

Discussing the role of TikTok sharing practices in everyday social life

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Abstract

A crucial element of TikTok consumption is the act of sharing TikTok videos with others, such as friends. In this article I draw on ethnographic fieldwork with young adult TikTok users based in the United Kingdom to investigate this practice. I show how people use TikTok's "For You" page as a resource to facilitate social relationships at a distance and in settings of physical co-presence. I highlight how TikTok clips are shared in a phatic manner to activate social relationships, for example through communicating messages "thinking about you" or relating to others through referencing TikTok memes in conversations. Attending to sharing practices, I argue, provides a fruitful way to understand how self-identities and interpersonal relationships are articulated in social media environments increasingly organized around the logic of personalization.

Keywords: TikTok, sharing, social media, everyday life, interpersonal relations, ethnography

Introduction

Over the last years, personalization has become an increasingly dominant logic organizing the social media landscape (Kant, 2020). This logic has been advanced along the promise to reduce information overload and free people from the burden of choice (Cohn, 2019), and to create a more “relevant” experience (Lupinacci, 2022). In this article, I take the popular short-video app TikTok as a case to explore the consequences of this shift towards personalization as a dominant logic of social media. TikTok exemplifies these developments, most clearly visible through its prominent “for you” branding. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with young adult TikTok users in the United Kingdom, I investigate how the logics of algorithmic personalization and networked sociality converge around the app. To do so, practices of TikTok content sharing are my particular focus in this paper.

Previous scholarship has already, and early on, hinted at the significance of such sharing practices in relation to TikTok use (compare Siles and Meléndez-Moran, 2021, p. 20). By putting sharing practices in the focus of my analysis, I explore the question of how we might think differently of personalization, namely with sociality as one of its outcomes. I illustrate the multifaceted ways in which the TikTok “For You” page, meaning the app’s algorithmically personalized content feed, is used as a resource to connect with others in meaningful ways on and beyond the platform. Moreover, I argue that paying attention to such mundane, yet often taken-for-granted, practices is of vital analytical significance. It is along them that we can gain a rich understanding for how even within highly personalized online spaces people continue to maintain social networks and express their various relationships in meaningful ways.

After a discussion of the theoretical framework and research method, I will provide a general description of how my participants used TikTok. In particular, I will show how their primary

experience of TikTok was that of a personalized entertainment hub. Following this description, I then discuss three ways in which this personal use of TikTok was entangled with interpersonal relationships. First, I talk about how people would see videos on their “For You” page that reminded them of someone they knew, making them share those with them. Second, I discuss how people selected and saved specific TikTok content from their “For You” page to watch it together with friends or partners later, in a setting of physical co-presence. Third, I discuss how TikTok trends and memes came to shape people’s everyday language more broadly. Finally, the article will be closed with a reflection on future directions for scholarship on personalization and social media more broadly.

Theoretical framework

The case of TikTok

According to commentators like Wei (2020), TikTok can be understood as an app built for an algorithm to get the best possible insights to curate a personalized content feed. This feed is the so-called “For You” page. Once opening the TikTok app, people are immediately placed on this feed. On the Google App Store, TikTok (2022) argues that this content feed will provide an “endless stream of short videos that feel personalized just for you. From your morning coffee to your afternoon errands, TikTok has the videos that are guaranteed to make your day.” TikTok is neither the first nor the only app that advances the promise of a personalized experience by means of algorithms (compare Cohn, 2019; Kant, 2020). The reason why I focus on TikTok as case, however, is that it exemplifies, like no other platform, this trend towards personalization in the social media landscape. TikTok is not a platform that has merely added algorithmic personalization as a feature to its service, like Instagram (2016) did many years ago, for example. TikTok is the product of a long history of commercial innovation in algorithmic content distribution systems (see Stokel-Walker, 2021).

In this light, Bhandari and Bimo (2022, p. 3) argue that we cannot understand TikTok with the same concepts used to make sense of a social media like Facebook in the past. According to them, ideas of the “social network site” (Ellison and boyd, 2013) or “networked self” (Papacharissi, 2010) have proven effective to understand how people use social media like Facebook to connect with their peers and construct an identity in engagement with their various social circles. On TikTok, Bhandari and Bimo (2022) argue, people in contrast primarily engage with a content feed and the image of an “algorithmized self” it generates. Lee et al. (2022) approach TikTok from a similar angle, through the idea of the “algorithmic crystal.” They conceptualize TikTok use as engaging with a multi-faceted, yet also partial, representation of self-identity as it is mediated through videos on the “For You” page.

To think about personalization systems, like TikTok’s “For You” page, through ideas of self-identity is a common approach. Karakayali et al. (2017) have prominently theorized recommender systems as technologies of the self, as tools through which people constitute their self as a self. In this view, the interaction between user and algorithm has become a central unit of analysis. This, however, has some shortcomings. These technologies of the self are used for a variety of purposes, extending beyond those of personal entertainment or self-reflection. For example, in a recent study, Kaye (2022) has shown how the “For You” page can be a site where creative collaboration is organized among artists. Similarly, Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin (2022) study how people use TikTok trends to turn the “For You” page into a “For Us” network. Boffone (2021) more broadly shows how sites like TikTok are vital spaces of youth cultural formation. Studies like that of Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2019), furthermore, importantly underscore that TikTok is not just a personalized entertainment hub but also a discursive arena for public debate. Likewise, Lee et al. (2022, p. 18) point out that people at times develop a sense of belonging to certain communities on TikTok when they engage with content on their personalized content feeds.

In short, even within highly personalized online environments like TikTok, social networks continue to materialize. I contribute to this understanding, from a slightly different angle, however. My interest lies not in social interaction as it takes place mediated through the “For You” page but how the “For You” page functions as a resource for social interaction beyond the platform’s boundaries. More specifically, I focus on content sharing practices in interpersonal relationships. Paying attention to these mundane practices helps to broaden our understanding of how personalization systems, embedded in social media platforms, operate as technologies of the self. I advance this argument through TikTok as a case and by showing how its personalization system became integrated into everyday articulations of interpersonal biographies and relationships among young adults in the United Kingdom.

Sharing as heuristic

I approach the case of TikTok through polymedia theory and “sharing” as a heuristic. The theory of polymedia, as Madianou and Miller (2012) have developed it, argues that people do not experience media as discrete technologies but integrated parts of an environment of communicative affordances. Within this environment, Madianou and Miller (2012, p. 170) write, each medium’s meaning and purpose is defined in relation to all other media people draw on to tackle their various communicative needs. I thus understand TikTok not as a discrete technology but rather as part of a polymedia environment in which it is used in conjunction with other media, such as messaging apps. As such, we can only understand the meaning of it, and its affordances, contextually, that is by looking beyond TikTok.

Secondly, I use the notion of “sharing” heuristically to understand how people integrate TikTok into this polymedia environment and, by extension, their daily routines and social networks. As John (2012) has prominently discussed, the meanings of ‘sharing’ in the social media context are manifold. “Sharing” relates, for instance, to the shared nature of online

spaces, people sharing their life online, or acts of sharing content on and across platforms.

While the latter practice is my focus, I draw on the notion of “sharing” in broad terms.

Following Kennedy (2016, p. 462), I understand it as a set of practices “motivated by an extension of self and familial relationships.” Or, in line with Wittel (2011, p. 5), I see it broadly as a form of social interaction.

My use of the notion of “sharing” is in this sense of a more heuristic nature. As Wittel (2011, p. 6) writes, “the sharing of digital things is effortless, it does not involve any sacrifice.

Digital things just get multiplied.” For Wittel, “sharing” is less descriptive of the actual practices—multiplication of files, distribution content, and so on—than their underlying social qualities. Social connection can be understood as a common and desired quality behind most distributive sharing practices on social media. For example, in a recent study, Campos Valverde (2022, p. 213) has shown how sharing music on social media is associated with the aspiration “to re-enact groups and togetherness, and influence and change our social circles for the better.”

Similarly, studies like that of Ham et al. (2019) confirm that social presence, conversation, and connection are key motivators behind content sharing practices on social media. The study of Scharlach and Hallinan (2023) provides further evidence on this, underlining that people associate values of togetherness and care with social media sharing affordances. Yet beyond that, they also highlight how people associate efficiency with social media sharing features, enabling social interaction through the click of a button (Scharlach and Hallinan, 2023, p. 6). For the case of TikTok, McLean et al. (2023) add further to this understanding of sharing as socially integrative. They highlight how by sharing content, people create a discursive space in which friends can relate to each other as friends, for example.

In this sense, my interest in analyzing TikTok sharing practices has less to do with a spreadable media culture (Jenkins et al., 2013) in which sharing is a vital mechanism for participation in public debates (see Zulli and Zulli, 2020 for such a discussion of TikTok). Asking how personalized social media are shared, I steer my attention in a different direction. Following Siles (2023, p. 136), I am interested in understanding how people transform “algorithmic recommendations for many into singular suggestion for some.” As Siles (2023) highlights, it is within such transformations that we find rich social dynamics unfolding, for example in friends expressing their tastes or opening a window into their current mood states.

As a heuristic, the idea of “sharing” steers our attention towards these myriad socially integrative practices of personalized social media. It allows us to unpack, following Madianou (2015, p. 3), how technology and sociality are made to converge in everyday life contexts today. As such, it is fruitful as a heuristic precisely in that it brings to the fore how personalization systems come matter socially. That is, by facilitating presence, interaction, and connection in social networks. Following the heuristic of “sharing,” asking how personalized media are shared, aids discovery of these social dynamics. It does so especially in media landscapes that are increasingly personalized by helping us see how people creatively transform these “for you” experiences into opportunities of social connection.

Research method

To discuss the case of TikTok, I draw on material from a larger ethnography of the TikTok use of young adults based in the United Kingdom. The project aimed at getting a general understanding of how young adults use TikTok, how they interact with the TikTok algorithm, and how they evaluate the app in terms of its personal and cultural significance (see Schellewald, 2023). Work started in early 2020, when TikTok was still mostly seen as a “kids app.” At this time, however, young adults already formed one of the biggest groups on

TikTok, globally and in the United Kingdom (Loose et al., 2020). Because of that, the investigation was focused on this group as their voices and experiences appeared underrepresented in debates back then. Participants were randomly recruited using a promoted tweet on Twitter (now called X) as well as subsequent snowball sampling.

The tweet was targeted at people aged 18 to 24, located in the Greater London area, and interested in TikTok. The tweet contained a general call for participants, stating in plain language a call for people to talk to about their experience of using TikTok. 30 young adults were recruited. All were based in the United Kingdom and only a couple outside the Greater London area. Most were students or recent graduates taking on their first full-time employment. Most participants matched the targeted age range of 18 to 24 with some being slightly older. The sample can thus be seen as representing a group of young, mostly well-educated, and primarily middle-class individuals. In terms of gender, 22 of participants identified as female, 7 as male, and 1 in another way.

Due to the study taking place during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted using the video call application Teams and participants were kept in touch via email. Initial interviews took place in the summer of 2020. Prior to this interview, participants completed a pre-interview task. In it they were asked to sort different devices and apps they use in their everyday life based on personal relevance, using the MeSort tool developed at the University of Bremen. These media mappings were then used to guide initial conversations and understand the role of TikTok in people's everyday media use routines.

Additionally, people were asked more specific questions on their use of the TikTok app, like how they interact with the TikTok algorithm, as well as questions on how they perceive TikTok as an app and cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, during the interview participants were asked to open the TikTok app and scroll through it for a couple of minutes, describing

the content they see and if they would watch it were they on their own. The interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes.

Following this initial interview, participants were reached out to in a three-month interval and for a last time in July 2021. Over this period, 50 formal interviews were conducted in addition to numerous conversations having taking place via digital channels like email.

Follow-up interviews and conversations were specific to the TikTok use and life circumstances of each participant. For example, during the fieldwork period some participants had moved to new places, picked up new jobs, returned to their university accommodation after periods of lockdown, or started their first year of studies. Further, during these times some people also stopped using TikTok. Follow-up conversations were organized around such changes in people's life circumstances and TikTok use.

The data gathered was anonymized and each participant given a pseudonym. The project received ethical clearance from an institutional review board. Data analysis of interviews, email conversations, and notes made during this fieldwork process was thematic in nature. In a first stage, descriptive codes were created to identify aspects like practices of TikTok use (e.g. scrolling, sharing, creating, commenting), settings of use (such as in bed while waking up), actors mentioned in relation to TikTok (like friends, siblings, partners, etc.), people's feelings in relation to TikTok use (e.g. joy, boredom), or imaginaries of the TikTok algorithm (e.g. perceptions of it having a scary accuracy). Following initial coding, overarching themes, like "TikTok as an escapist means," were inductively developed with the aim to identify dominant patterns in people's TikTok use and experience of the app during fieldwork.

Through this process, a deep and contextual understanding for the TikTok uses of young adults in the United Kingdom was acquired. The length of the overall project was especially important in that it allowed to trace and qualify uses of TikTok over an extended time period

and evaluate their significance accordingly. The practice of sharing TikTok videos was one of these significant aspects identified. Some participants mentioned that they sometimes share up to ten videos per day with friends. On average, each participant would at least share a few TikTok videos per week with their partner, friends, housemates, colleagues, siblings, or parents. These sharing practices were observed along people's primary use of the app, that of scrolling for personal entertainment. Henceforth, the next section first contextualizes this primary use and then discusses how people transformed this personal to a more social use of the app.

Findings

Scrolling for personal pleasure

Participants primarily engaged with TikTok by scrolling through the "For You" page. Some exclusively consumed content and said they have no interest in creating videos. Others occasionally created videos, but scrolling was how they continuously used the app during fieldwork. Reasons behind TikTok consumption aligned with findings of previous research. Similar to Scherr and Wang (2021, p. 5), I observed how many participants initially picking up TikTok because of its trendiness. Like Omar and Dequan (2020, p. 125), I found that people scrolled through TikTok because of escapist and peeking motivations, the desire to peek into the life of others. Like Jang (2021, p. 25), my data revealed that people who create videos, and those who exclusively consume them, had similar levels of escapist motivations, rendering escapism as common denominator.

As a mobile phone app, TikTok can be used potentially anywhere and anytime. Moreover, TikTok is designed in a way that people are immediately placed on the "For You" page once opening the app. That is why my participants perceived TikTok as "just easy to use" (Iris). According to them, all you need to do is take out your phone, open the app, and start

scrolling. This ease of use and flexibility, however, are not unique to TikTok. As Wajcman (2015, p. 154) notes, mobile media in general enable the creation of “new sites for separation and autonomy, allowing the person to be present but also absent or withdrawn.” Rather, the appeal of TikTok needs to be understood from within people’s polymedia environments (Madianou and Miller, 2012). Sunder described to me that when he is bored, he will just be going through various social media apps on his phone, “almost waiting for the right thing to appear to entertain you” (Sunder). Within such searches for entertainment, TikTok has over time emerged as dedicated escape site.

Other platforms like Twitter or Instagram also offer small pieces of content that people can conveniently consume on endless content feeds. However, these platforms had already been given different roles in participants’ polymedia environments. Scrolling through Twitter was less a way of feeling entertained than being connected to current affairs and news debates. Scrolling through Instagram was a way for my participants to check on the latest pop cultural trends, and to stay in touch with what is going on in their friends’ lives. Twitter and Instagram were sites of social connection for my participants, not means of escape and entertainment.

Bea made this differentiation by saying: “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. On TikTok time is kind of paused” (Bea). Similarly, Judith contrasted TikTok to sites like Instagram or Twitter in telling me the following.

It’s just nice going somewhere you don’t know anyone, but also the people there aren’t all established influencers, or the people aren’t, 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).

Put differently, for my participants TikTok was an experiential space on which time seemed paused and they could experience life free from worries and social obligations. By engaging with the app, they did not physically escape their daily life, as one might do when going on vacation, for example. Similarly, on TikTok people also do not experience a total change of scenery. Instead, scrolling through the “For You” page, participants saw an array of videos that they told me felt very relatable by showing a high degree of closeness to their interests, personality, and life situation. Further, while TikTok content covers a wide range of topics and genres (compare Schellewald, 2021), my participants mostly described the videos they saw as comedic and joyful, rendering TikTok scrolling as entertainment at heart.

In short, my participants (a) used TikTok primarily for content consumption, (b) more or less spontaneously in their daily life, (c) primarily as a means of escapism and entertainment, and (d) enjoyed how relatable the content they would see was to their personality and life situation. More could be unpacked about what happens when people consume content on the “For You” page (see Kang and Lou, 2022; Schellewald, 2022; Siles and Meléndez-Moran, 2021; or Simpson et al. 2022). However, I want to focus on an aspect that has received comparably little focused attention in research on personalization systems, with the notable exception of recent works like Siles (2023). Namely, I focus on how personalization systems become integrated into social rituals.

Other than solely creating a personalized entertainment experience, the “For You” page also provided my participants with a resource they used to articulate their relationships. In the next sections, I illustrate how my participants transformed their personalized experience of TikTok into something socially meaningful through the practices of content sharing, content co-consumption, and content referencing.

Sharing TikTok videos with others

Early on during fieldwork I noticed that sharing TikTok videos with their friends was a vital element of how my participants used TikTok. Some shared TikTok videos multiple times per day. Most mentioned that at least every other day they send someone a TikTok. While some people shared videos directly on the app, using its built-in messaging function, most shared videos using the affordances of other apps. This was because it was apps like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, or Snapchat on which people would primarily maintain their social relationships in their polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller, 2012). Additionally, many friends did not use TikTok themselves. This further made it necessary to share content beyond the platform's boundaries.

Sharing videos with friends was something that I found was also integrated into escapist engagements. Asking Manu for how long she would normally scroll through TikTok, she replied by saying:

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).

Descriptions like Manu's were common. Even though people would approach TikTok for personal pleasure, a certain sense of connection and care for one's relationships was still present within the desired experience of disconnection. What exact content participants would share can be observed in relation to both the accuracy and inaccuracy of TikTok's personalization system. The videos that Manu mentioned she would share would sometimes be videos that popped up on her "For You" page and she herself didn't find funny but thought that someone she knew would. Sharing was for some people thus a by-product of sorting through the "For You" page.

The kind of videos participants shared were described to me as being either generally funny or content that seemed very specific to a given friend. Antonio said that “I send stuff that is relatable ... that they could kind of laugh along or get the joke.” In this sense, content sharing practices were prompted somewhat randomly whilst scrolling through the “For You” page. However, they almost always involved curation. Antonio continued by explaining that he will usually share videos that make him “be like ‘oh that’s very me’ or ‘oh that’s very you’.” In other words, Antonio shared videos he felt represent his relationships. Similarly, Benjamin told me how he would share videos that related to recent interactions. This is how Benjamin described the last video he shared.

[laughs] It was a video of Boris Johnson saying that we’re entitled to a blue passport, and he just says blue really weirdly. And my friend and I, we were talking about how much we hate Boris Johnson the other day ... because he just sounds like an idiot ... so, I sent that to her on Instagram. (Benjamin).

Similarly, Joyce mentioned that she usually shares TikTok videos with her siblings. In particular, she described sharing TikTok videos with her older sister.

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.” (Joyce).

What we can see here is how scrolling through the “For You” page provides people with opportunities to articulate their existing relationships. This can be through being reminded of something that has recently shaped a relationship, such as a conversation about politics, as in the case of Benjamin. However, it can also relate to a wider aspect of an interpersonal biography, as the example of Joyce shows, who shared videos relating to her and her sister’s

childhood. Two aspects are interesting about these sharing practices emerging on the “For You” page. Firstly, research has shown that sharing small pieces of content plays a key role in how relationships are maintained at a distance (compare Bayer et al. 2016; Madianou 2016). TikTok is interesting in that context because the type of content shared is only a reference of a given relationship or life situation. The videos people would share were not their own creations, or documentations of their own life, but that which other people uploaded to TikTok.

TikTok’s personalization system thus enables sharing practices by helping people find “for you” content which, by extension, can also be relevant “for us” as friends, siblings, and so on. In this sense, the second interesting aspect is how these practices foreground that people’s self-identity is necessarily intertwined with that of their close social ties. The highly relatable nature of the “For You” page also rendered it highly shareable, not just a means of personalization but also social connection. As the example of Joyce shows, her self-identity rests, among other things, on a biography shared with her sister. Benjamin’s political views are not isolated but socially shaped along those of his friends. More or less obviously, interests and tastes have a certain overlap with that of social ties. Isobel talked about this in the following way.

I definitely share videos ... when I share them with my friends, I definitely think it is stuff that relates to either them or both of us. Me and my friends, we send each other lots of Anime TikToks or London TikToks. Just because that’s what we relate to.
(Isobel).

Velta described a similar overlap of personal interests and how it leads to her sharing of TikTok videos.

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).

In relation to such videos and the sharing of them, people like Velta evaluated the overall consequence of their TikTok use in the following way: "I've mostly grown a lot closer to my existing friends." (Velta). Even though Velta primarily engaged with TikTok for personal pleasure, by using the "For You" page in conjunction with other platforms, like WhatsApp, she had turned her TikTok use into something socially meaningful. It is here that we see the importance of the polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller, 2012), adding to Velta's TikTok experience a social component by using it alongside WhatsApp.

Tanja made an argument similar to Velta's. She mentioned how 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." For Tanja, TikTok content was perfect for purposes of phatic communication, meaning communication for the purpose of social interaction. When sharing videos, Tanja wanted to signal to a friend that they are thinking about them, even when there was nothing more profound to talk about at the time. What people such as Tanja liked about TikTok content was its short nature. Tanja liked that sharing videos was an easy way to make someone laugh or smile whilst not communicating anything deeper than that.

In this sense, I do not claim that TikTok videos are the first and only media content that people share for relationship maintenance. Many participants still shared tweets or Instagram posts and were shared such content from friends. I highlight these TikTok content sharing practices herein precisely in how they exemplify such a mundane practice of personalized

social media use. This, in return, has implications for how we need to think about personalization on TikTok and beyond. For my participants, the “For You” page was not just a personalized escape site or space on which to engage with an algorithmized representation of their self (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022). It was a space of social opportunity. Other than isolating people, scrolling through the “For You” page provided them with opportunities to activate their social networks through TikTok content. In the next section, I expand this argument by looking at how TikTok videos were shared in settings of physical co-presence.

Watching TikTok videos with others

Aside from sharing TikTok videos at a distance, some participants would share them in settings of physical co-presence. For instance, they would watch videos together with their partner, a family member, close friend, or roommate. Adna was friends with Manu. Asking her about how they share TikTok videos, Adna mentioned that occasionally when they hang out, they would scroll through TikTok together.

Manu lives around the corner from me, so I go there quite a lot on the weekend and yeah ... and we'll scroll through TikTok occasionally and share videos then ... but not really, more like a one off if that happens. (Adna).

However, not many liked scrolling together, or doing it often, as Adna mentioned. This was especially because of how tailored the “For You” page would be. There is an overlap with what close friends would like, yet there still is also a considerable number of videos that people would have diverging opinions on in terms of watching, re-watching, and scrolling past them. Rini described this issue while scrolling together in the following.

Certain people wanna watch videos over and over ... it's kind of just, I don't know, sometimes it's just annoying to share those things when you have to be conscious of

someone's cues of when they wanna re-watch a video or go back or something like that. (Rini).

Instead of scrolling together, what Rini mentioned she would do is share specific videos but in a setting of physical co-presence. The example that she remembered was when she and her mother were travelling on the train. To pass the time, Rini opened TikTok on her phone and specifically looked for videos of cats, because she knew her mother would like them. Sunder described a similar setting in which he would share TikTok content with his wife. Sunder would scroll through TikTok before falling asleep to clear his mind at the end of the day. His wife, he mentioned, would do the same. Each of them would scroll on their individual phones, every now and then turning their phones around because they discovered a video the other might find interesting or funny.

What we see here is another example of phatic communication. Rini, Sunder, and his wife shared videos to create social presence, not to communicate a specific message necessarily. They simply wanted to connect with the person they are with. This phatic use of TikTok was not uncommon. Among those of my participants that were in a romantic relationship, most mentioned that their partner wasn't using TikTok themselves. This also created barriers, however. Benjamin, who mostly would be shown comedy and dance related videos on TikTok, told me:

I'm staying with my boyfriend right now and we just have completely different senses of humor. If I see something really funny and show it to him, he'll literally look at me like "... what's your point?" So, I wouldn't be like "let's scroll through TikTok together." (Benjamin).

Similarly, none of my participants mentioned that when they shared and watched TikTok videos together with their partner that it was in the form that Benjamin rendered it unlikely,

that of saying “hey, let’s scroll through TikTok together.” Participants would share TikTok videos with their partners as they would with their friends. They would see something they think their partner might find funny and send it to them using an app like WhatsApp—that is, channels already established for interpersonal connection in the polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller 2012). Although participants’ partners wouldn’t use TikTok themselves, they still would like and enjoy seeing these selected bits of TikTok content shared with them. Hajna explained it in the way that her boyfriend “sort of laughs at the videos but doesn't really care for it.” (Hajna).

Often people mentioned to me that their partner liked the content shared, but not the process of how one has to discover it. They disliked the process of scrolling and sorting through the “For You” page, a content feed that was perceived as mostly accurate yet also not all the time. What we see here is that it requires work to make effective use of personalization systems as a social resource that can enable connection and presence. Some of my participants thus shared videos with their partners in a way as Bea explained.

What I’ve been doing since the beginning of lockdown is like, you know, liking all the things that I know he would think are funny and then showing them to him. I’ll collect funny things to curate almost from my TikTok the most entertaining videos and then show them to him at the end of the night (Bea).

On the dimension of sharing in physical co-presence, we thus also see another implication. The personal space of TikTok was not only a resource generative of social connection. By making the personal present, it also caused frictions in relationships. Bea mentioned that she doesn’t just curate these montages of funny TikTok videos to be able to create a meaningful experience for her and her boyfriend to connect over, but also to communicate to him the message: “hey, this app actually is great” (Bea). She tries to create more acceptance for the

app that personally brings her pleasure while many people, like her boyfriend, still talk about TikTok as a childish form of entertainment.

Stories like that of Bea underline the importance of studying personalization systems contextually. The practices of co-consumption I have discussed provide further evidence for the fact that the “For You” page delivers not just personalized entertainment but also material that can be used in the articulation of relationships. People like Bea search the “For You” page for content that they then can use to create meaningful experiences of togetherness. The design of the “For You” page is well equipped to cater towards such practices of relationship maintenance, all while the status of the app itself can be counterproductive to this very objective at the same time.

Referencing TikTok in everyday conversations

Talking about the public perceptions of TikTok, it has to be noted that they have changed over the course of fieldwork. Before most of my participants started using TikTok, in late 2019 and early 2020, many thought the app was a bit childish. Back then, many associated TikTok almost exclusively with teenagers and kids lip-syncing and dancing to the latest music trends. However, giving TikTok a try, they had come to experience it differently. Likewise, today TikTok enjoys much more public acceptance than it did when I started my fieldwork. Talking about such changing perceptions, Lisa mentioned to me the following anecdote.

I was out with a friend last week and I mentioned one TikTok and maybe later in the day I mentioned another one, and she was like “oh wow, you really use TikTok loads, don't you?” I think now it's almost become a thing of like ... if you use it you are perceived to use it a lot and are sort of addicted to it. Rather than it being like any other social media app. But yeah, I think generally it has become more normal. (Lisa).

Especially among my participants that were older, being in their mid-twenties, or had older friends, for instance in their late twenties, I was often told stories about how they were hesitant in sharing TikTok videos in the way Lisa described it. That means, talking about specific TikTok memes and trends in everyday conversations. In fact, when I asked Jade if she had any friends who might also be interested in participating in the study, she replied by saying that she has, but doesn't want reveal to them that she uses TikTok. For her it was still somewhat embarrassing to use TikTok as she told me that it is "a secret like guilty pleasure kind of thing" (Jade).

However, there also were exceptions among older participants, including during the early months of my research where TikTok was not yet as normal as it was towards the end. These exceptions related mostly to memes that went viral on and beyond TikTok. Manu and Adna talked about such viral memes as increasingly informing conversations in their wider friend group.

There is this girl on TikTok that lives in Northern Ireland, and she's been looking after tadpoles in a paddling pool in her garden. And now they're growing into frogs and it's becoming a bit of a news story as well ... but yeah, I was with friends the other day in the park and everyone was sort of saying "have you seen the TikTok frog girl?" [laughs] So it's kind of becoming a talking-point, you know, viral things on TikTok. Similar to viral things on Twitter, for example. And I think this is also what makes you continue use the app because now things become these talking-points. (Manu).

Among my younger participants, and especially those who had started studying at university, knowledge about and referencing specific TikTok memes had a similar impact, informing the content of everyday conversations. Rini, who during fieldwork commenced undergraduate

studies, mentioned that TikTok and knowledge about certain memes and trends helped her when meeting new people and trying to figure out if they would get along.

There is a lot of phrases that you see on TikTok that you can very casually drop in conversations ... it's kind of like signaling that you are on the same wavelength, especially with people that you just casually meet at Uni. You mention TikTok and then you mention like a few popular sounds or phrases ... it's like a way of connecting very quickly. (Rini).

As Silverstone (1994, p. 130) noted for the case of television: “The appropriation of meanings derived from television, for example, is an indication of membership and competence in a public culture, to whose construction it actively contributes.” TikTok, I came to find, increasingly occupies a similar position in the social life of young adults in the United Kingdom. To have an awareness of the latest TikTok trends, memes, and phrases is key for phatic communication skills, enabling communion with peers by signaling one’s cultural status (see also Siles, 2023). Here, again, I do not claim that TikTok is either the first or only site from which people pick up cultural references that they then incorporate into their practices of everyday talk (compare Sierra, 2021). Nonetheless, there is something particular about TikTok’s cultural status.

In popular discourses, TikTok has often been described as being the “internet’s hottest meme breeding ground” (Martin, 2019). Similarly, participants like Hajna mentioned that when friends that don’t use TikTok share memes with her, it usually will be content that she had already seen weeks ago on her “For You” page. Being able to access and navigate personalization systems as such a cultural source informing everyday interactions becomes thus a skill of increasing social significance. By extension, it also becomes a potential site of social divisions to be considered in future research on personalized social media. By asking

how these personalized media are shared, we come to uncover the wider impact they have, not just on the individuals who engage with them, but also the social networks they are part of.

Conclusion

As boyd (2010, p. 55) reminded us over a decade ago, “people are learning to work within the constraints and possibilities of mediated architecture, just as people have always learned to navigate structures as part of their daily lives.” Within the drive by tech companies to personalize the Internet, it appears crucial to me that we keep a sensibility for these ways in which people learn to live on grounds not of their own making (Martin-Barbero, 1984). Even on sites like TikTok, branded as “for you” and designed for personalized content consumption, people continue to “socialize” the Internet in meaningful ways that deserve more recognition and attention. Guiding our investigation of apps like TikTok by asking how they are shared will thus be vital, I argue, for us to provide accurate descriptions of their impact on people’s lives in the future.

Put differently, it is true that as a keyword “sharing” seems to be on the decline, as John (2022) observes. Nonetheless, “sharing” remains to me an absolutely crucial concept analytically. Saying so I do not argue for a theoretical re-invention of the concept. Neither do I necessarily hold that we need empirical inquiries seeking out sharing practices that are new and novel. I mostly see the continued relevance of “sharing” as a concept precisely in how it is old. Denoting an old and mundane facet of social media use, “sharing” allows us to recognize a continuity of mediated social practice. It allows us to grasp how social networks are maintained within environments of continuous technological change and commercialization.

Showcasing that some things have not changed that much does, in the end, constitute a crucial contribution to knowledge. As I have shown in this paper, the participants of my study shared TikTok content in ways that do not really feel new. They send video clips, watch them together, or discuss memes with their peers just like people have done in relation to various other media contents in the past. Yet, what is to note is how these sharing practices were key in how TikTok came to matter in my participants lives. That is, not just as a personal entertainment hub, but also as a resource through which social relationships can be articulated.

While this observation might appear trivial or obvious, it is nonetheless crucial. It leads us to get a different understanding of personalization in a social media context, as well as how its impact needs to be investigated. It is true, in other words, that all across the Internet—from TikTok to Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, over to Netflix or Google—people engage with content in ways that are personalized. This has implications for the how people see themselves (Kant, 2020), and how they relate to public life more broadly (Siles, 2023). However, it also has implications for the ways in which they manage their social networks, and their position within them, as I have underlined in this paper.

To understand this social dynamic, we have to look at the “cultural work” that is going on “in the background” (John, 2022, p. 15). The heuristic of “sharing.” asking how media are shared, allows us to bring this very background work to the foreground. It allows us to explore the space that people create in-between apps and platforms as they share their experiences with others. After all, it is within this domain of human practice that the social qualities of social media have always emerged from (Madianou, 2015). As such, tracing how personalized social media are shared does not only help us better understand their social

consequences. It also provides us with an opportunity to paint a different picture of what social media are today.

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