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For who page? Tiktok creators' algorithmic dependencies

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This paper examines how TikTok impacts creativity through an investigation of the platform's interaction and algorithmic design. Through one-on-one interviews, autoethnography, walkthroughs, and observation, this research reveals how TikTok's design is impacting the creative processes, form, aesthetics, and topics of videos shared on the platform. The results demonstrate how both algorithmic and interaction design mediate video elements such as sounds, timing, style, language, trends, length, and more. TikTok's "Duet" feature is taken as a case study, demonstrating that participants are engaging in certain creative forms and processes to increase algorithmic visibility, which is primed by the platform's design. The results reveal that creators are purposefully minimising their own creativity in order to pander to perceived algorithmic tastes and subsequently enhance their visibility. As TikTok increasingly mediates cultural norms and information visbility, it is imperative to consider the platform's design's outsize influence on what is created and shared—and how.

Keywords: tiktok; algorithmic cultures; creators; collaboration

1 Introduction

TikTok has become the darling of advertisers, teens, and researchers alike. Against the backdrop of a harsh regulatory landscape—in which both the United States and the European Union are threatening to "ban" the app—this paper examines how TikTok's users are influenced by the platform. In particular, this research focusses on how two key elements of the app's user experience (UX), the platform design and the underlying algorithmic system, shape users' creation practices. By examining creation practices, we focus on the types of videos users make to post on TikTok, as well as how they film, edit, caption, and distribute those videos.

As the proportion of internet users that find their news, information, and entertainment on TikTok continues to rise (Dean, 2022), videos that are shared on the platform seep into offline cultural realities. It becomes imperative to consider TikTok's influence on the type of media that circulates not only by examining which videos gain visibility on the platform, as many scholars have aptly done, but

by also examining the more entrenched ways that TikTok implicitly influences the videos that are created in the first place.

One might say that people are creating "for" TikTok, such that the app influences platformed content before users even share videos on the platform—and even further before the platform even determines who sees those videos. As videos are increasingly made "for" TikTok, the app influences creative norms (including processes, aesthetics, forms, and topics), which propogates into downstream effects on creative cultures. Here, we examine the change at the root of human behavior—human's creation practices—that has been precipitated by the platform's interactions.

2 The algorithmic culture of tiktok

This research is situated within what Ted Striphas' terms "algorithmic culture," the "enfolding of human thought, conduct, organization and expression into the logic of big data and large-scale computation, a move that alters how culture has long been practiced, experienced and understood" (Striphas, 2015). In this alteration, algorithms (and, subsequently, the cultural reality they disseminate) impose their host platforms' profit-driven models of success. This prioritisation undercuts the values of democratic public access that are often touted by techno-optimists, who claim that digital platforms provide any creator with direct access to a global audience, without elitist intermediaries such as galleries or museums. However, Striphas and others highlight how this widespread access actually necessitates the further use of algorithms to sort, catalogue, and display the plethora of cultural content available. This, in turn, places corporate-driven models in the powerful position of determining which content is rendered visible and accessible to the public. In this way, the ideal of open democratic access is undercut by the display of only a small proportion of cultural content selected by corporate algorithms.

This brings us to a core assumption of the existing platform design literature: technology platforms have become gatekeepers. Metoyer-Duran introduced the concept of information gatekeepers (Metoyer-Duran, 1993), and many technological platforms have since been described as "gatekeeping" access to information for their users. In this article, I extend this gatekeeper analogy beyond informational content to creative content. In the context of creative media, platforms are bi-directional gatekeepers: they simultaneously determine both a) which content a user sees and b) what audience a creative reaches. These decisions are made by the respective platform's algorithms, thereby rendering algorithms the underlying gatekeepers of creative content and audiences. Given the creative context, one might say that algorithms are "curating," a framing I will use throughtout this paper.

In a cultural space curated by algorithms that cannot parse creativity, creatives are driven to pursue projects that provide visibility on these platforms (Poell et al., 2021). Becker presciently warned that systems of distribution directly impact the art that will be distributed in that system (Becker, 2008). As one artist bluntly describes in a 1972 ethnography (Levine, 1972), "When you can't sell your paintings and you continue to produce you can't help but become bitter unless you're a very strong person, and most artists are not." Of course, creatives do not have to follow these conventions, but they will "pay the price in…decreased circulation of their work" if they do not begin to pander to the distribution systems' expectations (Becker, 2008). Algorithms are particularly capable of decreasing circulation of creatives' work: by determining which audiences see which pieces, they can instantly

render content invisible by failing to display it to an online audience. Therefore, platforms are empowered to confer or remove "visibility and hence status" for cultural creators (Poell et al., 2021).

The more cultural producers distribute and monetise content through platforms, the more platform curation steers which content becomes visible and, therefore, monetisable (Poell et al., 2021). As Ohlheiser describes, "Small algorithmic changes by a platform can make or tank an entire career" (Ohlheiser, 2020). Researchers describe this as "a centralisation of curatorial power" (Poell et al, 2021; Prey 2020; Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Bucher, 2018). In this way, algorithmic platforms assume a position of economic power while driving creators into economic precarity: creative workers might lose their audience and income whenever a platform alters its curatorial structures (Duffy et al., 2021). Furthermore, the majority of creators are not making a living wage from their work for these algorithmic platforms (Poell et al., 2021), which rely on creators to make content that will keep the their users entertained and their business profitable.

In particular, this research examines how the sociotechnical structure that algorithmic culture creates ultimately influences creative processes and aesthetic decisions. As Lev Manovich describes, AI is no longer simply a tool that artists can use to make art, but it is a sociocultural influence that shapes aesthetic decisions and tastes (Manovich, 2018). Manovich draws on Instagram's "Explore Page" as an example of a site of algorithmic influence. This algorithmically-curated page determines what visual content a user has access to, thereby informing their conception of sociocultural norms. These AI-determined norms might include creative processes, artistic styles, or aesthetic trends.

As Sophie Bishop described in her Real Life article "Influencer Creep," creators are facing increasing pressure to optimise their work for the algorithmic platforms' system of distribution: "Thanks to social media, production and content can be constantly monitored and adjusted to maximize their potential for visibility and engagement. Artists are beholden not only to art markets—from which they once could keep a safe personal distance even as they depended on it—but to the principles of…optimization" (Bishop, 2022). In qualitative interviews, Bishop found that many creators have begun optimising their practice for visibility on Instagram. In so doing, they have changed everything from the content's form to their underlying creative processes.

Such changes to artists' form, content, and processes have been informed by marketing strategies, personal platform experiences, and algorithmic lore (Bishop, 2020) that presupposes what is being prioritized by the platform (Bishop, 2022). Drawing on these sources of information, creators actively choose to change their work to pander to perceived algorithmic priorities in exchange for increased visibility. At the same time, creators may be subconsciously influenced by a subtler force: the platform's design, which shapes what artists produce. Applying Davis' theory of affordance impact (Davis, 2020), the platform's designed affordances encourage certain types of work; downstream, other affordances influence audience expectations. These expectations, mediated by the platform, are fed back to creators, inciting further changes to their process and output (Bishop, 2022). Building upon Bishop's initial interviews with creators, this paper further unpicks the influence of algorithmic platforms on creators' artistic decisions and processes.

In this paper, I utilize TikTok as a site to examine the impact of algorithmic curation on creative processes and aesthetic norms. TikTok is the fastest-growing social media platform, with over 1 billion monthly active users (TikTok Newsroom, 2019), 2.9 billion downloads (Sensor Tower, 2020), and 67%

of Gen Z using the platform (Vogels et al., 2022). Its growth has rapidly exceeded platform competitors like Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube. Globally, the average time spent on TikTok per day is 52 minutes, and 90% of its users access the app daily (Dean, 2022).

TikTok is an ideal site for this research as "the algorithm" figures centrally in its user experience. (Thoughout this paper, I will use the term "the algorithm" to refer to the complex system of several algorithmic models that drive the algorithmically-mediated curation on TikTok's platform; this language reflects participants' conception of "the algorithm" as a single—and in many cases, anthropomorphised— entity.) The TikTok experience is configured around a "For You Page," an algorithmically-curated stream of endless video content. The FYP is not made up of videos from friends, family, or even creators the user has chosen to follow; instead, the FYP serendipitously displays videos from various unknown sources, selected according to the algorithm's perception of the user's tastes. This stands in stark contrast with historical experiences on Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, or Twitter, where the primary "feeds" have been based upon one's social connections. Social media began with content from friends and family to achieve the oft-touted "network effects." Now that the platforms are ubiquitous, they can focus on serving professionalized content that is easier for platforms to track, control, and monetise. Indeed, we may soon "forget how aggressively social media companies tried to capture and direct our sociality" (Horning, 2022). Rather than being a space to connect with friends, colleagues, or loved ones, TikTok becomes a site of pure entertainment, more akin to a short-form streaming service. In this way, "recognition from friends has been replaced by recognition from the algorithm (it knows me so well!)" (Horning, 2022).

Indeed, "interpersonal connections are downplayed on the platform" (Zulli & Zulli, 2020), replaced with a highly personalized individual experience. In this way, the experience of using Tik Tok is one of repeatedly engaging with the self: how the self is perceived and, therefore, what the self is shown to perceive. This leads to a platform that facilitates "intra (rather than inter)personal connection" (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020), creating an "algorithmized self" focussed on self-representation according to the algorithm and replacing the oft-discussed "networked self," which incorporated the attributes of one's social graph (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). The algorithm both creates this self-representation and consumes it, imbibing input from the individual users' likes, searches, and other actions. If the user decides to create a video, the algorithm consumes this self-representation as well.

Collie & Wilson-Barnao performed a walkthrough to identify the ways in which TikTok's design and algorithmic affordances are influencing what is created on the platform. They argue that TikTok is explicitly designed to cajole users into becoming creators, only to subsequently extract value from their creative work, which is unpaid digital labour (Collie & Wilson-Barnao, 2020). As Rob Horning notes, "TikTok users in effect work for its algorithms: The algorithm isn't 'for you;' it's a technique optimized to compel you to act on its behalf." In this way, the platform uses its users to create content in order to facilitate downstream engagement on behalf of other users.

The researchers also argue that the platform is designed to shape exactly what the users create, encouraging certain forms of content while discouraging others through real-time algorithmic success (or lack thereof) (Collie & Wilson-Barnao, 2020). At a higher level, by training creators to aspire to algorithmic success, TikTok has ushered a shift in cultural perceptions of creative content: now, the researchers argue, creative value is measured according to the content's capacity to "go viral," rather than the consideration of other aesthetic, social, or artistic qualities (Collie & Wilson-Barnao, 2020).

Previous research of mine (Herman & Hwang, 2022) has shown that platform users are now perceiving "attention-grabbing" works as more creatively valuable.

Tiktok foregrounds imitation and replication wherever possible (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). For instance, the TikTok algorithm will prioritize videos that are replications of an already popular video (leading to "trending" audio content, recurring "viral" dances, endless "reaction videos," and mimetic "Duets"). In this way, TikTok itself becomes a meme. Furthermore, the content that users select becomes "a visible part of the memetic process itself" (Zulli & Zulli, 2020), since, as Bhandari & Bimo point out, people are choosing the content that matches them and matching the content that is selected for them. Indeed, Karizat et al. demonstrated that participants intentionally engaged with videos on the platform in ways that they expected would train the algorithm to display or not display content on their main feed, the For You Page (FYP), to achieve alignment between their algorithmic identity—how the algorithm is believed to understand them—and how they understand themselves" (Karizat et al., 2021). In this way, the Personal Engagement Theory of Social Feeds developed on Facebook (Eslami et al., 2016) persists on TikTok, and users believe that actions such as liking or commenting on a video inform the algorithm and influence what they see on their For You Page. Downstream, this memetic process informs video curation (from the perspective of the viewer) and audience curation (from the perspective of the creator).

Given the newfound centrality of the algorithm as a creative stakeholder, creatives begin to leverage the TikTok algorithm as a key tool in their creative process, designing content according to its implied suggestions. Jeremy Wade Morris describes this role of the algorithm as a "Bordieusian infomediary:" a curator-gatekeeper that exhibits control over what content is created, how it's shared, the audience it reaches, and how it is perceived (Morris, 2015).

In this paper, I examine the impact of said algorithmic curator-gatekeepers on creators' processes and aesthetic decisions. Using TikTok as my site, I conduct an autoethnography, cognitive walkthrough, observational sessions, and one-on-one interviews with creators.

2.1 Research questions

1. How does the TikTok algorithm's role as a curator and audience gatekeeper influence creators' processes and aesthetic decisions?

    - How do the design affordances of an algorithmic platform influence what content is made and how it is produced?
    - How does algorithmic curation influence aesthetic norms when humans sacrifice agency over what they see?

3 Methodology

I employed multiple methodologies to investigate these questions, visualized below (Figure 1). Firstly, I have conducted an auto-ethnography within TikTok's virtual space (à la Boellstorff, 2015). I created a TikTok account and observed what the algorithm selected to display on my "For You Page," with increasing specificity, over a period of several months. I interacted with the platform according to standard user practices: liking, following, commenting, searching, sharing, and even editing, creating, and posting my own videos. I have kept detailed notes on my experience, including what types of videos have been shown when, the factors that seem to impact which videos are displayed, what

"niches" become visible within the content ecosystem, and so on. I also reflect on how the algorithmic display has influenced my own self-perception, aesthetic tastes, and creation practices.

In tandem with my auto-ethnography of TikTok's user experience, I utilised the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) to familiarize myself with the platform's user interface design. Although algorithmic platforms do not explicitly force their users to engage in specific ways, their design can "request, demand, encourage, discourage, refuse, and allow particular lines of action and social dynamics" through including or excluding certain digital features (Davis, 2020). For example, Twitter's 280-character limit encourages discursive brevity whereas Facebook allows more detailed posts; Instagram requires visual communication whereas Twitter allows posts that are just text. I have used the walkthrough method here because it "recognizes that technical systems implicitly and sometimes explicitly configure content production and consumption in specific ways" (Davis, 2020). By "walking through" the user experience of video creation and consumption, I aim to unpack the ways in which TikTok is influencing creative processes and aesthetic norms.

After familiarising myself with the interface and its affordances, I conducted 8 semi-structured online interviews (Hine, 2008) via Zoom with TikTok content creators (participant details can be found in Appendix 8.1). These creators were recruited via Direct Messages on Instagram, since TikTok does not allow contact with users who are not following you. These interviews were guided by an open-ended set of questions centring around TikTok's "Duet" affordance (interview questions can be found in Appendix 8.2), and the conversation often deviated from the questions in order to capture the participants' unique ideas, needs, habits, and opinions. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and later analysed through a system of qualitative coding, in which recurring themes were logged and deconstructed.

Finally, I observed the same creators as they made a new TikTok video, examining their process from start to finish. This observational design research process was also conducted online (Hine, 2015), and participants shared their smartphone screen via Zoom in order to facilitate observation. In addition to visually sharing their process, participants were instructed to "thinkaloud" (Ericsson & Simon, 1993) as they progressed through their TikTok-making process (prompts can be found in Appendix 8.2). Sessions were recorded, such that the participant-narrated screen captures were available to map out participants' workflows and interactions, highlighting key commonalities between participants.

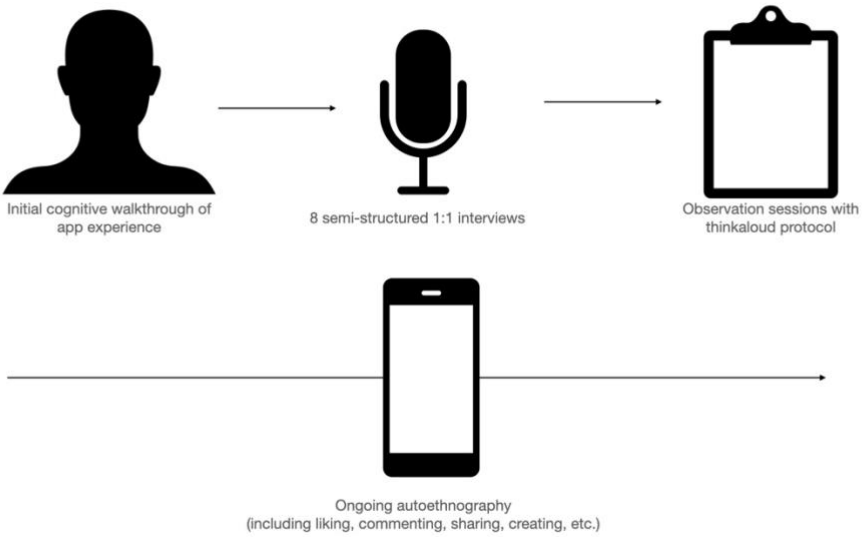

Figure 1. A diagram of the mixed-methods approach utilized in this research.

4 Results

On social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Instagram) prior to the rise of TikTok, those with the most followers automatically received the most visibility, since their content would be shown to everyone who followed them. This was perceived by some as an "unfair advantage," as a few creators gained maximum visibility and steered our cultural consciousness. TikTok has inverted this model: now, anyone can purportedly "go viral," as viewers do not only see videos from those they follow. Instead, they see videos that are selected for visibility by the platform's algorithmic models; these videos appear on a user's "For You Page," the carefully designed centerpiece of the TikTok app. Indeed, a recent study confirmed that over 75% of TikTok video views come from the For You Page (Romero, 2023). Therefore, in order to gain access to an audience, a creator's video must appear on the For You Page, and in order to appear on the For You Page, the video must be selected by the algorithm. In this way, anyone has the opportunity to go viral, so long as they satisfice algorithmic tastes. In this section, I will explore the multitudinous ways in which TikTok creators are shaping their creations to satisfice the tastes that they perceive the algorithm to have; at the same time, I will explore how the app's interaction design is also shaping what is created, as suggested by Davis' affordance theory (Davis, 2020).

It is worth noting that viewers do have some power, because the algorithm uses users' view time, likes, comments, follows, and audience retention to determine whether to show the video to other users (Romero, 2023). Therefore, follows don't determine who or what a user sees, but they do determine which creations gain visibility to other users. In the words of one creator, "The key to successful content is retaining your audience's attention."

This is a prime example of algorithmic lore (Bishop, 2020), in which creators develop theories about algorithmic decision-making processes. Some lore spreads through partner managers at the company,

who work with creators that they think will help make their platform more successful. On a recent scroll through my For You Page, I saw a video from one of the creators who received advice from a TikTok partner: "…so here's everything the TikTok algorithm is apparently prioritizing in 2023. They're super shady about their algorithm, but here is what they're telling their key influencers and brand partners." Most lore, however, spreads through creators' personal experiences. One creator uses a web plug-in to sort his videos from most to least successful, and then looks for patterns amongst his most successful videos to determine what the algorithm "likes." It is worth noting that TikTok's algorithmic model is what researchers call a "black box," rendering its processes and protocols opaque to anyone outside the company. Therefore, algorithmic lore is often unfounded, and humans may grok causal patterns that do not exist amongst successful (or unsuccessful) videos. For instance, as I created several videos for TikTok, I noticed that the two videos of mine that got the most views were both quite short (10 seconds or less). I presumed that the algorithm shows shorter videos to more people, which would align with a profit-driven goal of getting viewers to see as many videos as quickly as possible (and the oft-touted shortening of attention spans that is presumed to be caused by TikTok's short-form video model). Therefore, I made sure that the next few videos I made were also 10 seconds or less, sometimes cutting longer videos in half just to achieve this goal. However, the results of a recent study indicate the opposite of what I had mistakenly assumed: longer videos often receive more views, peaking at 42 seconds in length (Romero, 2023).

Algorithmic lore is rife on the platform, with many TikTok creators using the platform to share their homespun theories, thereby leveraging lore itself for visibility. Indeed, I also saw several videos discussing the results of the recent study I mentioned above (Romero, 2023), discerning how they might leverage the study's findings to increase their visibility. (It's worth noting that the algorithm included these videos in my personalised For You Page, having rightly noticed my interest in these topics as I performed this research.) In this way, creators develop interpretations and forms of resistance when understanding and playing the "visibility game," rather than being cast as "victims" of algorithmic decision making (Cotter, 2019; Petre et al., 2019).

The results below are organised according to four aspects of video creation that are impacted by TikTok's platform design: the creative process (4.1), aesthetics (4.2), topics (4.3), and form (4.4). In each section, I delineate the influence of both algorithmic design and interaction design. By organising the results in this way, I collapse the data across the various methodologies described above (Section 2), orienting the findings according to the resulting themes versus methodological format. The diagram bellow illustrates the organizational logic of these results (Figure 2).

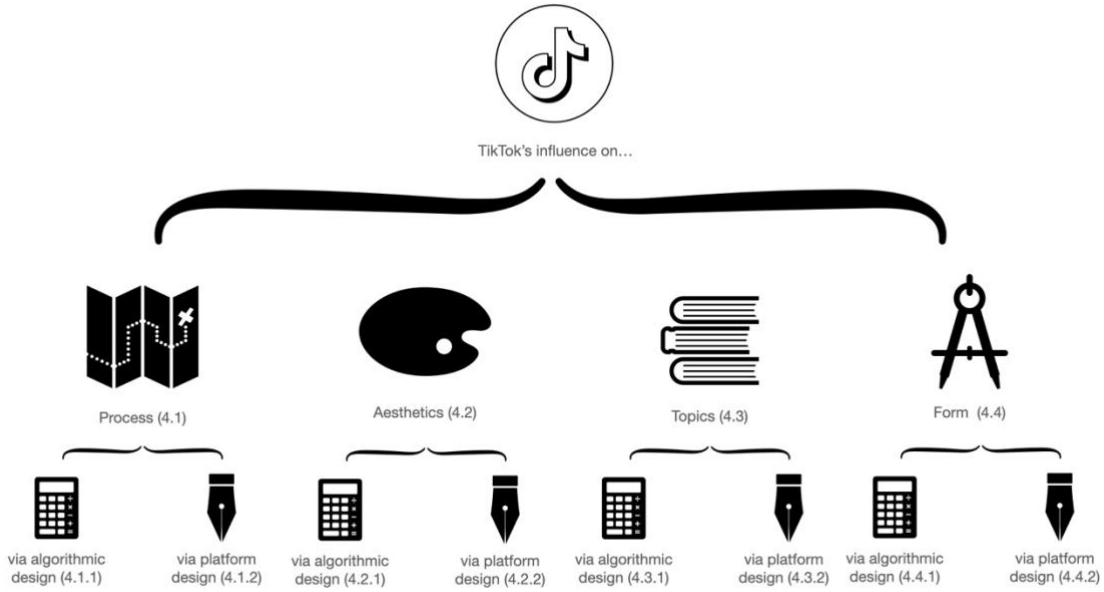

Figure 2. A diagram of the organizational logic of the research results.

4.1 Platform shaping process

First, I examine how TikTok impacts creators' processes. Below, I demonstrate how the platform's algorithmic design (4.1.1) and interaction design (4.1.2) influence the creative process.

4.1.1 Algorithmic influence on process

One focus of algorithmic lore is the impact that posting frequency and timing have on visibility. There is a widespread assumption that the algorithm will prioritise videos from those who post more frequently, and that there is a certain time of day that is best for visibility. Indeed, a recent study found that both frequency and timing appear to impact the visibility that the algorithm affords to a given video: for maximum visibility, creators should be posting three times a week; they will start to see an uplift in view counts after approximately two weeks. Timing-wise, videos that are posted at 8pm on weekdays and 6pm on Saturdays perform best, with Friday being the posting day that results in the maximum number of views (Romero, 2023).

Participants described facilitating their own "experiments" to determine the best days and times at which to post for their own audience. One creator said, "I have analysed all data….I have done experiments…I have concluded that this is the best time for posting on social media….If I posted in morning, I get up to 10,000 views only. Afterwards, it goes up to 40 to 50,000… Until evening or night…if it starts trending then it gets more views, but average views are 40 to 50,000." There is a sense that simply "timing it right" will have a drastic impact on the visibility of their videos, and that all of their videos will be seen more if they simply post more often. This can lead to a hamster-wheel-like effect by which creators are churning out as many videos as possible as quickly as possible.

This has been seen in other research as well, including a study by Arriagada & Ibáñez (2020), which found that creators realized how the algorithm redistributed and controlled content dissemination, encouraging them to create more content more frequently in order to "beat the algorithm" and be involved in the social media platform economy. Valentina, a content creator since 2011, described her

learning process: "If you are not uploading content constantly, [the algorithm] punishes you . . . before that you upload your picture and you can see it immediately, but now depends on the number of people who “likes” the picture and my kind of followers. You can upload a picture and if I don’t “like” it maybe I will not see your content for a long time."

When I first began this fieldwork, I did not often take videos on my mobile phone; when I was traveling, visiting friends or family, or participating in events, I often took pictures instead. However, my TikTok feed instantly became filled with videos of extremely short clips strung together to give the “taste” of a travel, social, or event experience. Over the course of my fieldwork, I noticed that I began to take short, 1 to 2 second videos of the things I would have previously photographed. These videos could then be strung together quickly and easily into a TikTok video that slotted into the format and genre of videos I was accustomed to viewing on TikTok. In this way, my very mode of capturing my own memories was shifted according to the process by which other people in my algorithmically-curated TikTok feed captured theirs.

4.1.2 Interaction design influence on process

TikTok’s interface design also encourages creators to record their videos directly within the TikTok app. By doing this, creators have access to an array of additional editing functionalities that are not enabled for participants who even record a video using their device’s native camera. One example of a feature that is only available if creators record their video in-app is what TikTok calls “Filters.” These filters can be applied to someone’s voice (obscuring personal tone or inflection), someone’s face (including the recently viral “Bold Glamour” filter that regenerated a version of the user’s face according to Western beauty standards), or a general scene (bringing virtual objects into the frame or shifting the entire lighting and color palette of the space). While such features are only accessible to creators that record within the TikTok app, the actual recording mechanisms of the app are quite limited, thereby shepherding (or gently coercing) creators to use specific tools or features to capture their videos. In these ways, the designed affordances of the interface shape how videos are both captured and edited.

4.2 Platform shaping aesthetics

Next, I examine how TikTok’s algorithmic design (4.2.1) and interaction design (4.2.2) impact creators’ *aesthetics*.

4.2.1 Algorithmic influence on aesthetics

Part of the aesthetic experience of a video is the sounds or music used. Within TikTok’s video editing interface, a creator is encouraged to either replace the video’s existing sounds with a TikTok “Sound” (which can be a snippet of music, a clip of someone speaking, or any other audio recording) or to overlay a TikTok Sound over the video’s existing audio. The app algorithmically “recommends” certain Sounds for each video; these recommendations appear to be informed by three factors: first, the app appears to analyse the content of the video, and suggest a Sound that matches with the content or aesthetic. Next, the app considers what Sounds the creator has used before, suggesting Sounds of a similar aesthetic. (After making two videos with classical music Sounds, almost all of the Sounds recommended by the platform in the future were classical.) Finally, TikTok pushes Sounds that are “trending” on the platform, creating a cyclical flywheel by which there is an explosion of videos affiliated with a certain Sound, thereby causing even more videos to be recommended to use that

Sound. Creator lore suggests that using a trending Sound will also push a video to more users For You Pages, as the algorithm can easily track how a sound is performing and push videos using that sound. The video will then be displayed with the Sound title overlaid on the bottom portion of the video; viewers can tap on the Sound name to see other videos made with the same sound.

Another aesthetic choice that has become rife due to TikTok's algorithmic design is on-screen text. On nearly every TikTok that I scroll past, the video contains either a) text summarizing the key points of the video or b) on-screen subtitles of what is being said in the video. At first glance, this may appear to be an accessibility affordance, rendering videos consumable to people who are hearing impaired. Others have noted that subtitles make videos more consumable in more locations; watching a TikTok in public settings (school, doctor's office, library, public transporation) suddenly becomes possible without audio. However, the primary driver of on-screen text appears to be the algorithm; creators perceive text to be parsable by the algorithm in ways that audio or visuals are not. As one creator recently described, "In any video you make, you should have on-screen text that contains search terms relevant to your content…it helps the algorithm know who to serve the content to in the first place." Therefore, including on-screen text is yet another way creators play the "visibility game." Indeed, on-screen text seems to have replaced the hashtags of yore; words in the video play the role that hashtags used to, but creators no longer need to explicitly flag certain words as relevant to the video. Instead, the algorithm is perceived as quickly parsing any written words. As another creator said, "The algorithm is way more likely to use subtitles or on-screen text [than hashtags] to categorise your content."

4.2.2 interaction design influence on aesthetics

As described above, the video editing interface suggests certain Sounds to creators, pushing algorithmically popular audio loops to extreme visibility. Once a creator selects a pre-made template or filter to use, the app automatically populates a Sound based on what sounds other creators have used with the same template or filter. Though users have the opportunity to change the Sound, a default Sound has a strong impact, and creators are much more likely to use the Sound suggested by TikTok. Creators also perceive TikTok as supporting and prioritising videos with certain sound quality and volume levels if the built-in TikTok sounds are not being used. One common format in which creators will use their own sound is a "Voiceover," in which they record themselves speaking in time with the video. TikTok's app offers a particular design affordance to record a voiceover, such that the creator can watch the video and record over it in real-time, aligning their words with the video. If this voiceover is recorded in-app, creators can use voice-altering technology to obscure the sound of their individual voice and sound instead like a pre-made voice, an aesthetic decision that became common during my fieldwork, with many creators using a voice titled "Jessie." This results in many voiceover videos sounding the same, obscuring individual inflections. (At one point in my fieldwork, the supposed voice actress behind the "Jessie" voice came forward to reveal herself—and promptly went viral.)

4.3 Platform shaping topics

In this section, I demonstrate how TikTok's algorithmic design (4.3.1) and interaction design (4.3.2) shape the topical content of videos on the platform.

4.3.1 Algorithmic influence on topics

Topics are purported to be the primary organising principle of TikTok's algorithmic curation. TikTok aims to sort all videos according to their topic, which is then used to determine who will be shown the video in their For You Page. For instance, at one point in my fieldwork, I was traveling to Denmark for a research collaboration; TikTok's algorithm realized that I became interested in videos of "What to Do in Copenhagen," and I started seeing many videos pertaining to the "topic" of Copenhagen.

This is one example of what creators call a "niche." A TikTok niche is an identity and/or topic-based audience segment (see example in Figure 3). Niches are typically referred to as _____ "tok," such as "Tech Tok" in Figure 1. Creators often discuss the importance of "finding your niche," as there is a widespread conception that pandering to a certain niche will result in visibility success as the algorithm will show "niche" videos to every viewer interested in that topic. In the early stages of my fieldwork, I saw many videos welcoming me to a certain "tok," as if I was being granted access to a certain niche. In reality, creators were typically describing themselves, operating under the assumption that the algorithm would somehow know to show their videos to other people like them. This description, in turn, was likely used by the algorithm to define a creator's topic areas, such that it could show that creator's videos to viewers that appear to be interested in said topics. It is worth noting that anything associated with a certain identity implicates Karizat et al.'s concept of "algorithmic privilege," in which certain users benefit from how an algorithm operates on the basis of identity (Karizat et al., 2021).

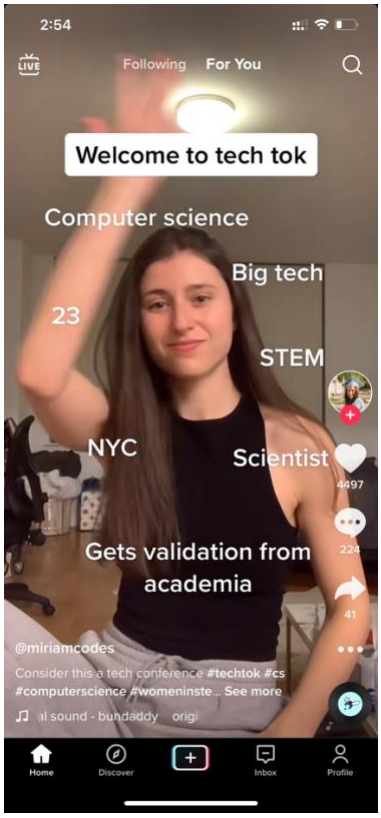

Figure 3. An example of a "niche" on TikTok.

The words used in a video are also used to sort and categorize the videos for visibility. During the course of my fieldwork, it became apparent that Gen Z was increasingly using TikTok as a search engine, searching for answers in TikTok videos instead of on Google (as represented in Figure 4). One creator

I spoke with said: ““TikTok is slowly becoming a search engine… it’s very easy to search for content of a specific topic that you want to see.” As TikTok increasingly takes on the role of a search engine, typical practices of “Search Engine Optimization” (“SEO”) begin to apply. As one creator recently shared, ““Are your TikToks stuck at low views? Here’s what you’re probably doing wrong. If you want to boost your views on TikTok, you need to be search engine optimized.” In this way, the inclusion of certain topics (and words clearly associated with those topics) will result in enhanced visisiblity for creators.

At the same time, association with certain topics and words can also result in minimized visibility, as creators describe a fear of being “shadow-banned” or “getting a community guidelines violation.” This can occur if a creator uses certain words that are banned by TikTok, so creators have come up with their own language to circumvent these restrictions: for example, they use “unalived” instead of the banned word “killed,” and “seggs” instead of banned word “sex.” It is worth noting that videos made using the English language will typically garner the most views, as they are accessible to the widest possible global audience. The prevalence of English on TikTok represents an increasingly globalised digital reality, in which English must be spoken in order for creators to gain relevance.

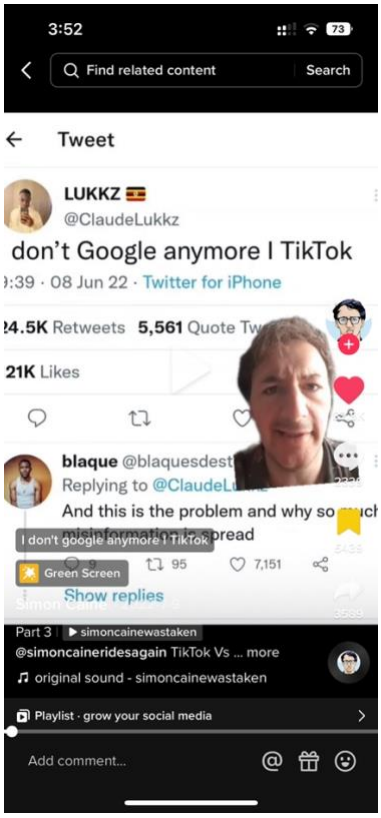

Figure 4. A creator reacts to a tweet that reads, “I don’t Google anymore I TikTok.”

4.3.2 Interaction design influence on topics

The TikTok app explicitly organises videos according to certain “Trends,” such that there is a “Trends” page (Figure 5) that is constantly ranking and highlighting current trends. The added visibility that this Trends interface affords encourages creators to make videos that correspond with Trneding content.

Trends can be organized according to topics, hashtags, Sounds, Duets, or Filters. In this way, the app tracks and displays content according to these elements, which are afforded only by those who use TikTok's in-app editing system to choose a Sound, Filter, etc.

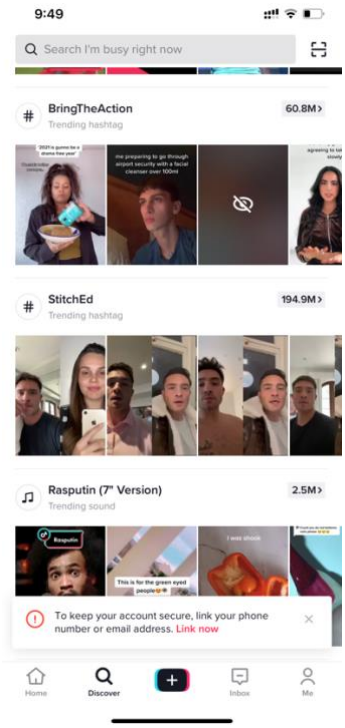

Figure 5. TikTok's "Trends" page.

TikTok's video display design also includes a search bar that suggests similar content to the topic it identifies within the video at hand. This can be used not only for discoverability of videos on similar topics, but also for creators to optimise their own SEO. As one creator described to me, "On each of your videos, you're going to see a search bar at the top. If the search bar just says 'Find related content,' you're not showing up in search. However, if it's something very specific to what you're talking about in the video…then you are showing up in the search engine." I found myself referring to this advice when posting a video from a specific art museum; at first, I included the name of the art museum in the on-screen text of my video. However, once I posted it, I realised that nothing came up in the search bar of my video, so I posted another video and changed the on-screen text to include the city that the museum is in. This seemed to unlock a topical niche, and the city name appeared in the search bar. Sure enough, that video received exponentially more views than the video that only had the museum name. Though the museum name was more interesting and relevant to me, I changed my creation practices to pander to what the interface design seemed to suggest, rewarding me by appealing to an app-defined "niche."

4.4 Platform shaping form

Finally, in this section, I examine how the platform shapes the form of videos created, through both algorithmic design (4.4.1) and interaction design (4.4.2).

4.4.1 Algorithmic influence on form

As described at the start of this section (Section 3), the length of a video seems to be a key factor that TikTok's algorithm takes into account when sorting videos. I observed my own shorter videos seeming to achieve maximum visibility, though recent studies have suggested otherwise (Romero, 2023). At one point in my data collection process, there were a proliferation of videos that contained many lines of on-screen text against a simple background; the videos were extremely short (approximately 6 seconds), but it would be nearly impossible to read all of the text in that timeframe. Thanks to TikTok's auto-loop design feature, by which each video continues to be played continuously until the user scrolls to the next video, participants were watching the video several "times" just to read all of the text. This would be registered by the algorithmic platform as several views, increasing the video's view count and purportedly indicating maximum audience interest, such that the video would then be shown to even more viewers. This is a prime example of creators playing the "visibility game" (Cotter, 2019) by leveraging their knowledge of algorithmic metrics and processes to "hack" the algorithm in their favour.

Another algorithmic influence on form is referred to as "direct-to-camera." In this format, creators place themselves in the centre of the image and record themselves speaking directly to the camera. Creators perceive this form of video as "preferred" by the algorithm. While many creators describe this format as uncomfortable for them, they continue to make videos in this format to gain visibility. Throughout my fieldwork, this has led to a proliferation of "Get Ready With Me" ("GRWM") videos, a genre of video in which the creator speaks directly to the camera as they "get ready" by doing their makeup. This format has become so commonplace that it has become a meme-able phrase, and its rare to find creators speaking directly to the camera while not engaging in some form of "readying."

TikTok offers specific forms of videos that are supported by their in-app editing functionality and are displayed differently according to the format in which they've been edited. Two examples of these are "Duets" and "Stitches." In a Duet, a creator makes a video that is designed to be shown side-by-side and concurrently with another video (made by another creator). The platform enables the original creator to be credited, while the side-by-side Duet appears as a new video on the Duet-er's profile. In a Stitch, the creator can select a portion of another video to play first, after which their own video content plays—tacked on the end of the original video. Once again, the initial creator is credited and linked, but the Stitch belongs to the Stich-er. As detailed further in Section 3.3 below, creators often make videos in these formats to increase their own visibility. The algorithm is perceived as prioritising Duets and Stitches, so my interviewees made these videos not because they found them interesting or creative, but because they believed they would be algorithmically rewarded for using these formats.

4.4.2 Interaction design influence on form

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, TikTok introduced a new format type, referred to as a carousel. Carousel posts contain a series of still images (which can be overlaid with text) set to a TikTok "sound," not any video. However, when a viewer comes across a carousel on their For You Page, the app will automatically scroll through each image one-by-one as the sound plays in the background. In this way, the viewer remains passive, though the viewer can also choose to actively swipe through the images to see them more quickly. Once this new form of post was introduced to TikTok, many creators began to collate collections of images, text, and sound to tell stories in a way that leveraged the interface's affordances, thus creating a new genre of TikTok content that no longer deploys film and video as its

primary medium. As one creator joked, “When you work in social media and have to remember that now Instagram is pushing Reels (TikToks) and TikTok is pushing carousel posts (Instagrams).”

Speaking of other editing platforms, it is worth mentioning that TikTok’s interface design strongly encourages creators to use CapCut, an all-in-one video editing tool, to make and edit their TikToks. CapCut is owned by ByteDance, TikTok’s parent company, so the app is given plug-in functionality (such as “Edit in CapCut..”) within the TikTok editing workflow. Furthermore, on videos made or edited in CapCut, TikTok displays a CapCut logo to viewers, inviting them to try out the template that was used to make the video they are watching. Indeed, like many new digital creative tools, CapCut is founded on templates: users make and edit videos using template options that are built-in to the app. When the video is ultimately posted on TikTok, the information about which template was used to make the video travels with it, such that TikTok can sort and categorize videos that have been made using the same template. This results in certain CapCut templates “trending” or “going viral” on TikTok, driving even more video creators to a) use CapCut’s editing software, which ultimately has an impact on the form and aesthetics of a video made using the tool, and b) to use that particular CapCut template, resulting in a proliferation of videos containing that template’s structure or aesthetics. In the words of one creator, “It’s pretty obvious they want you to record on CapCut or directly in the [TikTok] app, and if you do that, the algorithm will naturally give it a boost.” (Describing the algorithm as a “naturally” occurring phenomenon—similar to other creator’s description of “organic” audience growth on the app—demonstrates the breadth and power of this obscured model.) In this way, the parent company’s apps are prioritised over editing apps owned by other companies.

3.3 The Case of duets

As described above, “Duets” are a form of video on TikTok in which a creator’s video includes a previous video side-by-side with the video they make (Figure 6). The creators that I selected to interview had each created at least one Duet. I used Duets as a particular video “case”—involving a specific creation process, a specific form of sharing, and specific types of content—to explore the themes detailed in the earlier sections. This deep-dive into creators’ experience with Duets aims to vivify and concretise themes observed across the platform.

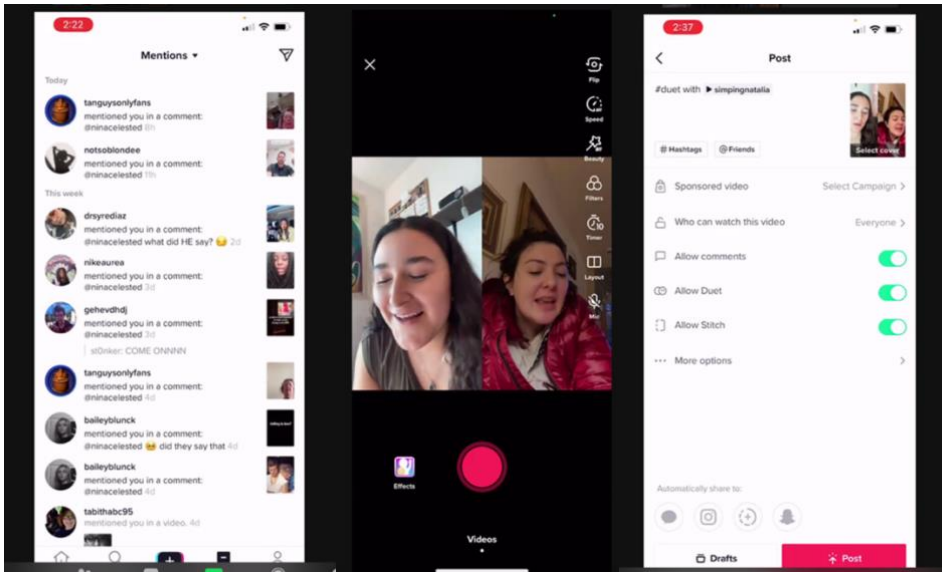

Figure 6. TikTok’s“Duet” interface.

Duets are automatically tagged according to the original video creator and collated alongside other Duets with the same parent video, producing a traceable trail of duets. It quickly became apparent that many people are Duet-ing a small number of original videos, as was the case in a "Sea Shanty" trend (Figure 7). In this trend, one creator sang a traditional British marine folk song; others around the world Duet-ed his original video, adding their voices to the song. A second layer of creators Duet-ed the already Duet-ed videos, and then a third, fourth, etc., such that an entire geographically-disparate chorus sang the song in unison.

Indeed, the analysis indicated that Duets are often used for a variety of art forms, including music-making, acting, dancing, and visual art. In making music, creators (including well-known songwriters and DJs) would often share a melody with the hashtag "#DuetMe," promoting engagement with their music (Figure 8). Singers would then add vocals to the melody through a Duet. In other cases, singers would harmonize with each other (Figure 9).

In acting-oriented Duets, some creators design their video to foster a Duet: they pause for the Duet-er to respond and provide a "script" of lines onscreen. In other cases, Duet-ers are simply adding a character into an already-complete scene. For dance duets, creators are typically performing the same dance together, sharing choreography as they would onstage. Visually artistic duets include real-time portraiture, as well as additions to the initial artwork (Figure 10).

Notwithstanding their artistic potential, Duets are seen as a second-rate form of creative content on TikTok. As one participant described, Duets are "mooching," while "original content" is a creative ideal. However, all participants were quick to inform me that TikTok prioritizes Duets over original content. They were exasperated and frustrated by what they called "the algorithm"– which they characterized as "unfair" and "impossible." By prioritizing Duets, the algorithm appears to be actively minimizing creativity, coaxing creators into reupping staid content. Furthermore, Duets force constrictive dependencies; one actress described taking up the part a certain character in Duets with another creator's own character. When this content creator stopped sharing videos, her videos necessarily diminished as well. Logistically, dependencies exist within the videos themselves: a Duet-er is restricted to the timing, pace, content that the original creator provides. Furthermore, all participants described power imbalances in Duets: on TikTok, those with more followers are perceived to be "above" those with less. A Duet inherently pits one's status against the other's; typically, well-known creators are Duet-ed, while lesser-known creators do the Duet-ing. However, this can be beneficial: making a Duet with a famous content creator can enhance one's visibility.

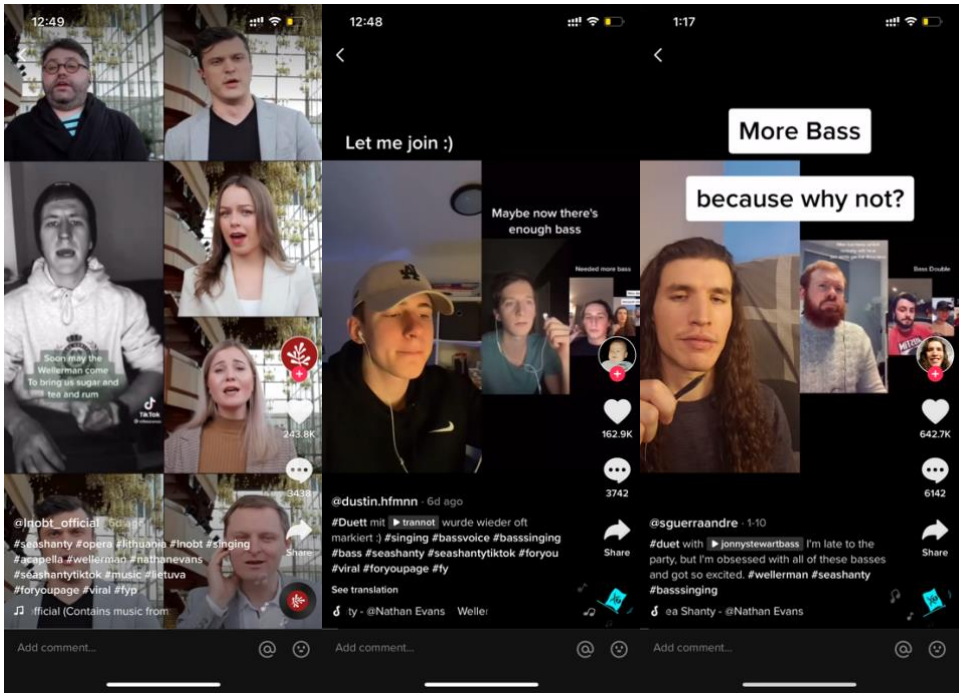

Figure 7. Screenshots from the recent "Sea Shanty" collaborative singing trend.

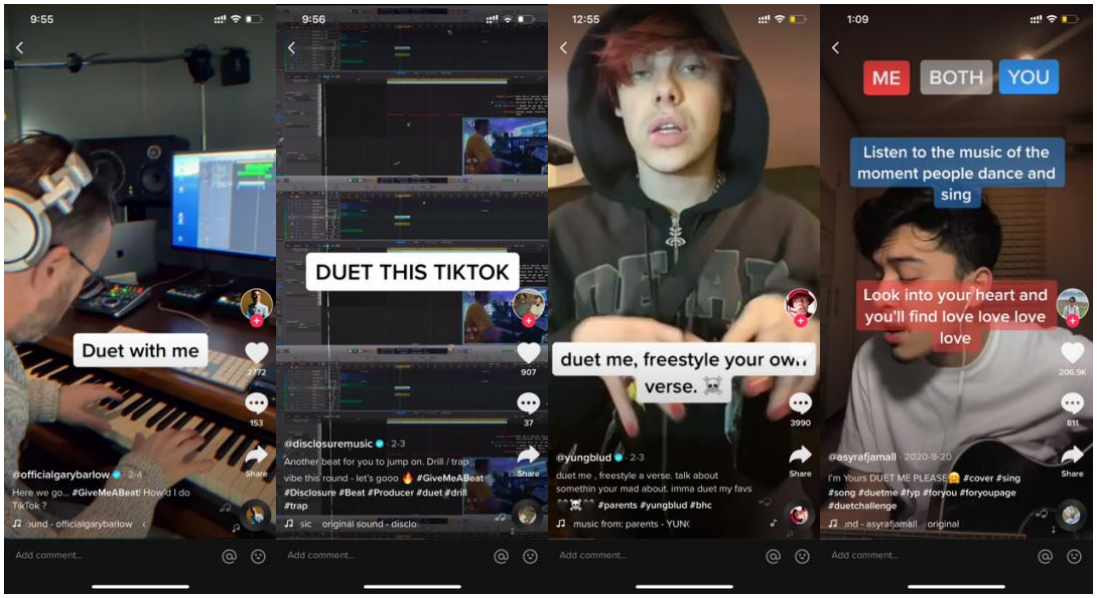

Figure 8. Prominent musical artists share melodies via videos explicitly designed to be Duet-ed.

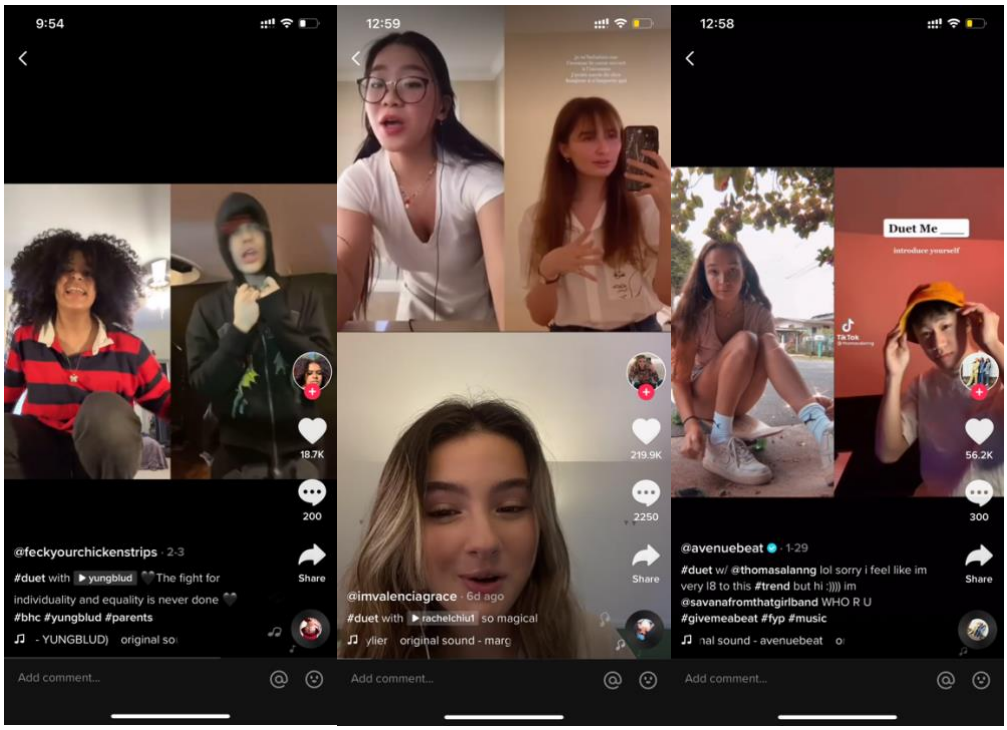

Figure 9. Musicians sing over melodies from other artists or harmonize with one another.

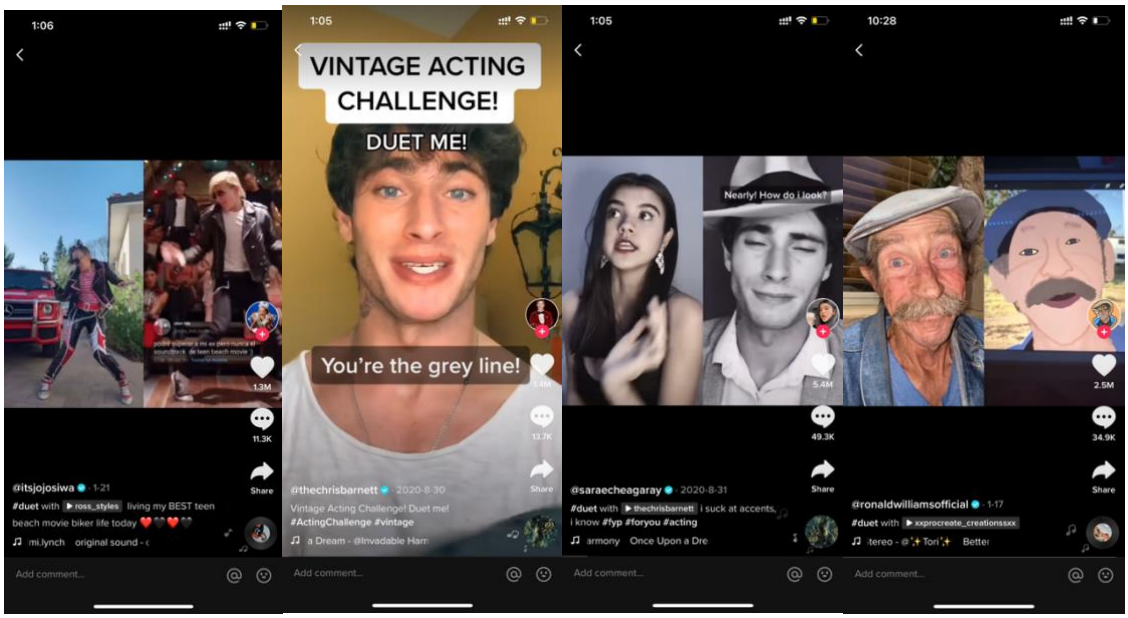

Figure 10. Duets are used for dance choreography, two-person acting scenes, and artistic portraiture.

It is imperative to acknowledge the inherent goal that every interviewee was striving towards: attention. As one participant flippantly stated, “TikTok is for marketing, not for creativity.” TikTok is seen as a view-generating platform rather than an idyllic creative outlet, and this is reinforced by the platform’s design, which prominently highlights views on profile pages and likes in the feeds. Indeed, most of the participants had set certain metrics for themselves: for instance, one participant demands “1-3 pieces of content per day, including a response, a Stitch, and a Duet.” Though I did not plan to ask about “views,” “followers,” or “virality” in my interviews, every participant raised these concepts within the first five minutes of our conversation. One even opened by saying, “It’s so interesting that you’re doing a study on the virality of Duets on TikTok” (though I had said no such thing in my recruiting call). In telling me about their experiences on TikTok, they measured their progression and growth according to video views and follower count. Indeed, one participant said, “I’ve never heard anyone tell me they only do TikTok for fun.” This platform—which bills itself as a distracting, multisensory creative relief—has become a commodified business site.

Aside from re-takes, the Duet creation process was relatively straightforward for these creators: all of them recorded their videos directly in-app, and none of them edited the videos before posting. Perhaps most interestingly, none of the participants in this study had even considered speaking to the creator whose video they were Duet-ing prior to filming their Duet. In this way, Duets are perceived as remixing rather than co-creating. However, the participants did express hope that the original creator would view their Duet and potentially respond with their thoughts; the collaborator is seen a viewer rather than a partner.

The participants chose which content to duet through a cocktail of considerations: the popularity of the original creator, how “current” the content is, the relevance of the content to their “niche,” and the overall quality of the content. Generally, the participants sought original content that was good or interesting; however, they avoided content that was “too good,” instead prioritizing content that provided a stage for their unique skills. As one participant described, “You’re not necessarily proving to others that you’re better, but you don’t want to make yourself look bad.” For this reason, the creators dueted those that were as or less talented than themselves. Furthermore, the participants were highly aware of their perceived niche. They would prioritize content that—while generally likeable—was particularly suited to that population.

5 Discussion

As Arriagada and Ibáñez describe, it is clear that "creators are beholden to constant changes in the social media ecosystem, from technical features and algorithmic configuration to renewed terms of service and policy restrictions" (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). Here, we have demonstrated the outsize impacts of specifically the algorithmic and interaction configurations of the TikTok platform on creators. Alvarado and Waern developed the concept of algorithmic experience (AX), “an analytic tool for approaching a user-centered perspective on algorithms, how users perceive them and how to design better experiences with them.” This research demonstrates how the AX and UX of TikTok’s platform converge to influence what is created and how.

Through participant observation, contextual analysis, and interviews, it becomes apparent that creators view TikTok as a limited outlet: one that is characterized less by collaboration and creativity and more by market-based optimization. In pandering to TikTok’s algorithm, participants formulate

videos in the hope that the platform's algorithm will provide a reward: increased viewership. Indeed, the platform's design has rendered view count a centerpiece of the app experience, coercing the app's users into focussing on this metric.

As the platform's design ingratiates users to the pre-eminence of view counts, the platform's algorithm takes on the role of mediating those view counts. While previous iterations of social platforms (e.g. Instagram circa 2015) allowed users to select which content they saw by following certain creators whose content subsequently appeared in the follower's feed, TikTok has restructed the primary feed such that the content a user views is determined by its algorithm. Meanwhile, the ways in which this algorithm chooses which content gains visibility are "strategically obscured to creators and users alike" (Bucher, 2012; O'Meara, 2019), leading to both widespread confusion and frenetic myths attempting to mitigate the confusion. These mythical interpretations of algorithmic models are divorced from the reality of algorithmic models, which remain nested in "black boxes." As a recent Washington Post article decried, "No one knows exactly what the algorithm rewards or punishes, leading many of them to regularly recalibrate what they talk about or how they behave in hopes of garnering its blessing."

As the primary decision-maker opaquely determining which videos get views, the despised algorithm thereby becomes a central figure in the creative output, influencing what is created and how. As creators scramble to bask in the spotlight of algorithmic visibility, "the algorithm 100% dictates what people create," in the words of one participant. As demonstrated in Sections 3.1.1, 3.2.1, 3.3.1, and 3.4.1, participants shape their videos' process, form, aesthetics, and topics according to what will purportedly achieve algorithmic success. Due to the opaque nature of the algorithm, creators are incapable of knowing if their creative changes are actually impacting visibility. However, as Rob Horning notes, "As algorithms are impacted by the feedback loop of user-algorithm interaction, these perceptions of…the algorithm—regardless of whether the perceptions map to what these algorithms technically do—have the potential to yield real influence on entire technological systems of social media platforms and their feeds." In this way, what is actually encoded in the algorithmic model matters less than how the users percieve the algorithm as performing. It is this perception that shapes creators' behaviours and creations, resulting in wholesale shifts in cultural norms. In this way, algorithms are co-forming our social reality (Karizat et al., 2021); as Becker described in his now-famous Art Worlds text, the system of distrubiton for the creative work is co-producing the cultural artifact itself (Becker, 2008).

It is worth noting that some participants are hesitant to entirely sacrifice their inborn creative inclinations to pander to the system of distribution: one participant who talked about "playing the hits" (i.e., what the algorithm will prioritise) was quick to clarify that he doesn't always "cater to the algorithm." Surprisingly, this was not always the case with participants who are artists offline, who are often viewed as pursuing individual creativity at all costs (Dewey, 2008). One marketer that works with professional artists described photographers frantically seeking support to make video content, even though that is not their medium of choice. They felt driven to make videos solely to gain visibility online as they "try to keep up with the algorithm." Unfortunately, some artists are unaware that the algorithm is determining which pieces of content gain visibility and attribute a drastic decrease in viewership to a sudden dislike of their work. It is more likely that the algorithmic model has been adjusted such that the artist's style, form, or aesthetics are no longer prioritised. Only the younger,

savvier artists are aware of the algorithm's influence and realise that the platform is not simply a direct-to-audience service that represents pure viewer interests. Those who are aware have an advantage: they can then shape their output to match the algorithm's tastes. These creators play the "visibility game," (Cotter, 2019) leveraging their understanding of how algorithmic platforms work ot improve the viewership of their content.

Rather than neutrally surfacing content, the algorithm plays an active role in shaping such content by deprioritizing what participants in this research perceived to be truly "creative." If the algorithm minimizes the visibility of truly creative content, less new creative content will be made, potentially spelling the foreclosure of a rich creative culture in modern society. As Rob Horning has written, "Creativity is now subordinated to training, to feeding algorithms data and prompts and appropriating the results and making myths about them." In this way, people apply their creativity to producing algorithmic lore (Bishop, 2020), rather than new creative content.

Furthermore, the algorithm creates audience entities that creators refer to as their "niche," a highly specified version of a traditional audience that centres a certain topic or identity. Due to the distributed scale of the platform, it suddenly becomes possible—and, perhaps, optimal—to produce content that only suits a narrow subset of the population; the algorithm is perceived as more likely to show content to an audience when it taps into a specific niche. This is likely because the platform has sorted users into narrow groups, and the more specific the group, the less content is created for that niche; therefore, creators are competing with fewer other creators to reach that community. At a global scale, that limited community can swell to a large audience. When a creator makes a video that applies to a "general" audience, on the other hand, their video is competing against all other general videos for the statistical opportunity to gain visibility.

The conception of the all-powerful algorithm is complicated by the recent revelation that TikTok's corporate employees have the power to "heat" certain videos, pushing them to more viewers than the video would typically get, in order to close business deals (Baker-White, 2023). At the end of the day, however, this is simply an extension of the algorithmic model of video prioritisation, which is similarly determined by the company's employees for the purpose of corporate profit.

The results of the Duet case (Section 3.3) reveal a dissociation from true collaboration defined as partnership between two or more parties. Instead, Duets become a playground for borrowing, re-appropriating, and subsuming previously-made content. The creators of the two sides of the Duet do not communicate, and their partnership is inherently asymmetrical. The originator is given unconstrained creative freedom in production but minimal creative control over future adaptations, while the Duet-er is confined to readymade assets weighted with another's identity. In the eyes of these creators, TikTok's main offering is the provision of an audience– one that becomes accessible when creators deign to "mooch" (i.e., Duet) the content of the creative other.

Duets are a form of remixing, which is a form of content re-appropriation that has accelerated on algorithmic platforms involving the replication of another creator's content alongside one's own creation. In some cases, there is very little added to the original content, but digital platforms still assign "ownership" to the more recent creator. While remixing connects the creative community, participants perceived it as less creative than truly original content. Nonetheless, many creators may create remixes because they believe that social media algorithms increase the visibility of content that

is remixed. Horning claims, “it is clear that TikTok's algorithm rewards content formats (like Stitches and Duets) that fuel conflict and harassment."

While this research did not reveal any examples of conflict or harassment via Duets, it is feasible to assume that algorithmic platforms would prioritize remixes: as Horning also notes, they serve as “ads for the content that users are already being driven to watch in their algorithmically populated feeds…material that has been vetted as recommendable by its statistical performance.” In this way, remixes reinforce the success of both the original and new creators, tying them to the platform with golden handcuffs. Seeing the success afforded by remixes, creators continue to create more remixes, thereby shifting their manner of creation to suit the algorithm’s preferences. This is a prime example of how algorithmic platforms are influencing what and how people create.

6 Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the multitudinous ways in which TikTok’s user and algorithmic experiences (UX & AX) simultaneously influence what is created and how. As TikTok plays an increasing role in shaping both cultural norms and the flow of information, it is imperative to consider how the platform’s design is implicated in these downstream effects. To this end, this research has shown the impacts of both the platform’s interactions and its underlying algorithmic models on creators’ processes, aesthetics, forms, and topics. It has become apparent that TikTok has designed the platform such that visibility (i.e., view count) is the central goal, which follows from its profit mechanisms that rely on viewers seeing as many ads as possible. TikTok then mediates access to this visibility through its algorithmic model, which appears to have certain “tastes” that are satisficed by the creators that seek visibility. In pandering to these tastes, creators exhibit certain creative norms and practices. However, the platform’s tastes can change without a moment’s notice, resulting in a highly precarious state of success for creators on the platform (Duffy et al., 2021; Poell et al., 2021) and an outburst of algorithmic lore (Bishop, 2020).

As shown in previous research of mine (Herman & Arora, 2023), algorithmic platforms have been both designed and optimised for Western audiences, failing to account for cultural realities outside the west. Therefore, future research should examine how the platform’s design impacts creators outside the West, as this paper was limited to research within the Global North. Future research might also unpack how Instagram’s similar video affordance, Instagram Reels, replicates and/or deviates from the norms imposed by TikTok. Creators often post their videos to multiple platforms simultaneously so as to avoide the precarity of relying on a single platform and to optimise their income. Therefore, the interaction design and algorithmic structure of several sites may be converging to influence creators’ decisions simultaneously; future research should take this into account.

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Appendix

Participant details

The 8 participants selected for the research were all TikTok creators who had made a Duet in the past month. Their Duets each corresponded to an artform—including performing arts, visual arts, music, singing, acting, etc. All of the creators were "hobbyists;" that is, none of them were making their primary income via TikTok. Participants' TikTok followings ranged in size from a few hundred followers to tens of thousands of followers. Participants were all in in the 18-34 year old age range and represented a mix of gender identities. All participants provided informed consent prior to participating in the interview and observation session, approved by the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee.

Semi-structured interview questions & thinkaloud observation prompt

Below, there is a list of sample questions asked of TikTok creators during the semi-structured interviews, as well as the thinkaloud prompt for the observational session. Conversations often deviated from this specific set of questions, which served only as a guiding framework for the discussion.

Semi-structured interview discussion guide:

- How long have you been using TikTok?
- When do you use TikTok?
    - Why?
- How did you begin creating videos for TikTok?
- Why did you begin creating videos for TikTok?
- What do you like about creating videos for TikTok?
    - What do you dislike?
- Who do you make TikToks for?
    - Why?
    - How do you engage with those people via TikTok?
- Can you tell me about your offline artistic practice?
    - What mediums do you use?
    - How does your artistic practice influence what and how you share on TikTok?
    - How is creating for TikTok different than creating for offline audiences?
    - Do you have any collaborators offline?
        - If so, how do you work together?
            - What tools do you use?
            - How do you communicate?
- I noticed you recently made a Duet on TikTok. Can you tell me that experience?
    - Why did you decide to make a Duet?
    - How did you get started making a Duet?
    - How did you choose what to include in your Duet?
    - What is your relationship with the other creator?
        - How did you communicate with them?
        - How did you share your Duet with them?

        - What agency did they have in your Duet-making process?
    - What tools did you use to make this Duet?
    - How did you record the Duet?
        - Why?
    - How did you share the Duet?
        - Why?
        - Who did you intend to see the Duet?
- How has the way you collaborate been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Thinkaloud prompt:

First of all, I'd like to remind you that we are not testing you, so there are no right or wrong answers. This is about your own experience.

Also, please put your mind on speakerphone for me as you go through the experience of building this Duet: let me know what you are looking at and what you are thinking.

In order to get started, I'll first have you connect your phone to your computer, so I can observe what you're doing via BlueJeans. If you have your charging cable handy, go ahead and plug your phone into your computer. You may need to "trust" the devices from each other. Whenever you're ready, go ahead and open QuickTime. A folder will pop up– you can go ahead and close that. Instead, go to File → New Movie Recording. You should see a recording of yourself. Right next to the red record button, you should see a dropdown arrow. Click on that, and then you'll see an option to change your "Camera" to your phone. Once you've done that, I'll just ask you to share the QuickTime window with me via BlueJeans by selection "Share Screen." From there, you can choose to only share the QuickTime window (rather than your whole screen), if that's more comfortable for you.

Feel free to get started as you naturally would, and let me know what tools you're using and why, what you're trying to accomplish, and how and why you're making certain decisions. I'll just be here observing.