

# On getting carried away by the TikTok algorithm

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Cite as: Schellewald, A. (2021). On getting carried away by the TikTok algorithm. AoIR  
Selected Papers of Internet Research. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2021i0.12039>

Author version of a short paper published at

<https://spir.aoir.org/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/12039>

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### Abstract

In this paper I respond to debates on the addictive and distractive quality associated with algorithmic environments like the popular short-video app TikTok. TikTok has frequently been discussed for its addictive nature. Many commentators and critics rendering the app as emblematic for the ways in which digital media as such distract their users from more meaningful and profound experiences. Contrasting such commentary, I draw on a one and half year long ethnographic investigation of TikTok. Doing so, I outline how young adult users of the app appropriated the TikTok algorithm's addictive quality in their search for distraction and escape in everyday life and during the pandemic. Teasing out similarities with prior media forms, like soap operas or magazines, offering similar sites of escape in daily life, I discuss how the sense of getting carried away on TikTok was constructed by users in interaction with the app's algorithm. Finally, I will conclude by arguing that independence, in the context of algorithms and their emotional consequences, comes to matter not in absolute but relative terms. While for my participants 'mindless scrolling' through TikTok induced pleasure, the same practice, on other platforms, like Instagram, induced boredom. These subtle differences within the landscape of 'addictive media' are often overlooked within debates and the question how they come into being require more attention.

*Keywords: TikTok, ethnography, digital culture, algorithms, well-being*

In this paper I respond to debates on the addictive and distractive quality associated with algorithmic environments like the popular short-video app TikTok. While it has been discussed and praised for its fun atmosphere, especially during lockdown (cf. Kale 2020 or Roose 2018), many describe TikTok as mere short-lived entertainment made addictive by algorithmic means. Or, in other words, a distraction from more meaningful and profound experiences (cf. Koetsier 2020, Odell 2019, or Spanos 2019).

Scholarship on TikTok has opposed such commentaries, instead emphasizing the depth and complexity of communication on the app (among others Abidin 2020, Literat and Kligler-Vilenchick 2019, Rettberg 2017, or Siles and Meléndez-Moran 2021). Joining these scholars taking TikTok seriously, I report from an ethnographic investigation into the short-video app. Doing so, I explore how the TikTok algorithm's addictive quality is actively approached and managed by users of the app in search for distraction.

Fieldwork started in early 2020 and lasted for roughly one and a half years. During that period, a digital ethnography of the TikTok app was carried out, aimed at understanding the forms and flows of communication on the platform (see Schellewald 2021). In addition, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted over the course of one year, starting in the early summer of 2020. Participants of the study were 30 young adults, mostly based in the Greater London area. Interviews focused on locating TikTok within people's polymedia environments (Madianou and Miller 2012) and their interactions with and reflections on the TikTok algorithm.

The primary way in which participants of the study used TikTok was for 'passive consumption' or 'mindless scrolling'. On their respective For You Pages all would see a dominant element of comedy content. Aside from that, a variety of different types of videos (such as vlogs or dance videos), genres (like Cottagecore), or topics and 'TikTok sides' (like

‘Gay TikTok’, ‘British TikTok’, or ‘DnD TikTok’) characterized each participants’ individual feed. While none felt as being part of a specific TikTok community, all described their For You Page as ‘close to home’ and the people and videos they would encounter as exceptionally ‘authentic’ and ‘relatable’.

Early during fieldwork, it became clear that the key reason why mindlessly scrolling through TikTok’s algorithmically curated content feed appealed to people was as a means of escape. They always ended up on the app in situations in which they felt left empty by the ‘here and now’. They turned to TikTok when they needed cheering up, distraction, help relaxing and winding down, or simply escape the unbearableness of boredom. For them TikTok was something like a ‘true 30-minute escape’, an easily accessible way of forgetting about life in the ‘here and now’. An experience that none of their other social media apps seemed able to afford.

Tracing these small moments of everyday TikTok use, in my work I show how people actively appropriated and engaged with the addictive quality of the TikTok algorithm as a means of escape, of getting carried away. In the spirit of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999), I link this ‘passive consumption’ of TikTok to prior popular media forms like soap operas (Ang 1985) or magazines (Hermes 1995). I outline how the pleasure people experience and desire from TikTok fits within a broader lineage of media forms like soap operas that have and do still offer similar forms of momentary escape and distraction in everyday life.

Following Ien Ang’s (1985) argument that such ‘mere entertainments’ are not simple pleasures but the product of complex processes, I trace how people interacted with the TikTok algorithm to achieve an experience of getting carried away. Looking at how people dealt with ‘scarily precise’ recommendations on their feed, as well as how they adjusted their

behavior on the app to be ‘seen’ more easily by the TikTok algorithm, in my work I discuss how the tension of TikTok being a site of pleasure yet also surveillance played out.

Drawing on these stories of situated interactions with the TikTok algorithm, I conclude by arguing that independence, in the context of algorithms and their emotional consequences, comes to matter not in absolute but relative terms. The importance of independence is not fixed but dynamic, matters to people more in some moments and digital settings than others. Doing so, I join scholars emphasizing that the emotional consequences of practices of scrolling are manifold (e.g. Lupinacci 2020) and that digital media play a vital role in the micromanagement of everyday rhythms (e.g. Markham 2020 or Paasonen 2021). While for my participants ‘mindless scrolling’ through TikTok induced pleasure, the same practice, on other platforms, like Instagram, induced boredom. These subtle differences within the landscape of ‘addictive media’ are often overlooked within debates and the question how they come into being deserves more attention.

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