, 2019), or on science communication and the spread of (mis)information (Zeng & Schäfer, 2020). While sharing these scholars' serious interest in TikTok, I take a different approach. Instead of

focusing on specific discourses and cultures on TikTok, in this article I present the results of an exploratory investigation aimed at mapping the variety of different ways of expression that come to mark TikTok as a communicative environment.

Put differently, my study set out to understand communication on TikTok as it unfolds mediated through the so-called "For You" page. That is the algorithmic content feed lying at the heart of the app's design. The "For You" page presents users with an endless stream of TikTok clips selected by the platform's algorithms attempting to identify those videos that will likely resonate with a user's interests. TikTok's algorithms do so by observing and reinforcing a user's past viewing habits. They look at what videos people watch and which they have scrolled past. They observe how users engage with the videos they see, if they tag them with "like" or "not interested," if they rewatch them, leave a comment, or read those of others, follow the creator of the video, or look at their profile pages. Taking all these and other signals as input, TikTok's algorithms recommend content "for you."

To confront this "For You" page as the primary setting of communication on TikTok, I will proceed in three steps. First, I argue that it is because of "communicative forms" that the ephemeral video clips appearing on people's content feeds present themselves not as random and short-lived entertainment but as complex, cultural artifacts. With the term "communicative form," I will be referring to the platform-specific languages or memes, trends, and aesthetic styles that are specific to TikTok and the meaning-making practices of its users. I then, second, will discuss the methodological challenges that arise when studying short-video contents as cultural artifacts of algorithmic environments like the "For You" page. Lastly, I present the results of a six-month-long investigation that explored predominant communicative forms on TikTok. Doing so, I show not only what constitutes labels of TikTok being "silly fun" but also outline the broader variety of different communicative

forms that also come to define the app. Based on this exploratory investigation, I close the article by discussing directions for future research.

Making Sense of Ephemerality

Generally, short-video content can be characterized through its ephemeral nature. It primarily comes to matter in the immediate impression it creates and only rarely manages to sustain this meaningful quality beyond its momentary presence. As research on apps like Snapchat has shown, short-video content affords to share "small moments" of daily life with trusted peers (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2016; Ekman, 2015; Piwek & Joinson, 2016). It facilitates meaningful social interaction through enacting a site of momentary copresence that brokers awareness for the life circumstances of distant others (more generally, see Madianou, 2016). Apps like Snapchat, but also Instagram, underscore this ephemeral nature by limiting the availability of short-video content. On Snapchat, videos are, by default, available to be watched only once. Likewise, so-called "Instagram Stories," which are used to document and share moments out of one's daily life, are available for only 24 hours. There is, by design, nothing meant to be expected and extracted from such content beyond its immediate impression. However, while previous research on short-video communications has mainly focused on platforms like Snapchat, I maintain that limited availability of content is only one of many ways in which ephemerality can materialize as communicative affordance.

On platforms like TikTok, videos remain available even after they have been watched. They are, in fact, looping by default. Once they have been watched, they automatically start over again. Yet it still makes sense to speak of such content as ephemeral in relation to other short-video apps. TikTok clips, too, are transient, fleeting, or short-lived phenomena. They are only a few seconds long, often variations of a meme or trend, and distributed through an algorithmic content feed. Embedded within this feed, TikTok clips are, by design, consumed

in light of a new video standing ready to replace the current. Users might scroll because the current video did not immediately resonate with them and just appears random and arbitrary or because such an impression or affective response like laughter has worn off. In either case, TikTok's algorithms always place a new video just one swipe away that according to their models will likely impress a user.

For these reasons—lengths of videos and their ephemeral or fleeting appearances—popular debates often falsely and prematurely frame short videos as mindless or meaningless. In the case of TikTok, content is rendered a mere short-lived entertainment made addictive by algorithmic means (see Koetsier, 2020; Odell, 2019). However, such a stance is not exclusive to apps like TikTok. Critics of digital media, like Turkle (2011), have long maintained that online encounters are not only lacking but also withholding people from more meaningful and "real" social interactions. In return, media scholars like Baym (2010) have frequently opposed such reductionist views by emphasizing that the meaningfulness of digital media can only be understood through their contexts. Previous inquiries into short-video communications highlight the importance of this. They have outlined for the case of Snapchat how it is the contexts within which videos are shared that ephemerality presents itself not as an obstacle to but the key quality affording meaningful communication (Bayer et al., 2016).

Recognizing this importance, I, too, adopted a contextualist approach. However, where, for apps like Snapchat, the context appears to be interpersonal in nature, on TikTok the situation is different. This is because on TikTok, short videos are mediated through the "For You" page, connecting users with the broader cultural dynamics unfolding on the platform. This is why in popular debates, TikTok is referred to as a "meme breeding ground," as a place where new trends continuously emerge (Martin, 2019). More generally speaking, the concept of "meme" can be understood as communally shared "cultural units" that provide people with a

set of established contents and formats that they can rely on and adapt online for purposes of self-expression (Shifman, 2014). Early studies on TikTok support the observation of TikTok as a "breeding ground" of such cultural units. They have focused on tracing how different languages take shape that are specific to TikTok and the meaning-making practices of its users (see Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick, 2019; Rettberg, 2017).

The exploratory investigation presented in this article was thus centered around broadly tracing communicative forms on TikTok. Taking shape as specific memes, trends, aesthetic styles, or genres, it is such communicative forms that tie the ephemeral appearance of individual contents to a larger frame of reference. They create a common background against which the expressions of others that people encounter on their "For You" page can be made sense of, however brief they might be. Whatever might be documented or spoken about is done so using TikTok's distinct languages or communicative forms.

Methodological Challenges

To operationalize this contextualist approach, there is a key methodological challenge that needs to be tackled: studying short videos as cultural artifacts. An overinterpretation of individual videos needs to be avoided, and instead, focus should be set on their embeddedness within the broader background of shared trends, memes, or platform-specific languages. The challenging nature of that process rests, on the one side, in the accelerated nature of TikTok. Not just individual TikTok videos but also their context of TikTok trends is ephemeral. Trends often fade away or are replaced by new ones emerging within a short period of time—hence the association of TikTok being a "meme breeding ground" (Martin, 2019). An ethnographic stance appears best suited to tackle this challenge. Focusing on time spent in the field instead of the number of individual cases and videos analyzed, an

ethnographic approach can provide the longitudinal perspective necessary to understand forms of expressions in their constant (re)use and variation on the platform.

On the other side, TikTok's size and way of content distribution also adds to the challenge. Various cultural contexts are represented on TikTok. Accessing these is complicated through TikTok's "For You" page creating algorithmic "personalization," a technical term that is misleading when conflated with an everyday understanding of personality. Ultimately, what the "For You" page and other recommender systems do is reinforce past viewing habits. Therefore, a conscious approach and field navigation strategies are necessary to avoid feedback loops that emerge during "personalization." Such strategies can be pragmatic, like avoiding the "For You" page and accessing content through hashtags. Yet they can also be of thematic nature, following deeper or turning away from certain trends already observed (Burrell, 2009). This is why I propose that processes of data gathering are joined with those of preliminary analysis. If not, one will be unable to become aware of the paths that have already been taken, which is necessary to avoid feedback loops and to explore a broader variety of cultural contexts and their communicative practices on TikTok. Ethnography seems the best approach to provide this kind of contextual awareness and should guide data gathering on short-video platforms.

In return, the investigation presented in this article was conducted in accordance with principles of digital ethnographic practice. Instead of making digital domains fit taken-for-granted methodological frameworks, a creative and adaptive approach was deployed to cope with the complex and dynamic nature of networked communication on TikTok from the bottom up (see Hine, 2015; Markham, 2013; Marres, 2017). This digital ethnographic stance was adopted in the context of an exploratory study that aimed at mapping different forms of communication as one can encounter them on TikTok as a digital field site. Put differently, I

present, here, not an ethnography of TikTok or of specific user groups but a detailed description of its communicative forms—perspectives that can function as starting points and guidance for more complete ethnographies of the platform and its cultures to be written.

Fieldwork and Data Gathering

Fieldwork started in January 2020 and lasted six months. It took place in the form of a routine of using TikTok, where I would scroll through the app's "For You" page for around 30 to 60 minutes every other day, closely guided by a spreadsheet document as a field diary. This document was the central form in which data was gathered in an aggregate form. Individual videos were watched and analyzed on the platform; no contents were downloaded and stored; and screenshots were taken only once as needed for illustrative purposes. Given TikTok's design and public image, it can be assumed that most users are aware of their content potentially reaching large audiences. Nonetheless, it was determined that the ethically responsible way of gathering data was to create an aggregate document that links only to videos on the platform and thus leaves control over the content with the users that have uploaded them. Extra care was taken to explicitly discuss in publication only videos or creators that had already achieved some level of public recognition on the app and beyond.

The spreadsheet field diary was set up and used in the following way: The vertical axis of the table was used to note individual TikTok trends and groups of videos, naming them, and entering a short description of their content and style. Following an inductive process, these trends were continuously (re)grouped with attention focused on identifying common themes and shared formal characteristics like videos being plain montages of everyday life or staged skits. The vertical axis was used to sort and link individual clips as significant cases of specific groups of videos.

The routine was structured in observing the content present on the “For You” page alongside this field diary. Gaining contextual awareness through observing the growth of the spreadsheet guaranteed and enabled the exploration of a broad variety of communicative forms on the platform. If the number of trends increased too much, the focus would switch to investigating individual trends more closely. This meant reevaluating cases that had been assigned to them, following the associated hashtags, and surveying videos that used similar formal elements, such as a song or a visual effect. If the table extended horizontally—accumulating lots of individual cases for already identified clusters—navigation switched back to searching for other thematic groups of videos. In that situation, I would keep scrolling until I encountered a video that did not fit any of the already identified clusters—for instance, by using a new bit of audio. I would then search for similar videos following the above procedure of investigating associated hashtags to assess whether it may constitute a new trend or meme.

The first weeks of fieldwork were marked by covering ground within the field and establishing an overview of more generic aesthetic styles and genres like comedy. Especially in the weeks following this initial period, the field diary became an integral tool to navigate through the “For You” page. Other than being stuck within a feedback loop centered around the initial group of videos, the awareness this spreadsheet provided on the type of content already encountered enabled continuous discovery of new content, nuances, and variations of memes and styles within the “For You” page. After six months, the spreadsheet appeared saturated and data gathering was stopped.

Consolidating Patterns in Field Data

The result of this fieldwork period was a spreadsheet document referencing a body of 700 videos spread across 96 clusters. With the investigation offering an exploratory account of

communication on TikTok, these 700 videos are significant cases identified from within the field and based on the deep, contextual understanding that was gained while scrolling through TikTok for six months. This sample and the initial clusters were then refined and consolidated through further qualitative content analysis. The three memetic dimensions of "content," "form," and "stance," as developed by Shifman (2013), were used as guidance. The dimension of "content" refers to the kinds of ideas, messages, or feelings that are conveyed within a meme. The dimension of "form" confronts the audio, visual, and textual or symbolic means through which a meme takes shape, as well as the genre-related patterning thereof. The last dimension, that of "stance," finally addresses the position that a creator of memetic content takes toward both the discourses and formats that are more generally associated with a specific meme or trend (Shifman, 2013).

Concerning the dimensions of content and form, a description detailing what is being expressed in the video clip and what specific means, like a song or visual effect, are defining the delivery of that content most centrally was added to each video. In addition to that, the formal structure of videos was coded along five generic variables. The levels of each variable were grounded in the knowledge that was gained during fieldwork as well as sharpened during the initial data overview and the early stages of content analysis (see Table 1 for a detailed description).

Table 1. Variable Description of Formal Video Aspects.

Variable	Description
Ensemble	Count of people in the video up to five, then as "group." Relationship between two or more coded as either "partner," "family," "friends,"

	"classmates/colleagues," or "strangers." Animals and pets were counted too, yet explicitly named as such.
Stage	A generic descriptive code was entered for the videos' primary setting and location, such as being filmed in the "bathroom," "living room," "office," or "car."
Audio	The type of audio used was coded as being either "original sound," "reused sound," or "song." Specific descriptions of sounds and lyrics were added in the content description.
Visual	Each video was added with generic codes for the visual elements, effects, and filters used, such as "text annotation," "green screen," or "Zoom and face-track effect."
Edit	The overall form of the edit and setup of the video/shots was coded as either being "one continuous shot," "two-scene setup," "three-scene setup," or "montage of shots/clips."

The result of this step was a refined field diary that, for each of the 700 videos, outlined a descriptive record of the content and formal elements. Then, guided by Shifman's (2013) dimensions, intragroup comparisons of the videos that had previously been clustered in the field were carried out. The reason for this step was to reevaluate the elements constitutive to each of the 96 memes, trends, styles, or genres. For instance, clusters of videos using the

same song or audio bit—that means being stable in form—were often observed having variations on the dimensions of content or stance, meaning people using the same song to express different messages or using that song in a comedic way parodying the way others use it. In this way, using Shifman's (2013) memetic dimensions to sharpen the field data, the qualitative content analysis allowed to reduce the initial number of 96 clusters to 64 more distinct groups of videos and ultimately inferring six overarching communicative forms: comedic, documentary, communal, interactive, explanatory, and meta.

Communicative Forms on TikTok

Comedic

Throughout fieldwork and at least within the Western contexts in which it was located, public perceptions of TikTok remained in line with initial connotations of it being "silly fun" (Roose, 2018). Especially at the start of 2020, when the first lockdowns were put in place to tackle the spread of the coronavirus, the entertaining and comedic tone underlying much of TikTok's content had been discussed as the key reason behind the platform's sudden rise in popularity (Kale, 2020). However, during that time TikTok also commenced campaigns aimed at diversifying content on its site through investments in informational content and educational partnerships (TikTok, Inc., 2020). Further, especially in the United States, political communications and notions of the public sphere were topics discussed more frequently in relation to TikTok. However, political communication, as previous inquiries into TikTok have shown, often remains comedic in nature (see Abidin, 2020; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick, 2019).

Among the six communicative forms identified, that of comedy or comedic contents can thus be positioned as good starting points to make sense of TikTok. This is because of its cultural-historical significance that, of course, might change in the future. Yet it is also important

analytically: The comedic form identified allows us to draw a vital distinction, namely that between content that is "just funny," marked by an overall atmosphere frequently associated with TikTok, and that which is deliberately concerned with delivering a specific joke or sketch.

Comedic content on TikTok is diverse both in its content and form. Some, for instance, addresses more general topics, such as religion, like a video from TikTok creator @lonnieiiv (2020). In it, he stages a sketch in which God and Gabriel talk about the process of God creating Earth. @lonnieiiv, playing the roles of both God and Gabriel, presented the conversation between the two by adding a text label to indicate as whom he is speaking. Other creators, such as Melissa Ong, film themselves in the mirror to perform stand-up-like routines. For example, in one video, Ong (@chunkysdead, 2020) films herself in the mirror talking about how people think happiness comes from healthy relationships when it, as she argues, does come from drugs. However, forms of political comedy are also present. Max Foster (@maxfostercnn, 2020), for instance, created a video in which he lip-synchs to the audio of "I don't think you have the facilities for this, big man" to comment on world leaders claiming that they can handle the pandemic. Foster's clip displays another popular format that combines the elements of a text annotation, setting the scene of the joke, with the audio element being used to deliver a response or punchline (see Figure 1 to get an impression of the visual setup of the three cases).

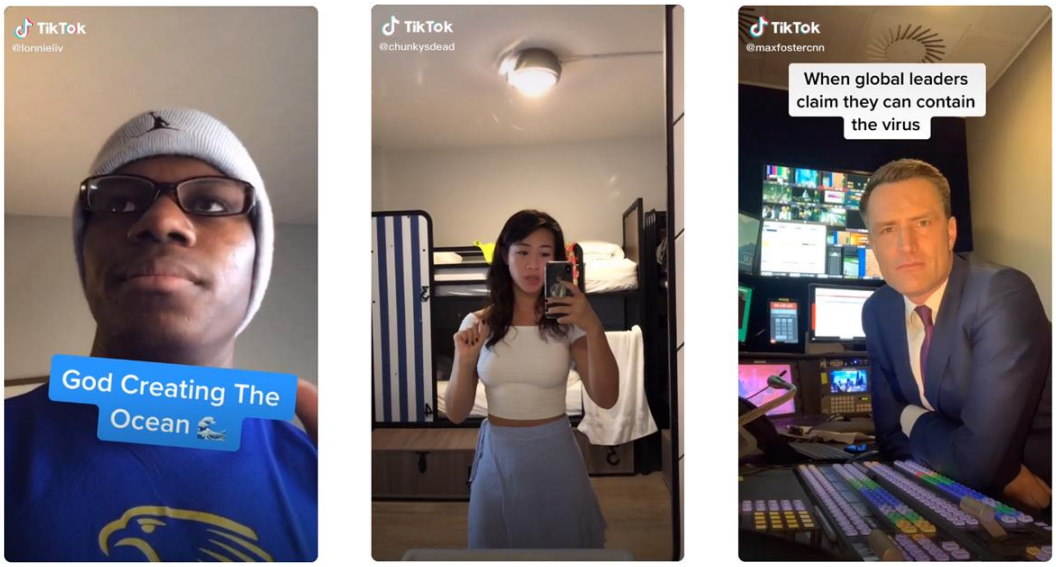

Figure 1. Screenshots illustrating the discussed TikTok creations of @lonnieivv (2020), Ong (@chunkysdead, 2020), and Foster (@maxfostercnn, 2020).

These different examples and other comedic videos surveyed could easily be linked to specific discourses, such as those surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. However, videos did not seem to be organized topically. Writing from within the dynamic reality of scrolling through the "For You" page, it was on the dimension of format that differences were most noticeable. Many contents remained raw in the sense of relying on the creator's filmed performance. Others, however, used visual elements like an effect that would dramatically zoom in and track the face of the performer to underscore the delivery of his or her punchline. Some videos even organized the entire routine around a song or audio bit that would set the pace and breaking point of the joke, as was the case with the aforementioned video from Foster (@maxfostercnn, 2020). And yet others focused on editing techniques and mixing different video materials, for instance reediting pop-cultural contents from movies and tv shows like The Office, herein often linking to the use of such pop-cultural material in other memes present around the Internet.

All these contents remained comedic in nature in the sense of them creating some tension that is then released, or in parodying situations to a point of funny absurdity. However, these different styles enact the comedic form in different tonalities. Some are clearer and more direct, while others are of a much higher pace and intensity. These different comedic styles materialize different "affective rhythms" (Papacharissi, 2015); they create and sustain specific patterns of how people relate to and become aware of others and the world through comedy and TikTok as a medium.

Documentary

The majority of comedic contents analyzed seemed—even if to varying degrees—mostly detached from the personality of the performer. Their focus appeared to rest, first and foremost, not on drawing from the creator's everyday life or sharing the self as such, but rather by commenting through comedy on more general topics or current affairs. However, within the body of videos surveyed there also was content that did the opposite—that is, videos having a comedic tone but using it to express the self, talk about one's life circumstances, or document a current event. A lot of comedic videos on TikTok are pieces of anecdotal comedy, like a video of @rachill_1024 (2020) telling the story of how her father was mistaken as a homeless person at the supermarket. Or they are self-deprecating forms of humor, such as a creation by Emma Westfall (@emmaclarewestfall, 2020), that shows her sitting in the car joking about how she can't love someone back because that person clearly has bad taste.

These videos differentiate themselves from those of comedy in that although they are marked by a comedic tonality, they use that tone to document domains of everyday life. Seen through Shifman's (2013) memetic dimensions, they differ in content and use formal comedic elements not to let a joke unfold but rather to enable self-expression and document daily life.

Although there are many plain and unedited documentations of something funny or absurd happening, adhering to TikTok's "silly fun" atmosphere, other tonalities are also present. Many videos portray typical everyday situations or stereotypes. A good example is a video from Chloe Walker (@chloegwalkerr, 2020) in which she stages a situation of what happens every time she tries to talk to her guy friends, which results in them shouting and shutting her up. Similar to this setting of the friend group and its gendered dynamics, documentary videos cover a broad range of situations and settings of daily life (such as at school, the office, or the supermarket) or they play with questions of cultural heritage and national identities. However, there are also videos that create an aestheticized context in which seemingly arbitrary video clips of people's rooms, of cityscapes, or nature can be shared in a meaningful way. These videos are either montages put together to fit a specific song, or they are simply a continuous shot documenting a single moment or situation. A video of @itsizzy611, for instance, consists of a single, continuous shot showing her lying on a balcony in the rain while the video caption reads, "It's an incredible feeling . . . letting the rain fall on you." (@itsizzy611, 2020).

Documenting and sharing the self and one's everyday life circumstances is not specific to TikTok; neither is it a novelty of social media as such (see Humphreys, 2018). However, there are two ways in which TikTok differs in comparison to other video-sharing platforms like YouTube. The first has to do with the shortness and ephemeral appearance of TikTok's contents. Even though creators thematize more specific elements of everyday life, documentary communications do not necessarily center around the person creating the video as a distinct content creator personality. Instead, their key is relatability. They communicate typical, funny, or absurd moments against the common backgrounds of life in school, college, lockdown, and similar settings. The ephemeral appearances of such clips, occupying people's screens for only seconds, leaves little room to highlight those subtle differences constitutive

to the idea of personality. Instead, documentary communications are embedding works. They create relatability by locating the self as part of common settings and circumstances.

This becomes clearer when looking at the second characteristic difference, namely that of a "memeification" of daily life. On TikTok, there exist myriad formats and trends that allow expressing the self and one's current mood through already existing formats and scripts. For example, the "door slam" meme combines a script of people angrily entering a room, slamming the door, and jumping on their beds with an audio bit playing the sounds of the door slam followed by loud music. This meme only has specific nuances through people outlining their current and personally specific situations in a text annotation to which they then react in the meme's format.

Communal

The form of communal communications underscores the prominence of such TikTok trends and memes. Yet it also highlights their cultural vitality in them lowering barriers for online expression by presenting memes as ready-to-share ways of self-expression. The communal way of expression is hence strongly linked to the first two formats, which means it mostly documents "silly fun." However, the foundational element is that videos are created communally, together with partners, family members, friends, classmates, or colleagues. One trend, for instance, combines an audio bit of Simple Plan's "I'm Just a Kid" with a script that people are supposed to re-create and then cut to a childhood photograph of them, often also featuring parents, siblings, and other family members. As the example from Joe Mele (@mmjoemele, 2020) illustrates, there is a communal element lying within the process of creation: father and son coming together, yet the final product also creates a "silly fun" video clip to which others can relate. Similarly, the video of @alexvaa (2020) underscores this point by showing her and her parents participating in one of TikTok's dance trends. Yet

often, communal communications are also tied to showcasing friends and family members, especially during lockdown, as the example from @darnbee (2020) shows. Her video is part of the “Dude, we’re getting the band back together” meme, in which the corresponding audio bit from a Phineas and Ferb episode is used to present a montage of shots showing siblings back at home during lockdown (see Figure 2 to get a sense for the style and composition of typical communal content).

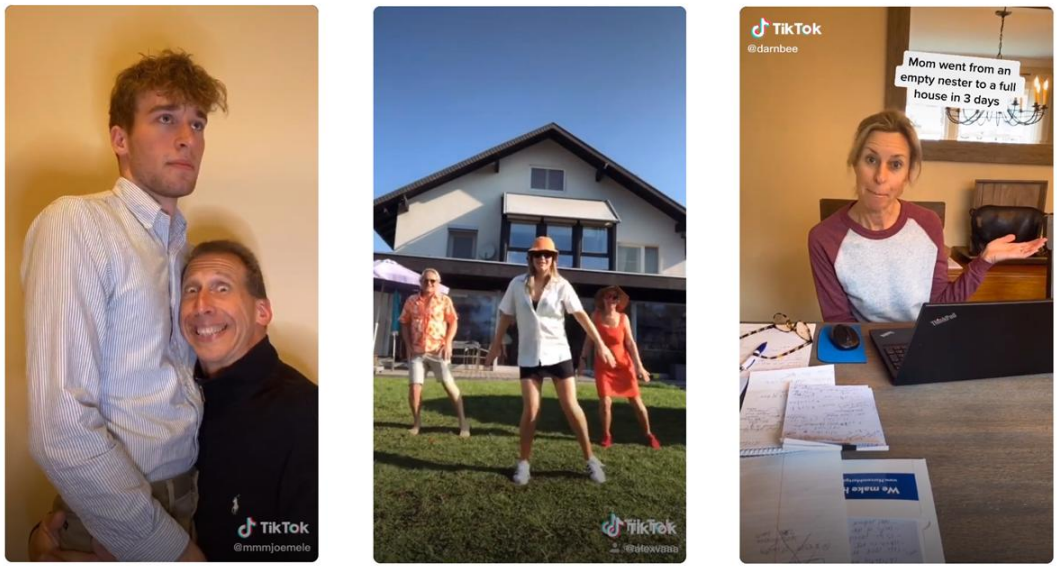

Figure 2. Screenshots of TikTok videos by Mele (@mmmjoemele, 2020), @alexvaa (2020), and @darnbee (2020) for illustration of communal communications.

As these examples outline, social relationships are prominently featured within TikTok content. However, enframed through trends, memes, and shared ways of expression, these contents enable a different kind of relationship to form: that in which strangers can relate to one another in meaningful ways. The significance of the performers as distinct subject positions is overshadowed by that of their participation in a larger cultural event. The communicative form opens grounds for an encounter that is not necessarily concerned with dialogue or debate, but that kind of meaning emerging from sensing the presence of others in

what has been theorized as a "contact zone" (Ahmed, 2004)—a surface area enabling the materialization of collective sentiments and sensibilities of the now.

Similar communal experiences through memes—that means on the grounds created by shared ways of expression—have already been observed in other online contexts like student Facebook groups. The mostly text-based and image-based memes present in such groups were observed creating a shared symbolic and semantic space (see Ask & Abidin, 2018). However, because of the audiovisual nature of TikTok memes, the trends I have encountered have a much stronger emphasis on the embodied and performative aspects of communication, meaning the way in which content touches and creates shared sensibility. This form of memetics, creating a collective sensibility, appears thus an interesting area for future research to explore.

Explanatory

Another communicative form linked to that of documentary content can be found in videos that are tutorials and "life hacks." Such explanatory videos primarily come in the form of montage videos detailing creative processes in areas of arts and crafts, style and clothing, food and recipes, music and dancing tutorials, general tips and tricks for everyday life, and many more. They are, to varying degrees, closely linked to the documentary form in that they focus on sharing knowledge from one's own professional experience, hobbies, or general ways of going about life.

There are some differences in the style and tonality of such explanatory videos. Some are raw and unnarrated montages, like a video from @lunarstruc showing how to prepare an "easy, fast, and healthy" burrito meal (@lunarstruc, 2020). However, on the other end, tutorials often are aestheticized through songs and through adding elaborations in the form of text annotations or speech. However, key differences that could be observed rested mainly on the

dimension of content. Although some explanatory videos appeared unique to TikTok, others—and especially those related to food, cooking, and recipes—seemed as if they also could have been found on other platforms like Instagram. In fact, videos were distributed on both platforms by their creators in many cases. Underscored by TikTok's initiative to promote and develop more educational content on the platform (TikTok, Inc., 2020), these and other learning-related contents form an important area of future research.

Focused on the formal elements of communication on TikTok, explanatory contents appeared in line with the earlier outlined theme of videos being, to some degree, detached and decontextualized from the personality of the creator. While drawing from that person's everyday life, the focus of communication seemed mostly set on the more general aspects like preparing a quick meal—explanatory content works, so to speak, without further contextualization or knowledge about the creator as such. What was interesting in that regard was how people reused songs and audio bits for their tutorials that were, at the time, popular on TikTok as part of a dance trend or meme. Other than creating meaningful context through a kind of content creator personality, the more central embedding was that of TikTok and its cultural dynamics. These appropriative practices of reuse in return hinted at the kind of interactions that unfold within the platform environment.

Interactive

This element of interaction on the platform can further be observed as two distinct communicative forms. The one way it was encountered was through the myriad TikTok videos that turn trends into challenges and especially made use of the app's filters and visual effects. They emphasize the way in which TikTok can be transformed into an interactive space, keying the app's use into something almost playful and gamified. For example, the video of Jessie Shen (@jessie.shen, 2020), illustrated in Figure 3, below, nicely outlines how

dancing trends often become transformed into a challenge. Using a piece of audio or detailing a specific set of actions in text annotations marks communication as the act of showcasing one's skill of completing the said challenge. The "level up" trend in which people showcase their skills—or other's—of completing increasingly difficult tasks or levels is another good example. The video of @dobyandblue (2020), also shown in Figure 3, below, is a typical case for that challenge. It shows the creator's dogs jumping over an increasingly high stack of toilet paper. The shared use of the "level up" audio, indexing videos in a searchable way, creates in return an almost decentralized setting of competition of people showing off such or similar skills and capabilities of their pets.

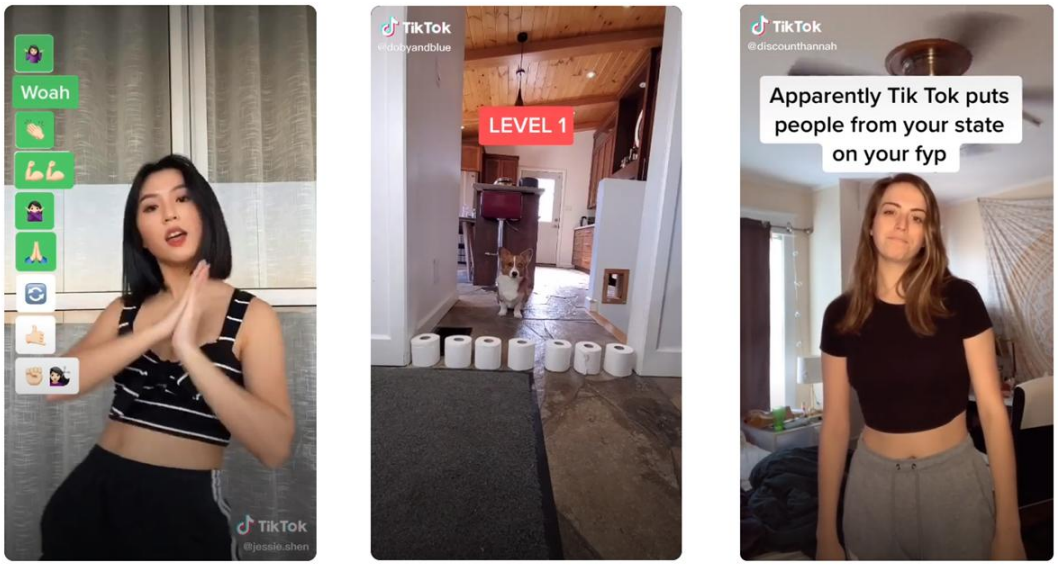

Figure 3. Screenshots of exemplary interactive and meta communications by Shen (@jessie.shen, 2020), @dobyandblue (2020), and @discounthannah (2020).

The way in which TikTok's affordances enable this process of opening up interactive spaces is further emphasized through the app's duet function. TikTok's duet function allows users to respond to and incorporate another person's video into their own new creations. It originates

from its predecessor Musical.ly, and, compared with other major platforms, is a relatively unique affordance. Studying the practices and dynamics in which such interactive spaces are enacted on TikTok through its affordances is a very fruitful area for future research. In particular, a better understanding of the nature of these interactions and communal experiences is interesting, given that other platforms like Instagram or Twitter primarily foster text-based or image-based interactions. The audiovisual nature of TikTok videos and their ephemeral appearance adds a different and arguably new kind of complexity to the question of how online interactions can come to constitute meaningful social forms.

Meta

Interactive communications are closely related to the sixth and last form, that of meta communication. Being likely one of the most interesting and unique aspects of TikTok, meta communications are contents that address TikTok as such. One of the most common types of such content on TikTok is the "if you see this" video. The creation of @discounthannah (2020), illustrated in Figure 3. above, is a perfect example of this type of content. Videos of this kind will often start by talking about how TikTok's algorithms place content in your feed from users that have similar interests or who are in a similar life situation. They then follow up by revealing that similarity, often through lip-synching an audio bit or through text annotations and borrowing from other forms and genres, such as comedy. In the case of @discounthannah, the reveal of "a state of depression," (@discounthannah, 2020) referred to her experience with the COVID-19 pandemic, life in lockdown, and all other life events happening on top of that.

A video by @itskingchris (2020) is another example that highlights how meta communications often mix with comedy. His video is one of many meta communicative sketches. Depicting the TikTok algorithm as a king sitting on a throne and handing down

"likes" to creators with a big following but not those who create "original content," @itskingcrhis (2020) critiques and creates awareness for the algorithmic practice of TikTok. What makes meta communications on TikTok unique and interesting in that regard is how thematizing the app while contributing to its "silly fun" atmosphere enables them to become seamlessly integrated into the content feed's textual fabric. Because on TikTok contents are consumed in a composite environment, the "For You" page, self-referential loops in the form of videos joking about this algorithmic environment can emerge within the very conditions they seek to make fun of. They can do so much easier than on a YouTube video or blog post, opening a perspective on algorithmic recommendation from the outside.

However, there are also other ways in which meta communications intervene. One of the most interesting ways is that of "TikTok checkpoints." Videos of this kind, like one of @tofu_corgi (2020), often are up to a minute in length and feature a continuous shot and slow music or ambient sounds. They present themselves as "rest areas," as in the case of the video of @tofu_corgi (2020), which shows a dog lying in bed and the text in annotations inviting people to stay as long as they want to. They oppose a predominant rhythm of comedic and upbeat content, seeking to spark immediate affective responses like laughter or joy. These checkpoint videos try to break with that rhythm; they create speed bumps. They are expressions that do not mediate knowledge on TikTok in an explicit but rather an implicit way. These "rest area" videos communicate by speaking in a tonality that is noticeably different from those predominant on the platform. By doing so and creating this noticeable difference, they open up opportunities to become aware of one's own presence on the platform and within the flow of the "For You" page. They are bottom-up negotiations of TikTok as an algorithmic environment.

There are also more serious and direct videos in which people share thoughts on the TikTok algorithm. They establish what has previously been theorized as “algorithmic gossip” (Bishop, 2019) or “algorithmic imaginaries” (Bucher, 2017), the knowledge of how algorithms work and can be interacted with. The creations of Mady Dewey (@madydewey1, 2020) are exemplary in that context. They often feature her talking directly to the camera and reporting on experiments she conducted or on thoughts she has about the TikTok algorithm. However, such forms of meta communication appear less prevalent. Instead, it is the more implicit and indirect videos that give TikTok a unique standing. What makes TikTok interesting is how its meta communications are not abstract or an outside discourse on the app but rather speaking from its inside. They afford opportunities of self-awareness and moments to intervene and regulate from the bottom up.

Conclusion

Contrary to predominant critiques, TikTok materializes not as a communicative environment that affords merely simple entertainment made addictive through algorithmic means. Instead, it takes shape as a dynamic structure that is open toward being appropriated and navigated in different ways and in negotiation of potential consequences. Other than being the perfect fit for popular debates trying to render digital technologies wholly corrupt, TikTok strongly resonates with much older debates on audience agency. TikTok adds new, even if not unprecedented means of data gathering onto people’s smartphones. These should be scrutinized. However, this scrutiny should not overlook the potentiality that rests within TikTok’s formal structure, affording myriad moments of audience activity—for example, by enabling the seamless integration of meta communications into the very experience of scrolling through the app.

As Stuart Hall (1981) prominently argued: “The danger arises because we tend to think of cultural forms as whole and coherent: either wholly corrupt or wholly authentic. Whereas, they are deeply contradictory, they play on contractions” (p. 233). This kind of sensibility, for the contradictory uses and appropriations of platforms like TikTok, seems a quality increasingly missing in debates today. Although it remains for future research to empirically trace how exactly people navigate TikTok’s communicative environment in their search for meaning and meaningful experience, this article has provided resources and perspectives for the process of better understanding TikTok to take the complexity of the app and its content seriously.

In this article, I have conceptualized TikTok as a communicative environment composed of ephemeral video clips. Fleeting and transient short videos, bound together through their underlying communicative forms that were theorized as communally shared ways of expression or platform-specific languages. They were theorized as forming shared cultural contexts. They form a background against which meaningful self-expression and sense-making of others and otherness can take place. TikTok creates, so to speak, a representation of reality as documented through the lens of its specific communicative forms, six of which I have identified and discussed in this article—a representation of reality mediated through the “For You” page, the algorithmic content feed connecting a single user with the broader cultural dynamics unfolding on TikTok. It is this structural condition—the combination of communicative forms and the “For You” page—that comes to define TikTok’s structural complexity. That is the complexity of environmental awareness and the means through which such a sensibility for the life of others and the world around is mediated. Reflecting on TikTok in light of this conceptualization and findings of the exploratory investigation, the following directions of future research appear worthwhile to pursue.

First, although an understanding of TikTok and the complexity of its formal structure is important, meaning continues to be the product of the situations and local settings within which media are used. Thus, studying how the creation and consumption of TikTok content is integrated into everyday life is vital. As communication on TikTok relies on sharing moments and stories from daily life in a way that people located outside one's social circle can relate to, the senses of publicness and intimacy organizing uses of TikTok thus form a crucial area worthy of further inquiry.

Second, TikTok's content feed presents a unique and diverse textual structure assembling contents of different genres and styles. Within this textual structure, the presence of meta communications—videos addressing the app and its algorithmic system—appears particularly interesting and novel. Studying how knowledge on TikTok and its algorithmic system takes shape from within the app appears to be an important area of future research, especially to better understand from a bottom-up perspective how people can and do manage to interact with algorithms in meaningful ways today.

Lastly, TikTok is increasingly making investments aimed at promoting learning-related content on—and uses of—its app (TikTok, Inc., 2020). Faced with this structural development of the platform, imposed from the top down by TikTok as a company, it is crucial that future research looks at the ways in which users respond to that development. Research should study the ways in which this development of learning-related content unfolds in an environment currently more centered around entertainment and comedic content. Of interest here are both the means of resistance to such a top-down imposed change but also the ways in which it might be appropriated by users to create new forms of learning in the context of the short-video format and algorithmic content feeds like the "For You" page.

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