

Changing modes of public connection: an essay on TikTok and the social affordances of personalized social media

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Abstract

The short-video app TikTok has become one of the most used social media globally. Its affordances are herein distinctly different from that of prior apps and platforms – specifically due to TikTok’s algorithm-centric design. This essay critically reflects on the consequences of this design logic, especially in relation to modes of public connection, resistance, and social change. Reflecting on ethnographic fieldwork on TikTok, it opens three perspectives: (1) on the modes of disconnected sociability that TikTok’s “For You” page affords; (2) the forms of infrapolitical resistance that materialize within the textual structure of the “For You” page; (3) the importance of creativity as an element of the consumption process shaping its social meaningfulness. Across these three perspectives, the essay argues that TikTok affords relatively unique modes of public connection which, ultimately, can only be understood in their real consequences when looked at as integrated parts of the micro-social worlds where people’s day to day lives unfold.

Keywords: TikTok; popular culture; social media; algorithms; digital ethnography; public connection; affordances

Introduction

In recent years, the short-video app TikTok has emerged as a key site in the global media landscape. Every day, millions engage with it and the “For You” page, an algorithmically personalized content feed. TikTok affords many things and is often discussed for its vibrant culture and creativity (Barta et al., 2021; Boffone, 2021; Kaye et al., 2022; Stokel-Walker 2021). However, it is access to the “For You” feed which defines the key affordance driving the popularity of the app amongst creators and audiences (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022; Schellewald, 2023; Su, 2023).

In that way, TikTok has been found to shift away from many of the principal affordances along which prior social media have been structured (boyd, 2010). TikTok’s design replaces the centrality of social networking (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022) with a form of content-centricity (Kaye et al., 2022) where, by design, people’s primary interaction partner is “the TikTok algorithm” (Siles et al., 2022). This has implications for questions of self-identity formation (Lee et al., 2023), association with social groups (Maddox and Gil, 2023), and the formation of publics (Zulli and Zulli, 2020).

In this perspective essay, I reflect on these social consequences that the shifts towards content-centricity and algorithmic personalization carry – specifically from an everyday life and audience engagement perspective. Based on my ethnographic engagement with TikTok (Schellewald 2024), I aim to open avenues for reflection on the question of how TikTok affords social movement, resistance, and, ultimately, public connection around issues of shared concern (Couldry and Markham, 2006).

Background

We can conceptualize affordances as imagined interactive possibilities (Nagy and Neff, 2015) that are articulated at the intersection of platform-specific features and cultures (Gibbs et al., 2015). To put it simply, affordances are the constraining and enabling elements of platforms that groups of people negotiate in their meaning-making processes online (boyd, 2010). As such, what a platform affords is defined through how that platform is enacted by people in their social lifeworlds (Siles, 2023). Grounded in this view, then, generalizations of such affordances are inherently difficult because they necessarily are something local (Madianou and Miller, 2012).

My perspective on TikTok draws on one-and-a-half-year ethnography of its consumption (Schellewald, 2024). This fieldwork explored the app's role in an English-language cultural context and involved 30 young adults in the United Kingdom. For six months, I used TikTok daily for about an hour, actively engaging with its diverse content and communities. Over the following year, I worked with participants aged roughly 18 to 24 to study their experiences through semi-structured interviews (around every three months), participant observations, media repertoire mappings, and informal conversations (for details, see Schellewald, 2024).

Based on this account, in this essay I open a perspective on TikTok's affordances primarily from an audience perspective – that is, through the experience of people who engage with TikTok and the “For You” page by consuming content. This account is not a universal but positioned truth (Abu-Lughod, 1991). It provides a reflection on TikTok affordances as they are experienced by a particular group of people at a specific point in time – generalizing not this experience but abstracting for scholarly engagement the underlying interactive dynamics TikTok affords.

As a platform, TikTok has established its place in the global media landscape through what has often been described as a unique, algorithm-focused design that sets it apart (Su, 2023).

Shaped by this design, publics on the site form through modes of cultural remix (Zulli and Zulli, 2020) enabled by the app's affordances of collaborative creative expression (Kaye et al., 2022). Similarly, social uses of the app have been found to be centered around the utilization of content trends as a mechanism to appropriate algorithmic spaces for communion (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin, 2022) and acts of discursive subversion (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2024).

Culturally, TikTok confronts us here with complexity (Su, 2023). TikTok's algorithmic architecture remediates hegemonic structures which shape who and what comes to be visible (Rauchberg, 2025; Stein, 2023). This has given rise to vernaculars, like "algospeak", that bend around the edges of algorithmically enforced content moderation policies (Steen et al., 2023). Yet also TikTok's creative affordances shape modes of public discourse. Such are characterized by the platform's vernaculars and meme cultures (Cervi and Divon, 2023; Hautea et al., 2021; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021) in which commentary and remix shape discursive exchange (Quick and Maddox, 2024; Zulli and Zulli, 2020).

TikTok's design shapes not only ways of speaking but also ways of listening. It accentuates an engagement with streams of content (Lin et al., 2023) that materialize as refracted images of self-identities (Lee et al., 2023). These representations are partial. People navigate algorithmic environments that show an incomplete view of their identity – hiding at times elements of their identities, especially amongst marginalized groups (Karizat et al., 2021). Herein, social association on apps like TikTok becomes an algorithmically mediated sense of affinity (Maddox and Gil, 2023), replacing notions of social networking with rhythms of algorithmically mediated ephemeral engagement (Lupinacci, 2024). Therefore, it is this dimension of engagement – the navigation across the "For You" page (Siles, 2023) – that I discuss in relation to TikTok's social consequences in this essay.

Perspective

Disconnection

What a medium affords to a given person is relative to the polymedia environment they navigate – that is, the integrated environment of communicative opportunities people have available to facilitate their everyday social lives (Madianou and Miller, 2012). For young adults, like my participants, TikTok emerged as the latest addition to an already matured polymedia environment. Unlike teens, for whom TikTok was found to often be their first social media platform (De Leyn et al., 2021), adults usually had been actively engaging socially online on various platforms already when they encountered TikTok. And, for my participants, it was precisely a dissatisfaction with other platforms that shaped how they envisioned the affordances and appeal of TikTok (see Schellewald, 2023).

For instance, many reported to me that on sites like Twitter (now X) they felt pressure to interact. This was caused by the platform's affordance of participation – low barriers to contribute in short, textual form. This mobilizing force of Twitter has been theorized as an “affective refrain” that draws people into shared discussion (Papacharissi, 2014) – an experience which the young adults I met experienced as overwhelming. Similarly, the young adults I worked with noted that on sites like Instagram they often felt pressure to interact with content of friends and family members, creating a social burden (see also Au, 2020).

The TikTok “For You” page and the ephemeral interactions with content that it mediates afforded to my participants thus a form of disconnection. They found TikTok appealing for the “authenticity” that is associated with the platform – which itself is a quality emergent at the intersection of the platform's design and vernacular ways of expression (Barta et al.,

2021). For my participants, TikTok afforded thus something liberating, the ability to feel socially connected to what they called “ordinary strangers”. These were perceived as just normal people that can easily be related to, yet free from any social obligation towards them. This echoes other theorization of TikTok viewing as “uncommitted attention”, a form of engagement that is immersive yet unstable (Siles and Valerio-Alfaro, 2025) – as well as discussion of TikTok creator cultures being defined by characteristics authenticity, relatability, and audience interactivity (Abidin, 2020).

One way to make sense of this modality is by drawing inspiration from Simmel’s (1949) work on sociability. Simmel describes sociability as interaction practiced for its own sake – a modality where value lies less in outcomes than in the pleasurable play of association itself, freed from the demands of personal interests and social obligation (1949, p. 255). While Simmel was primarily writing about situations of co-present interaction, his idea of sociability can serve us as a useful orientation to understand the interactive dynamics in algorithmically mediated spaces like the “For You” page. The association mediated on the “For You” page resonates with what Simmel described as an “ideal sociological world” (1949, p. 257). Participants described to me encounters with “ordinary strangers” that felt light, pleasurable, and detached from durable commitments, qualities that echo Simmel’s idea of sociability, while at the same time taking on a distinctively mediated form.

In return, it won’t come as a surprise, then, that my participants did not primarily engage with TikTok as a means to participate in social movements. That is to say, they encountered contents from such movements – such as Black Lives Matters protests at the time in 2020 and 2021 – but did not actively follow them. TikTok remains, in that sense, a space in which political discourses unfold and are negotiated (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). At the same time, the structural form of the “For You” page raise questions. It does for matters of

sustained audience engagement (see also Tufekci, 2017) and the possibility of public connection on the grounds of shared concerns (Couldry and Markham, 2006).

The modality of ephemeral social interaction afforded by people's navigation of the "For You" thus warrants us to remain critical. If, following Simmel, we can think of these dynamics as resembling a form of sociability, then we must also ask what is gained and what is lost, in terms of affordances for public connection, when encounters are ephemerally mediated in such ways rather durably networked socially. What does it mean, in other words, to engage and move people on a platform where disconnected sociability and uncommitted attention (Siles and Valerio-Alfaro, 2025) are not incidental but structurally inscribed modalities of social engagement?

Resistance

One way in which TikTok stands out from other platforms as a medium for public connection is precisely a consequence of the "For You" page's centrality. Through the relative openness of the "For You" page – and similar personalized and trend-driven content feeds – TikTok constitutes an immersive "live" space (Lupinacci, 2021), a dynamic assemblage of lived experiences shared in short-video form (Lin et al., 2023). The subversive potential of that textual openness is demonstrated in scholarship showing how social groups utilize hashtags or sounds to creatively integrate their lived experience in discourses on the app (e.g., Peterson-Salahuddin, 2024), achieving visibility by speaking in ways that circumvents the logics enforced through algorithmic moderation and content curation systems (Steen et al., 2023).

These bottom-up acts of resistance to dominant discursive structures – and to the broader visibility logics of the TikTok platform economy (Su, 2023) – demonstrate the tactical potential enabled by TikTok's affordances. Tactics, to broadly follow de Certeau (1984) here,

are about the clever and opportunistic utilization of limited resources. The open textual structure of the “For You” page affords that kind of opportunistic resistance in the absence of larger structural interventions – which elsewhere have been positioned as reason for rising feelings of digital resignation (Draper and Turow, 2019).

During my early fieldwork, this became evident to me through acts of care some TikTok content articulated. Back then, there was a strong moral debate about the supposed “addictiveness” of the app – a consequence of the app’s “endless scroll” design creating a continuous, immersive flow experience (Lupinacci, 2021). What caught my interest during this time were encounters with videos created and shared purely for the purpose of breaking the immersive flow of other people’s scrolling. Some playfully expressed that one had reached “the end of TikTok”, an embodied interruption that temporarily suspended the scroll. Others more explicitly articulated care in the form of reminders to take a break or drink water (see Schellewald, 2022). These moments of disruption stood out not as discursive circumventions of censorship but as affective interventions into the very texture of TikTok’s centralized experience.

This type of bottom-up intervention into another person’s “For You” page is relatively unique to TikTok’s design. It is tactical, not in the sense of evading constraints towards visibility, but in its capacity to modulate the affective experience of individual TikTok Scrollers. By cleverly utilizing the platform’s affordances and architecture, these interventions integrate acts of communal care into the very flow experience of consumption. The ephemerality of TikTok content, its shortness, afford these forms of infrapolitical resistance (Lin, 2025; Siles, 2023). They align with the disconnected sociability outlined before. That is to say, they are acts of resistance unfolding in the absence of both durable social organization and possibility for enduring structural change.

Examples like the “end of TikTok” clips demonstrate a different form of resistance than discursive subversions (e.g., Peterson-Salahuddin, 2024). Whereas tactics like “algospeak” (Steen et al., 2023) operate on the more traditional level of discursive language and visibility, the “end of TikTok” example showcases a form of resistance on the level of affective experience. These acts of resistance work by disrupting the immersive continuity of TikTok’s hegemonic structure, producing momentary pauses that reorient attention, even while leaving the platform’s integrity intact. TikTok’s affordance for commentary (Quick and Maddox, 2024) and remix practices (Zulli and Zulli, 2020) enable the material manifestation of infrapolitical resistance in that sense – doing so not at the margins but at the very core of the “For You” page as a space for public connection.

Collectively coordinated action remains, of course, vital in the digital context (Natale and Trere, 2020). At the same time, TikTok seems to foreground the potential vitality of ephemeral resistance that intervenes directly in the immersive social ambience of TikTok. Rather than accumulating into an “affective refrain” of social movement and political will (Papacharissi, 2014), these acts manifest embodied interruptions – moments of tension, pause, or care – that shape how the “For You” page is experienced not as a personal but communal site. In this sense, resistance on TikTok emerges increasingly as a tactical modulation of the sensorial orchestration of the app as a space for public connection (Lupinacci, 2024).

Creativity

A vital yet in my view underexplored affordance of TikTok in relation to these matters discussed is content sharing. TikTok is here not necessarily unique in that it enables sharing videos with others. More broadly, research finds that people associate values of togetherness and care with sharing (Scharlach and Hallinan, 2023), aligning it with earlier examples of

communal care. Content sharing practices emerge as interesting here how they blend together social domains in a way that has been studied foundationally across the history of the Communications field (e.g., Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955).

When people share content from the “For You” page, they “singularize videos that had been circulating for everybody” and transform them into cultural artefacts that matter inside social networks (Siles 2023, p. 136). These audience practices are exemplifying the creative nature of consumption – the way in which consumption is about the habitual yet thoughtful process of re-contextualization (Miller, 1987). Although my participants’ experience on TikTok was marked by a mode of disconnected sociability, the app still had a strong social impact. From cooking “TikTok meals” with family members to discussing viral memes with friends to watching videos together with siblings or simply sharing them in group chats – as a cultural phenomenon TikTok substantially shaped how my participants connected in their social networks (see Schellewald, 2024).

Like other research has found at different times, even though media consumption seems to increasingly become more of a personal matter, people continue to talk about media in their everyday social life (Couldry and Markham, 2009). It is precisely in such forms of everyday talk, and the domain of “personal influence” (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), that ultimately questions of social change and movement need to be studied from a Communications point of view.

TikTok’s platform architecture affords vibrant creativity and cultural exchange (Kaye et al., 2022) and creates spaces where people seem to feel a sense of affinity to groups and movements (Maddox and Gil, 2023). Affinity is in that sense of critical political importance – a defining element that has reshaped the modality of how people orient themselves in social movements and democratic processes more broadly (Manning and Holmes, 2014).

Disconnected sociability might in that sense afford convenient association, mediating a sense of affinity to social movements in which one feels at once authentically engaged yet not overwhelmingly committed.

To understand the change of such experience, to me, appears thus a question of creativity in the sense of translation. For example, how are TikTok discourses discussed and used in schools to build connections (e.g., Boffone, 2021)? Or how do TikToks form the semantic material that shapes group dynamics and inclusion (e.g., McLean et al., 2024)? How does TikTok afford, differently than other media, to translate a sense of affinity into more durable public engagement across the domain of the everyday? For is it within everyday micro-social worlds – on the street, in the office or workshop, at the dinner table, and so on – that what we call society emerges and changes (Knorr-Cetina, 1988).

Conclusion

In this essay, I have opened three perspectives on TikTok and its social consequences based on my ethnography of it, and in dialogue with the existing scholarship on TikTok – creating a situated rather than definitive truth of the app (Abu-Lughod, 1991). I have argued that, based on my participants' experience, TikTok primarily affords a form of disconnected sociability that appeals through distance and ephemerality rather than durable social association.

Moreover, I have argued that in this disconnected and algorithmically mediated social space resistance is afforded as subversive injection into the textual structure of the “For You” page – materialising infrapolitical tensions at the core of TikTok's phenomenal appearance (see also Siles, 2023).

TikTok affords thus, I argue, relatively unique dynamics of public connection, ones primarily based on ambient senses of affinity – activated through situated irritation of encountering subversive content embedded in the “For You” page, for example. From here, I have

maintained, to me the question of social change emerges around matters of creativity. That is, not so much just new forms of creative expression afforded by TikTok (Kaye et al, 2022), but also the creative work of translation and re-contextualisation of TikTok into different social domains. Following previous scholarship on media and their consequences for public connection (Couldry and Markham, 2009), I thus come to a similar conclusion that foregrounds the dimension of talk and “personal influence” (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1995) as analytically crucial here.

An assessment of TikTok’s affordance requires thus from us to answer the question of social power, in that sense. That is, power understood as a process of setting “limits and the exertion of pressures within which variable social practices are profoundly affected but never necessarily controlled” (Williams 1974, p. 133). In the end, what matters is to ask how TikTok materialise as a socio-culture force in that sense, shaping and reconfiguring the social fabric. It is by answering this question that we will come to better understand the real impacts that TikTok has on the formation of social movement and social change across societies around the globe today.

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