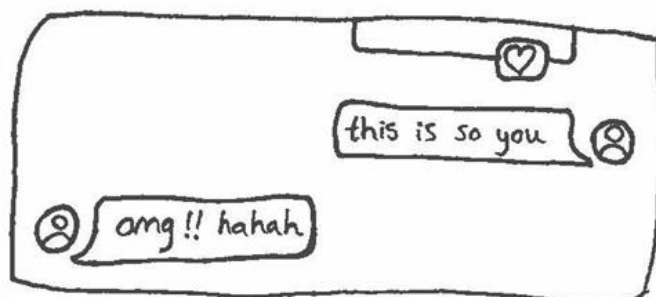
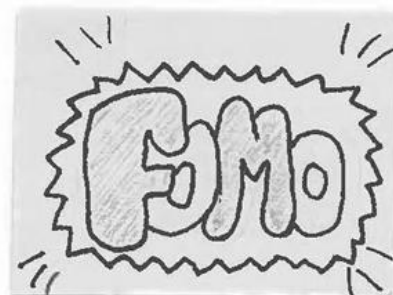
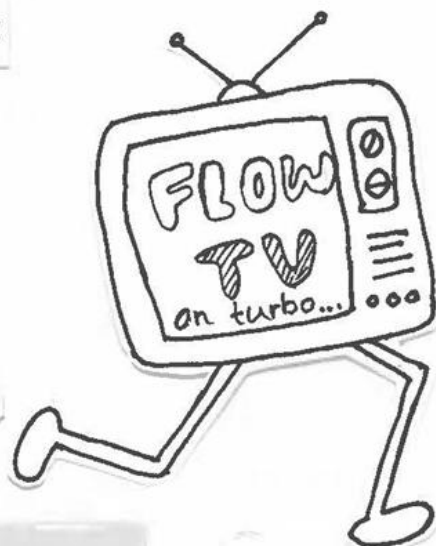
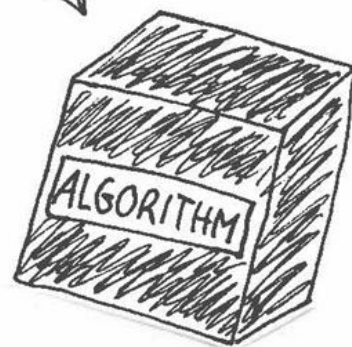
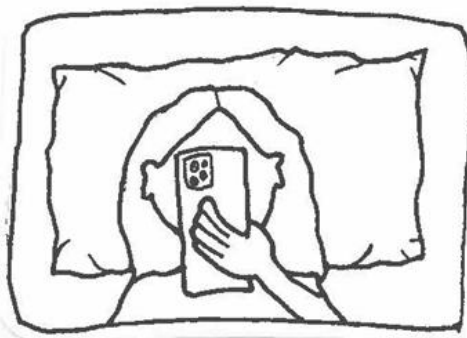
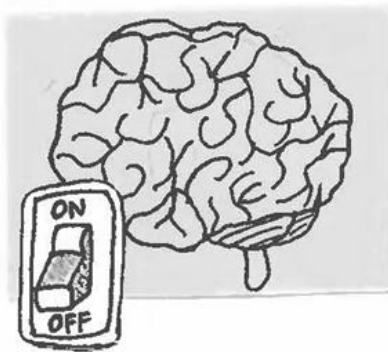


MAKING SENSE OF TIKTOK

A User-Centric Exploration of Digital Culture,
Everyday Use, and Algorithmic Experiences

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Everyday Use, and Algorithmic Experiences

Amanda Skovsager Mouritsen

Making Sense of TikTok: A User-Centric Exploration of Digital Culture, Everyday Use, and Algorithmic Experiences

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Abstract

This PhD dissertation explores TikTok from a user-centric perspective by examining how young Danes (aged 15–29) use, experience, and make sense of the platform as part of their everyday media practices. Situated within the tradition of media reception research, the dissertation approaches TikTok primarily as a lived media environment shaped through users' engagement, interpretations, and experiences. The overarching research question guiding the project is: *How is TikTok embedded in young Danes' everyday lives, and how do they make sense of the platform as part of their media practices?* The dissertation addresses this question through three analytical dimensions: (1) the content and digital culture encountered by young Danes on TikTok, (2) young Danes' everyday practices and motivations for using the platform, and (3) young Danes' experiences and perceptions of TikTok as a media platform. By integrating these dimensions, the project provides a comprehensive and nuanced account of TikTok as an influential part of contemporary digital media culture.

The dissertation is based on a research design combining mobile data donation and in-depth interviews. Through mobile data donation, 24 young Danish TikTok users donated parts of their TikTok *Data Download Packages*, enabling the analysis of 1,200 videos they have encountered on the platform. Additionally, in-depth interviews with 24 young Danes explore how users integrate TikTok into daily routines, how they experience and understand the platform and its recommendation algorithm, and how they reflect on their relationship with TikTok.

The dissertation consists of four research articles. The first article contributes methodologically by exploring the potential of mobile data donation for qualitative and small-scale digital media research. It conceptualizes data donation as a collaborative and ethically grounded research practice and demonstrates how digital trace data can be meaningfully integrated into qualitative inquiry. The second article examines TikTok video content in a Danish context by mapping genres and identifying recurring characteristics across the 1,200 sampled videos. Drawing on the concept of *templatability*, the article introduces the notion of *TikTok-ness* to describe defining features of the platform's digital culture, including mundanity, humor, audio-centricity, and the pervasive use of platform features. The third article focuses on users' everyday experiences of TikTok. Through interview analysis, it shows that TikTok is deeply embedded in daily routines and experienced as a highly immersive, hybrid media platform. Central to this is their experience of *algorithmic flow*, in which users adopt a largely receptive and passive mode of engagement, trusting the algorithm to curate content aligned with their preferences. Additionally, their experiences reflect *hybrid forms of agency*, where human actions and

algorithmic processes interact and mutually shape one another. The fourth article examines the ambivalence that characterizes users' experiences and perceptions of TikTok. Drawing on concepts of *group-level* and *within-person duality*, the analysis demonstrates how TikTok is simultaneously experienced as relaxing and stressful, enriching and addictive, familiar and unsettling. In doing so, it highlights how interactions with TikTok are characterized by ongoing, coexisting tensions and profound ambivalence.

The dissertation contributes empirically, theoretically, and methodologically to the fields of TikTok research, digital media studies, and audience studies. By combining mobile data donation with qualitative interviews, the project offers a comprehensive and multi-layered exploration of TikTok as an influential media platform in the contemporary media landscape. Through its rich empirical foundation, it provides insights into how young users use, experience, perceive, and ultimately make sense of TikTok as part of their everyday lives. Empirically, the dissertation offers one of the first analyses of concrete video content encountered by TikTok users and conceptualizes defining characteristics of the platform's digital culture through the notion of *TikTok-ness*. Theoretically, it extends media reception research to algorithmically curated platforms by examining everyday use, algorithmic *flow*, and user *agency*. Analytically and conceptually, it illuminates *duality* in user experiences of TikTok, foregrounding ambivalence as a fundamental condition of contemporary platform use. Methodologically, the project demonstrates the qualitative potential of mobile data donation as an ethically grounded and collaborative approach to studying digital media from the users' perspectives.

Taken together, the dissertation offers a nuanced understanding of TikTok as a cultural, technological, and lived phenomenon, emphasizing how young users actively make sense of the platform within the conditions of contemporary digital media life.

Dansk resumé

Denne ph.d.-afhandling undersøger TikTok fra et brugercentreret perspektiv ved at analysere, hvordan unge danskere (15–29 år) bruger, oplever og forstår (en. make sense of) platformen som en del af deres daglige mediepraksisser. Situeret i mediereceptionsforskning tilgår afhandlingen TikTok primært som et levet mediemiljø, formet gennem brugernes engagement, fortolkninger og oplevelser. Projektets guides af det overordnede forskningsspørgsmål: *Hvordan er TikTok indlejret i unges hverdagsliv, og hvordan forstår de platformen som en del af deres mediepraksisser?* Afhandlingen adresserer dette spørgsmål gennem tre analytiske dimensioner: (1) indholdet og den digitale kultur, som unge danskere møder på TikTok, (2) unges daglige brug af og motivationer for at bruge platformen, og (3) unges oplevelser og opfattelser af TikTok som medieplatform. Ved at integrere disse dimensioner giver projektet en omfattende og nuanceret forståelse af TikTok som en indflydelsesrig del af den samtidige digitale mediekultur.

Afhandlingen bygger på et forskningsdesign, der kombinerer mobil datadonation og dybdegående interviews. Gennem mobile datadonationer donerede 24 unge danske TikTok-brugere dele af deres TikTok *Data Download-pakker*, hvilket muliggjorde analysen af 1.200 videoer, de var blevet præsenteret for på platformen. Derudover undersøger de dybdegående interviews med 24 unge danske, hvordan brugere integrerer TikTok i deres daglige rutiner, hvordan de oplever og forstår platformen og dens anbefalingsalgoritme, samt hvordan de reflekterer over deres forhold til TikTok.

Afhandlingen består af fire forskningsartikler. Den første artikel bidrager metodologisk ved at udforske mobil datadonationens potentiale for kvalitativ og småskala digital medieforskning. Den konceptualiserer datadonation som en etisk forankret og kollaborativ forskningspraksis og demonstrerer, hvordan data bestående af digitale spor meningsfuldt kan integreres i kvalitativ forskning. Den anden artikel undersøger TikTok-videoindhold i en dansk kontekst ved at kortlægge genrer og identificere gentagende karakteristika på tværs af de 1.200 udvalgte videoer. Med udgangspunkt i konceptet *skabelonbarhed* (en. *templatability*) introducerer artiklen begrebet *TikTok-hed* for at beskrive platformens digitale kulturs definerende træk, herunder hverdagslighed, humor, audio-centrering og den udbredte brug af platformens funktioner. Den tredje artikel fokuserer på brugernes daglige oplevelser af TikTok. Gennem analyse af interviews viser den, at TikTok er dybt integreret i deres hverdagsrutinerne og opleves som en særligt engagerende, hybrid medieplatform. Centralt i dette er oplevelsen af *algoritmisk flow*, hvor brugerne indtager en overvejende modtagende og passiv rolle og stoler på, at algoritmen viser indhold, der passer til deres præferencer. Deres oplevelser afspejler desuden *hybride*

former for agens, hvor menneskelige handlinger og algoritmiske processer interagerer og gensidigt påvirker hinanden. Den fjerde artikel undersøger den ambivalens, der kendetegner brugernes oplevelser og opfattelser af TikTok. Med udgangspunkt i begreberne *gruppeniveau-* og *individ-dualitet* viser analysen, hvordan TikTok opleves som både afslappende og stressende, berigende og vanedannende, velkendt og foruroligende på samme tid. Hermed fremhæves det, hvordan interaktioner med TikTok er kendetegnet af vedvarende, sameksisterende spændinger og dyb ambivalens.

Afhandlingen bidrager empirisk, teoretisk og metodologisk til forskning inden for TikTok, digitale medier og publikumsstudier. Ved at kombinere mobil datadonation med kvalitative interviews bidrager projektet med en omfattende og flerdimensionel undersøgelse af TikTok som en indflydelsesrig medieplatform i det samtidige medielandskab. Gennem sit rige empiriske grundlag giver afhandlingen indsigt i, hvordan unge brugere bruger, oplever, opfatter og i sidste ende forstår TikTok som en del af deres hverdagsliv. Empirisk bidrager afhandlingen med en af de første analyser af konkret videoindhold, som TikTok-brugere bliver præsenteret for, og konceptualiserer platformens digitale kulturs definerende karakteristika gennem begrebet *TikTok-hed*. Teoretisk udvider den medie receptionsforskningen til algoritmisk kuraterede platforme ved at undersøge hverdagsbrug, algoritmisk *flow* og brugerens *agens*. Analytisk og konceptuelt belyser den *dualitet* i brugeroplevelser af TikTok og fremhæver ambivalens som en grundlæggende tilstand ved nutidig platformbrug. Metodologisk demonstrerer projektet det kvalitative potentiale i mobil datadonation som en etisk forankret og samarbejdsbaseret tilgang til at studere digitale medier fra brugernes perspektiv.

Samlet set bidrager afhandlingen med en nuanceret forståelse af TikTok som et kulturelt, teknologisk og levet fænomen og fremhæver, hvordan unge brugere aktivt forstår platformen inden for rammerne af det samtidige digitale medieliv.

Table of Contents

PART 1: THE FRAMEWORK ARTICLE

Prologue: How the Conditions of Lockdown Led Me Here.....	13
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	15
1.1. Research Questions.....	17
1.2. Overview of Research Articles.....	17
1.3. Overall Contributions.....	22
1.4. Dissertation Outline.....	24
Chapter 2: State of the Art.....	25
2.1. Content.....	25
2.2. Everyday Practices & Motivations.....	27
2.3. Experiences & Perceptions.....	29
Chapter 3: Research Objects.....	34
3.1. TikTok.....	34
3.1.1. The For You Page & the Recommendation Algorithm.....	35
3.1.2. Content on TikTok.....	37
3.1.2.1. User-generated Content.....	39
3.1.3. Creating & Engaging.....	40
3.1.4. TikTok as a Medium.....	42
3.1.5. Public Discourse of TikTok.....	44
3.1.6. The Danish Context.....	46
3.2. Danish Youth as Media Users.....	48
3.2.1. The Specific Age Group.....	50
3.2.2. The Public Sphere.....	51
3.2.2.1. Screen Time Debate & Media Panic.....	51

3.2.2.2. Shifting Perspectives	54
Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework	56
4.1. <i>Media Reception Research: Past, Present, & Future</i>	56
4.1.1. Media Reception Research 1.0: The Broadcasting Era	56
4.1.2. Media Reception Research 2.0: The Digital Era	59
4.1.2.1. The Continued Relevance of Media Reception Research	61
4.1.3. Towards Media Reception Research 3.0?	62
4.2. <i>Core Theoretical Concepts & Perspectives</i>	66
4.2.1. The Context of Everyday Life	66
4.2.2. Agency	68
4.2.2.1. Agency in Media Studies	69
4.2.3. Flow	71
4.2.3.1. Flow in Media Studies	71
4.2.4. Duality	73
4.2.5. Summary	76
Chapter 5: Methodology	77
5.1. <i>A User-centric Project</i>	77
5.1.1. User-centric Methods	78
5.2. <i>An Explorative & Inductive Approach</i>	79
5.3. <i>My Role as Researcher & User</i>	81
5.4. <i>Data Collections</i>	82
5.4.1. Participant Groups	83
5.4.1.1. Overview of Participant Groups	84
5.4.2. Mobile Data Donation	86
5.4.3. Qualitative Interviews	87
5.5. <i>Ethical Considerations</i>	90

5.6. <i>Playing Catch-up with TikTok</i>	92
Chapter 6: Findings	96
6.1. <i>Empirical Findings</i>	96
6.1.1. Content & Digital Culture	96
6.1.2. Everyday Use	100
6.1.3. Motivations for Use	101
6.1.4. TikTok as a Media Platform	103
6.1.5. Ambivalence in Experiences & Perceptions	104
6.2. <i>Methodological Findings</i>	106
Chapter 7: Discussion	108
7.1. <i>What is TikTok (to its Users)?</i>	108
7.2. <i>The For You Page & Hyper-Fragmentation</i>	110
7.3. <i>From Networked Publics to Clustered Publics</i>	112
7.4. <i>Concluding Reflections</i>	115
Chapter 8: Conclusions	117
8.1. <i>The Three Sub-questions</i>	117
8.2. <i>Final Conclusion</i>	120
8.3. <i>Limitations & Future Research</i>	121
References	124

PART 2: THE RESEARCH ARTICLES

Article 1: Exploring the Qualitative Potential of Mobile Data Donation.....	148
Article 2: Decoding TikTok-ness.....	173
Article 3: The Experience of TikTok.....	219
Article 4: The Duality of TikTok.....	244

PART 1

The Framework Article

Prologue: How the Conditions of Lockdown Led Me Here...

This brief prologue describes how I came up with the idea for my PhD project – an idea shaped equally by my personal experiences, my background in media studies, and my academic interest in digital media and audience studies:

In the early Spring of 2020, Denmark had just been shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which suddenly provided me, a final-semester BA student, with significantly more time on my hands than usual. Just as (what felt like) the rest of the world, I was lured into this new, mysterious, platformized world to cure both my boredom and curiosity – I installed the TikTok app on my phone. “2020-03-18 14:49:18” is, according to my video browsing data (more about that later), the first time I watched a video on TikTok. Thereby, I managed a week of lockdown, which in Denmark was announced on March 11, before I caved in and jumped on the extremely fast-paced train of short videos, endless scrolling, and audio bits. Prior to this, I had, like the rest of the people who had not boarded the TikTok train yet, deemed it a ‘kids-app’ with uninteresting and uninspiring content. At that time, TikTok’s reputation was still heavily ‘colored’ by its predecessor Musical.ly, known for its very young user group and lip-sync focused content, which TikTok had merged with in 2018.

At first, I figured it was maybe just the fact that I was trapped in my tiny one-bedroom apartment for an indefinite time (together with all the other uncertainties, worries, and anxiety that came with the pandemic) that made the immersive and thought-absorbing app an excellent way to pass the time. I think few people would disagree with me when I state that the circumstances of lockdown were the perfect conditions for the boom of TikTok. But, nonetheless, as the world slowly opened up again, and I went back to in-person classes at the university – now as an MA student – I did not neglect my new favorite platform. Actually, my (sometimes slightly excessive) use of TikTok gave me an idea. Namely, the idea for what I wanted to write my MA thesis about – basically, I was interested in finding out more about why I suddenly found myself (and so many of my friends) scrolling for hours on this app that I (and so many of my friends) had labelled a ‘kids app’ just a few months prior. I was interested in finding out more about *what* we were watching

on TikTok, *how* we were using TikTok, and *why* we were using TikTok. This initial interest has since been ‘academicized’, rewritten, contextualized, and revised numerous times, but the foundation still stands as a core part of my project – the interest in media use, everyday life, and experiences of digital media.

During the first year of my MA, I took my first baby steps as a working academic when I started a job as a research assistant on a project together with my fellow student (and best friend) Thomas. Here, Pia, who eventually became my main supervisor, planted the very first seed of my PhD journey. One day, she asked us if we were interested in or had ever considered applying for a PhD, to which we both (with a confused expression) replied something along the lines of: “What is it that is again?”. Nonetheless, the seed was planted. About six months later, I submitted my PhD application with a tiny hope that it might go through – and if not, as Pia had mentioned several times, I had at least done a lot of early preparation for my MA thesis, so ‘it wasn’t all for nothing’. As you probably already know at the time of reading this (I hope), I actually got accepted and started my PhD in February 2022, when the world was almost back to ‘normal’ but forever changed – just as my path had been by the conditions of lockdown that led me here.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Digital media is an integral part of most Danes' everyday life (Danmarks Statistik, 2023). We use social media to connect with friends and family, we get our daily news from online sources, we track our sleep, runs, menstrual cycle, and parcels with apps, we listen to podcasts on our way to and from work, and we catch up with the newest series on streaming platforms. Digital media is at the core of many of our daily routines and, to many, an absolute essential part of everyday life. Danes are among the most digitally engaged populations in Europe, particularly in our use of digital media platforms – often referred to as social media – with 90% of the population (16-74 years) being users (ibid.). In the early 2010s, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter started gaining traction in Denmark, later followed by Instagram, Snapchat, and LinkedIn, and alongside these prominent platforms, more niche platforms such as Arto, Vine, and BeReal also emerged.

In 2020, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new platform was suddenly on everybody's lips as it had quickly become an essential companion to people in lockdown and isolation around the world – TikTok. TikTok was especially embraced by the younger generation, who immersed themselves in its universe of fast-paced videos, catchy audio bits, and trending dance challenges while stuck at home. Since its international launch in 2017, TikTok has emerged as one of the most widely used digital media platforms globally, reaching 1.6 billion users in 2024 (Tafradzhyski, 2025), of which more than 200 million are based in Europe (Reuters, 2025). On TikTok, users can watch, engage with, and create content in the platform's highly immersive and interactive environment (Miltsov, 2022). In Denmark, which serves as the geographical context of this project, the number of users has grown to 1.3 million¹ (Lange, 2023) since the platform's popularity took off in 2020. Most of the Danish users are, not surprisingly, adolescents and young adults (Green & Skinbjerg-Holm, 2023).

TikTok is particularly known for being home to ever-changing trending content and an infamous meme culture characterized by its *aural turn* (Abidin & Kaye, 2021). Besides the content itself, the algorithmically driven and highly personalized feed, the *For You Page* (FYP), where much of the content is presented to the users, is a key appealing aspect of the platform. The FYP's recommendation algorithm provides each user with a tailored scrolling experience based on their preferences, past engagement, and demographics (Miltsov, 2022). TikTok has quickly become a vital part of users'

¹ The population of Denmark is approximately 6 million.

daily routines and lives, who especially enjoy the platform because of the endless entertainment and inspiration it provides as well as its relaxing qualities (Jung et al., 2025; Lüders, 2025; Martinez et al., 2024; Omar & Dequan, 2020; Schellewald, 2023). Alongside its rise to fame, the platform has also been the subject of considerable global debate, especially concerning its Chinese ownership, data security issues, and the well-being of its young users. In Denmark, the critique of TikTok has also been considerable in public debate during recent years, which I will elaborate on later in the dissertation.

TikTok has had, and continues to have, a significant impact on the broader media landscape. It is the first short-form video platform to develop into an international mainstream phenomenon, thereby cementing the *short-video turn* (Kaye et al., 2022b, p. 7), which builds upon the *visual turn* (Gibbs et al., 2015) marked by the rise of visually rich platforms and modes of communication. Its algorithmically driven, short-form video feed has since been adopted by multiple platforms, including Instagram (Reels), Facebook (Watch), and YouTube (Shorts). This development can be described as the “TikTokification” of social media, highlighting how other platforms emulate TikTok’s features and underscoring the platform’s profound influence on the contemporary media landscape (Gerbaudo, 2024).

The users of TikTok play a central role in shaping the platform and its digital culture. Through user-generated content (UGC) – short-form videos, picture carousels, comments, and other contributions – they create the platform’s distinctive atmosphere, tone, and aesthetic. Users influence both their own experience on TikTok through their engagement, which the algorithm ensures, and the broader platform. By creating and sharing content, they contribute to the pool of accessible material, while their engagement with others’ content also guides the algorithm, affecting what is recommended to similar users (TikTok Newsroom, 2020). Mimesis is central to TikTok as users often replicate and adapt others’ content, a process facilitated by features like the “Use this sound” button (Zulli & Zulli, 2022), which drives trends, memes, and broader cultural patterns on the platform. Given this influence, the users are a very significant part of TikTok and, therefore, I argue, also an inevitable part of trying to understand this complex platform – what it is and, more specifically, what it is to its users.

This is explored through an investigation of young Danes’ (aged 15–29²) usage, experiences, and perceptions of TikTok as part of their everyday lives, conducted within the overall framework of media

² For clarification, the participants in the data donation study are aged 15–29, and the respondents in the interview study are aged 16–29.

reception research. Methodologically, mobile data donation and in-depth interviews are applied, informing the findings of this dissertation, which consists of four research articles and this framework article.

1.1. Research Questions

This dissertation aims to understand TikTok through its users by analysing (1) the content and digital culture they encounter, (2) their everyday practices and motivations, and (3) how they experience and perceive the platform. Accordingly, I have adopted a user-centric approach that informs the methodological, empirical, and theoretical frameworks of the dissertation. This leads me to the following primary research question and three sub-questions:

How is TikTok embedded in young Danes' everyday lives, and how do they make sense of the platform as part of their media practices?

- 1. What characterizes the content and digital culture encountered by young Danes on TikTok?*
- 2. How and why do young Danes use TikTok in their everyday lives?*
- 3. How do young Danes experience and perceive TikTok as a media platform?*

The three sub-questions, which in different ways contribute to answering the primary research question, will mainly be investigated through my research articles, which will be briefly explained in the following section.

1.2. Overview of Research Articles

Throughout the last four years, I have written four research articles, which constitute the largest part of the analytical work in my project. Article 1 is method-focused and explores the potential of mobile data donation as a method for qualitative and small-scale research. The three other articles (Articles 2, 3, and 4) are empirical and based on my two data collections, respectively, the mobile data donation and the interview study. In the following section, I will introduce the articles and summarize their contents. The full-length articles can be found in part 2 of this dissertation ("The Research Articles"). For

the sake of clarity, the table below illustrates how each article contributes to addressing my three sub-questions:

Article:	SQ 1: What characterizes the content and digital culture encountered by young Danes on TikTok?	SQ 2: How and why do young Danes use TikTok in their everyday lives?	SQ 3: How do young Danes experience and perceive TikTok as a media platform?	Method
1: Exploring the Qualitative Potential...	x			Mobile data donation
2: Decoding TikTok-ness...	x	x		Mobile data donation
3: The Experience of TikTok...	x	x	x	Interviews
4: The Duality of TikTok...		x	x	Interviews

Article 1: Exploring the Qualitative Potential of Mobile Data Donation in Digital Trace Data Studies

This article explores the methodological potential of *mobile data donation* (Boeschoten et al., 2020; Breuer et al., 2022; Ohme et al., 2021; Van Driel et al., 2022) as a research approach for studying digital media usage and content in small-scale and qualitative studies. Mobile data donation refers to the process in which participants collect and donate digital trace data, typically obtained through *Data Download Packages* (DDP) (Boeschoten et al., 2020), from their personal apps or devices to the researcher. As a *user-centric* alternative to *platform-centric* methods (Ohme et al., 2023), such as data scraping, this approach enables researchers to access detailed, valid, and participant-authorized data while maintaining ethical transparency and informed consent. So far, the method has primarily been used in quantitative studies of digital media (see, e.g., Brinberg et al., 2021; Thorson et al., 2021; Verbeij et al., 2024; Zannettou et al., 2023). The article argues that mobile data donation holds significant promise for qualitative and small-scale research, not only within media and communication studies but also across the broader humanistic and social sciences engaged with digital media.

Drawing on a case study involving donated DDP TikTok data from 24 Danish users aged 15–29 (Article 2), the article illustrates how the method can be applied to investigate the nature of

algorithmically curated media content and everyday digital practices. The case demonstrates that data obtained directly from participants' devices provides a very accurate reflection of their media use (Ohme et al., 2021), overcoming issues of recall bias and misreporting that can arise in self-report methods. It also details the practical stages of conducting a data donation study – from recruitment and participant guidance to data collection, sampling, and analysis – while addressing the associated methodological and ethical considerations.

Beyond its technical procedures, the article conceptualizes mobile data donation as a collaborative research practice that positions participants as active collaborators in the research process. Unlike the usual role of passive data providers in such studies, users actively engage in the collection, selection, and donation of their own data. In the TikTok case study, the collaboration between the participants and the author was essential to the successful completion of the data collection. The participants had to request, download, and donate portions of their DDPs, while the author offered tailored guidance and troubleshooting support. By granting participants agency and visibility, the method redistributes power in digital research contexts typically dominated by extractive logics. The article concludes that mobile data donation represents a methodological innovation that bridges elements from digital ethnography and computational data collection while embedding collaboration and ethics at its core. By combining user-centered data collection with dialogic engagement, the method offers a pathway for scholars to study digital culture with empirical depth, ethical responsibility, and participant partnership.

In the context of my project, the article does not empirically contribute to answering any of the sub-questions, as it is method-focused and contributes at the methodological level. However, it indirectly supports the examination of the first sub-question (*What characterizes the content and digital culture encountered by young Danes on TikTok?*) because the method enables the investigation of the content and digital culture encountered by the users.

I am the sole author of the article, which is currently under review at *Qualitative Research*.

Article 2: Decoding TikTok-ness: An Analysis of TikTok Video Content Genres and Characteristics in Denmark

Article 2 examines the characteristics of short-form video content that young Danes have been presented with on TikTok. The study draws on a sample of 1,200 TikTok videos, which were collected from 24 Danish TikTok users between the ages of 15-29 through the method of mobile data donation (Ohme et al., 2021). The videos have been sampled from the users' *Data Download Packages* (Boeschoten et al., 2020), specifically, the file *Video Browsing*, downloaded directly from TikTok.

The study applies the concept of *templatability* (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Leaver et al., 2020), which I propose in the article as operating across different levels of content on the platform.

First, a comprehensive genre mapping of the sample was conducted to investigate the diversity, similarities, and complexity of the videos. Through the mapping, seven overarching genres were identified: *daily life*, *performance*, *self-expression*, *instructive*, *external*, *meta*, and *advertising*, and, additionally, several subgenres. Analysis of content *templates* (Abidin & Kaye, 2021) revealed a spectrum of fixedness, ranging from rigid meme templates to flexible genre templates. Furthermore, four recurring and defining characteristics across the genres emerged through the analysis: *the mundane*, *the comedic tone*, *the use of platform features*, and *the significance of audio*. Together, they represent the core elements of the content and what makes it particularly ‘TikTok-esque’. I refer to this quartet of qualities as *TikTok-ness*, a term that captures the shared digital culture reflected in the analyzed videos.

In the context of my project, the article directly addresses the first sub-question (*What characterizes the content and digital culture encountered by young Danes on TikTok?*) through the categorization and characterization of the 1,200 videos collected from young Danish users. Furthermore, the content analysis provides indications as to how and why the participants engage with TikTok content, thereby supporting the second sub-question (*How and why do young Danes use TikTok in their everyday lives?*). The mapping reveals, for instance, that content driven by entertainment value and educational purposes is prominently featured in the sample, suggesting that these factors are key reasons why users turn to TikTok. In a broader context, the study offers new, in-depth insight into the content and digital culture of TikTok. Additionally, the template-focused analytical approach sheds light on how digital content emerges, evolves, and can be conceptualized across different template levels.

I am the sole author of the article, which is currently under review at *First Monday: Peer-reviewed Journal of the Internet*.

Article 3: The Experience of TikTok: Scrolling, Algorithmic Flow, and Shared Agency among Danish Users

Article 3 investigates how young Danish users experience TikTok by analyzing their everyday use, how they compare the platform to other media, and the ways they articulate the sense of *flow* and *agency*. The study is based on 24 in-depth interviews with young Danish users aged 16-24. It reveals that TikTok is deeply integrated as part of their daily routines, e.g., when waking up in the morning or winding down at the end of the day. Additionally, they experience TikTok as a dynamic and immersive hybrid media platform, sharing similarities with both other digital media platforms, such as

Instagram and YouTube, but also traditional television. When scrolling on the FYP, the respondents experience an *algorithmic flow* (Faltesek et al., 2023; Firth & Marinelli, 2025; Kendall, 2021; Lin et al., 2023; Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2021), making them assume a largely passive, receiving, and ‘laid back’ role (Siles, 2023), trusting the algorithm to curate a feed to their liking. Furthermore, the users’ experiences go beyond a simple dichotomy between active and passive media engagement. Instead, they reflect *hybrid forms of agency* (see, e.g., Fink & Weyer, 2014; Hanson, 2009; Hepp, 2022), in which human actions and algorithmic processes interact and mutually shape one another.

By examining the respondents’ usage in relation to their everyday routines as well as their motivations for using TikTok, article 3 addresses the project’s second sub-question (*How and why do young Danes use TikTok in their everyday lives?*). The third sub-question (*How do young Danes experience and perceive TikTok as a media platform?*) is addressed through the investigation of the algorithmic flow and agency as well as the respondents’ descriptions of TikTok as a media platform. Furthermore, throughout the interviews, we also discussed the content the respondents encountered on TikTok, which supports the first sub-question (*What characterizes the content and digital culture encountered by young Danes on TikTok?*). The article thereby contributes to answering all three sub-questions. More broadly, the article contributes both empirically and conceptually to research on digital platforms. Empirically, it provides in-depth insights into users’ everyday experiences and how algorithmic processes shape engagement. Conceptually, it advances discussions of *hybrid agency* by highlighting the intertwined roles of humans and algorithms. More broadly, it informs debates on how digital platforms mediate everyday life and positions TikTok as a hybrid media platform.

The article is co-authored with my main supervisor, Associate Professor Pia Majbritt Jensen, and is currently under review at *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*.

Article 4: The Duality of TikTok: Exploring Ambivalence in Danish User Experiences and Perceptions

The users’ relationship with TikTok is at the center of Article 4, which draws on the same interview study as Article 3 to explore how young Danish users perceive TikTok based on their personal experiences. More specifically, the study examines the complex and, at times, contradictory ways in which the respondents experience the platform, building on the concepts of *group-level duality* and *within-person duality* (van der Wal et al., 2024; Weinstein, 2018).

Three areas of tension emerged in the analysis of the interview data: the respondents’ (1) experiences of relief and stress, (2) feelings of addiction, and (3) relationship with the algorithm.

Investigating these tensions revealed that the respondents' experiences with TikTok are marked by profound ambivalence as they perceive the platform as being relaxing yet stressful, enriching yet addictive, and familiar yet unsettling. So, TikTok is situated in a spectrum of these contradictory affects, which exist both across the group and within the individual person. By emphasizing this duality, the analysis shows that users' experiences of TikTok are not easily categorized as purely positive or negative. Instead, it reveals a nuanced mix of enjoyment and discomfort, where appreciation for certain features coexists with criticism or unease toward others – highlighting ambivalence as an integral aspect of how users engage with the platform.

Article 4 is directly tied to the third sub-question (*How do young Danes experience and perceive TikTok as a media platform?*) as it addresses the respondents' experiences and perceptions of TikTok. Furthermore, article 4 also builds on the findings from article 3 and, in doing so, reveals further nuances of the respondents' usage of TikTok and their motivations to use it, thereby supporting the second sub-question (*How and why do young Danes use TikTok in their everyday lives?*). Outside the context of this project, the study contributes to scholarship on digital media, well-being, and algorithmic culture by emphasizing that TikTok is not experienced or perceived in one-dimensional ways but rather shaped by ambivalence, contradiction, and coexisting tensions. The article expands our understanding of TikTok as both a cultural and affective practice, while also emphasizing that experiences of digital media platforms are not always straightforward. Rather than being simply 'positive' or 'negative,' many of these experiences are perceived as deeply ambivalent, revealing the complex ways users engage emotionally with the platform.

The article is co-authored with my main supervisor, Associate Professor Pia Majbritt Jensen, and is currently under review at *Nordicom Review*.

1.3. Overall Contributions

My dissertation is of particular interest to scholars interested in TikTok, digital media use, algorithmic culture, and emerging media. My contributions span empirical, theoretical, and methodological domains, advancing scholarship in the fields of TikTok research, digital media studies, and audience studies. The project offers a comprehensive and multi-layered exploration of TikTok as an influential media platform in the contemporary media landscape. By combining qualitative interviews with mobile data donation, the project provides a rich empirical foundation for understanding how young users use, experience, perceive, and ultimately, make sense of TikTok as a media platform. The

dissertation contributes to our understanding of TikTok and contemporary digital media by highlighting the complex interplay between algorithmic culture, user practices, and ambivalent experiences. While each of the four research articles makes its own distinct contribution, the dissertation as a whole constitutes an integrated, user-centric exploration of a platform that has become a central part of many young people's media practices.

The dissertation contributes empirically by offering one of the first examinations of the concrete video content encountered by young users on TikTok. Article 2 advances a template-focused analytical approach that maps genre diversity of the platform and conceptualizes the defining characteristics of *TikTok-ness*. This contribution provides an empirically grounded articulation of TikTok's digital culture as experienced by its users.

The dissertation contributes theoretically by deepening the understanding of TikTok as a media platform within a broader framework of media reception research. Drawing on in-depth interviews, Article 3 foregrounds the everydayness of TikTok and conceptualizes how young Danes navigate *algorithmic flow*, negotiate *agency*, and integrate the platform into daily routines. This situates TikTok at the intersection of entertainment, habitual use, and emotional regulation, thereby extending reception research into algorithmically curated media environments.

The dissertation contributes analytically and conceptually by illuminating the ambivalence that characterizes the user experiences of TikTok. Article 4 draws on the notion of *duality* – at both group level and within individuals – to show how TikTok is simultaneously relaxing and stressful, enriching and addictive, familiar and unsettling. This contribution positions ambivalence as a fundamental condition of contemporary platform use.

The dissertation contributes methodologically by demonstrating the qualitative potential of mobile data donation for small-scale research on digital media. Through development, execution, and critical reflection of a data donation design tailored to TikTok, Article 1 shows how digital trace data can be collaboratively generated, ethically handled, and analytically incorporated into qualitative inquiry. This contribution expands existing methodological toolkits and provides a guideline for scholars seeking to study digital media environments from the perspective of the user. Additionally, the study is one of the first – and, to my knowledge, remains of the few (Wedel et al., 2024; Zannettou et al., 2024) – data donation studies focusing on TikTok.

Taken together, the dissertation provides an empirically grounded understanding of TikTok from the perspective of its users. By combining mobile data donation, in-depth interviews, and a media reception research lens, the project offers a nuanced and situated account of how young Danes use, experience, perceive, and make sense of TikTok. The findings contribute not only to Nordic

and European scholarship but also to global discussions about algorithmic platforms, everyday media practices, and contemporary digital culture.

1.4. Dissertation Outline

The dissertation consists of two parts. This first part is *The Framework Article*, wherein the four research articles are contextualized and tied together. This part thoroughly describes the project's research objects, theoretical framework, methodology, and findings, ending in a discussion and conclusion grounded in these results³. The second part of the dissertation is *The Research Articles*, which consists of the four research articles introduced previously (see section 1.2.).

"The Framework Article" consists of eight chapters. The first chapter, which you are currently reading, introduces the project, outlines the research questions, summarizes the four research articles, and presents the contributions of the dissertation. The second chapter outlines the current state of the art in TikTok research and situates the project within this scholarly field. The third chapter defines the project's two research objects – namely, the digital media platform TikTok and its young Danish users. The fourth chapter situates the dissertation within the overall framework of media reception research and describes the core theoretical concepts and perspectives. The fifth chapter outlines the dissertation's methodology, detailing the project's user-centric perspective, main explorative and inductive approach, the two data collection processes, and different methodological reflections. The sixth chapter presents and synthesizes the findings of the project, which are then discussed in relation to the broader theoretical and empirical landscape surrounding TikTok, algorithmic media, and contemporary digital culture in the seventh chapter. Finally, the eighth chapter concludes the findings of the dissertation and reflects upon its limitations while discussing opportunities for future research.

³ It should be noted that parts of *The Framework Article* are based on my master's thesis "Mapping the Nature of TikTok: An Explorative Study of Usage, Content Genres, and "TikTok-ness" from 2023. As I am a 4+4 PhD Fellow, I completed my MA simultaneously with the first part of my PhD, meaning this dissertation directly extends my MA thesis.

Chapter 2: State of the Art

This section outlines the current state of the art in the field of TikTok Studies, focusing on studies of typical TikTok users and usage. More specifically, within this frame, I examine research that explores (1) TikTok content, (2) everyday practices and motivations for usage of TikTok, and (3) experiences and perceptions of TikTok. Throughout this section, I discuss how my work builds on these studies while also outlining the ways in which my dissertation diverges from and contributes beyond them.

When I began working on my PhD application during the summer of 2021, the TikTok scholarship had already started to take shape. The *TikTok Cultures Research Network* had been founded the year before by Professor Crystal Abidin, the first books on TikTok were being published (Boffone, 2021; Stokel-Walker, 2021) alongside several journal articles concerning different aspects of the platform (see, e.g., Abidin, 2020; Boffone & Jerasa, 2021; Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Cervi, 2021; Cervi & Mari-n-Lladó, 2021; Hautea et al., 2021; Kaye et al., 2021; Omar & Dequan, 2020; Zeng & and Abidin, 2021) and, in general, interest in TikTok research was emerging. Over the past four years, during which I have been conducting this project, scholarly research on TikTok has grown exponentially, and significant ground has already been covered. In Chapter 5 (section 5.6.), I reflect upon which consequences this development has had for my project.

2.1. Content

Numerous studies have examined TikTok, covering a wide range of content types on the platform. Research has focused on topics ranging from political communication (Cervi et al., 2023; Cervi & Mari-n-Lladó, 2021; Cheng & Li, 2026; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021) and topics related to COVID-19 (Li et al., 2021; Literat, 2021) to different forms of activism (Cervi & Divon, 2023; Hautea et al., 2021) and far-right content (Weimann & Masri, 2023), among many other areas of content on the platform.

This section highlights research that explores TikTok content and its characteristics in a broader sense, focusing on key defining elements. Firstly, Shutsko (2020) performs a content analysis of 1,000 TikTok videos to explore what types of UGC are most common and popular on short-video platforms. Comedy and musical performance videos dominate, with comedy being the most frequent category overall. Shutsko provides a useful baseline showing which general categories are widespread, but the classification of categories transferable to other similar platforms means it pays less attention

to what may be unique or emergent about TikTok's logics and digital culture. In the context of my project, it offers limited insight for my focus on the particularities of TikTok content, which is what I, especially, investigate in Article 2.

Schellewald's (2021) digital ethnography also focuses on categorizing TikTok content. Based on a dataset of 700 videos, collected over the course of six months, the study shows that short, ephemeral videos become intelligible through recurring patterns in content, form, and stance. Schellewald identifies six overarching *communicative forms* – *comedic, documentary, communal, explanatory, interactive, and meta* – that organize how users express themselves and interpret others. These forms draw on trends, audio bits, memes, and aesthetic conventions that circulate widely and shape participation, making TikTok not a chaotic stream of isolated clips but a dynamic cultural environment structured by recognizable genres and shared practices. The six communicative forms informed the initial coding of the 1,200 TikTok videos in my data donation study, which is explained in further detail in Article 2. Schellewald's framework does not define clear classification boundaries and is not designed to assign videos to mutually exclusive categories, which was one of the main aims of my study to develop. Methodologically, in comparison to both Schellewald (2021) and Shutsko (2020), my dataset is also broader, drawing on videos from 24 TikTok users rather than a single profile.

TikTok is known for being a place for meme creation and circulation. Abidin and Kaye (2021) highlights TikTok's role in advancing an *aural turn* in internet memes, emphasizing the centrality of *audio memes* in contemporary meme culture. Unlike traditional visual memes, audio memes rely on sound – music, lyrics, beats, and small audio bits – to convey humor, narrative, and identity, often in multimodal formats that combine audio, video, and text. Abidin and Kaye highlight how TikTok's platform features, including “Use this sound”, “Duet”, and “Stitch”, facilitate *templatability* and *circumscribed creativity* – concepts that are described in detail in Article 2 – allowing users to remix and repurpose audio clips while navigating algorithmic visibility and attention economies.

Trillò (2024) analyzes the PoV (point of view) meme as a key genre in TikTok's platform vernacular. Examining 250 videos, the study shows how PoV memes combine text, audio, and performance to construct short roleplay scenarios. The concept of *echoic affiliation* is introduced to explain how users bond through reusing the same audio and participating in shared templates. PoV memes also foreground communicative values, for instance, authenticity, and reflect user imaginaries of how TikTok's algorithm clusters audiences. The study demonstrates how memes create ephemeral connections and support community-building on the platform.

Zulli and Zulli (2022) argue that TikTok's platform design actively encourages imitation, framing the platform itself – and not only much of the content on it – as a memetic text. Through a walkthrough analysis, they show how features such as “Use this sound” nudges users toward replicating and remixing existing content. Rather than interpersonal networks, TikTok fosters what they call *imitation publics* – loose collectives that form through shared participation in memetic templates. Their work, therefore, highlights how TikTok's technical affordances structure user behavior and shape distinct forms of platform sociality.

These three studies on memetic practices on TikTok (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Trillò, 2024; Zulli & Zulli, 2022) especially inform Article 2, where memetic content is also included in the sampled 1,200 videos. Article 2 demonstrates that characteristics of TikTok memes, such as audio and comedy, are not confined to meme formats but are embedded more broadly across diverse types of content on the platform, thereby extending our understanding of how memetic practices shape TikTok content and culture more generally. Additionally, I examine TikTok video content through the framework of *templatability* (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Leaver et al., 2020), thereby building on and extending this theoretical concept. This template-focused approach highlights the different levels at which content templates operate and how they are shaped on TikTok, offering new insights into both the characteristics of the content and the platform itself.

2.2. Everyday Practices & Motivations

As my project examines TikTok users in a broader sense – focusing on typical users within a Danish context rather than on specific groups, communities, or usage practices – I have included studies with a similar focus here. Numerous other TikTok user studies focus on more specific groups and communities and/or particular usage practices, such as WitchTok (Barnette, 2022), Japanese karaoke cultures and practices (Petrovic, 2023), transgender identity (Rochford & Palmer, 2022), healthcare workers (Southerton, 2021), and TeachTok (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2023). I have chosen not to include these studies here, as they fall outside the scope of my dissertation.

TikTok has become embedded in the everyday lives of, especially, young people, serving not only as a source of entertainment but also as a space for social connection, identity work, and emotional regulation. One of the recurring themes across TikTok user studies is the centrality of the FYP in shaping user experiences. Schellewald's ethnographic work with young adult users in the UK highlights how scrolling the FYP has become a routine practice, often used as a form of escapism and a

way to deal with boredom or stress, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdowns (2023). At the same time, the FYP is not just about solitary consumption but also about connection, as sharing TikTok content with peers helps build and sustain relationships both online and offline (Schellewald, 2024). This dual role of TikTok – as a space for both entertainment and sociality – emerges across multiple studies. Research with teenagers shows that interpersonal motivations, such as seeking fun or distraction, and relational motivations, such as staying connected with friends, underpin their use of the platform (Langlais et al., 2024). While TikTok can provide moments of enjoyment and enhance well-being through entertainment and social connection, it is also associated with some negative outcomes. Research shows that teenagers report that when used as a distraction or when negative content dominates the feed, TikTok use can lower their mood (ibid.). Similarly, Martinez et al.’s study (2023) shows that college students value, e.g., the humor, diversity, educational aspects, relatability, entertainment value, and personalization of content as well as the how TikTok can be used to manage emotions and stress, yet simultaneously express concerns about, e.g., the addictive nature of the app, exposure to unpleasant or misleading content, the platform’s guidelines, and the prominence of influencers and advertisements. These findings point to the ambivalence of TikTok use, which I explore in Article 4, where pleasure coexists with concerns about overexposure and loss of control.

Early studies of TikTok usage have also been examined through the theoretical framework of uses and gratifications (U&G), which emphasizes the motivations that drive media engagement. One study highlights how specific motivations, e.g., self-expression, archiving, social interaction, and escapism, shape how young users interact with TikTok rather than their personality traits (B. Omar & Dequan, 2020). Similarly, Bucknell Bossen and Kottasz’ study (2020) of pre-adolescent and adolescent TikTok users in Denmark shows that passive forms of engagement, such as scrolling and consuming content, were particularly common, with entertainment and affective enjoyment emerging as the strongest motivators of use (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020).

Other scholars have linked TikTok use more directly to questions of well-being. Lüders (2024) shows that social media entertainment, including TikTok, is experienced by teens as meaningful because it connects to self-formation, belonging, and agency. Rather than being understood as ‘mindless scrolling’, entertainment on TikTok can provide symbolic resources for identity development and experiences of recognition within peer cultures. These findings resonate with other studies that document how TikTok affords both escapism and social connection (Schellewald, 2023, 2024). Building on this perspective, research foregrounds the agency of young people in navigating the platform. Owens (2024) argues against viewing teenagers as passive recipients of technological influence or as vulnerable subjects within discourses of media panic. Instead, drawing on practice theory,

Owens conceptualizes TikTok use as a set of everyday practices embedded in broader social lives, emphasizing the creative and relational agency of young people as they negotiate identity and community through the app. Additionally, Owens (2025) introduces the concept of “brain rot” as a genre of participation, directly challenging public narratives that position it as evidence of harm. Rather than a cognitive decline, brain rot is described as a *decompression-driven* genre of engagement, whereby teenagers deliberately embrace trivial or non-productive content as a means of resisting cultural pressures toward productivity and self-optimization. From this perspective, brain rot becomes a socially meaningful practice, offering young people ways to articulate identity, belonging, and subtle forms of resistance.

Overall, my project’s findings on users’ everyday practices and motivations (see Article 3) correspond with insights from earlier studies, further refining our understanding of how TikTok use manifests among typical users. In addition, the project contributes a Danish contextual perspective on how these dynamics unfold in everyday life.

2.3. Experiences & Perceptions

This final part of Chapter 2 focuses on studies examining TikTok users’ experiences and perceptions of the platform. I specifically highlight research that explores how users compare TikTok to other media, their experiences of algorithmic flow, and their understandings of the algorithm.

In the third chapter of the book *Living with Algorithms: Agency and User Culture in Costa Rica* (2023), Siles argues that users’ understandings of TikTok and its algorithm are not only shaped by what happens with the app itself but also by their broader *media manifold* (Couldry, 2016), which is described as the interconnected system of platforms they use in everyday life (Siles, 2023, pp. 77ff.). The Costa Rican participants consistently interpreted TikTok in relation to other apps, drawing on past and present platform experiences to make sense of how its algorithm works, what kind of content it promotes, and how it fits into their broader media habits. Siles identifies four relational strategies that structure this cross-platform meaning-making. *Differentiation* captures how users contrast TikTok with other platforms, most often Instagram, highlighting TikTok’s perceived authenticity, creativity, and algorithmic responsiveness (ibid., pp. 79ff.). *Aggregation* reflects how users place TikTok within a general category of “social media”, borrowing assumptions and expectations from other platforms to understand it (ibid., pp. 80ff.). Through *retrieval*, users revive memories of discontinued platforms like Vine or older meme cultures, using these earlier experiences to interpret TikTok’s

formats, humor, and algorithmic logic (ibid., pp. 82ff.). Finally, *export* describes how TikTok becomes a reference point for evaluating other platforms and even wider cultural phenomena (ibid., pp. 84ff.). Users, for instance, identify TikTok's technological features in other digital environments – claiming Instagram has copied TikTok's algorithmic recommendations and FYP concept – and note its cultural influence in referring to specific songs as 'that TikTok song' or use TikTok-derived phrases and inside jokes in other contexts.

Similarly, in Bhandari and Bimo's study (2022), users frequently compared TikTok to platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube because they struggled to describe it on its own terms. These comparisons reveal that TikTok shares features with multiple social media categories but does not fully align with any of them. Like Twitter, TikTok involves curating content that reflects one's identity, yet users have far less control over their feed. Like Instagram and YouTube, it resembles a content community centered on media consumption, but users rely less on following others and more on algorithmically delivered cultural material. And although TikTok shares interaction features similar to Facebook's, participants rarely used them for social networking, instead repurposing them to interact with the algorithm, for example, liking content to signal that they want to see more of it. Overall, TikTok blends elements of microblogging, content communities, and social networking, while simultaneously diverging from all three, resulting in user practices that resist neat categorization (ibid.).

Additionally, Jung et al. (2025) compare how young users experience TikTok and YouTube, showing that the platforms foster fundamentally different modes of engagement. TikTok is described as promoting passive, effortless, and often unintentional consumption driven by algorithmic flow – users scroll automatically, lose track of time, and treat the app as a space for distraction or emotional release. In contrast, YouTube is associated with active, purposeful, and goal-oriented use, where users search for specific content, invest more attention, and view the platform as useful or productive.

Firth & Marinelli (2025) introduces the *datacasting paradigm*. They examine how users experience TikTok's algorithmic flow and how it influences content enjoyment, as well as the parallels to television viewing habits. The users' responses fall into two main categories: "TV on TikTok" (consumption of traditional televisual content on TikTok) and "TikTok as TV" (connections between televisual viewing habits and TikTok). In a similar vein, Siles & Valerio-Alfaro (2025) explore how users engage with traditional televisual content on TikTok. They argue that the flow on TikTok is *co-programmed* through user engagement with the algorithm, rather than being universally predetermined. The respondents in my interview study not only compared TikTok to similar platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, but also, both directly and indirectly, to flow television. Therefore, I build

on these studies, especially in Article 3, and particularly in relation to the respondents' experiences of TikTok's algorithmic flow.

TikTok's algorithm has become almost synonymous with the platform and is often highlighted as its most distinctive feature. The following studies explore users' awareness, assumptions, and understandings of the algorithm. Although my project does not focus exclusively on the TikTok algorithm, these studies nonetheless inform it in various ways. I draw on and build upon them in my analysis of users' broader experiences, interpretations, and understandings of TikTok as a platform, not only in relation to its algorithm. In doing so, I also add a broader perspective to this body of scholarship.

Klug et al. (2021) investigate users' assumptions about the TikTok algorithm through a mixed-methods study. Based on interviews, they identify three main criteria that users assume influence the algorithm: video engagement, posting time, and hashtag usage. They then conducted a quantitative analysis of over 300,000 videos to test these assumptions by examining the criteria for trending videos. The analysis confirms that higher video engagement and posting at specific times increase the likelihood of a video being promoted to the trending section, while the use of multiple hashtags does not have a significant effect. The study concludes that users develop an awareness of the algorithm's functionality through their experiences as both consumers and creators of content. Additionally, they acquire strategies to "trick and please" the algorithm, optimizing their experience on the app.

Schellewald (2022) explores "stories about algorithms", or the ways in which everyday users share experiences about algorithms with each other, through an ethnographic study of young adult TikTok users in the UK. This is illustrated through two cases: "if you see this..." videos and "TikTok rest area" videos. While users experienced the TikTok algorithm as dynamic and noticeable, these shared stories created a social environment that helped them make sense of their experiences and feel less powerless, even without direct control over the algorithm. These stories help shape users' algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) – their everyday understanding of and relationship with algorithms.

Through diary entries, Siles et al. (2022) examine how a group of Costa Ricans experienced TikTok and its algorithm as first-time users. The authors argue that algorithmic awareness – what a person knows, feels, and does in relation to algorithms – should be understood as a dynamic and evolving process rather than a fixed trait. They identify five activities – expectations, training, personalization, oscillations, and rejections – through which users' cognitive, emotional, and practical awareness of the algorithm changes over time. Initially, many users felt disconnected and overwhelmed by the app, but through continued engagement with specific usage practices, many developed a sense of harmony

with the algorithm. Some, however, experienced the algorithm’s personalization as unstable, leading to confusion and shifting perceptions. Siles et al. introduce the term *algorhythms* to highlight how users experience multiple temporal rhythms, such as harmony, repetition, and disconnection, within a single app.

Focusing on everyday algorithmic experiences, Issar (2024) explores the social construction of the TikTok algorithm through a qualitative analysis of 100 videos that discuss the algorithm in various ways. The videos are categorized into three levels of algorithm awareness: basic awareness, critical awareness, and rhetorical awareness. The article examines the relationship between algorithm awareness and trust in TikTok, concluding that most users do not deeply question or analyze the algorithm, despite the assumed importance of such scrutiny. Users show little interest in understanding the technical inner workings of the algorithm, preferring instead to rely on folk theories and personal experiences to make sense of it. Moreover, users tend to focus on navigating and responding to algorithmic experiences rather than unpacking the underlying systems. The study also highlights how a heightened level of algorithm awareness can significantly influence user behavior, content creation, and social interactions.

Felaco (2025) examines young Italian users’ algorithm awareness through the vignette method, focusing on their understanding of TikTok’s recommendation and moderation systems and how these influence engagement. Similar to Siles et al. (2022), Felaco concludes that algorithm awareness is not a fixed trait but emerges through cognitive, emotional, practical, and reflective processes. Some users never explicitly used the term “algorithm” but still demonstrated an understanding of the automated decision-making processes that govern TikTok. Others referred to these processes more broadly as “system”, “TikTok”, “app”, or “platform” when describing content recommendation and moderation mechanisms. Users interpret these systems differently, shaped by previous experiences with algorithmic platforms, and engage critically with them based on these interpretations.

Karizat et al. (2021) explore how TikTok users understand the relationship between identity and the TikTok algorithm. Based on interviews with 15 US users, the authors show that participants develop detailed *folk theories* that explain how the algorithm engages with both personal identities (interests, preferences) and social identities (race, gender, sexuality, class, ability). Users believe the algorithm privileges certain identities while suppressing marginalized ones, leading the authors to introduce *The Identity Strainer Theory* to describe when users believe an algorithm filters content based on social identity, thereby suppressing marginalized groups on a platform’s feed. They also introduce the concepts of *algorithmic privilege* – held by users whose identities position them to benefit from

algorithms – and *algorithmic representational harm*, which refers to the harm experienced by users who do not possess such privilege.

Lee et al. (2022) investigate how TikTok users conceptualize the algorithm in relation to their self-concept. Through 24 qualitative interviews, they show that users experience the algorithm as reflecting multifaceted and dynamic aspects of themselves, and that they purposefully adjust their behavior to align the algorithmic representation with their own self-conceptions. The authors propose the *algorithmic crystal* framework, which emphasizes how algorithmic personalization both mirrors multiple facets of identity and refracts connections to others on the platform.

Taken together, the studies reviewed in this chapter demonstrate that TikTok scholarship has expanded rapidly over the past few years and now spans a remarkably wide set of concerns, from content typologies and memetic vernaculars to everyday usage practices, emotional and social motivations, and the increasingly central question of algorithmic experience. The existing literature provides a rich and multifaceted picture of TikTok’s cultural, social, and algorithmic dynamics. Building on this foundation, my dissertation offers new empirical insights and conceptual refinements by analyzing how young Danish users engage with TikTok across content, everyday practices, and experiences and perceptions of the platform. In doing so, it contributes both a contextualized account of TikTok use and a broader understanding of how platform logics shape contemporary media experiences.

Chapter 3: Research Objects

In this chapter, I present the two main research objects of the project. First, I introduce TikTok as a platform and highlight its most prominent features and characteristics. This first section is theoretically grounded, whereas the second section situates TikTok within a broader context, focusing on recent public debates, controversies, and bans. Furthermore, I discuss TikTok in relation to the specific Danish context, which leads to the introduction of the project's second research object – young Danish users. Here, I characterize Danish youth more broadly as media users, focusing on their use of digital media, and explain why I chose to work with the specific age group (15-29 years) in my project. Finally, the chapter concludes with a section that brings together both research objects and examines the public sphere, characterized by concern and critique, surrounding their co-existence – Danish youth using TikTok.

3.1. TikTok

TikTok was launched internationally in 2017. Prior to this, the Beijing-based company Bytedance had launched its short-form video content app Douyin to the Chinese market in 2016 (Miltsov, 2022). Following this, Bytedance bought the lip-sync video app Musical.ly, which was particularly popular among pre-teens and teens (ibid.; Savic, 2021). In August 2018, Bytedance merged Musical.ly with, respectively, the international TikTok and the Chinese Douyin, retaining the names TikTok and Douyin for the respective markets. Douyin can still only be accessed by the Chinese audience, while TikTok has grown into one of the most popular apps internationally, having been downloaded more than five billion times since its launch (Tafradzhiyski, 2025). The number of TikTok users has increased significantly over the past five years, reaching more than 1.6 billion in 2024 (ibid.). TikTok's global headquarters are located in Los Angeles and Singapore, while they also have offices in, e.g., New York, London, Dublin, Paris, Berlin, Dubai, Jakarta, Seoul, and Tokyo (TikTok Newsroom, n.d.).

TikTok is the first short-form video platform to grow into an international mainstream operation, rivaling major Silicon Valley technology companies such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube (Kaye et al., 2022, p. 7). While other popular video platforms have emerged across Europe, the United States, and Asia, such as Vine and Dubsplash, none have achieved the same level of influence as TikTok. Kaye et al. (2022) argue that TikTok's rapid growth is part of a broader *short-video turn*

(p. 7). This shift builds on the earlier *visual turn* (Gibbs et al., 2015), signified by the rise of visually rich platforms like Instagram and forms of communication such as selfies, GIFs, and vlogs. Although short-form videos share many similarities with longer-format videos like YouTube videos, they are distinguished by “a higher degree of sociality, immediacy, and playfulness” (Kaye et al., 2022, p. 7). Different factors have led to this era of short-form video content (ibid., p. 7-8). First, technological advancements, including high-speed internet, e.g., 5G, and the widespread adoption of smartphones, have enabled the dominance of audiovisual mobile communication. Second, the maturing of the youthful and creative Generation Z (Gen Z), alongside the rise of TikTok. Gen Z often perceives ‘older’ digital platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, as outdated, while emerging short-form video platforms have become significant social spaces to many in this generation (ibid., p. 8). Although TikTok now attracts a more diversified user base, Gen Z’s vernacular culture and visual grammar, e.g., audio memes, lip-syncing, and dance videos, continue to shape the platform and influence its digital culture.

3.1.1. *The For You Page & the Recommendation Algorithm*

TikTok is especially known for its default landing page, the *For You* Page (FYP), through which users primarily encounter and engage with content on the platform. The FYP is endless and driven by the app’s recommendation algorithm, which tailors the content shown to each user, thereby creating a personalized scrolling experience. Recommender systems, as TikTok’s algorithm, use complex statistical calculations to identify similarities between users based on their responses to the items they encounter (Gerbaudo, 2024). In June 2020, TikTok published a post on its website titled “How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou”, which, to some extent, describes how the recommendation algorithm curates users’ FYPs (TikTok Newsroom, 2020). It should be noted that this post was published when TikTok only supported video content, whereas it is now also possible to post photos, nonetheless, the workings of the algorithm are assumed to be the same. According to the post, recommendations are based on different factors, including user interactions (likes, shares, comments, follows, posted content, etc.), video information (captions, sounds, hashtags, etc.), and device and account settings (language preference, country setting, device type, etc.). The factors are processed by the algorithm and then weighted based on their value (ibid.). For instance, if a user watches a longer video from beginning to end, that is considered a strong indicator of interest and is therefore weighted more heavily than weaker indicators, such as whether the user and the video creator reside in the same country.

Based on these weighted factors, the algorithm ranks videos to determine how likely they are to be of interest to the user and subsequently delivers them to their FYP. According to TikTok, factors like a creator's number of followers or if they have previously created popular videos are not direct factors in the recommendation system (ibid.). In this way, TikTok creates an experience, as they state, "For you, by you. An experience tailored to what you love" (TikTok Newsroom, n.d.). During recent years, TikTok's feed format has been adopted by other platforms, most notably the *Reels* feed on Instagram, which purely displays short-form video content.

In addition to the FYP, users can also view content through the app's two other page-feeds: the *Explore* page, where they can explore, e.g., new content and emerging trends, and the *Following* page, which exclusively displays content from profiles they already follow (Figure 1). Users can also view content from their friends⁴ by clicking on the *Friends* tab, as well as watch livestreams via the *Live* feed (Figure 1). On the FYP, content from whom the users follow, are friends with, and livestreams can also be part of the curated content stream if the algorithm considers it of interest to the user. Unlike similar platforms, where users are primarily being shown content from profiles they already follow, whom they follow on TikTok, therefore, becomes secondary in the construction of their FYP due to the algorithm.

When scrolling on TikTok – regardless of which feed they are on – users are presented with one post at a time, displayed in full-screen mode as illustrated in Figure 1. They can scroll up to move on to the next post, or scroll down to return to the previous one (Miltsov, 2022). The videos are looped and therefore play continuously until the user decides to scroll away. This format differs from the feeds we have been used to on digital platforms, where users are shown a continuous flow of various posts rather than one single post at a time (ibid.).

⁴ "Friends" are mutual connections where both users follow each other.



Figure 1: Illustration of TikTok's landing page (made by author).

3.1.2. Content on TikTok

TikTok is best known for short-form video content, which was also the only format available in its early days. TikTok videos can now be up to 10 minutes long, whereas the maximum length was previously limited to 15 seconds, then 60 seconds, and later three minutes. In August 2020, TikTok introduced “TikTok LIVE”, allowing users over the age of 18 to livestream directly from the app (TikTok, 2024). Since October 2022, it has also been possible to post content in “Photo Mode”, where users typically create a carousel of still images that can be swiped through, or upload a single still image

(TikTok Newsroom, 2022). Additionally, users can post “Stories” that disappear after 24 hours (TikTok Support, n.d.). While TikTok was initially distinguished from other digital platforms by being dedicated exclusively to short-form video, the platform now bears more similarities to, especially, Instagram in its content formats.

The content on TikTok is diverse not only in format but also in themes, topics, and subjects. Anderson (2020) aptly describes this as follows:

There is a creative chaos present in the app that is further deepened by an element of uncertainty. As one swipes up it is difficult to anticipate what will appear, several swipes can bring up an astounding variety of content that can be described as sincere, ironic, cringy, wholesome, offensive, make-believe, authentic, ridiculous, confusing and everything in between. (p. 8)

This quote highlights the vast diversity of TikTok content, which I also explore in my data donation study articulated in Article 2. However, I argue that recurring and defining characteristics, such as mundanity and comedy, also shape the platform’s content, a point supported by other scholars as well (see, e.g., Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Schellewald, 2021). TikTok is often associated with mimetic practices and has been described as a “meme breeding ground” (Martin, 2019). These practices are highly visible on the platform, where a substantial amount of content consists of users imitating and recreating other users’ creations or drawing on external sources, such as pop culture clips (Anderson, 2020). One of the most distinctive meme practices on TikTok is carried out through audio, which Abidin and Kaye describe as an “aural turn” in memes (Abidin & Kaye, 2021). Unlike traditional internet memes, which typically rely on images or text, TikTok memes are often driven by short audio bits, taken from music, films, television, or online media, that are added to content within the TikTok app. These audio bits are the part of the memes that get reused, remixed, and repeated by users, while new visual and/or textual elements are continuously added to them. Some sounds have thousands, or even millions, of videos attached, and several songs have been popular on TikTok before becoming chart-topping hits (Anderson, 2020). The centrality of audio in TikTok content can also be traced back to its predecessor, Musical.ly, which was widely known for lip-syncing videos where sound plays a key role. In Article 2 audio memes and the significance of sound for TikTok’s digital culture are explored in greater detail and illustrated through video examples.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, TikTok was often framed as Instagram’s more relatable, goofy, and authentic counterpart (see, e.g., Kennedy, 2020; The Sunday Times, 2020). At the time,

creators' lockdown-related content, which depicted the shared experience of being confined at home, resonated strongly with many users (Kennedy, 2020). As will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, TikTok's built-in recording and editing tools make creating and sharing content highly accessible. Coupled with the possibility of reaching a large audience, since the algorithm does not necessarily privilege already popular creators, this originally fostered a more amateur-driven and 'free-for-all' aspect of the platform. Over the past five years, however, as TikTok has cemented itself as an influential platform, professionalized content production has become increasingly prevalent. Today, more creators earn income through sponsored content – just as they do on similar platforms – and through TikTok's *Creator Rewards Program* (TikTok Creator Academy, 2025).

3.1.2.1. User-generated Content

Within the broader context of UGC, the professionalization of originally amateur content has given rise to a new creative industry, which Cunningham and Craig define as *social media entertainment* (SME) (2017). In addition to professionalization, this industry is characterized by creators' engagement with content innovation and media entrepreneurship across multiple platforms, as well as their status as media brands with global fan communities (ibid.). Cunningham and Craig distinguish SME from content distributed on major media platforms such as Netflix and Amazon. SME began to emerge shortly after Google acquired YouTube in 2006, and today millions of creators earn income by producing and sharing content across different platforms (ibid.). Despite this professionalization, the ordinary, mundane, and personal aspects of user-generated content remain prevalent (Burgess & Green, 2018). Burgess' concept of *vernacular creativity* (2006), originally applied to practices such as home videos and personal photography, can also be used to describe the everyday aesthetics commonly portrayed in UGC. In *YouTube – Online Video and Participatory Culture* (2018), Burgess and Green argue that creating and sharing videos can be understood as a way of participating in a collective culture and forming social connections, as well as a means of individual self-expression and aesthetic experimentation.

Before platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, UGC was shared in other media forms. Jenkins (2009) argues that the cultures of, e.g., alternative media, fan vidders, and activist videos paved the way for the adoption and popularization of these newer platforms. Among the most well-known and enduring forms of 'amateur' video is the *vlog* (video blog), which developed into a central cultural form, especially on YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 39ff.). The vlog genre

predates YouTube and, in its original form, typically featured a monologue delivered directly to the camera. The topics discussed in the videos, which were usually filmed with a webcam, ranged from everyday life to celebrity gossip, comedy, and politics, and characteristics such as “good storytelling and a direct, personal address” were, and remain, central to the genre (ibid., p. 40). In YouTube’s early years, the platform was often framed as an open arena for amateurs, but as explained above, this has shifted over the past decade. YouTube has played a significant role in redefining what professional media looks like – “and sometimes, it looks like video blogging, live gameplay, haul videos, beauty tips, and toy unboxing videos” (ibid., p. 11).

3.1.3. *Creating & Engaging*

TikTok’s built-in recording and editing tools make content creation on the platform highly accessible. By tapping the create button on the landing feed (see Figure 1), the in-app camera opens, allowing users to record a video, take a photo, or create a text image (see Figure 2). Several editing features are also available on the page; for example, users can add sound, filters, textual elements, and visual effects to the content they are creating (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Figure 2 illustrates the “Post” mode and which options it provides in the creation process, but the users can also switch to “Create” mode, where they can, e.g., access their drafts, edit photos, add captions, and create based on preselected templates (e.g., “Monthly recap”, “Summer”, “Viral song”). When you have taken a photo or recorded a video, you are provided with even more options, e.g., adding text, stickers, and voice-over, on the right-side menu (Figure 2). The entire process of content creation can take place within the TikTok app; however, users can also upload external material, such as photos from their phone’s gallery or videos edited in other applications. User creation practices are also shaped in various ways by the TikTok platform itself. As I explain in more detail in Article 2, the app *circumscribes creativity* (Kaye et al., 2021) by nudging users to use features such as “Use this Sound”, “Duet”, and “Stitch”, which facilitate interaction between users and with the platform. In doing so, TikTok influences creative potential by ‘guiding’ users and providing templates that simplify content creation and promote trend replication (ibid.).

As previously mentioned, much content on TikTok is mimetic and, in different ways, imitates and replicates other content on the platform. Zulli & Zulli (2022) argue that this practice is embedded not only in TikTok’s sociality but also in its very infrastructure: “TikTok can be read as a mimetic text in and of itself” (p. 1876). Through the ways in which the platform circumscribes creativity,

it nudges users toward creating content with shared elements, such as reusing the same sounds, resulting in a high degree of similarity across content (ibid.). Moreover, several of TikTok's distinctive features reinforce this mimetic logic: (1) the "Stitch" function allows users to incorporate a segment of another user's video into their own, (2) the "Duet" function enables users to place their video side by side with another on a split screen, and (3) users can reply to a comment on one of their previous videos with a new video response (Miltsov, 2022). These features allow users, to varying degrees, to embed and transform others' content within their own creative practices.

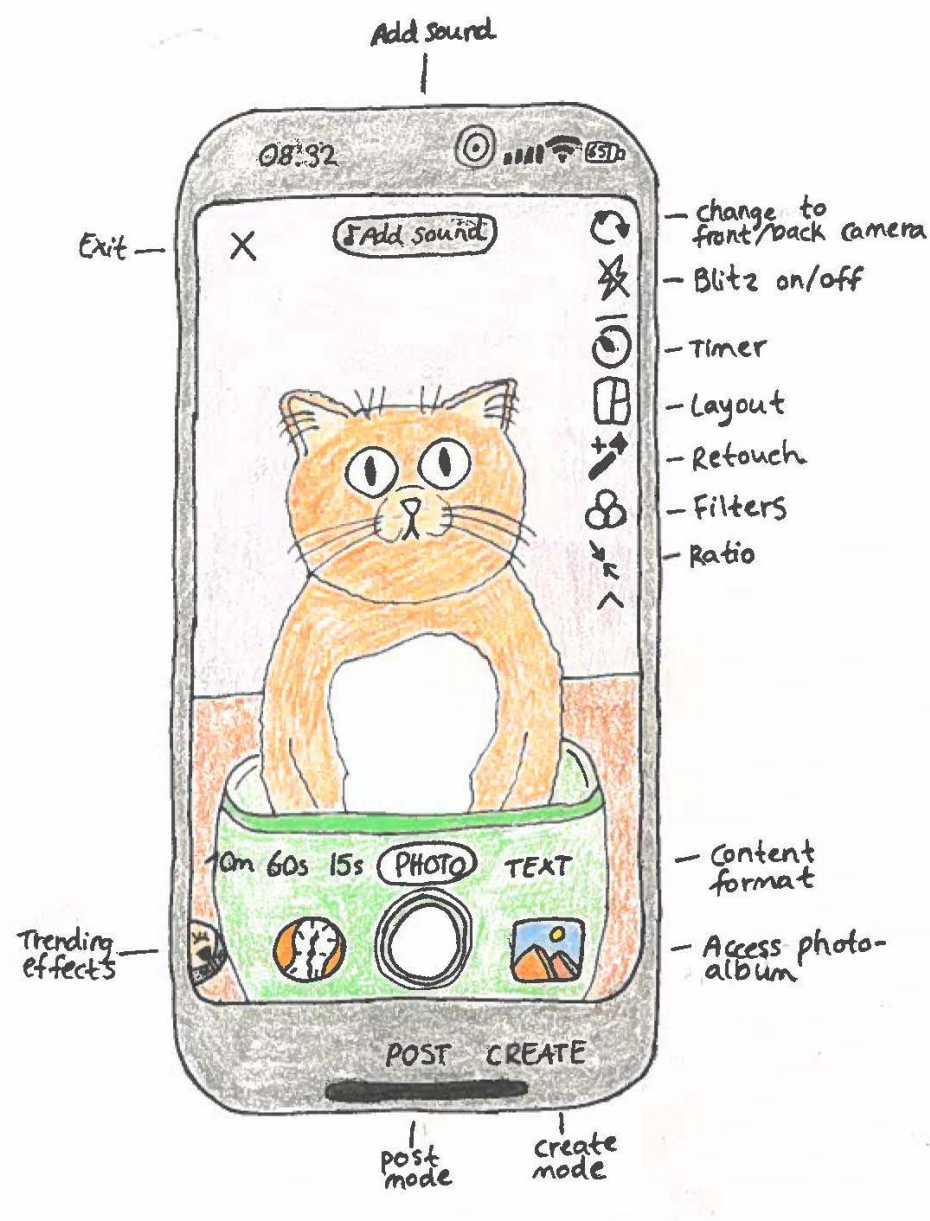


Figure 2: Illustration of TikTok's create/editing page (made by author).

Similar to other digital content platforms, TikTok provides numerous possibilities for engaging with creators' content. Interaction between users and the platform is not limited to the creation features described above. As illustrated in Figure 1, users can like, comment, save, and share content they encounter, as well as follow creators. Additionally, they can, for instance, also use the search bar to find content on specific topics, tap on sounds or hashtags to view other videos that use them, or click on a creator's profile picture to access their full profile. Furthermore, users can chat with their "Friends" via direct messaging, which is frequently used to exchange content (Schellewald, 2024). Collectively, this wide range of features makes TikTok a highly interactive platform, offering multiple avenues for both content creation and engagement with others' content. However, as will be demonstrated in Article 3, many users only use a small selection of these features and, overall, minimally engage actively with the platform. In general, the main activity for the majority of users on the platform is simply scrolling and watching content.

3.1.4. *TikTok as a Medium*

As this project is highly concerned with exploring what TikTok is, and more specifically, what it is to its users, this section outlines how TikTok is typically defined as a medium. I will also explain how I refer to TikTok throughout this dissertation.

In common parlance, TikTok is typically referred to as a social media platform, likely because of its many similarities with Instagram, Facebook, X, and others, e.g., the UGC, opportunities to communicate and interact with others, and the fact that it is primarily accessed on smartphones. When googling "What is TikTok?", Google's AI assistant responds: "TikTok is a popular social media platform owned by the Chinese company ByteDance [...]". On the first slide of TikTok's "About" page, the company states that its mission is to "inspire creativity and bring joy" (TikTok Newsroom, n.d.). Representatives of TikTok have on multiple occasions emphasized that TikTok is an entertainment platform rather than a social medium (see, e.g., Honigman, 2022; Ritzau, 2021). Khartoon Weiss, TikTok's former Head of Global Agency and Accounts and current Head of Sales in North America, described the app's users as follows in her keynote at the Gathering marketing conference in April 2022:

The audiences that love and build and create and connect with TikTok, they say they check Facebook, and they check Instagram, and they check Twitter, and they check Snap, and they check things. But they don't check TikTok. They tell us they watch TikTok. (Honigman, 2022)

She further stated that “you can't TikTok and...”, meaning that TikTok cannot easily be used in parallel with other media activities such as watching television or texting with friends, unlike other similar platforms. In this way, she underlines the immersive experience that TikTok provides to its users. In the news article by Honigman (2019), it is also pointed out that TikTok might try to avoid being classified as a ‘social media’ due to the many negative connotations associated with such platforms. Instead, framing itself as an entertainment platforms appears to be a “safer bet”.

In scholarly research, there does not appear to be a consensus on how to define TikTok (Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025). In the studies referenced in this dissertation, TikTok is typically referred to as a social media platform, social network, short-video app, or simply just an app or platform. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Bhandari and Bimo (2022) argue how TikTok fits into different categories of social media: “it can be seen as a microblogging site, a social networking site, and a content community, and yet, it departs significantly and fundamentally from each type” (p. 9). Several scholars have also explored TikTok in relation to television and the televisual flow experience (Faltese et al., 2023; Firth & Marinelli, 2025; Kendall, 2021; Lin et al., 2023; Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025, p. 202; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2021). Faltese et al. (2023) even state in their abstract that their study offers evidence that “TikTok is television, not social media”. In Article 3, the flow experience on TikTok is examined in further detail. On a different note, Kurzrock (2019) describes TikTok as a *virtual playground* and argues that it is more a creative media than a social media, e.g., due to the many editing features on the app. Kurzrock underlines that TikTok liberates its young users to play without adhering to past visual styles, narratives, and online cultures, and that the platform “feels more like an energetic playground than a passive video sharing application” (p. 10).

These diverse, and to some extent conflicting, definitions underline the importance of further investigation, particularly with regard to the users' own perceptions and understandings, as they are the ones engaging with the platform and, in doing so, shaping TikTok as a medium.

Throughout this dissertation, I consistently refer to TikTok as a *platform*. I have chosen this term because I find it to be the most neutral within a media studies context. At times, particularly when discussing more technical aspects of TikTok, I also use *app*, as this simply denotes TikTok's digital presence on users' devices. One of my key arguments for conducting a user-centric study,

which I explain in the introduction as well as later in this framework article, is that users constitute a significant part of TikTok and are therefore an inevitable component of understanding the platform. For this reason, I deliberately avoid employing more specific or prescriptive terms such as *social media platform* or *entertainment platform*, as such labels may conflict with users' own experiences and perceptions. A central aim of this project is to investigate how users themselves make sense of what TikTok is and does; thus, it would be both contradictory and problematic, given the user-centric and inductive approach of the study, to pre-emptively place TikTok into a fixed category. As Jean Burgess (2021) notes, the term *platform* encompasses a wide range of media, including, for example, WhatsApp and WeChat (chatting), Tumblr (visual blogging), Twitch (livestreaming), Patreon (niche content and crowdfunding), and Facebook and Instagram (social media) (p. 21). This aligns with how I employ the term *platform* in this dissertation: as a broad reference to a digital medium characterized by user-generated content, where users can share their own content but also watch and engage with others'. I am aware of the ongoing scholarly debates about what a *platform* is and how it should be defined. However, as this project does not focus on my interpretation of what TikTok is, those debates will not be addressed here.

3.1.5. Public Discourse of TikTok

Since TikTok began growing immensely in popularity during the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, the app has frequently been discussed and criticized publicly by politicians, organizations, academic scholars, and other opinion leaders. I find it relevant to include this here not only to situate TikTok within a broader context but also because it undoubtedly influences how users perceive and relate to the platform. This brief section, therefore, provides useful background for Article 4, which explores ambivalence in user experiences and perceptions of TikTok. In the next section (3.1.6), I will situate TikTok within the specific Danish context of the project.

Much of the critique directed at TikTok resembles that aimed at other platforms. It typically centers on concerns related to the collection and storage of user data, user well-being, and inappropriate or unsafe content. However, these concerns, particularly those regarding data security, tend to be emphasized even more strongly in the case of TikTok, largely due to its Chinese ownership.

In 2020, the U.S. government announced that it was considering a ban on TikTok at the request of President Donald Trump, who viewed the app as a national security threat (BBC, 2021). At the end of 2022, then-U.S. President Joe Biden approved the "No TikTok on Government Devices

Act”, which prohibited the use of TikTok on federal government devices in the U.S. (Kim, 2023). Following this, the Biden administration gave ByteDance an ultimatum – sell the platform’s U.S. shares or face a nationwide ban. In March 2023, the FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice launched an investigation into TikTok, and only a few days later, TikTok’s CEO, Shou Zi Chew, testified before the U.S. Congress in response to concerns about potential Chinese surveillance and the app’s collection of user data (Webber, 2023). Several content creators protested the government’s proposed ban outside Congress in Washington, D.C. (Ritzau, 2023). These controversies contributed to several restrictions on TikTok in other Western countries, including Belgium, Canada, and Australia. In March 2023, the European Parliament also banned members from having TikTok installed on their work devices due to concerns over the handling of politicians’ data (Bang Ramsbæk, 2024). Later that year, TikTok was fined €345 million for violating EU data protection rules regarding children’s personal information (ibid.). In April 2024, Biden signed a bill that would ban TikTok in the U.S. unless the company sold its American division within nine months. A few weeks later, TikTok filed a lawsuit against the U.S. government, arguing that the potential ban was unconstitutional (Porter, 2024). The case remained unresolved by the end of Biden’s presidential term.

In August 2025, the White House launched an official TikTok profile (Ritzau, 2025a). After President Trump had extended the deadline for TikTok to be sold or face a ban three times (Ritzau, 2025b), the US Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent, announced on October 26, 2025, that the US and China had finalized the details of a deal transferring TikTok’s US operations to new owners (Sainato, 2025). Based on these developments, it appears that Trump has adopted a more moderate stance toward TikTok compared to his previous presidential term. In a European context, TikTok was fined €530 million in May 2025 by Ireland’s Data Protection Commission (DPC), acting on behalf of the EU, for failing to protect European users’ data from Chinese authorities (Ritzau, 2025d). The fine was issued because personal data of European users had been stored in China and was accessible to employees there, constituting a violation of EU data protection rules. TikTok had previously denied storing European data in China but admitted to it during this case. The EU has not indicated that it plans to ban TikTok.

As of September 2025, India, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Kyrgyzstan have nationwide bans on TikTok. Many other countries, including Denmark, have implemented more limited restrictions, such as prohibiting government employees from installing the app on official service devices.

3.1.6. The Danish Context

Building on the previous section, this section will describe TikTok within the specific Danish context of this project. Even though TikTok is a global platform, I argue the importance of studying TikTok in specific geographical contexts. Elements such as the platform's content, digital culture, trends, challenges, and aesthetics, to some extent, vary from region to region (Boffone, 2022, p. 3). Therefore, it has also been an advantage for me to focus on the Danish context, being Danish myself, as I have been able to understand content in Danish and references to Danish culture, celebrities, politics, and so on. My role as both researcher and user of TikTok will be elaborated on in Chapter 5. In the content analysis of the donated data, I encountered both widely international trends but also content set in a specific Danish or Nordic frame and language. Therefore, I believe it is important to recognize the geographical and cultural differences, but also be aware that projects set in a specific region are of value beyond that specific region. As will be evident throughout this dissertation, my findings, discussions, and contributions are not only relevant in a Nordic context but also on a broader, international scale. Later in this chapter, I will characterize Danish youth as media users, which will underscore how they, and their surroundings, differentiate from users in other contexts.

Similar to the development around the world, the number of Danish TikTok users has grown in recent years. The latest reported figure, provided by TikTok itself in 2023, stated that 1.3 million Danes used the platform monthly (Lange, 2023) – a substantial number in a country with a population of about six million. Most of the users are, not surprisingly, teenagers and young adults (Green & Skinbjerg-Holm, 2023; Molsing et al., 2024). The biggest Danish TikTok profiles include Razi Irwani (@razioff, 7M followers), Kelly Louise Killjoy (@kellylouisekilljoy, 1.2M followers), Magnus Moth Søndergaard (@historyseason, 1.4M followers), and the official profile for the mobile game Subway Surfers (@subwaysurfers, 10.8M followers).

As mentioned in chapter one, TikTok has been heavily debated in Denmark since it started gaining popularity in 2020. Following the EU's ban of TikTok on employee devices in 2023, mentioned above, Denmark's *the Centre for Cyber Security* stated that they advised against having the app installed on official devices due to concerns about data security and a potential risk of espionage (Styrelsen for Samfundssikkerhed, 2023). Following this announcement, the Danish Parliament (*Folketinget*), all eight Danish universities, and an array of media institutions, including the Danish public service broadcaster *DR (the Danish Broadcasting Corporation)*, either restricted access or completely banned the app on employees' phones. This resulted in a recommendation from the Danish *Media Council for Children and Young People*, which stated that all users under the age of 18 should either

delete TikTok or change their settings significantly (Nielsen, 2023). Chairperson Miriam Michaelsen justified the decision by pointing to concerns about TikTok harvesting data from its young users, illegal content circulating on the platform, and that TikTok uses business models and tricks designed to keep the users on the platform: “we do not consider it a safe place for children and young people, as it is now” (ibid., translated from Danish).

During the last five years, there have been different cases covered in the media where TikTok has been criticized. There have been different examples of problematic and, in some cases, unsafe content being present and circulated on the platform. For instance, in October 2024, the organization *Børns Vilkår* (*Children’s Welfare*) reported 700 self-harm videos to the platform, but only 20 were completely removed while 400 were restricted so only the owner of the video could see them, which the organization criticized heavily (Slyngborg, 2024). In the same month, a TikTok trend involving videos that showed exploding acid bombs and instructions for making them was linked to two undetonated acid bombs, as well as traces of exploded ones, found near two schools in the town of Odder in East Jutland (Solgaard, 2024).

During the interview study in this project (Articles 3 and 4), the respondents were also asked about their opinions on the critiques of and general skepticism towards TikTok. Here, a couple of respondents mentioned having watched the Danish documentaries *Alene hjemme på nettet* [*Home Alone on the Internet*] (2024) by DR and *Spionerne bag skærmen* [*The Spies Behind the Screen*] (2023) by TV 2, which both address Danish children and teenagers’ use of digital media. DR’s *Alene hjemme på nettet* [*Home Alone on the Internet*] focuses on young Danes’ encounters with inappropriate content online, while TV 2’s examines how digital games companies collect the players’ personal data and manipulate them to remain in the game for as long as possible. Neither of the documentaries has a specific focus on TikTok, but they highlight similar concerns to those the Danish *Media Council for Children and Young People* has expressed about TikTok. Following their release, both documentaries received substantial media coverage.

Taken together, this section illustrates how TikTok, besides being a central digital space for, especially, young Danes, is a recurring object of public concern regarding data protection, problematic content, and the well-being of its young users, which forms an important backdrop for the further analyses in this dissertation.

3.2. Danish Youth as Media Users

This second part of this chapter focuses on the project's second research object – namely, the users. In this section, I characterize Danish youth as media users, focusing on their use of digital media, argue for the choice of the project's specific age group (15-29-year-olds), and examine the public sphere surrounding Danish youth and their use of TikTok.

Our current media landscape is characterized by the transition from the analogue to the digital, a shift led by the younger generations of media users (Larsen & Johansen, 2024, p. 33). Although this generation is especially known for its use of digital media, it still engages with analogue media, for instance, reads books, talks on the phone, and listens to the radio in the car (ibid.). As I mentioned in chapter 1, Danes are among the most digitally engaged populations in Europe (Danmarks Statistik, 2023), and this characteristic also applies when focusing specifically on the younger Danes. Compared to their peers in other European countries, Danish youth use social media and, more broadly, the internet more frequently and also from an earlier age (Larsen & Johansen, 2024, p. 11). In 2023, 91% of the entire population (16-74 years) and 100% of Danes aged 16-19 had a profile on at least one social media platform (Danmarks Statistik, 2023). It is also important to note that Danish youth grow up within a Nordic welfare system that is highly media-saturated and digitalized, in which the internet plays a crucial role in areas such as the social infrastructure (Larsen & Johansen, 2024, p. 11ff.). Together, these factors shape the conditions under which young Danes engage with contemporary digital platforms, providing an essential context for understanding their practices on TikTok.

Looking more broadly at young Danes' media use, it is clear that different types of digital media occupy the majority of their media time. DR's *Medieudviklingen 2024*, which describes Danes' lives with media based on data from 2023, provides an overview of the distribution of media use across age groups (Armour et al., 2025, p. 5). Among 12-24-year-olds, most of their media time is spent on social media (29%), streaming of TV and video (25%), and streaming of music (13%). They also spend 10% on radio (FM, DAB, and net), 9% on online games and gaming, 6% on podcasts and audio books, 3% on printed newspapers and magazines, and the remaining 5% split between traditional TV and reading news online (ibid.). The slightly older age group of 25-31-year-olds shows similar patterns. They spend the most of their time with media streaming TV and video (36%), followed by social media (20%) and streaming of music (11%). They also devote 9% to radio (FM, DAB, and net), 8% to podcasts and audiobooks as well as online gaming, 3% to online news as well as print newspapers and magazines, and the remaining 2% to traditional television (ibid.). Taken together,

these figures underline the central role of digital media in the practices of both the younger and older segments of the project's age group (15–29 years).

Focusing specifically on digital media platforms, 84% of Danes (16–74 years) use Facebook, 56% Instagram, 45% Snapchat, 33% LinkedIn, 21% Pinterest, 19% TikTok, 13% Twitter, and 5% other platforms (Danmarks Statistik, 2023). In 2021, only 9% of the population reported using TikTok, meaning the number more than doubled between 2021 and 2023. According to *Medieudviklingen 2022*, weekly TikTok use among 15–29-year-olds increased from just 3% in 2019 to 41% in 2022 (Green & Skinbjerg-Holm, 2023, p. 25). Among young media users, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat – just like on the populational level – are the three platforms most have a profile on (Danmarks Statistik, 2023). TikTok use is significantly higher among younger age groups than in the general population: 80% of 16–19-year-olds, 60% of 20–24-year-olds, and 29% of 25–29-year-olds use the platform (*ibid.*). Unfortunately, the 2023 data from Danmark's Statistik does not provide information about time spent on TikTok. However, the report *Internetbrug og sociale medier 2021* (published by the Danish Ministry of Culture) shows that, in 2021, Danish TikTok users aged 12–18 spent on average 333 minutes on social media 'yesterday', of which 46 minutes were spent on TikTok, only topped by YouTube (Kulturministeriet, 2021, p. 36). Users aged 19–34 spent 306 minutes on social media overall, with 29 minutes on TikTok. It should be noted, as the report itself emphasizes, that these figures are based on a small sample. The same report also highlights the main purposes of social media use among 15–24-year-olds and 25–34-year-olds: to communicate with friends and family (77.4% / 77.4%), to stay updated on friends and family (74.8% / 70.7%), to follow general news (53.7% / 43.9%), and to be entertained (60.4% / 50.3%) (*ibid.*, p. 28).

Danish youth and their use of digital media have been the subject of different studies over, especially, the last decade. For example, research has examined location sharing via Facebook among youth (Bertel, 2016), teen's attitudes towards social media platforms (Villebro et al., 2018), social media usage among first-time voters (Ohme, 2019), information repertoires among young adults' in the digital media landscape (Peters et al., 2022), and the social media presence of young people with physical disabilities (Johansen, 2024b). In the context of TikTok, only a handful of studies have been conducted in the Nordic context (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Larsen, 2023; Lüders, 2025; Martens et al., 2022; Widholm et al., 2024). Of these, Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz (2020) and Lüders (2025), as described in Chapter 2, focus on users and usage patterns. Thus, research on TikTok within the Nordic context remains relatively scarce.

The Danish case on which this project is based is, of course, not illustrative of all TikTok users everywhere, as no single country study could or should claim to be. However, I argue that Denmark offers a particularly interesting case for qualitatively exploring the use, experience, and perception of TikTok, given the deep integration of digital media in Danes' everyday lives. As one of the most digitized populations in Europe, with particularly high levels of digital media usage (Danmarks Statistik, 2023), Denmark provides a rich context for examining how global platforms like TikTok are embedded in local media cultures and social practices.

3.2.1. *The Specific Age Group*

When I was preparing my project application in 2021, very little data was available about TikTok usage in Denmark and the wider Nordic region. However, *Medieudviklingen 2020* included a chapter titled "*TikTok er blevet voksen*" [*TikTok has grown up*], which featured a graph showing that the number of Danish TikTok users aged 15–24 who used the app weekly had increased from only 5% in 2019 to 30% in 2020, while usage among 25–31-year-olds rose from 0% to 4% (Schwartz & Scheutz, 2021, p. 52). The same chapter also included a graph showing that 63% of TikTok users over the age of 15 had joined the app in 2020 (p. 53). As I write in the prologue, the idea for this project began to take shape when I, and many of my friends, suddenly became interested in using TikTok, which at the time was still widely regarded as a 'kids' app'. The data from *Medieudviklingen 2020* confirmed my impression that a shift was underway: TikTok's user base was both evolving and expanding. This realization was a significant factor behind my choice of age group for this project.

Because the user base of Musical.ly – and of TikTok in its early days – was predominantly very young, many user studies at the time focused on children and teenagers (see, e.g., Bucknell Bosen & Kottasz, 2020; De Leyn et al., 2022; Escoda & Pulido, 2018; Şimşek et al., 2018). The newer, older TikTok users, however, had not yet been explored. Based on this, I chose to work with a broad age group in order to compare similarities and differences across ages, both in terms of the content they encountered on the app and their use, experiences, and perceptions of TikTok. I was also particularly interested in comparing those who had used TikTok (and Musical.ly) for a longer time, typically teenagers, with those who had joined during the pandemic or later, typically young adults, and in exploring how this temporal difference shaped their practices and perceptions of the app. Originally, I planned to examine the data from the data donation study in a more historical perspective by focusing on specific temporal points – for example, during the first COVID-19 lockdown in

2020, six months after, and so on – to trace how the content had evolved over the years and whether this reflected shifts in the user base. However, before I began the data donation study, TikTok changed its in-app settings, meaning that users’ data only included browsing activity from the most recent six months rather than from their entire time on the app, as had previously been the case. Although this original idea could not be realized, I still argue that the ability to compare across a broader age group remains a strength of the project. As will be demonstrated in the findings (Chapter 6), the different age groups show both differences and notable similarities.

The age group I study is *typical instance* (Tracy, 2020, p. 82ff.) because, as highlighted, they are the most frequent users in Denmark as well as internationally. In addition, I chose to focus on users who represent the ‘typical’ Danish TikTok user rather than users who earn a wage through TikTok or have a large following. This choice is closely tied to my interest in exploring how TikTok is embedded in everyday life – specifically, the everyday life that characterizes the majority of users. In the methodology chapter (Chapter 5), I present the two participant groups from, respectively, the data donation study and the interview study.

3.2.2. *The Public Sphere*

This final section of this chapter brings together both research objects – TikTok and Danish youth – and examines the public sphere of worry, unfamiliarity, and critique that surrounds them. I end this chapter by highlighting the importance of ‘pushing against the panic’ and adopting an open and nuanced approach when researching youth’s media usage.

3.2.2.1. Screen Time Debate & Media Panic

The screen time debate and the broader phenomenon of media panic are most commonly associated with children and teenagers’ use of media. Although my project concerns a primarily older age group (15-29 years), these debates remain relevant for understanding the societal context in which TikTok use takes place. While these discussions continue to focus heavily on younger audiences, recent years have seen an expansion of such anxieties to include older user groups as well. In Denmark, news coverage, public debates, and policy discussions still emphasize children and teenagers as particularly vulnerable to, for instance, algorithmic control and diminishing self-discipline in relation to digital media use. At the same time, these concerns increasingly extend to adults, who are also portrayed as affected

by similar dynamics. As a result, worries about technology and the potential loss of autonomy are no longer confined to a single demographic but reflect broader anxieties about how deeply digital media are embedded in everyday life across all age groups. As I described earlier in this chapter (see sections 3.1.5. and 3.1.6.), TikTok is a central part of these debates. The platform is often labelled as both addictive and opaque, with discussions highlighting its possible risks, from data privacy and Chinese ownership to well-being. This critical view reflects a wider skepticism toward digital platforms and their influence on our daily lives, echoing global conversations about the power and responsibility of larger technology companies. By situating my project within this landscape, I want to underline that users' experiences and perceptions of TikTok are undoubtedly influenced, at least to some extent – even if this cannot be directly observed in my data – by the broader moral and political climate that frames the platform in highly critical terms.

As Staksrud (2024) notes, we live in a public climate where concerns about the negative effects of digital media and the rise in screen time coexist with a fascination with new technologies and their possibilities. Online media represents both opportunities and benefits, but also potential risks and challenges that are difficult for anyone to fully grasp, and especially so for adolescents and their parents or caregivers (ibid., p. 45). Even though the internet and online media have been part of our lives for nearly three decades, becoming progressively integrated into everyday routines, one might expect that such worries would have diminished, just as concerns and fears eventually subsided when television was first introduced (ibid., p. 46). However, this does not seem to be the case.

Parents and caregivers today worry about a wide range of issues related to children's use of digital media, such as its impact on cognitive and emotional development, exposure to digital bullying, violations of privacy, and risks to mental health. However, the most prominent concern continues to be the amount of time children spend on digital media – so-called “screen time” (ibid.). Digital media is frequently criticized for, whether it being social media, online games, or other types of platforms, its ability to manipulate users into prolonged engagement. As noted earlier, this was among the criticisms directed at TikTok by *the Danish Media Council for Children and Young People* in 2023. Some scholarly research supports this concern: both Marengo et al. (2022) and Qin et al. (2022) conclude that TikTok possesses addictive qualities, with Qin et al. in particular highlighting how the app's immersive flow experience reinforces this effect. In my own interview study, many of the respondents described feeling addicted to TikTok, and several also linked this perception to the immersive nature of the platform and the scrolling format (Articles 3 and 4).

In Denmark, the screen time debate has been especially prominent in recent years (see, e.g., Bikic, 2024; Johansen, 2023, 2025; Johansen et al., 2021; Richter, 2023). In February 2025, Minister

for Children and Education Mattias Tesfaye announced that the government intended to introduce a nationwide ban on smartphones and other personal tablets in schools and after-school care centers (SFO) through legislative amendment (Ritzau, 2025c). By September 2025, however, the proposed bill had shifted, requiring schools and SFOs instead to establish their own “anti-smartphone policies” [translated from Danish] (Honeré & Lund, 2025). The year prior, a citizens’ initiative proposing a total ban on social media use for young people under 18 gathered more than 50,000 signatures, meaning it qualified to be taken into consideration in the Danish Parliament (Folketinget) (Johansen, 2024a). In response, Associate Professor Stine Liv Johansen authored an op-ed in *Jyllands-Posten* – co-signed by 33 Danish scholars, including myself – warning that such a ban risked doing more harm than good (ibid.). As of 7 November 2025, the Danish government has reached an agreement to ban social media for children under 15 years (Digitaliseringsministeriet, 2025). The agreement contains a total of 14 initiatives aimed at strengthening the protection of children and young people online and creating better conditions for their digital lives. This illustrates how the Danish context surrounding youth’s digital media use is characterized by widespread concern, a strong desire for intervention, and bans presented as viable solutions.

Throughout history, the introduction of new media – long before the internet, the digital age, and concerns over screen time – has consistently been met with worry and fear. Two discourses are particularly prominent: (1) the potential negative effects of new media on children’s physiological, cognitive, and behavioral development, and (2) the potential impact of new media content and consumption on the values and morals underpinning society at large (Staksrud, 2024, p. 48). For example, in the 1980s, the VCR (videocassette recorder) made it possible for audiences to watch films on demand and to pause, rewind, and replay scenes. This provoked a fear of ‘video violence’, with critics worried that young audiences would become morally desensitized and begin imitating violent behaviors they saw on screen. As Drotner (1999) famously observes, *media panics* are neither exceptional nor novel, but rather a recurring, fundamental part of modern society. Media panics, which arise each time a new medium appears, are emotionally charged public fears about new media forms marked by moral concerns, alarmist claims about negative effects, and, often, with a particular focus on youth (ibid.). As highlighted earlier (3.1.5. and 3.1.6.), TikTok has been subject to considerable scrutiny in both Danish and global public debates since 2020. While the number of Danish TikTok users has grown substantially over the past five years, DR’s *Medieudviklingen 2023* report noted that usage among 15–19-year-olds decreased for the first time, dropping from 63% in 2022 to 55% in 2023 (Molsing et al., 2024, p. 17). Although no clear explanation exists for this decline, it may reflect the platform’s heavy public criticism, which could have led either parents to impose limits or young users themselves to

reduce or stop their use. The *panic* surrounding TikTok is particularly centered on three issues: (1) its personalized algorithm and, especially, the way it impacts how long users spend on the app, (2) the risk of encountering inappropriate content and its potential effects, and (3) its Chinese ownership and the implications for data security. In many ways, these concerns, not surprisingly, mirror earlier panics in relation to other media.

An interesting aspect I have noticed in public debate is how TikTok is often compared to and deemed worse than other similar platforms that have themselves been subject to public critique. This comparative critique frequently emphasizes TikTok's algorithm, which is highlighted as significantly more powerful than others, and its ownership structure, which heightens data security concerns. I agree that a critical perspective on the platform is warranted and necessary, and I in no way deny any actual risks associated with the use of TikTok. However, I do also argue for a more nuanced perspective, which I believe, in part, can be better achieved by including and listening to the experiences of the users themselves. The following section will elaborate on this approach in more detail.

3.2.2.2. Shifting Perspectives

In their commentary "Pushing against the panic: Considering the positives of TikTok and children" (Rodriguez & Zhao, 2025), Rodriguez and Zhao call for a shift in perspective within the research community. They argue that scholarship should move away from the assumptions and anxieties (re)produced by media and policymakers, and instead adopt approaches grounded in children's and young people's everyday experiences with TikTok. Importantly, they suggest that research should not only foreground the potential risks of TikTok but also acknowledge and make visible the joy, creativity, and forms of connection that many young users experience through TikTok and similar platforms. To guide such a shift, Rodriguez and Zhao propose three key principles (pp. 7–8), which I consider highly relevant when working with older users as well:

- *Principle one: Critical reflections of 'hot topics' in the media about TikTok and children:* Instead of accepting public fears about TikTok at face value, researchers should unpack how issues like screen time, mental health, and TikTok challenges are socially constructed. Therefore, it is important to examine who shapes the dominant narratives and how the young users are portrayed in these discourses.
- *Principle two: Championing diversity as the research subject:* Experiences of TikTok differ across cultural, national, and socio-economic contexts. Research should resist 'one-size-fits-all'

claims and instead recognize the diversity of risks, benefits, and meanings attached to TikTok use.

- *Principle three: Privileging children’s agency, voices, and perspectives within research:* Research should center young users’ own perspectives and experiences, challenging adult-dominated narratives. This means ethically and methodologically creating space for youth to articulate how they use, understand, and navigate TikTok in their daily lives.

I strongly align with Rodriguez and Zhao’s reflections and call for a shift in perspective that puts the young users at the center of research. I have also noticed that their framework resonates with recent studies in the field, such as Owens (2024), who similarly advocate for a research approach that “moves away from discourses of media panic and towards understandings of media practice” (p. 174).

In my project, I approach both my research objects and their intersections with this more open and nuanced approach in mind. As I will emphasize in Chapter 5, this is also a central part of why I chose a user-centered framework and a more explorative approach for my project. From the earliest stages of developing my project idea, I considered it essential not only to include users’ voices but to embed their perspectives as a core component of the research design. As I also highlight in Chapter 1, the users who interact with the platform on a daily basis are a very significant part of the platform and its culture, making, therefore, a key aspect of investigating the platform.

Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical framework of my dissertation. The first part of the chapter focuses on methodological theory. Here, I situate my research within the broader context of media reception research by outlining the broadcast age and the digital age, as well as discussing current developments in the media landscape and their implications for reception studies. In the second part of the chapter, I explain the core theoretical concepts and perspectives that underpin the dissertation, focusing on (1) the context of *everyday life*, (2) *agency*, (3) *flow*, and (4) *duality*.

4.1. Media Reception Research: Past, Present, & Future

The project is situated within the overall framework of media reception research. This section of Chapter 4 will first provide a brief definition of reception research and outline its historical background in relation to audience studies – what I refer to as *Media Reception Research 1.0*. I will then describe the developments within reception research related to the rise of digital media platforms and their impact on the study of audiences – *Media Reception Research 2.0*. Finally, I will discuss current developments in the media landscape and how these raise new questions, discussions, and considerations concerning reception research, as well as examine how we might adapt our approaches in response to these changes. In this final section, I will emphasize my argument that these developments might be leading us “*Towards Media Reception Research 3.0?*” (4.1.3.).

4.1.1. Media Reception Research 1.0: The Broadcasting Era

Audience reception research was born out of the broadcasting age and emerged as part of media and communication research in the 1980s (Schrøder, 2019). Before this development, there was a significant absence of empirical research into how audiences experienced media content. Reception research, therefore, aimed to fill a gap in the broader understanding of mass-mediated communication processes (Schrøder et al., 2003, p. 136) by bringing together research traditions from the humanities – the theories – and social sciences – the methods (Jensen, 1991, p. 135). Additionally, a qualitative

orientation was added to the otherwise primarily quantitative orientation of audience research at the time.

David Morley (1980) defined reception as the semiotic process through which “audiences differentially read and make sense of messages which have been transmitted, and act on those meanings, within the context of the rest of their situation and experience” (Morley, 1980, p. 11). As Schrøder (2019) points out, Morley’s use of “read” in the definition underscores that mediated communication is simply not about “transmitting” a message from senders to receivers, but instead about a “sense-making” process that requires both natural as well as acquired literacy skills (p. 157). Furthermore, audiences’ meaning-making from media discourses should be studied in relation to both their societal “contexts”, e.g., in relation to gender, ethnicity, and class, and their “situational” circumstances of place and time (ibid.). In a similar vein, referencing Hall (1973), Schrøder et al. (2003) emphasized that it is a foundational principle of reception research that meaning is never just transferred from media to its audiences (p. 122). Instead, meaning is generated according to the communicative repertoires – or codes – of the encoder(s) and, thereafter, interpreted according to the communicative repertoires of the decoder(s) (1973). Moreover, it is important to emphasize that audience meaning-making processes are always embedded in the social contexts of their everyday life in which they use media.

A classic example is Schrøder’s (1988) reception study of Danish viewers’ readings of the imported and subtitled American primetime soap *Dynasty* (Schrøder et al., 2003, pp. 121-122). In episode 105, the American character Ashley mentions “the Boston Tea Party”. The 50-year-old married Danish couple being interviewed is confused about this sudden mention of “something from years back... something about a tea party...” (p. 121) within the narrative and how they have not heard anything about this, seemingly important to the plot, tea party in the series before. As it is highlighted by the authors, it would be assumed that American viewers would understand the reference to the Boston Tea Party (1773), as it is a major event in American history. American viewers, to whom the series was originally made, are expected to possess the code or frame necessary for understanding this reference, whereas the Danish couple clearly does not possess this code. Therefore, the couple draws on the familiarity with this genre, and the phenomenon of “hidden events of the past” is brought in to provide narrative resolution (ibid.). As emphasized by Schrøder et al. (2003), the lesson learned is that when audiences perform their readings – whether ‘correct’, ‘misunderstood’, or something else – of the media in the context of their everyday lives, the outcome is often both unpredictable and uncontrollable. The authors conclude:

If we, as academic researchers, are interested in understanding how people experience media content, we have to use a research approach that enables us to explore the processes through which people actualize media meaning and incorporate them in meaningful ways into their daily lives. (p. 122)

Reception research has defined itself in opposition to two traditions: the humanistic textual analysis and the survey-based U&G approach (ibid. p. 122ff.). The humanistic textual analysis assumes that media impose fixed meaning and ideologies on passive audiences, while the survey-based U&G approach ignores the question of meaning, focusing only on gratifications. Reception research critiques both approaches for neglecting the everyday contexts in which meaning and media use arise in the first place (ibid.).

As mentioned, reception research brings together traditions of the humanities and social sciences and thereby works as an interdisciplinary area between the two. Schröder et al. (2003) outline four defining characteristics of this interdisciplinary orientation (pp. 124–125):

1. *“Reception research explores the encounter of active audiences with media meaning”*: Reception research emphasizes that audiences are active participants rather than passive consumers. Instead of simply absorbing media messages, people use them in constructing their cultural, social, and political identities, as well as in making sense of social reality.
2. *“Reception research regards meaning as a joint product of text and reader”*: Meaning, in this approach, is seen as a joint product of media text and reader. Texts provide encoded meanings or ‘preferred readings’, but these only become actualized when interpreted by audiences. Audiences may accept, negotiate, or oppose these meanings, drawing on their own experiences and repertoires of interpretation.
3. *“The situational and social contexts of reading affect the meanings actualized by audiences”*: Audience interpretations are also shaped by wider social and situational contexts. Factors such as family, peer groups, class, ethnicity, and gender influence how meanings are understood and shared. At the same time, the immediate context of media use – for example, watching with family versus with friends – affects the way media experiences are interpreted.
4. *“The preferred methodological approach of reception research is the qualitative interview”*: To study these processes, reception research relies heavily on qualitative methods, particularly interviews. Individual in-depth interviews allow researchers to probe personal perceptions and

attitudes, while focus groups reveal how audiences negotiate and share meanings collectively. These methods aim to capture authentic audience experiences within their social worlds.

Taken together, these characteristics demonstrate how reception research reframed the study of media by centering audience sense-making, situating it within social and cultural contexts, and adopting qualitative methodologies to capture its complexity. As such, reception research continues to provide a critical lens for understanding the dynamic relationship between media texts and their audiences.

4.1.2. Media Reception Research 2.0: The Digital Era

We now live in a different media systemic regime of digital, mobile, and participatory media, with media use taking place not just, or even mainly, in the home, but, as the saying goes, “anywhere any time”. (Schröder, 2019, p. 158)

In the digital era – or the post-broadcasting era – sense-making processes are still the core concern in media reception research. However, major transformations in the media landscape, as the quote above illustrates, have impacted the trajectory of reception research. Schröder (2019) points to three transformations: (1) an empirical shift from analyzing audiences’ ‘decoding’ encounters with media ‘texts’ to, now, mapping their participation in broader mediascapes of both traditional, digital, and social media, (2) a theoretical adoption of theories of participation and mediatization, and (3) a methodological shift from qualitative to mixed-method (p. 155). In this context, reception scholars have raised a central question: *are there still audiences to study in this media culture?* This concern is particularly tied to whether people can still be considered audiences if they actively take part in the participation-focused culture happening online (ibid., p. 160). As Rosen famously noted, we must now study “the people formerly known as the audience” (2006). However, both Schröder (2019) and Livingstone (2013) argue, people who are continuously accessible online in a deeply mediatized culture are always, in some sense, audiences. In the broadcast era, people moved in and out of their status as audiences, whereas now in today’s era of “continual immersion in media,” we are simultaneously audiences and workers, relatives, citizens, and more (Livingstone, 2013, p. 22). Schröder (2019) defines these audiences as:

[...] the people who, in their capacity as social actors, are attending to, negotiating the meaning of, and sometimes participating in the multimodal processes initiated or carried out by institutional media. And, as reception researchers, we have something to offer for the study of such audiences. (p. 160)

Many are familiar with Bruns' (2008) term *producers* – a blend of 'producer' and 'user' – highlighting the digital communities “which engage in the collaborative creation and extension of information and knowledge” (p. 2). In the broadcasting era, the people studied by reception scholars were referred to as 'viewers' or 'audience', whereas in this era, 'users' has become a common term to use about said people. Napoli (2011) observes two significant trends, driven by widespread digitalization, that are shifting the orientation of media institutions to audiences: *audience fragmentation* and *audience autonomy* (p. 5). Audience fragmentation refers to how media audiences have been, and still are, continually fragmented into smaller groups specifically due to the many opportunities for media consumption, e.g., the array of different digital platforms. This results in individuals being dispersed across multiple media platforms, in contrast to the broadcasting era, during which a single medium, such as television, exerted a unifying effect. Audience autonomy refers to the increasing control audiences have over the process of media consumption caused by contemporary characteristics such as interactivity, mobility, on-demand functionality, and expanded potential for user-generated content (UGC). These new technological developments are turning audiences from consumers into users as they become “much more actively involved in shaping their own media and network usage” (Bruns, 2008, p. 15). These developments will be discussed in relation to TikTok in Chapter 7.

Additionally, these technological changes are enabling new forms of collaboration and creativity among media audiences. Jenkins (2006a) argues that the internet has empowered users to participate in what is termed a new *participatory culture* – a cultural shift in which audiences are invited to take an active role in the creation and circulation of media content (p. 290). According to Jenkins (2006b, pp. 135-136) this development occurs at the intersection of three key trends. First, new technologies allow audiences to “archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content” in ways that were previously unavailable. Second, the rise of do-it-yourself (DIY) subcultures has fostered new practices of media production outside traditional industry structures. Third, economic trends favor media conglomerates that facilitate the circulation of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple platforms, for example, by releasing a film, producing a related video game, and selling merchandise, while fostering more active forms of audience engagement.

4.1.2.1. The Continued Relevance of Media Reception Research

In this age of digital and social media, Mathieu (2015) argues for the continued relevance of reception research and for its continuation in a drastically changed media landscape, where audiences are offered new possibilities. While the concept of ‘reception’ may appear insufficient to capture the circulation of meaning in contemporary contexts, its methodological focus – the investigation of the relationship between media and audiences, or between text and context – continues to offer relevance and depth. Revising reception research involves not only rethinking the practices of audiences but also re-examining the very notion of the text (ibid., 20ff.). The media text is no longer only a delimited piece of content, but rather an increasingly complex, multi-formed phenomenon, often embedded within platforms and integrated into audience practices. This shift highlights how both “audience” and “text” have become problematic categories under the label of reception. In the broadcast era, their boundaries were more clearly delineated: television texts were produced by cultural elites, distributed by powerful corporations, and received in the familiar setting of the living room (ibid.). By contrast, today’s media texts are diffuse, shaped by “the digitalisation of content, media convergence, the interconnectedness of content and the participation of the audience” (ibid., p. 21).

As a result, scholars struggle to identify the text under study and to trace processes of meaning-making back to a single, stable source; thereby, it is arguably impossible to account for the entire ‘universe’ of the texts encountered by a given user (Jensen & Sørensen, 2014). For these reasons, Mathieu insists that reception research must continue to place questions of meaning as a central concern in media studies – a focus that, at least in 2015 when this article was published, seemed to be lacking in many contemporary approaches to social media, as the audience was often reduced to a single reality or completely ignored (p. 13). As I see it, methodological advancements have made it possible to study users through the platforms themselves, e.g., scraping posts and comments, thereby adopting a more platform-centric approach. Yet such methods rarely allow for the investigation of sense-making processes, as they typically do not involve direct contact with users, the very concern that reception research was designed to address.

In this age of reception research, audiences are no longer viewed as consumers but rather active participants, navigating fragmented and interactive mediascapes, producing content, and shaping the circulation of information. The concepts of *audience* and *text* have evolved in response to these shifts, becoming fluid, interdependent, and often distributed across platforms. Yet, despite these changes, and by building on the legacy of the broadcasting age, reception research continues to offer

unique tools and perspectives for understanding how people interpret, negotiate, and co-create media meaning.

4.1.3. Towards Media Reception Research 3.0?

I acknowledge that it is a bold statement to suggest a new era of reception research. Therefore, I want to emphasize that I see this less as a radical break and more as an evolution of the 2.0 era outlined above, whose characteristics remain highly relevant in today's media culture – perhaps calling it a “2.5 era” would be more fitting. Still, I argue that significant developments in recent years have raised new questions, discussions, and considerations for media reception research. In this section, I focus primarily on changes related to the format of content and the structuring of feeds on digital media platforms, as these are especially relevant in the context of my project. However, I do not discard that other significant changes have happened in recent years, which also influence the field of media reception research in one way or another, but those discussions go beyond the scope of this chapter. I will highlight two developments that I consider key concerns in the study of digital media audiences: the evolution and spread of (1) short-form video and (2) recommendation algorithms, as well as examine how reception scholars might adapt their approaches in response to these changes. Since TikTok's launch, many other platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, have adopted algorithmically driven feeds, with short-form video as the dominant content format. Therefore, these developments are relevant not only to studies of TikTok specifically but also to digital platform research more broadly.

Development 1: Short-form Video

Video content is, of course, not new to digital media platforms. YouTube, for instance, has functioned as a UGC video platform for 20 years, while Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat have long integrated video into their content. Short-form videos – defined as videos that are very short in length – were popularized with the launch of Vine (owned by Twitter) in 2013, which allowed users to create and share 6-second looping videos (Kaye et al., 2022b, pp. 32-35). Although the format itself is not new, its spread has accelerated dramatically in the past five years due to TikTok's popularity. Other platforms, most notably Instagram's *Reels*, have since adopted it.

I argue that this development in UGC shapes how reception scholars must approach both media text analysis and data collection strategies in studies involving short-form video content. Firstly, in

a typical scrolling session, users encounter a large number of short-form videos but spend only fleeting moments with each. Research already shows that users struggle to recall content they encounter on, especially, digital platforms (see, e.g., Ohme et al., 2021), and this challenge is only intensified by the brevity and high volume of short-form videos. This raises methodological concerns for reception scholars when planning data collection methods, such as interviews or focus groups, particularly regarding how to ask respondents about the content they encounter but only remember a fraction of. At the same time, it also creates new opportunities for getting more creative and challenging common methods in reception research. As highlighted in Article 1, this was one of the key reasons I chose to conduct a mobile data donation study to investigate the content Danish TikTok users encounter, rather than relying solely on users' self-reports.

Secondly, short-form videos have distinctive features that affect both researcher analysis and user experience. Most notable is the significance of audio in short-form videos and, closely related, the mimetic practices of such videos as mentioned in Chapter 3 (3.1.2.) and in Article 2. Audio plays a crucial role not only in storytelling but also in creating referential layers, drawing from anything from internet culture to pop cultural moments and politics. While deep familiarity with (audio) memes and cultural references is not a prerequisite for researchers, I argue that it is crucial to initiate discussions with users about their perceptions and interpretations of such elements. For instance, how audio and its centrality affect their user experiences. Additionally, the significance of audio requires users to pay more attention when engaging with content, compared to content solely consisting of images and text. This, in turn, shapes when and where content is consumed and has implications for how audiences process meaning. Recognizing this aspect could therefore be beneficial for scholars seeking to understand patterns of engagement, attention, and meaning-making in multimodal media contexts.

Thirdly, as highlighted several times in this dissertation, short-form video content is typically consumed through a feed, which allows users to enter a state of *flow* while scrolling. As I emphasize in Article 3, this shapes the user experience in various ways, for instance, in how TikTok is experienced as something that is constantly moving and 'keeps going' in contrast to other platforms that are perceived as more 'static'. Therefore, I believe it is important for reception scholars to consider not only the format of the videos themselves but also how they are presented to users – and how this differs from other types of feeds – when researching short-form video content and platforms.

Development 2: Recommendation Algorithms

The second development I highlight here is closely related to the short-form video format: the evolution of recommendation algorithms. In Chapter 3 (section 3.1.1), I explain how TikTok's recommendation system functions. This is a significant development because it in different ways reshapes the user experience – a core concern of reception research. Firstly, as I also mentioned in relation to *Media Reception Research 2.0*, the fragmentation of audiences has gradually intensified as more opportunities for media consumption have presented themselves (Napoli, 2011, p. 5). I argue that audience fragmentation is even further intensified on TikTok because the recommendation algorithm personalizes each FYP to each user, thereby creating a tailored experience. Furthermore, many users experience being – or not being – part of specific subcultures on TikTok, often referred to as being on a particular 'side' of TikTok. A 'side' represents a loosely defined cluster of content, creators, aesthetics, and in-jokes, which reflect the interests users repeatedly engage with and are pushed toward by the algorithm. One of the most well-known examples is *BookTok* (Martens et al., 2022), a popular community on the platform where users share book reviews and recommendations and discuss literature, often within the genres of young adult, fantasy, and romance. Therefore, I find it significant for scholars to be aware of this and, especially, how it impacts the user experience of their feeds. Additionally, scholars may observe significant differences in the content that user groups, even those that are demographically similar, encounter and engage with on the platform. As a result, it becomes more difficult to generalize findings across user groups. However, this also opens up new possibilities for investigation – for instance, characterizing and categorizing users based on factors such as behavioral patterns, affective responses, or content preferences, rather than relying primarily on demographic variables, which often serve as the default. I discuss fragmentation on TikTok further in Chapter 7.

In Article 3, I explore the interplay between user agency and algorithmic agency. Here, I argue that users adopt a mode of *active passivity* (Siles, 2023, p. 57ff.) when scrolling on the FYP. Users actively 'train' the algorithm, but over time, once it aligns with their preferences, they shift into a more passive state, trusting the algorithm to curate their experience – they essentially 'lean back and enjoy' (Siles, 2023; Siles et al., 2022). Additionally, as I also highlight in the article, this is further emphasized by how they describe their own actions with verbs suggesting a more passive, consuming, and receiving role, whereas they attribute activity and agency to the algorithm. In their conceptual article, Lotz et al. (2025) aims to reframe screen audience studies by, as the title points to, "Rethinking watching" to manage the now complex practice of watching which transcends different types of media (television, streaming, YouTube, TikTok, video on social media, etc.), devices (tv screen, tablets, smartphone, laptops, etc.), and social contexts (home, work, public transportation, alone, with others, etc.). For nearly two decades, media studies have sought to understand and explain the implications of

industrial changes driven by the rise of digitalization, platforms, and streaming (ibid., p. 2). Despite these significant changes, as the authors highlight, not a lot of attention has been paid to how modes of watching have changed. TikTok, with its short, vertical videos algorithmically curated on smartphone screens, exemplifies these shifts. Lotz et al. (2025) call for approaches that center on viewer-based perspectives to better understand the complex field of viewing experiences. This includes considering viewers' own stated purposes for watching content – rather than relying on researchers' assumptions, e.g., that watching news necessarily implies information-seeking, as well as examining what viewers seek from video experiences at different times of the day.

Building on this, I suggest that while *Media Reception Research 2.0* emphasized audience activity – through concepts such as *producers* (Bruns, 2008) and *participatory culture* (Jenkins, 2006a) – we must now also reconsider more traditional discussions of audience activity and passivity from the broadcasting age. Much of the time spent on TikTok, and in part also on other similar platforms, as my own and other scholars' research suggests (see, e.g., Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Langlais et al., 2024; Schellewald, 2022, 2023), is spent on watching content rather than actively engaging, e.g., commenting or creating. As Lotz et al. (2025) emphasize, watching practices and their many current developments have received little scholarly attention in media studies in recent years (p. 2ff.). Moreover, scholars, including myself in Article 3, have compared the experience of scrolling on TikTok to that of flow television (see, e.g., Faltesek et al., 2023; Firth & Marinelli, 2025; Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025), further underscoring the centrality of watching practices. As several respondents also mentioned in the interview study, the platform's highly immersive nature demands the user's full attention, meaning that one cannot watch TikTok while simultaneously engaging with a second medium. Consequently, the practice of second screening is not common on TikTok, in contrast to how users often, for example, scroll through Instagram's regular feed while also watching something on a television screen. Thereby, TikTok provides an absorbing and compelling viewing experience.

I do not consider these 'current' audiences or their behavior passive; in addition to being cognitively active, they, for instance, also engage in subtle forms of interaction, such as liking posts or sharing content with friends, that seamlessly integrate into their scrolling behavior (Picone et al., 2019). However, throughout this project, I have come to understand that these audiences relinquish some degree of control and agency when they entrust the recommendation algorithm to curate their scrolling experience. In doing so, they place themselves in a state of active passivity and predominantly assume the role of viewer/watcher, rather than that of a more participation-focused user. Therefore, I also strongly believe that current media reception research could benefit from drawing on and combining theories, methods, approaches, and insights from both the broadcasting era (1.0)

and the digital era (2.0), thereby integrating and mixing traditions that primarily viewed audiences respectively as viewers and as users. I have not directly incorporated this approach in the current project, having recognized its potential only later, but I encourage other scholars to consider it in future studies.

In this section of Chapter 4, I have argued that the closely related developments of short-form video and recommendation algorithms mark important shifts in the media environment that have implications for media reception research. While I initially suggested that we may be entering a *Media Reception Research 3.0* era, it may be more accurate to frame this as more of a hybrid phase – one that draws on insights from earlier traditions while also pointing toward new approaches. This perspective reflects not only the evolving practices of watching, scrolling, and engaging that characterize today’s complex media culture but also how media reception scholars can adapt their methods to better capture these contemporary audience behaviors. By acknowledging both continuity and change, we can build on already existing and develop new conceptual, methodological, and analytical tools that address the realities of contemporary media consumption. In doing so, we ensure that media reception research remains a vital and adaptable field, capable of capturing the evolving dynamics of audiences in a platformized and increasingly algorithmically curated media landscape.

4.2. Core Theoretical Concepts & Perspectives

In this second part of Chapter 4, I elaborate on the core theoretical concepts and perspectives that underpin this dissertation: (1) the context of *everyday life*, (2) *agency*, (3) *flow*, and (4) *duality*. These elements form an interconnected theoretical foundation that also aligns closely with the broader framework of media reception research. The concepts and perspectives are employed through the dissertation, often in combination or closely linked, across both the individual research articles as well as this framework article.

4.2.1. The Context of Everyday Life

The project is framed within the context of *everyday life*, which is closely tied to both media reception research and my user-centric approach. As noted earlier in relation to reception research, the

everyday context is highly significant when focusing on sense-making, as media practices permeate and shape daily life. In media and communication studies, attention to the everyday has a long tradition (Ytre-Arne, 2023). The concept has been central to a range of approaches and research interests, including cultural studies (Gray, 2002; Hall, 1980; Morley, 1992) and domestication theory (Haddon, 2016; Silverstone et al., 2021). In the domestication framework, the everyday context plays a particularly prominent role due to its focus on the gradual integration of media technologies into the rhythms of home and family life. As Ytre-Arne (2023) points out, the centrality of everyday life in media studies is also underscored by the sheer number of books, articles, and studies of media use that adopt the term explicitly in their titles (p. 4).

A compelling motivation for studying media at all lies in its entanglement with the everyday (Silverstone, 1999). A central reason why we even study media, whether it be television, radio, smartphones, platforms, or something else, is that it is part of how people live their daily lives. Scholarship has emphasized how the concept of everyday life helps centre the human experience of living in datafied conditions (Kennedy & Hill, 2017) and foregrounds perspectives of the people rather than systems (Livingstone, 2018), which aligns closely with my user-centric approach in this project. The term thereby works to prioritize context over generalizability and to highlight the perspectives and experiences of ordinary users. As Ytre-Arne (2023) writes:

For me, the everyday signals a perspective on why and how to study media use: it is important because it is part of daily life, it is interesting because everyday life is diverse and meaningful, and it is impossible to be done with because it changes constantly. (p. 6)

Everyday life can be understood in terms of its temporal, spatial, social, and existential dimensions: the organization of time, space, people, and activities through which meaning is made, and the world is related to (ibid., p. 8). Media use is woven into these dimensions in *routinized* ways – rarely invented anew, but enacted through familiar, repeated actions, just like with other aspects of our daily lives. The everyday is typically approached as the mundane context “where the encoded meaning and affordances of media and media technologies are translated into the lived experiences of ordinary people” (Sandvik et al., 2016, p. 9). One reason why the study of these mundane contexts remains a key concern is that they are, more or less directly, tied to the perspective of the audience/recipient/user, which works as the counterpart to perspectives focused on institutions and systems (ibid.).

The historical development of media technologies has further reshaped their place in everyday life. In the pre-mobile age, dominant media such as the landline telephone, radio, or television were typically shared within the household and tied to specific places like the living room (Helles, 2016). The mobile media age has instead “dissociated the use of media from specific contexts” (ibid., p. 32). Today, much of media access is centered around the individual, and the use of any digital medium or content can, in principle, be chosen at the user’s discretion. This shift has contributed to re-defining the place of media in everyday life, producing a situation in which easy availability of communication services across contexts is the norm (Ling, 2012). Media are no longer something we engage with only in our free time. Instead, media is woven into our social lives, making *mediation* an essential part of daily existence (Waisbord, 2014, p. 6). Media can no longer be regarded as an isolated social domain (Hepp, 2022). With the ongoing process of digitalization, a new stage of mediatization has developed – often described as “deep mediatization” (Hepp, 2020). This concept seeks to capture the ways in which digital media have become so intertwined with everyday life that it is no longer possible to understand the various social domains of contemporary society as distinct from digital media (Hepp, 2022). Consequently, the boundaries between specific media-related activities, e.g., watching television, and other social practices, e.g., such as cooking, have become increasingly blurred. Hepp (2022) mentions “cooking with the help of YouTube tutorials” as an example of how media use practices and other social practices blend together.

Going back to the historic perspective, this turn to everyday life in media research is connected to what is often referred to as the *ethnographic turn*, originating in the cultural studies tradition. This turn marked a shift away from the analysis of media texts toward attention to the particular contexts in which media are decoded and consumed (Lull, 1980; Morley, 1986; Radway, 1984). While this project does not involve ethnographic observation of TikTok use, it builds on the ethnographic tradition by focusing on participants’ own accounts of TikTok’s role in their everyday lives. Similar to digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016), this approach seeks to understand how users interact and communicate in an online space as well as how digital culture is shaped.

4.2.2. Agency

When speaking about *agency*, more generally in relation to media, it typically relates to organizations that produce some form of media, e.g., news agencies (Buckingham, 2017). In media theory, however, agency has a much broader and abstract meaning and involves factors such as individual choice,

autonomy, self-determination, and creativity (ibid.). As Buckingham (2017) points to it implies *activity* but also *power* – “the power to produce an effect, to have influence, to make a difference” (p. 12). In academic discussions, the concept of agency is often linked to structure. Structures refer to the broader social frameworks that influence, constrain, and, to some degree, determine individual actions, including the economy, political institutions, and social categories such as class, age, gender, and ethnicity (ibid.). In social theory, structure and agency are often seen as opposing forces – more structure means less agency, and more agency means less structure. Structuralist perspectives stress the determining power of broad social forces, while agency-focused perspectives emphasize individual freedom and choice (ibid.). In a similar vein, 1970s Marxist debates were structured around a binary tension between the *economic base* – the relationship between labour and capital – and the *superstructures* – such as media industries and education – questioning whether ideology and human action were driven primarily by economic forces or whether superstructures enjoyed relative autonomy. Each side faced criticism for overstating its focus and neglecting the other (ibid.).

4.2.2.1. Agency in Media Studies

In the context of media, this kind of binary opposition is common in both public debate and academic discussion. The key issue once again concerns power, specifically the relationship between media and audiences (ibid.). As Buckingham (2017) points out, there is a tendency to frame this as an either/or choice – for example, either the media are powerful, or the audiences are, either audiences are manipulated by the media or they control it, and, most relevant to this project, either audiences are passive consumers or active participants. Studies of media institutions and media texts often emphasize structure, whereas studies of media audiences tend to emphasize agency. The history of media audience research can thus be seen as oscillating between the concepts of powerful media (structure), such as in media effects research, and powerful audiences (agency), as in U&G and active audience theory (ibid.). These different approaches are often separated and typically focus on distinct aspects of media or audiences. In the 1980s and 1990s, media studies were often divided between audience scholars, who emphasized the power of active audiences, and scholars who studied the political economy of media, who highlighted the influence of media institutions (ibid.). Both sides were often mischaracterized, creating a polarized field.

As I highlighted in the previous section on the digital age of reception research, with the emergence of digital and social media, claims about ‘powerful audiences’ resurfaced, framing users as active participants in participatory culture. Buckingham (2017) argues that this optimism overlooks the

significant political and economic interests at stake. For example, most major social media platforms are commercially owned and monetize users' data, requiring users to consent to this as a condition of access. Therefore, user activity does not automatically translate into true agency or power (ibid.). In Chapter 7, I explore this further.

Hepp (2022) discusses the shift in media sociology from studying mass communication to, now, studying a deeply mediatized world. Three specific changes are connected to this shift and to the emergence of the digital: (1) a rethinking of agency, (2) a redefinition of social relations, and (3) a re-discovery of order (ibid., p. 471). Here, I will specifically highlight Hepp's (2022) discussion of agency in relation to the entanglement of human practice with digital media and their infrastructures. Before, where media sociology addressed legacy mass media, the question of agency was simple – agency was associated with respectively media producers and audiences. The agential potential of digital media, however, is much more complex (ibid.). In the context of my project, algorithmic agency is the most central example, but Hepp (2022) also mentions the emergence of artificial companions such as Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa and bots on, e.g., Facebook and Twitter (p. 478). Based on these developments, many media sociology scholars have been rethinking the notion of agency. *Actor Network Theory* (ANT), originally used to explain material objects such as speed bumps that force people to drive slower, early on noted that 'things' can function as actants when they interact with human agents (Latour, 1991). With digital media, agency is no longer just about how humans act through technology but about how to describe algorithm-driven communication systems that both act as communicators themselves while also becoming deeply intertwined with human practices (Esposito, 2017; Guzman, 2018). Hepp (2022) points to *hybrid agency* approaches (see, e.g., Fink & Weyer, 2014; Hanson, 2009) as a way to understand how agency changes when humans interact with automated systems. Rather than seeing media technologies as simply tools controlled by humans, or as entirely independent actors with their own intentions, a hybrid approach focuses on the new forms of agency that emerge from collaboration between people and technology. In other words, agency is not just something an individual possesses – it can be shared between humans and digital systems. This perspective challenges older, human-centered models of agency, where it is assumed that humans are fully in control and that technology functions merely as a tool, which may no longer be sufficient for understanding behaviors and effects of modern, autonomous, and communicative media technologies.

In the context of this project, I explore agency in relation to how young Danish TikTok users act in collaboration with the algorithm on the platform. In particular, in Article 3, I investigate this in close connection with the concept of *flow*, which I will describe in the following section. Furthermore,

I examine how the respondents articulate their own sense of agency in relation to the platform's agency, and how this relationship reflects a form of hybrid agency.

4.2.3. Flow

The concept of flow can be understood in various ways depending on the contextual circumstances in which it is applied. The late psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, often referred to as 'the father of flow' originally coined the term to describe a psychological state of complete absorption in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In this state, individuals experience intense focus, a sense of control, and intrinsic enjoyment, often losing track of time while engaging in an activity. This understanding of flow has been widely applied in fields such as psychology, education, sports, and organizational studies. In this project, however, I employ the notion of flow as it is typically used within media studies to discuss continuous streams of content – most notably in relation to the concept of television flow and, more recently, algorithmic flow. While Csikszentmihalyi's concept emphasizes the individual's immersive experience, the media studies perspective extends this idea to consider how technology can structure and sustain continuous engagement, shaping users' experiences of absorption and attention. I focus on this perspective because it reflects the way in which my respondents articulate their experiences, for instance by comparing them to the experience of television flow, and because it aligns with how related studies on algorithmic flow frame and discuss the concept (Faltsek et al., 2023; Firth & Marinelli, 2025; Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025).

4.2.3.1. Flow in Media Studies

In the 1970s, Raymond Williams introduced the concept of flow in his work on television, particularly in his influential book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1975). Williams argued that flow is a defining characteristic of television as a medium, and one that sets it apart from other media such as film, print, and theatre which are self-contained works. Television should not be understood as a series of separate programs, but as a planned sequence – a flow – designed to hold the attention of the viewers (Williams, 1974). Television delivers a continuous sequence of sound and images that blends programs, ads, news, and other content, with transitions in between, so that the viewers experience a seamless stream when watching. Williams' concept of flow remains central to television and media studies and has supported many interpretations (Uricchio, 2004), though the concept has evolved considerably with new technologies.

In their study of how users engage with videos on TikTok that were originally produced for television, Siles & Valerio-Alfaro (2025) distinguish between three key dimensions of flow: agency, reception, and technology (pp. 3-5). The first dimension (agency) concerns who controls what is watched. Williams' (1975) original idea emphasized a producer-centred model in which programmers determined the sequence of content. With the rise of newer media technologies, such as streaming platforms, this shifted toward a more a *user-controlled* or *viewer-centred flow*, where viewers have the ability to disrupt traditional programming (Uricchio, 2004, 2009). Uricchio (2009) argues that a new development in agency began in the early 2000s when platforms that rely on metadata protocols, search and filters engines, and algorithms emerged. On these types of platforms, such as TikTok, neither producers nor users fully control the flow, which creates a complex relationship between users and technology companies (ibid.). The flow is, instead, co-shaped through interactions between users, technologies, and corporate interests, which points back to the notion of hybrid agency (Hepp, 2022), which I explained in the previous section of this chapter. Despite appearing participatory, these relationships often reinforce platform economies, as algorithms subtly govern users' experiences (Cox, 2018; Faltesek et al., 2023).

The second dimension (reception) is concerned with how audiences experience media (Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025). Williams (1975) viewed the continuous, immersive sequence of content that flow is as the central television experience. In algorithmic media, this has evolved into algorithmic flow, which is designed to “optimize our attention, shape our moods, and extract taps on buy buttons” (Brown et al., 2024). These processes can be described as “algo-rhythms” (Lupinacci, 2024), which are designed to shape human behavior by generating repetitive content flows that structure social interactions and ultimately serve economic objectives (Carmi, 2020). Building on Williams (1975), Coleman (2018) describes flow as an “infrastructure of feeling” to emphasize how digital platforms shape the affective texture of the present through their technological systems. Continuous updates, notifications, and autoplay features create a sense of continuity and anticipation, making the present feel dynamic and always on the verge of what comes next. In this way, flow becomes an affective infrastructure that organizes how time is experienced in digital culture.

The third dimension (technology) is concerned with flow as media engagement and examines the material and technological aspects of viewing. Flow on television structured domestic life by keeping viewers ‘glued’ to the screen and integrating it into everyday routines (Oswald & Packer, 2013). As I have described in the previous section on the context of everyday life, this dynamic persists in the digital era. Now, it has expanded across multiple screens and platforms as users actively manage and

navigate flows across devices, reflecting both greater flexibility and deep entanglements in digital media platforms (Oswald & Packer, 2013; Brown et al., 2024).

In this project, I explore (algorithmic) flow in relation to the user experience on TikTok and, as mentioned previously, in close connection with the notion of agency. In Article 3, I draw on the concept of *active passivity* (Hennion, 2013, as cited in Siles, 2023, pp. 57ff.) to explain the receptive and consuming role the respondents take on when scrolling on their TikTok FYP. Having already trained their algorithm over several years, users allow it to ‘act’ on their behalf, enabling them to simply ‘lean back and enjoy’. Siles & Valerio-Alfaro (2025) describe this process of training the algorithm, by, for example, liking content you wish to see more of and quickly scrolling past content you dislike, as “co-programming the flow”, which also includes ‘going with the flow’ and letting the algorithm tailor your experience (p. 6). The flow that the users experience on TikTok also includes *small acts of engagements* (SAOE) (Picone et al., 2019), such as tapping the ‘like’ or ‘save’ icons, which do not disrupt the flow because it is an integrated part of users’ habitual interaction with the platform. The recommendation algorithm’s effort to present users only with content aligned with their interests also serves to sustain this flow (Faltese, 2023). However, users’ flow is occasionally disrupted by certain events on the app, for instance, encountering unpleasant content that prompts them to exit TikTok, or receiving a private message from a friend that diverts them away from the FYP.

4.2.4. Duality

In this final section of Chapter 4, I will elaborate on the concept of *duality* in user experiences. The notion of duality I draw on derives from the scholarship of well-/ill-being and mental health/illness, in studies that explore if and how digital media platform usage impacts young users’ well-/ill-being and mental health/illness. As Valkenburg et al. (2022) point to in their umbrella review – a review of reviews – there has been a staggering increase in empirical studies into the effects of social media use on, specifically, adolescents’ well-being and mental health. As these concepts are not something I have explored further in my project, I will not go into detail about the findings of these studies. The umbrella review, which is based on 25 reviews published between 2019 and mid-2021 (seven meta-analyses, nine systematic reviews, and nine narrative reviews), states that most of the reviews interpreted the associations between social media use and mental health as “weak” or “inconsistent” and a few interpreted it as “substantial” and “deleterious” (ibid., p. 58). What I instead want to highlight here is, firstly, how several studies of digital media usage’s impact on young users have shown findings of

respectively negative and positive influences within the same studies (Beyens et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2024; O'Reilly, 2020; Valkenburg, Beyens, et al., 2022). For instance, some users report negative influences, and some report positive influences. But secondly, and more importantly in this context, some studies also conclude less binary findings of respectively negative and positive influences on users' well-/ill-being, but instead a greater complexity in these relations (van der Wal et al., 2024; Weinstein, 2018). Here, the notion of *duality* comes into play.

Weinstein (2018) explores how daily use of social media platforms influences adolescents' affective well-being. This is done through a two-part study consisting of a survey and qualitative interviews. Overall, the adolescents' survey responses portray social media use as generally a positive affect experience, whereas the interviews portray that they neither avoid nor deny negative emotions related to their usage. The positive and negative affect experiences are related to four dimensions of social media use: (1) relational interactions, (2) self-expression, (3) interest-driven exploration, and (4) browsing, which all emerged inductively in the study. Weinstein (2018) adopts a modified version of Dodge et al.'s (2012) see-saw metaphor to illustrate the findings of the study – a “social media see-saw” (Figure 3):

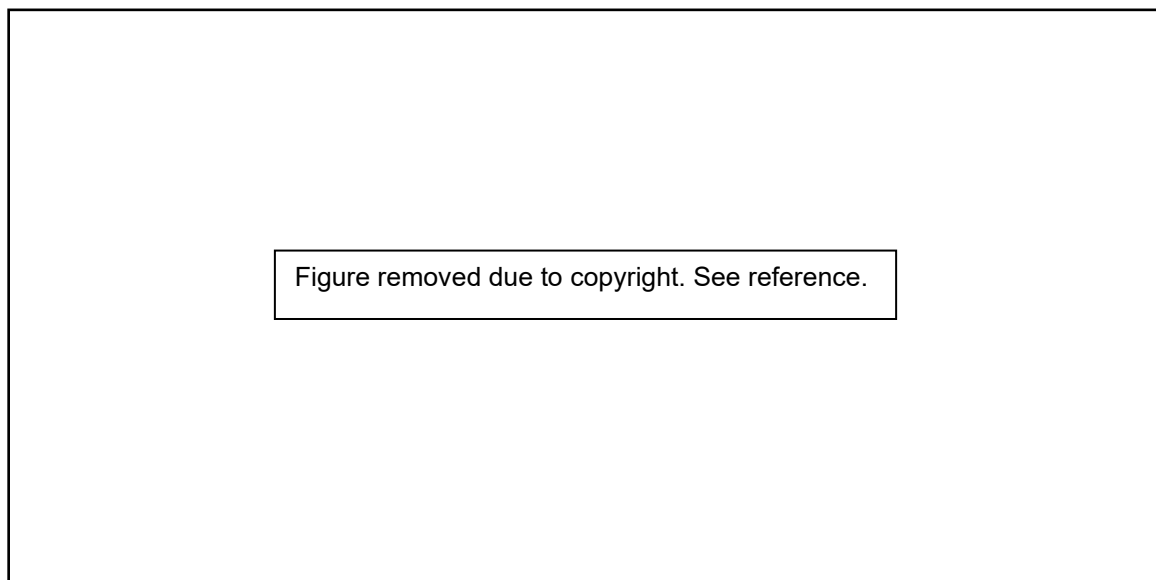


Figure 3: Social media see-saw: positive and negative affect influences (source: Weinstein, 2018, p. 3617).

The see-saw metaphor is used to illustrate how adolescents' emotional experiences on social media move back and forth between positive and negative affects rather than settling consistently on one side. Just like a physical see-saw tilts depending on shifting weight, an adolescent's experience can 'tilt'

toward more positive or more negative feelings depending on what aspects of social media use are most salient at a given moment. As the metaphor suggests, the presence of a negative element does not necessarily indicate an entirely negative experience, just as the absence of a negative element does not guarantee that social media use is wholly positive (ibid.). Adolescents may experience negative emotions in one of the dimensions, while simultaneously deriving positive emotions from another dimension. Moreover, both positive and negative experiences can coexist within the same dimension. For instance, an adolescent's relational interactions may foster closeness while also contributing to feelings of disconnection. Thereby, the study implies that the relationship between adolescent users' well-being and social media usage is not an either/or framework but rather a both/and framework (ibid.).

Van der Wal et al.'s (2024) study aligns well with the outcome of Weinstein's (2018). With regard to the relationship between adolescents' usage of social media and well-being, Van der Wal et al. explore homogeneity (commonalities between adolescents), heterogeneity (differences between adolescents), and duality (differences within adolescents). This is investigated through 8 focus groups with adolescents aged 14-17. As previously mentioned, several studies have found duality across groups in users' experiences of how social media usage influences their well-/ill-being (Beyens et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2024; O'Reilly, 2020; Valkenburg, Beyens, et al., 2022). According to Van der Wal et al. (2024), Weinstein (2018) was the first to report what they term *within-person duality*: "the co-existence of both positive and negative effects of social media on an individual" (p. 2). One of their key findings reveal that within-person duality manifests in several different ways when adolescents experience conflicting emotions: (1) concurrently (when they experience opposing emotions simultaneously, e.g., experiencing both envy and inspiration), (2) alternately (when they shift between contrasting emotional states, e.g., feeling connected and then isolated), and (3) sequentially (when one emotion gradually transforms into another, e.g., enjoyment turning into boredom) (Van der Wal et al., 2024, p. 8).

As previously noted, my project does not directly examine users' well-/ill-being or mental health/illness, as it does not explore potential long-term effects of using TikTok. However, I draw on the concepts of *group-level duality* and *within-person duality* (van der Wal et al., 2024) to illuminate how users articulate their often deeply ambivalent experiences with and perceptions of TikTok both as a platform and as part of their everyday media practices. These dualities help capture the coexistence of attraction and resistance that characterizes many users' experiences, which I explore in Article 4. By engaging with these concepts, I aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics that shape users' relationships with algorithmic media.

4.2.5. *Summary*

Together, the core theoretical concepts and perspectives form an interconnected theoretical framework that allows the project to understand young users' TikTok practices as lived, negotiated, and complex experiences embedded in their daily lives.

The concept of everyday life provides the overall contextual grounding for the dissertation, prioritizing users' daily routines, experiences, and meanings. This perspective is used throughout the project to interpret users' accounts and situate TikTok use within the different rhythms of daily life. The concept of agency helps the project analyze how users act on and with the TikTok algorithm, while also acknowledging the platform's own agential capacities. I, in particular, apply this in Article 3 to explore how human and algorithmic actors jointly shape experiences such as personalized flow. The notion of flow gives the project a way to conceptualize the continuous stream of content that shapes users' experience on the platform. This is especially central to the analysis in Article 3, where flow is explored in close relation to agency and the workings of the recommendation algorithm. Finally, the concept of duality allows the project to capture users' ambivalent and conflicting experiences, perceptions, and relationships with TikTok. This is, in particular, employed in Article 4 to analyze how users simultaneously express both attraction to and resistance toward the platform.

Overall, these concepts work together to provide a nuanced framework for interpreting how young users make sense of TikTok as part of everyday life, how they negotiate agency within algorithmic systems, how they are immersed in and shaped by continuous content flows, and how they navigate the contradictions that arise from their engagement with the platform.

Chapter 5: Methodology

In this chapter, I present the methodology of the project. First, I explain my user-centric framework and how this choice relates to the overall explorative and inductive approach. Next, I reflect on how I situate myself in the project as both a researcher and a user of TikTok. I then describe my two methods of data collection – mobile data donation and qualitative interviews – as well as the participant groups, which leads into a discussion of how I have conducted the project with ethical considerations in mind. Finally, the chapter concludes with a methodological reflection titled *“Playing Catch-up with TikTok”*, where I discuss some of the difficulties and obstacles I have encountered over the past four years in studying a platform that continuously evolves and changes.

5.1. A User-centric Project

In this section, I explain what I mean by *user-centrism* and argue for my choice of this as a general methodological approach in the project while also linking it to my data collection methods, analytical strategy, and limitations. As mentioned previously, my user-centric approach is closely related to both the overall media reception research framework of the project as well as its focus on the everyday context. When I call my project *user-centric*, the simple way to explain it is that the users are at the heart of my project. I aim to understand their practices, interpretations, and perceptions of TikTok, and therefore, the project centers on them. The users are not only essential for the theoretical framing of the project but are also, as I have pointed out earlier, a defining part of the TikTok platform itself. Therefore, to develop a comprehensive understanding of TikTok, I argue it is necessary to study its users. Additionally, my primary interest lies in what TikTok is to its users and as part of their everyday lives.

As Larsen & Johansen (2024) point out, the voices and perspectives of young audiences are often excluded from public debates about their digital lives, despite being those with first-hand experience (p. 19). Research has shown a persistent gap between adult discourses about digital media and young people’s lived experiences (Edwards & Wang, 2018; Herring, 2008; Larsen & Ryberg, 2011). In relation to the youngest users in my study, they have to navigate the intersection between the public discourse of what, e.g., digital media ‘does’ to them and their own practices and experiences from their daily lives (Herring, 2008). This age group, in particular, may experience a form of ‘double

consciousness’ as they are acutely aware of how adults – including parents, teachers, journalists, and experts – perceive them, but these perceptions often conflict with their own practices and experiences (ibid.). In the case of TikTok, public discourse has largely centered on risks, as I have also highlighted several times throughout this dissertation (see sections 3.1.5., 3.1.6., and 3.2.2.1.), while young people’s nuanced perspectives are rarely included. My interview study (Articles 3 and 4) demonstrates that users themselves describe TikTok in more complex ways, highlighting positive, negative, and ambivalent aspects of their engagement. Some respondents also expressed that they felt that the public criticism of the platform was overly harsh and did not match their lived experiences. Following Larsen and Johansen (2024, p. 19), I see it as researchers’ responsibility to portray young audiences in ways that resonate with their realities. My user-centric approach is one way to do so.

5.1.1. *User-centric Methods*

The methodological design of this project reflects its user-centric orientation. To capture both the practices and perspectives of TikTok users, I combined two complementary methods: mobile data donation (Articles 1 and 2) and qualitative interviews (Articles 3 and 4). This mixed approach was chosen deliberately, as it enables me to study both the digital traces of use but also the meanings and reflections that users attach to their experiences.

Data donation represents a user-centric way of working with digital trace data. Unlike platform-centric approaches – where researchers obtain data directly from platforms through, e.g., data scraping – data donation involves users actively sharing their own traces (Ohme et al., 2023). Platform-centric methods represent the dominant paradigm in trace-based social media research. In data donation, the users play an active role, collaborating with the researchers and, as I argue in Article 1, they also gain back some ownership over their data in the process.

The qualitative interview is a method that naturally foregrounds respondents’ voices. Here, users articulate their experiences and perceptions of TikTok in their own terms, providing the contextual richness that digital traces alone cannot capture. Livingstone (2018) cautions that in the age of datification, overemphasis and fascination with digital traces risks sidelining audiences as social beings. Audiences are embedded in society and history in many more ways than through their relationship with media; therefore, the analysis of audiences cannot be satisfied with, e.g., disembodied and decontextualized observations of behavior, but must engage meaningfully with people’s lived experiences

and everyday practices (ibid.). In line with this, I argue that interviews are essential to complement digital trace analysis in my project, ensuring that users' voices and everyday practices and experiences remain central (see Articles 3 and 4). My analytical strategy has also been shaped by this user-centric frame. As I aim to bring forth the experiences and perspectives of the users, I argue the importance of open coding, inspired by *grounded theory*, as the first step in working with my data. This allowed me to stay close to the material and minimize the influence of my own biases and preconceived assumptions.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the interest in everyday life within media research is connected to the ethnographic turn. Although my project does not involve ethnographic observation, it builds on the tradition of digital ethnography (see, e.g., Pink et al., 2016) by seeking to understand how users interact and communicate in online spaces, as well as how digital culture is shaped. Methodologically, however, it differs in that it does not rely on immersive, observational engagement within these spaces. Instead, the data donation study provides access to participants' usage data, offering insights into how the platform tracks their behavior and the content they encounter. Through the interview study, I have explored how users describe their everyday usage and experience of TikTok, and how they perceive and make sense of it as part of their daily lives (Articles 3 and 4). Together, these methods emphasize user perspectives and their articulations of TikTok's role in the rhythms of everyday life.

While the project could have been brought even closer to the users – for example, if I had conducted ethnographic fieldwork that provided a more detailed view of their everyday lives – the combination of data donation and interviews nonetheless establishes a meaningful form of proximity to users. The decision to focus on qualitative interviews is closely tied to my interest in how users express and interpret their experiences and perceptions of TikTok, which the interview method foregrounds. By integrating users' digital traces with their narratives, I sought to capture both what TikTok use looks like in practice and what it means to users in their daily lives. This combination acknowledges both the traces users leave on the platform and the ways they articulate and interpret these practices, thereby strengthening the validity of the study. In this way, the project remains firmly grounded in media reception research and its emphasis on audiences' everyday contexts, while also engaging critically with the methodological challenges of studying a datafied platform like TikTok.

5.2. An Explorative & Inductive Approach

From the very beginning, the project has been explorative in nature. Because TikTok is a dynamic and constantly evolving platform, it seemed natural to adopt an approach that was flexible and not

constrained by rigid hypotheses. This is also reflected in my research questions (see section 1.1.), which I have kept relatively open and not overly focused on specific details. Additionally, when I was planning the project, the field of TikTok studies was still at an early stage, which made it an obvious choice to work in an exploratory manner. This approach has allowed me to incorporate new findings – both from my own research and from the growing body of TikTok scholarship – and to adjust my direction along the way. It also aligned well with my wish to investigate, discover, and remain curious about users’ perspectives, which is also closely connected to my analytical approach to the data, for example, starting my coding processes with open coding as mentioned above. In this way, adopting an explorative approach has created space for unexpected insights and enabled me to pursue new ideas as they emerged.

Consistent with the project’s explorative focus, my work with the collected data has been largely inductive, with analyses that are data-driven and grounded in the material (Tracy, 2020, pp. 26ff.). As noted earlier, however, the coding of the 1,200 sampled videos from the data donation study was also informed by Schellewald’s (2021) study of communicative forms on TikTok (Article 2), and therefore not purely inductive. Still, the overall inductive approach aligns with the project’s broader framework (Chapter 4), which does not rely on a single primary theory but situates the study within media reception research and the dissertation’s core theoretical concepts – namely, the context of everyday life, agency, flow, and duality. By not imposing a predetermined lens on the data, the project is able to remain responsive to the nuances and complexities of TikTok use as expressed by the users themselves and in their data. Given the centrality of the users in the project, the inductive approach has allowed me to explore their opinions, thoughts, and experiences in the most neutral way possible, bringing me as close to their perspectives as I could through this research design. A key aim has been not only to use the users’ voices to confirm or challenge existing research conclusions, but to genuinely listen and maintain an open approach, remaining receptive to the complexities they express. This approach has also enabled me to identify patterns, themes, and insights that might not have been anticipated at the outset, allowing the study to develop organically and adapt to emerging findings.

In sum, the combination of an explorative orientation and an inductive approach has allowed the project to remain flexible, responsive, and deeply grounded in the collected data. By prioritizing openness and attentiveness to the material, the study has been able to capture both expected and unexpected dimensions of TikTok use, ensuring that the findings reflect the complexity of participants’ everyday experiences. This methodological stance not only reinforces the validity of the research but

also aligns with the broader aim of understanding the platform through the lens of its users, setting the stage for the analyses and discussions that follow.

5.3. My Role as Researcher & User

In this section, I reflect on how I situate myself in the project as both a researcher, in my professional life, and a user, in my private life, of TikTok. Even though I do not conduct (auto)ethnography in this project, I still find it important to transparently reflect on my position and consider how it has shaped my work.

Many scholars in media studies are themselves part of the audience or users of the media they study, since media, as I have pointed out several times, are deeply embedded in everyday life. In many cases, this does not necessarily influence their research or require explicit reflection, as it is to be expected that media scholars also engage with media in their personal lives – and often to a greater extent than others. In other cases, however, scholars may be part of the specific online community or subculture they are researching, and may adopt an autoethnographic approach, which requires a different level of transparency and consideration.

As I describe in the prologue to this dissertation, the idea for my project emerged during the first COVID-19 lockdown, when I was fascinated by how I and others around me suddenly became engrossed in an app we had previously shown no interest in. To some readers, the prologue might appear to signal the beginning of a project heavily involving my own experiences, but this is not the case. The prologue primarily serves to ‘set the scene’ by explaining the inspiration for this project, and additionally, it also illustrates how many TikTok users first began engaging with the app, due to boredom during lockdown. On the contrary, I have deliberately tried to distance myself and my own experiences with TikTok from the project, where my user-centric approach has been particularly valuable. The user-centric approach allows me to center the users and their perspectives, separate from my own personal experiences and interpretations, which I am not interested in including here. However, my own use of TikTok inevitably affects and informs my research to some extent.

In my everyday life, I use TikTok daily, and my use is similar to that of the respondents in this study, as I do not create or post content but mainly scroll through my FYP and share content with friends through direct messages. While I never feel that I am ‘working’ when I use TikTok, I do see keeping up with what happens on the platform as part of my research. As is well known, internet culture consists of many inside jokes, references, internal language, and so-called ‘lore’, which can be

difficult to grasp and understand if one is not actively engaged in the culture. On TikTok, the digital culture changes rapidly, and even though I have used the app daily for several years, it can still be challenging to keep up with new trends, memes, and audio bits. Nevertheless, the time I have spent on TikTok has enriched me with many insights and forms of ‘non-academic’ knowledge about the platform’s digital culture, which I inevitably draw on in my research. This has been advantageous, for example, in recognizing trends and popular sounds when coding the videos from the data donation study, as well as in understanding references my respondents made in interviews. At the same time, it may also have caused me to overlook certain elements or take them for granted because of my familiarity with the platform, whereas an ‘outsider’ might have noticed them, looked further into them, and asked questions. Overall, however, I do believe this knowledge and familiarity have been an advantage and have supported me throughout the project.

In addition, I want to emphasize the benefits of studying TikTok in a Danish context as a Danish scholar living in Denmark. The most obvious advantage is that I understand the language used in Danish TikTok content, which was also part of the sampled videos. Furthermore, I can recognize and understand references to Danish politics, television, and celebrities, as I am aware of current events, news, and popular culture in Denmark. Through my personal use of the platform, I have also encountered many of the trends and sounds that have been popular on ‘Danish TikTok’, thereby making it easy for me to identify them when coding the videos from the data donation study. This might not have been the case if I had studied users from another country, and, more generally, it would have been more challenging to identify and understand foreign trends and references. That said, it is worth noting that much of the content in the data donation study, as well as much of what the respondents mentioned in the interviews, was in English.

5.4. Data Collections

In this section, I firstly outline the reasoning behind involving two different participant groups in this project rather than one. Secondly, I describe the two data collections – the data donation study and the interview study – and explain why I chose to apply these two methods.

My research design follows a classic media reception research structure, where an analysis of the media text is first conducted and then followed by interviews with the audience or users. In this case, the ‘media text’ is not a single piece of content but rather TikTok videos more broadly – and, by extension, the platform itself – which were examined through the data donation study. The content analysis

provided insights into the type of content this age group encountered on TikTok, as well as initial indications of their app usage. In addition to these findings, this study also informed the planning and preparation of the subsequent interview study.

5.4.1. Participant Groups

In this project, I collected data from two different participant groups, each consisting of 24 Danish TikTok users between the ages of 15 and 29. Later in this section, I describe the groups and their demographics in more detail.

A question I have often been asked is why I chose not to work with the same group of participants throughout the entire project and conduct both the data donation and the interviews with them. There are several reasons for this. The first is practical: the data donation study took place in 2022, while the interviews were conducted two years later, in 2024. The data donation study was part of my MA thesis, which was also the first stage (Part A) of my 4+4 PhD program. At that time, I did not anticipate that I would later conduct interviews that could have involved the same participants. Consequently, the participants from the data donation study were anonymized, and their contact information was deleted during the semester when I wrote my MA thesis, as I had promised them. Therefore, I simply could not have contacted them afterwards to ask them about participating in the later interviews. Moreover, it would also have been uncertain – and perhaps unrealistic – to assume that the same participants would still be willing to take part in interviews two years later.

Beyond these practical considerations, there is also an ethical dimension to my decision not to involve the same participants in both data collections. I would not have felt comfortable interviewing participants whose TikTok data I had previously examined – data that they themselves did not have a full overview of (as I discuss in Article 1, this is, in fact, impossible). Having access to such data could have exposed personal details about them, for instance, through the content shown in their feeds based on how the algorithm calculates their preferences. This would have created an imbalance between us, in which I, unintentionally, held an ‘upper hand’. The very act of donating data and thereby granting me access to substantial parts of their personal information is already a significant request, and I believe that as researchers – especially in audience studies, where we usually study citizens of the general population – we must be mindful of how much we ask of our participants. While I recognize that having users reflect on and discuss their donated data in interviews could generate valuable insights in another study, this approach does not align with the aims of this particular project.

Therefore, even if it had been practically feasible to use the same participants across both data collections, I would not have considered it appropriate to do so in this specific context.

Additionally, by working with two different participant groups instead of one, and thereby a larger pool of participants, I was able to gain insights from a broader range of users. For example, I was able to compare the characteristics of the content encountered by participants in the data donation study with how respondents in the interview study described the content they typically encountered on TikTok. These comparisons will be presented in Chapter 6.

5.4.1.1. Overview of Participant Groups

In Section 3.2. (“Danish Youth as Media Users”), I described this overall age group as media users. As noted in that section, the age group in this project represents a *typical instance* sample, as they are among the most frequent TikTok users in Denmark. In both data collections, I aimed for *maximum variation* (Tracy, 2020, p. 82) within the sample in terms of age, gender, place of residence, and occupation. Table 1 below provides an overview of the demographic data for both participant groups.

All five main regions of Denmark are represented across the two participant groups: Capital (7), Zealand (1), South (8), Central (24), and North (8). The Central region is more heavily represented, as it includes Aarhus, where many participants who are students are based, and it also covers the largest geographic area among all regions. Larger cities (Copenhagen, Aarhus, Aalborg, Odense, etc.), towns (Struer, Skive, Hjørring etc.), and smaller villages are all included. In terms of gender, 27 participants identify as female, 20 as male, and 1 as non-binary. Regarding age, 14 participants are between 15–19 years, 17 between 20–24, and 17 between 25–29. Additionally, three respondents in the interview study have a minority ethnic background. None of the participants earn an income through TikTok or have a large following, and therefore they represent typical Danish users. Overall, the project is based on a demographically diverse sample.

DATA DONATION STUDY				
Participant	Gender	Age	Region	Occupation
1	Female	15	North	High school
2	Male	16	Central	Boarding school
3	Female	17	South	High school

4	Male	17	North	High school
5	Female	18	Central	High school
6	Male	19	North	High school
7	Female	20	Central	Gap year
8	Female	21	Central	Student
9	Female	22	Capital	Student
10	Male	22	Central	Student
11	Male	22	Capital	Dance teacher
12	Female	23	Central	Student
13	Female	23	North	Assistant store manager
14	Female	24	North	Student
15	Male	24	Central	Construction designer
16	Female	25	Central	Self employed
17	Male	25	Central	Unemployed
18	Male	25	Central	Unemployed
19	Female	26	Central	Communications officer
20	Male	26	Central	Student
21	Female	27	Central	Head of communications
22	Female	28	Capital	Student
23	Male	28	Central	Head of marketing
24	Female	29	Capital	Marketing content specialist

INTERVIEW STUDY

Respondent (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Region	Occupation
Samira	Female	16	Capital	Middle school
Marie	Female	16	Central	Primary school
Björk	Non-binary	17	Central	Vocational school
Morten	Male	17	South	Vocational school
Eva	Female	17	South	High school
Niels	Male	17	Zealand	Vocational school
Anne	Female	18	Central	High school
Mehmet	Male	19	South	High school
Zander	Male	20	South	High school
Holly	Female	21	South	Student
Frida	Female	22	South	Gap year
Vilma	Female	22	Central	Student
Anders	Male	23	Central	Student
Clara	Female	23	Central	Accountant

Josefine	Female	24	Central	Gap year
Per	Male	24	Central	Student
Lise	Female	25	Capital	Student
Mads	Male	25	Central	Student
Nadia	Female	26	North	Physiotherapist
Vanessa	Female	27	Capital	Consultant
Kristoffer	Male	27	Central	Student
Rasmus	Male	27	North	Self-employed
Jonas	Male	29	North	Self-employed
Camilla	Female	29	South	Office apprentice

Table 1: Overview of the two participant groups' demographic data.

5.4.2. Mobile Data Donation

Since the introduction of the European Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018, platforms that collect and store user data are legally required to provide it to users upon request (Boeschoten et al., 2020). This means any user can request access to their Data Download Package (DDP), though the content and level of detail vary by platform. Examining DDPs offers insights into both user behavior and platform content. Typically, social media DDPs include information on user activity (likes, comments, watch and search history, uploads, messages, followers), settings (profile visibility, language), profile details (username, bio, birthday), and advertising data (third-party ad information).

As Article 1 explains and discusses the data donation study in detail, I will only briefly highlight the key points here. As mentioned earlier (see section 5.1.1), mobile data donation (Boeschoten et al., 2020; Breuer et al., 2022; Ohme et al., 2021; Van Driel et al., 2022) is a user-centric method and therefore aligns well with the project's overall approach. The main reason for choosing this method was that it provided access to data about the content users had actually encountered on TikTok, reducing the need to rely solely on self-reported information (Ohme et al., 2021). Moreover, this method allowed for collaboration with participants and ensured their informed consent while distancing myself from the data collection process, as the data were not obtained through my own app or profile – again reflecting the user-centric approach.

Before conducting the study, I did different tests with my own and a pilot participant's data. Hereafter, I recruited 24 young Danish TikTok users (aged 15–29) (see Table 1) to participate in the

data donation study. They were asked to download their DDP from the TikTok app and donate selected folders/files from it to me. Recruitment took place via social media and through outreach to Danish primary schools, high schools, and boarding schools (see recruitment material in Appendix A). Participants received two informational documents, which they were asked to read before completing a consent form (see Appendix B). After providing consent, they received a detailed guide on how to complete the data donation (see Appendix C). Data collection occurred between June and September 2022. The data donation process consisted of three steps:

1. Participants requested their DDP from the TikTok app (via settings).
2. Participants waited for TikTok to process their request (typically a few days).
3. Once ready, participants downloaded their DDP and donated selected folders/files to me.

As I describe in Article 1, the process was not as simple as presented here, as it was complicated by various technical issues. In this study, participants were asked to donate three folders from their TikTok DDP: *Activity* (video browsing history, likes, favorites, etc.), *App Settings* (language, profile visibility, etc.), and *Videos* (content posted by the participant). In addition to the selected folders, the participants also donated screenshots of the Screen Time function on their smartphones, which I collected to gain an initial understanding of how much they used TikTok in their daily lives. In Article 2, where I analyze the data from the DDPs, I outline the sampling strategy, specify the dataset used, and explain the coding process in the methods section. The coding overview can be found in Appendix D.

5.4.3. Qualitative Interviews

The qualitative interview is the preferred method of data collection in reception research (Schrøder et al. 2003). I chose to conduct qualitative interviews with users to gain insights into their usage and motivations, experiences, and perceptions of TikTok (Articles 3 and 4). I recruited the respondents through a short survey that I shared on social media, sent to various schools, and hung up as a QR code around the university campus (see recruitment material in Appendix E). A total of 429 users completed the survey, in which they were asked to provide demographic information (age, gender, city, occupation), indicate how often they used TikTok, and specify whether they were interested in participating in an interview about their TikTok use. From this pool of respondents, I contacted

about 35 individuals who had expressed interest in being interviewed, selected based on demographic diversity, of whom 24 agreed to participate (see informational document and consent form in Appendix F). Specifically, I carried out *semi-structured, respondent interviews* (Tracy, 2020, pp.158-159) with 24 young, Danish TikTok-users (aged 16-29) (see Table 1) during May and June 2024. The interviews were carried out online through Zoom. The interview guide can be found in Appendix G.

As part of the interviews, I conducted two post-it exercises using the online platform *Miro*. In the first exercise, placed at the beginning of the interviews, I asked the respondents to rank different media according to how difficult or easy it would be for them to live without access to them in their everyday lives (see Image 1). They could also add other media they used, that I had not included, by writing on the orange post-its. This exercise was designed to give me an indication of how significant TikTok was as part of their daily media practices.

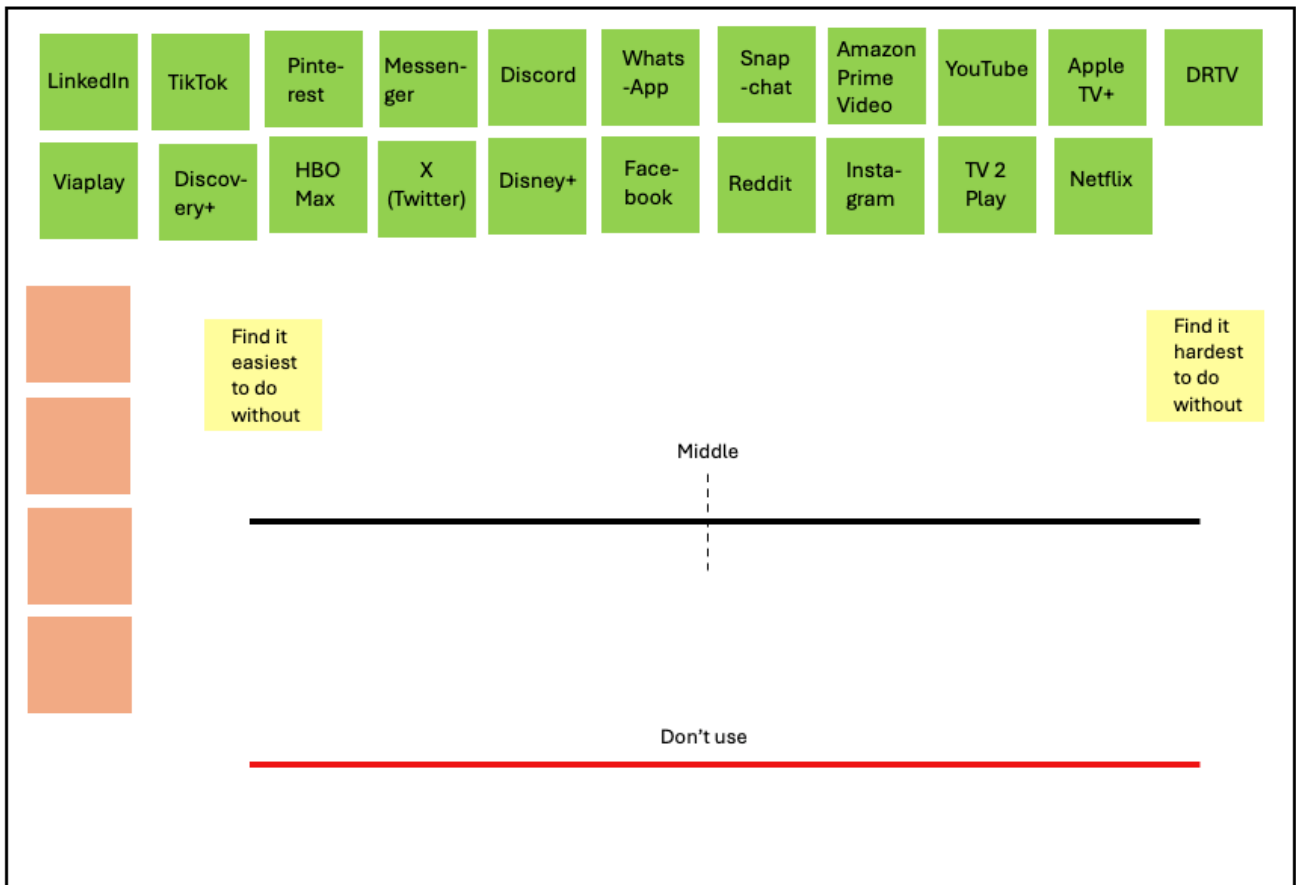


Image 1: Illustration showing how Exercise 1 was presented to the respondents (see screenshots of exercise in Appendix J).

The second exercise consisted of two parts. First, respondents were presented with an array of words (see Image 2, yellow post-its) and asked to select the ones they felt best described TikTok, placing them under the green “TikTok” box. They were then asked to do the same with the blue post-its, choosing the words that best described the content they watched on TikTok. I used the findings from the data donation study to guide which preselected words I included in the exercise, in order to test whether the same types of content were present in both studies and to identify any potential differences. In both cases, the respondents could also add their own words by writing on the orange post-its and placing them under the green box. This exercise aimed to make it easier for respondents to articulate how they experienced TikTok and the types of content they watched – particularly useful for participants who were less verbally expressive – and it proved effective in doing so. In Articles 3 and 4, I also compare the data from these exercises directly, for example, by examining how many respondents selected the same specific words to describe TikTok and its content.



Image 2: Illustration showing how Exercise 2 was presented to the respondents (see screenshots of exercise in Appendix J).

After conducting the interviews, I used *Whisper* to transcribe the recordings, after which I listened to each interview while correcting the transcription and taking initial notes (open coding). Based on the open coding, I then coded the transcripts (Appendix H) in NVivo, focusing on emerging themes and patterns. This process resulted in a codebook consisting of 87 codes and subcodes (Appendix I). The findings from the interview study are presented in Articles 3 and 4.

5.5. Ethical Considerations

In this section, I will reflect on the overarching ethical considerations that underpin and guide this project. These reflections address both the formal and situational aspects of ethics that have informed my methodological choices, interactions with participants, and the overall research process. Throughout the project, I have considered all of Tracy's eight "Big-Tent" criteria for quality in qualitative research which includes: (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence (2010). Here, I focus specifically on the ethical dimension. Tracy divides the ethical dimension into four different practices that attend to ethics in qualitative research: *procedural*, *situational*, *relational*, and *exitng ethics*.

Procedural ethics refer to ethical actions required by organizations and institutions, such as the mandates of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), including "do no harm", negotiating informed consent, and ensuring privacy (Sales & Folkman, 2000). My project has been assessed and approved by the Research Data Office at Aarhus University, and the data have been registered, processed, and stored lawfully (legal basis: (1) Consent, GDPR art. 6(1)(a); and (2) Explicit consent, GDPR art. 9(2)(a)). Participants in both of my data collections were provided with written information about the respective studies and how their data would be processed and managed before giving consent to participate. Additionally, they have been pseudonymized to protect their privacy throughout analysis and publication.

Situational ethics refer to ethical actions that emerge not only from prescribed laws but also through reasoning and context (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). They address the unpredictable and often subtle moments in the field that carry ethical significance (Ellis, 2007, p. 4), extending beyond review board mandates as mentioned above. Each circumstance is unique, requiring researchers to continuously reflect on, critique, and question their ethical decisions – often revolving around the utilitarian question, "Do the means justify the ends?" (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). Situational ethics call for ongoing reflection on research methods and decisions regarding which data to include. In my project, I have

engaged with situational ethics in several ways, especially in relation to the data donation collection. For instance, I carefully considered what and how much data to ask participants to donate. I chose to collect only a few selected folders, and when a few participants nevertheless donated their entire TikTok DDP, I immediately deleted the data that were not required for the study. As I point out in Article 1, it is impossible for the participants who donated their data to have a full overview of its contents – even though only selected folders were included – since the dataset is both large and complex. Given this situation, I found it essential to carefully consider which data to include in my analysis. I therefore focused exclusively on participants’ video browsing history data and excluded other types, such as what content they had liked, favorited, and saved, which could potentially reveal more private information about them to me.

Relational ethics emphasize awareness of how a researcher’s actions and character affect others (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). Rooted in an ethic of care, this approach values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researchers, participants, and their communities (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). Ethically relational researchers practice reciprocity – they work *with* participants rather than using them for personal gain. González (2000) highlights that researchers should respect participants as collaborators, for instance, by allowing them to help define research norms. I see my user-centric approach as part of this relational ethic, as one of my primary aims is to listen to users and ensure their voices and perspectives are heard. In Article 1, I also emphasize how the data donation method fosters collaboration between participants and the researcher, as the data collection process could not have been conducted without such cooperation. Additionally, I am also aware of the inherent power dynamics between myself as a researcher and the participants, especially in relation to the younger participants. I have tried to lessen this by, e.g., using accessible language (in informational documents, consent forms, data donation guide, interview questions, general communication with them, etc.) and clarifying their rights to withdraw at any stage.

Exiting ethics concern how researchers leave the field and share their results beyond the data collection phase (Tracy, 2010, pp. 847–848). Researchers should carefully consider how to present their findings to avoid unjust or unintended consequences. For example, they should reflect on whether they might inadvertently portray marginalized groups in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes (ibid.). In this respect, I have made it a priority to accurately present my participants’ complex, nuanced, and well-reflected perspectives on TikTok, thereby avoiding the reproduction of stereotypes of young people – especially teenagers – as uncritical media users. In Article 4, for example, I highlight how the respondents express ambivalence toward TikTok and articulate various concerns and critiques about the platform as well as their own, and their peers’, usage.

In relation to Tracy's (2010) work, I also draw on Markham (2006), who focuses on qualitative ICT (Information and Communication Technology) research and challenges the idea that ethics can be managed merely as a procedural checklist (consent forms, IRB approval, etc.). Research situations, especially online, are fluid, contextual, and relational. Markham (2006), in alignment with Tracy (2010), argues that ethics must be an integral part of the research process itself, relying on continuous reflexivity by the researcher, rather than something applied after methodological choices have been made. Hence, as Markham's article title suggests, *"Ethic as Method, Method as Ethic"* (2006). Studying communication, networks, and social interactions on media challenges existing assumptions and practices of qualitative research (ibid., p. 41). Important questions arise concerning, e.g., private/public, anonymity, and informed consent, as these concepts do not easily fit online contexts. The data donation method used in my project provides an opportunity to address some of these issues by ensuring that participants are informed and involved in the data collection process. Furthermore, applying this method required close collaboration between the participants and me, which also provided the participants with an opportunity to regain a degree of agency over their digital data, as I discuss in more detail in Article 1. Choosing data donation as a method, rather than collecting data through APIs or other digital trace approaches, was an ethically grounded decision from the very beginning of the project. This choice also aligns with the project's user-centric framework by centering participants, and not just their data, in the research process.

Throughout this project, ethical reflection has been an ongoing and iterative process rather than a procedural requirement fulfilled at specific stages. By integrating procedural, situational, relational, and existing ethics throughout the research process, I have aimed to ensure that the study not only complies with formal ethical standards but also embodies care, transparency, and accountability in practice.

5.6. Playing Catch-up with TikTok

Since the early stages of this project, I have considered writing some kind of reflection about my recurring feeling of always 'running behind' my research object with its never-ending changes and developments. In essence, this reflection stems from that inevitable feeling of continually trying to 'catch up' (but ultimately failing), a frustration shared by many media studies scholars, but I would argue, intensified when working with a platform like TikTok. Over the past four years, additional layers have been added to this experience, amplifying the feeling of constantly struggling to keep pace.

Accordingly, this final section of my methodology chapter reflects on three closely related dimensions of these experiences, emotions, and, not least, frustrations of perpetually ‘running behind’ as well as the accompanying fear of becoming outdated before even finishing the work: (1) TikTok as a research object, (2) the field of TikTok studies, and (3) academic publishing.

TikTok as a Research Object:

As is well known, TikTok is an ever-changing platform. New content, often in the form of fast-paced and short videos, is constantly uploaded, trends and memes appear and disappear within days, and the broader digital culture continuously evolves. While UGC platforms are generally characterized by ongoing changes in content, platform design (layout, algorithms, features, etc.), and user experiences, this volatility is further intensified on TikTok. The platform’s reliance on trends, particularly trending sounds, the short length of video content, and the ease of in-app content creation contribute to a highly dynamic and volatile environment that is difficult, in my opinion, most likely impossible to fully grasp.

Furthermore, this is intensified by how TikTok’s recommendation algorithm tailors each user’s FYP to their specific interests (see 3.1.1.), resulting in a personalized user experience. Users with similar interests get presented with content from the same communities or ‘sides’ of TikTok, as I exemplified earlier with BookTok (4.1.3.). Consequently, in the context of my own use, I only encounter content on my FYP that the algorithm has curated for me based on my previous engagement, which means that many trends, memes, and subcultures never reach me. This becomes evident when, for instance, one of my friends mentions “that specific TikTok sound that goes like this...” and I have no idea what they are talking about. It is also apparent when journalists contact me for expert commentary on a new TikTok trend, to which I, about half of the time, have to admit that I have never encountered it. Thus, despite considering myself an avid user, I cannot possibly keep up with all the developments happening on the platform. In this project, studying TikTok data from other users has, of course, broadened my view and understanding of the content on the app, but because TikTok content evolves constantly, some of these insights quickly become dated.

The choice of a qualitatively oriented research design has further intensified my feeling of ‘running behind’, as the processes of data collection, processing, coding, and analysis are inherently time-consuming in such studies. This has made me fear that my data and findings may have already become, or at least felt, outdated even as I was still processing, analyzing, and writing about them. My choice to study this topic in an in-depth, qualitative manner – and, for instance, spend substantial time

conducting extensive and detailed coding of data – has made it even more challenging to keep pace with a constantly evolving research object.

The frustration in my own work, and most likely more broadly among scholars, is particularly tied to the fleeting nature of content. Having accepted these circumstances, I have sought to adapt my approach to ensure the longevity and continued relevance of my project in different ways. For instance, this was one of the reasons why, in the coding and analysis of the donated data, I chose to categorize and map the TikTok videos based on formats, which I refer to as genres, rather than focusing on specific topics or themes, as these would quickly become outdated (Article 2). This approach, alongside my focus on overarching content characteristics in the analysis, allowed for more enduring insights into the dynamics of the digital culture on TikTok. On a broader scale, the project also gains long-term relevance through its theoretical framework, which situates the study within enduring discussions about, for example, everyday media practices and the dynamics of digital culture. In this way, the theory places the project in a longer-term perspective that extends beyond the ever-changing content on TikTok.

The Field of TikTok Studies:

Alongside TikTok's growing popularity, the field of TikTok studies has expanded rapidly. As mentioned earlier, when I began my project, the field was still at an early stage. Thereby, the field has evolved alongside my own research. *The TikTok Cultures Research Network*, founded by Professor Crystal Abidin in 2020, maintains a list of publications that are authored or co-authored by their members which illustrates this growth (TikTok Cultures Research Network, N.d.b) According to the list, only two journal articles about TikTok was published by members in 2020, 25 in 2021, 22 in 2022, 42 in 2023, 24 in 2024, and, so far, 14 in 2025. These numbers are significantly higher when the network's curated list of journal articles about TikTok from scholars outside the network is included, for instance, 112 articles from 2022 are listed there (TikTok Cultures Research Network, N.d.a).

At the beginning of my project, nearly every new publication on TikTok was potentially relevant to me, given the scarcity of prior research. During the last years, however, the volume of new work has been overwhelming, which has caused me to carefully select what to read and engage with, as so much is published. Consequently, several gaps in the literature that once seemed open have since been addressed by others. For instance, my research on how users use TikTok as part of their everyday lives – a central focus of my project – was relatively novel four years ago. Now, as highlighted

in Chapter 2 and Article 3, my findings on this topic align closely with those of similar studies, meaning that this specific aspect of the project contributes fewer new empirical insights than I had originally expected. The need to continuously assert the originality and relevance of my work, while simultaneously keeping up with the growing body of literature, has further reinforced this feeling of constantly running behind and not being able to ‘catch up’ with the field.

Academic Publishing:

Most scholars probably have, at least, a few unflattering words to say about the academic publishing system. Prior to my PhD project, I had no experience with academic publishing, but according to my supervisors and other colleagues, I have been particularly unlucky with journal experiences and especially with editors. I do not find it fitting or relevant to go into a long rant about my experiences here, but I briefly want to emphasize how the lengthy and unpredictable nature of the publication process amplifies the frustrations described above. The extended timeline for peer review and publication is, most likely, frustrating to most scholars across fields and disciplines. The risk of one’s work feeling outdated by the time it is finally published is very real. In my case, studying a fast-evolving platform like TikTok within a rapidly expanding field has heightened this experience. Even during data processing and analysis, I have often felt that my findings were already becoming ‘old’. On several occasions, I have experienced that other scholars were getting work published similar to mine while my own manuscript was caught in an endless loop of reviewers, revisions, new reviewers, new revisions, and so on. This cycle not only delayed dissemination but also intensified my sense of stagnation and outdatedness – that my work was aging in real time before it even reached readers.

Across these three dimensions, the experience of ‘running behind’ has emerged as both a methodological and emotional condition of researching TikTok. The platform’s continuous transformations make it a moving target for qualitative inquiry, the rapid expansion of TikTok studies has rendered the field increasingly crowded and competitive, and the slow pace of academic publishing causes risks of quickly being outdated. However, rather than viewing this perpetual state of ‘catching up’ as a failure, I see it as a defining feature of studying contemporary digital media – one that demands flexibility, reflexivity, and willingness to engage with the unfinished and the ephemeral. Despite all the frustrations, working with something as dynamic, unpredictable, and fast-changing as TikTok has also been deeply engaging, stimulating, rewarding, and, quite simply, fun. The constant evolution of the platform ensures that the research never feels static – there is always something new to discover, interpret, and debate.

Chapter 6: Findings

In this chapter, I present and synthesize the findings of the project. The chapter is divided into two parts: empirical findings and methodological findings. As this is an article-based dissertation, my research articles naturally constitute a significant part of the overall scholarly contribution. Therefore, it is recommended to read the four articles, located in the second part of the dissertation (“The Research Articles”), before reading this chapter in order to fully understand the analyses.

The first part of this chapter focuses on the findings from the three empirical articles (Articles 2, 3, and 4), which together form the dissertation’s primary analytical component. Each article addresses different aspects of the research questions and specific analytical focal points that I have chosen to pursue in my engagement with the empirical data. Here, I bring together and compare the findings across the two different data collections. The second part of the chapter presents the methodological findings with a primary focus on the data donation study.

6.1. Empirical Findings

This section is structured around five analytical focal points that emerged across the individual studies: (1) Content & Digital Culture, (2) Everyday Use, (3) Motivations for Use, (4) TikTok as a Media Platform, and (5) Ambivalence in Experiences & Perceptions. Instead of following a chronological order of the individual articles, the chapter adopts a thematic structure that integrates insights from across the studies. In this way, the chapter emphasizes the cumulative and interrelated contributions of the different articles to each of the focal points.

6.1.1. *Content & Digital Culture*

The content analysis of TikTok videos collected through data donation from 24 young Danish users reveals that the content they are presented with on the platform is both highly diverse but also characterized by significant repetition. Through the mapping of 1,200 videos, seven overarching genres were identified:

1. *Daily life*: is characterized by the specific way of *documenting* life through a *vlog*-style video or a *story time* video. This genre consists of 339 videos from the sample and is thereby the largest genre.
2. *Performance*: is characterized by the high level of (self)-staging, where the creator performs in some sort of way, e.g., by dancing, lip syncing, or in some sort of comedy sketch. This genre consists of 307 videos from the sample.
3. *Self-expression*: covers a range of videos in which the creators express themselves in various ways, e.g., a *reaction* video where the creator reacts to something they are watching/eating/listening to/etc. This genre consists of 144 from the sample.
4. *Instructive*: mostly consist of different tutorial videos, e.g., food recipes or DIY (do-it-yourself), but also covers more educational videos where the creator explains a specific topic. This genre consists of 106 videos from the sample.
5. *External*: covers videos where the visual content, all of it or partly, originates from another source, e.g., television or a movie, and thereby has not been recorded – though often edited – by the creator themselves. The genre consists of 210 videos from the sample.
6. *Meta*: is characterized by videos that address TikTok itself, e.g., referring to the TikTok algorithm. This genre consists of 11 videos from the sample and is thereby the smallest genre.
7. *Advertising*: includes different kinds of advertising videos, e.g., sponsored videos and regular ads that appear between the UGC. This genre consists of 83 videos⁵ from the sample.

Each of these genres encompasses a range of subgenres, reflecting the wide variety of expression within the platform's digital creation culture. The close reading of selected video examples illustrates how the genres and subgenres differ from one another in terms of storytelling, structural elements, and aesthetic complexity.

In the interview study, as previously mentioned, the respondents were asked to do an exercise where they had to choose words, preselected by me, and potentially add their own words that best described the content they watched on TikTok (see section 5.4.3.). Here, it became evident that much of the content the respondents expressed they were watching on TikTok largely corresponded with

⁵ Regular ads are most likely a more prominent part of the participants' data than it appears in this analysis. Because the dataset consists of 1,200 unique videos, any recurring ads across the participants' data are only represented in the dataset once. Therefore, even if an ad was shown to all the participants several times, it will only 'count' as one video in this analysis.

the video sample and the genres identified in the content analysis. Of the preselected words, “Food” and “Film/series/tv” were both chosen by 17 respondents, “Music” (16), “News” (13), “Fashion” (10), “Inspiration” (9), “Lifestyle” (8), “Fan” (8), “Workout” (7), “Beauty” (7), “Politics” (7), “Sport” (6), and “Sustainability” (1). Additional words added by respondents included “Comedy” (3), “History” (2), “Animals” (2), “Spirituality” (1), “Gaming” (2), “Book recommendations” (1), and “LIVE” videos (1). The variety of content described by the respondents reinforces the diversity revealed in the video sample. Generally, there are very few clear tendencies when considering the respondents’ demographic data (see Article 3 for an overview of respondents’ demographics and chosen content). “Fashion,” “Beauty,” and “Fan” content are significantly more common among female respondents – only one male respondent selected “Fashion,” and one selected “Fan.” “Sport” was also chosen by more male respondents (4) than female respondents (2). Across age groups, there are no notable differences in the types of content chosen.

During the exercise, I also asked the respondents to provide examples of the different words (content) they had chosen. Many of their elaborations closely align with the identified genres. For instance, “Music” content was often described as videos where the creator would play music, which is part of the *performance* genre, “Food” content was described as recipe videos, which is part of the *instructive* genre, and “Film/series/tv” content was typically described as clips of a scene from a movie or series, which is part of the *external* genre. This overlap validates the content analysis, suggesting that the genres and their characteristics not only exist in the 1,200-video sample but are also commonly encountered by other young Danish users. The most significant difference between the two studies in terms of content categories is that news content, which I consider a fairly common category on this type of platform, was absent from the donated data sample but featured prominently in the interview respondents’ encountered content. There can be different reasons for this. For example, news content on TikTok may have become more widely circulated after the data donation study was conducted in 2022. It is also possible that respondents highlighted news content in the interviews because they perceive it as particularly meaningful or socially acceptable – even if it only represents a small share of the content they encounter.

In the content analysis, the analysis of *templatability* (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Leaver et al., 2020) – defined as the aesthetic similarity resulting from the interplay between vernacular norms, algorithmic promotion of those norms, and user attempts to ‘please the algorithm’ – uncovered a spectrum of fixedness across the different genres. Building on this concept, I identified three different levels of content templates in the sample:

- *Level 1 – singular trends and memes:* are highly rigid templates built around fixed elements like specific sounds or dance moves, which change rapidly and have short lifespans
- *Level 2 – content genres and subgenres:* consist of more flexible and adaptable templates that repeat certain structures and aesthetics, making them longer lasting than the singular trends and memes.
- *Level 3 – overarching characteristics:* capture the overall *templatability* of TikTok content, reflecting the core features that recur across videos in varying forms.

Some templates, such as singular memes with rigid formats, display strong structural constraints, while others, like the vlog, have evolved over many years (Burgess & Green, 2018, pp. 39ff.), demonstrating how digital templates are continually reshaped and stabilized through user practices on TikTok. This underscores how the content creation practices and, thereby, also the digital culture on TikTok operate within a continuum between innovation and standardization, where templates serve as flexible frameworks for creative participation.

Despite the diversity of content types, the content analysis also identified four recurring and defining characteristics that cut across the different genres and templates: (1) *the mundane*, (2) *the comedic tone*, (3) *the use of platform features*, and (4) *the significance of audio*. These characteristics are repeatedly embedded within the sampled videos and together express what can be described as the overall *templatability* (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Leaver et al., 2020) of TikTok content. Collectively, these elements constitute what I refer to as *TikTok-ness*, representing the shared digital culture expressed through the videos in the study. While the characteristics of mundanity and comedy are not unique to TikTok and have long been central to UGC, for instance, in YouTube vlogs or internet memes, the centrality of audio and platform features is more distinctly native to TikTok. These characteristics are deeply embedded in the platform's infrastructure and often play an essential role in shaping a video's structure, tone, and narrative. In this way, TikTok's design and affordances exert a form of platform agency, guiding user creativity and encouraging the incorporation of specific tools and sounds. The prevalence of these platform-driven features supports previous research suggesting that TikTok effectively *circumscribes creativity* (Abidin & Kaye, 2021) by nudging users toward particular modes of expression and participation. Taken together, the four elements of TikTok-ness – *the mundane*, *the comedic tone*, *the use of platform features*, and *the significance of audio* – capture the interplay between user agency and platform design that defines TikTok's content culture. A seemingly ordinary moment, when framed humorously, paired with trending audio, and accentuated by on-screen text, transforms into a multilayered and distinctly TikTok-esque form of expression. Yet,

because the platform, its users, and its cultural trends are in constant flux, these defining elements are themselves subject to change. New components may emerge while others diminish, reflecting the platform's inherently dynamic nature.

In summary, these findings highlight how TikTok's content and digital culture are defined by both creative diversity and structural repetition. The platform's genres and templates illustrate how user expression is simultaneously shaped by individual creativity and by the algorithmic, aesthetic, and infrastructural conditions of the platform itself. These findings establish a foundation for understanding how TikTok's content forms and cultural logics shape users' usage and experiences, which will be presented in the following sections.

6.1.2. *Everyday Use*

The young users' everyday TikTok habits were primarily investigated through the interview study. The analysis revealed that TikTok has become a deeply embedded part of the respondents' everyday routines, serving both as a source of entertainment and as a habitual element of their daily media practices. For many, the app functions as an easily accessible space for relaxation, distraction, and brief social connection throughout the day. No significant differences were found in the respondents' TikTok media practices across gender or age groups.

Half of the respondents joined TikTok in 2020 during the lockdowns out of a mix of boredom and curiosity, while the other half had been active since before, some dating back to the *Musically* era. Out of the 24 respondents, only two reported not using TikTok daily, underlining the app's strong presence in most participants' everyday lives. This is further supported by the results of the first post-it exercise (see section 5.4.3.), where all of the respondents placed TikTok over the midpoint (see screenshots in Appendix J). This indicates that losing access to the platform would, to some degree, be difficult for them, underscoring TikTok's central role in their media repertoires and showing that it is not perceived as 'just another platform' but as a key component of their daily media use.

The respondents' engagement with TikTok primarily consisted of passive consumption through scrolling and watching videos on the FYP, which several other studies also point to (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Langlais et al., 2024; Schellewald, 2022, 2023). The FYP feed was described as the focal point of their experience, while the *Following* page was rarely used. Most respondents regularly liked and saved videos but interacted less through comments, and only a few had created and uploaded their own content to the platform. Instead, their everyday use was defined by the act of

watching, scrolling, and occasionally sharing videos with friends through TikTok's private messaging function. These sharing practices served as a way of maintaining social bonds (Schellewald, 2024) and expressing shared interests, but did not extend into broader conversation. They like and comment on the content their friends share with them, but communication about everyday life or social plans typically occurs through other platforms such as Messenger or Snapchat, suggesting that respondents viewed TikTok primarily as a content-based platform rather than a communication tool.

For many respondents, TikTok had developed into a habitual and often automatic part of their daily rhythm (Schellewald, 2023). Several described opening the app unconsciously when picking up their phones, and many associated it with specific moments in their routines. The app was most commonly used in the morning, often as a way to wake up, and in the evening before going to sleep, functioning as both a start- and end-of-day ritual. In addition to these moments, TikTok was also used during short breaks throughout the day – on public transport, during smoking breaks, or as a brief pause between activities such as studying or working. These patterns illustrate how TikTok use is not confined to particular settings or times but is seamlessly interwoven with everyday transitions and idle moments.

6.1.3. Motivations for Use

Closely connected to their everyday use of TikTok, the respondents described a wide range of motivations for using the platform, reflecting how the platform fulfills different needs in everyday life. Similar to their everyday use of TikTok, no significant differences were found in the respondents' motivations for using the app across gender or age groups. Overall, their reasons for engaging with TikTok were related to entertainment, ease of use, inspiration, relaxation, and social connection. These motivations illustrate how TikTok functions as both a leisure activity and a way to cope with everyday stress, boredom, and mental overload, seamlessly integrated into their routines.

A dominant motivation expressed by nearly all respondents was the platform's entertainment value (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Firth & Marinelli, 2025; Jung et al., 2025; Martinez et al., 2023). TikTok was perceived as a fun and engaging space where users could quickly find content suited to their interests. Many highlighted the constant variation of videos (Lüders, 2024; Martinez et al., 2023) and the way the algorithm tailors the FYP to individual preferences (Lüders, 2024; Schellewald, 2023) as central to their enjoyment. This personalization created a sense of effortless discovery, where users could continuously encounter new and interesting material without having to

actively search for it. These findings align with the content analysis, which also highlighted both the wide variety of content and emphasized its entertainment value, both through broader characteristics, such as the *performance* genre and the recurring characteristic of *the comedic tone*, and through several video examples that included humorous elements (Article 2).

Ease of use was also described as a key factor motivating regular engagement. Respondents emphasized how convenient it is to open the app and immediately begin scrolling without needing to decide what to watch, in contrast to platforms such as YouTube or Netflix (Firth & Marinelli, 2025). TikTok's short-form video format and intuitive interface made it easy to use during even the briefest breaks, which contributed to its presence in idle moments throughout the day. For many, it became a natural way to pass the time when bored or in need of a quick distraction (Jung et al., 2025; Schellewald, 2023).

In addition to entertainment and convenience, TikTok also served as a source of inspiration. Respondents frequently encountered and saved videos related to hobbies and interests such as cooking, fashion, fitness, crafts, and film recommendations. These practices positioned TikTok as a tool for everyday creativity and practical exploration, where users could both consume and collect ideas relevant to their personal lives.

A further and widely shared motivation for using TikTok was the desire to relax, unwind, and escape for a bit (Martinez et al., 2023; B. Omar & Dequan, 2020; Schellewald, 2022, 2023). Despite the fast pace of the platform, respondents often associated TikTok with taking a mental break or 'switching off' after periods of focus or stress during their daily lives. Some participants also described using TikTok intentionally to manage concentration-related challenges, such as symptoms of ADHD or ADD, by engaging with calming or low-effort content that allowed them to rest their minds.

While TikTok was most often used alone, social motivations were also evident. Sharing videos with friends through the app's messaging function was a way to maintain social bonds and participate in shared cultural references (Schellewald, 2024). Checking TikTok for new messages or trending content formed part of a routine of staying socially connected and up to date. Some respondents expressed a fear of missing out – both on social interactions and on cultural moments circulating within their peer networks – which further reinforced their motivation to engage with the platform daily.

6.1.4. *TikTok as a Media Platform*

Respondents' accounts reveal that TikTok is understood and experienced in ways that go beyond simple classifications as a social media platform, which is how it is often referred to. While many users compare it to platforms such as Instagram, Facebook (Watch), Snapchat, Vine, and YouTube, they consistently describe TikTok as unique in its speed, personalization, and immersive qualities. Instagram Reels was frequently mentioned as the closest comparison, though respondents highlighted differences in content freshness and rapid trend circulation (Miltsov, 2022; Schellewald, 2021) as well as the algorithmic tailoring. Some respondents also emphasized TikTok's unfiltered and relatable character, distinguishing it from more curated content on other platforms, such as Instagram, which is often perceived as more 'glossy' (Boffone, 2022, p. 6; M. Kennedy, 2020). As I highlight in Article 3, these characteristics can also be understood in relation to the platform's rise to widespread visibility during the first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. At that time, much of the content was created by regular people – meaning people who were not (yet) earning money from content creation – stuck at home with very little to do, reflecting the circumstances of those watching from around the world. While such domestic self-representations are not unique to the TikTok platform, its reputation for relatability and lack of polish actively encourages the display of these ordinary spaces (Boffone, 2022, p. 6; Kennedy, 2020).

Several respondents framed TikTok in comparison to YouTube, particularly in relation to short-form content. While some use both platforms to consume similar content, TikTok was described as more suited to casual and spontaneous viewing, with the FYP providing a continuous stream of varied content that requires minimal planning or decision-making. This further underlines how TikTok fulfills entertainment and time-passing functions, while YouTube is often used for more specific information or content-seeking purposes (Jung et al., 2025). TikTok's short videos allow users to consume a larger volume of content in a shorter time, reinforcing its role as a convenient, easily accessible form of media consumption.

Respondents also connected TikTok to a televisual experience, often likening it to flow television due to its continuous, algorithmically driven stream of content. As previously mentioned, several recent studies have compared TikTok to flow television in various ways (Faltese et al., 2023; Firth & Marinelli, 2025; Kendall, 2021; Lin et al., 2023; Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2021). This co-shaped flow experience, a product of the complex relationship between users and technology, characterized by a rapid succession of short videos and trends, promotes immersion and sustained attention, while simultaneously giving users a sense of effortless engagement. Younger

respondents described the experience as the feeling of movement and something that ‘just keeps going’, while older respondents drew direct parallels to traditional flow television consumption. Across age groups, the experience of flow was further enhanced by short acts of engagement, such as liking, saving, or following, which were integrated seamlessly into the scrolling experience and did not disrupt the sense of continuous media consumption. As previously mentioned, content consisting of clips from movies, series, and television was prominent both in the content analysis and among the content watched by the respondents (see 6.1.1). The prominence of these forms of traditional televisual content on TikTok, also highlighted in other studies (e.g., Firth & Marinelli, 2025; Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2021), further underscores the parallels between TikTok and television.

The respondents’ experiences of flow on TikTok are also closely linked to agency, more specifically *hybrid agency* (see, e.g., Fink & Weyer, 2014; Hanson, 2009; Hepp, 2022), which emerges when they act in collaboration with the algorithm on TikTok. During the interviews, the respondents generally described themselves in passive terms, taking on a more receiving role, whereas they described the algorithm as *showing*, *posting*, and *sending*, indicating how it actively shaped their experience. They trusted the algorithm to curate content according to their preferences, adjusting automatically when they indicated disinterest in certain videos. This active-passive dynamic allowed users to feel both immersed and relaxed, often enabling them to ‘turn off their brain’ while engaging with content. The immersive experience was reinforced by short video lengths, continual content novelty, and prominent audio elements, which demanded attention and made multitasking difficult. As a result, TikTok was perceived as a platform that actively *pushes* content, while users do very little *pulling* and instead assume a more receptive, laid-back role.

6.1.5. Ambivalence in Experiences & Perceptions

The interview study revealed that the respondents’ experiences with and perceptions of TikTok are marked by profound ambivalence. They value TikTok as a source of relief, distraction, and inspiration, offering moments of ease and an accessible way to switch off. Yet these same qualities also generate stress, loss of control, and feelings of addiction, blurring the line between relaxation and dependency. TikTok was thus experienced within a spectrum of contradictory affects – relaxing yet stressful, enriching yet addictive, familiar yet unsettling – reflecting a *duality* (van der Wal et al., 2024; Weinstein, 2018) both across the group and within individuals.

Firstly, the second post-it exercise (see 5.4.3.) showed some complexities in how the respondents perceive TikTok. A substantial number chose positive words to describe TikTok, such as “Entertaining” (22), “Fun” (20), “Relaxing” (17), “Educational” (15), and “Social” (8). At the same time, a considerable number also chose more negatively infected words, including “Addicting” (18), “Unpleasant” (4), “Stressful” (3), and “Boring” (1). This distribution suggests a duality in how users experience the platform, a pattern that was further underscored by the subsequent findings in the analysis.

As highlighted earlier in this chapter, for many respondents, TikTok functions as a space for unwinding and mental disconnection. Their use of the platform was frequently linked to relaxation and stress relief, often describing it as a low-effort and ‘leaned back’ form of media consumption. The platform’s design, centred around algorithmic curation and continuous flow, facilitates what seems a form of cognitive relief, offering users an opportunity to disengage mentally without necessarily achieving calmness or stillness. For these respondents, relaxation on TikTok did not imply calmness but rather an immediate and absorbing escape from external stressors in daily life. Despite these relaxing qualities, participants also associated TikTok with stress and overstimulation. Two prominent forms of digital stress (Steele et al., 2020) – *fear or missing out* (FOMO) and *connection overload* – were evident. Several participants described feeling compelled to check TikTok regularly to remain updated with friends, trends, and cultural events. Others emphasized the platform’s overwhelming nature, contrasting it with what they perceived as the more ‘quiet’ or ‘calm’ environment of other platforms such as Instagram or YouTube. These accounts highlight how TikTok’s immersive and fast-paced content flow, while engaging, can simultaneously generate tension and fatigue. Ambivalence was particularly visible in the tension between relaxation and stress, often experienced within the same individuals. Several respondents expressed difficulty determining whether TikTok was ultimately “Relaxing” or “Stressful”. Their experiences revealed a pattern of rapid emotional transitions, shifting between soothing and distressing content within moments. Others described losing track of time while scrolling – experiencing both mental absorption and frustration at the platform’s time-consuming nature.

Most respondents expressed having experienced feelings of addiction relating to their TikTok usage, often linking it to the platform’s immersive design and continuous flow of algorithmically curated content. This sense of compulsion was frequently associated with curiosity, FOMO, and the app’s convenience as an easy way to fill brief moments of downtime. A number of respondents also reflected critically on their own usage patterns, acknowledging difficulties in controlling time spent on the app and describing periodic attempts at ‘detoxing’. Some expressed concern that routinely using TikTok potentially had negatively affected their attention span and ability to concentrate. Nonetheless, even

those expressing concern typically continued to use the platform, emphasizing how it had become such an integral part of their daily routines and a way to unwind. Some respondents also pointed to the interconnection between feelings of relaxation and addiction in their experiences with TikTok. While they viewed the platform as a source of valuable content, inspiration, and relaxation, these same qualities were also what fueled their sense of dependency. Collectively, these reflections underscore TikTok's dual role as both a source of enrichment and a trigger of compulsion, capturing the ambivalence at the core of users' engagement with the platform.

Respondents' relationship with TikTok's algorithm was another central dimension of ambivalence. Participants frequently conflated the platform itself with its recommendation system, indicating that TikTok was, for them, inseparable from its algorithm. Many praised the algorithm's personalization, describing it as exceptionally accurate and attuned to their interests compared to other platforms. This perceived precision fostered a sense of familiarity and even intimacy, with several respondents suggesting that TikTok seemed to 'know' them. However, this sense of intimacy also provoked discomfort. Some users described the algorithm as 'too accurate' or 'creepy', particularly when it appeared to respond to personal experiences or emotional states.

In sum, these different paradoxical experiences and perceptions encapsulate the ambivalence that runs throughout users' relationships with TikTok. The features that make the platform engaging – its personalization, flow, and accessibility – are also those that evoke stress, dependence, and unease. Thus, TikTok emerges as both a source of leisure and a site of tension, where pleasure, distraction, and discomfort coexist in continuous interplay.

6.2. Methodological Findings

The dissertation presents mobile data donation as an emerging method for collecting digital trace data within a qualitative framework. The methodological findings of the study highlight how this approach can generate valid, detailed, and ethically grounded insights into digital media use and content. By including participants directly in the collection process, researchers gain access to rich, authentic datasets that reflect actual user experiences. This user-centric and collaborative approach enhances transparency and trust between researcher and participant, while also allowing participants to retain a greater degree of ownership over their data. The method thereby combines the empirical rigor of trace data with the reflexivity and contextual sensitivity characteristic of qualitative inquiry.

As I detail in Article 1, conducting the data donation study revealed various practicalities and challenges that may be of interest to others considering this method. One of these was preparatory testing, which proved essential in this study for understanding the structure and limitations of the data, as well as ensuring that participants could provide their data efficiently and securely. Recruitment also emerged as a notable difficulty, which I believe was partly due to privacy concerns, particularly given the context of TikTok, and unfamiliarity with the method, underlining the importance of clear communication, detailed guidance, and building participant trust. The study also found that continuous collaboration between the researcher and participants is crucial for overcoming technical issues and ensuring completion of donations, highlighting data donation as a process of co-production rather than passive data extraction. Additionally, I also want to highlight the need for careful management of large and complex datasets in data donation, particularly when working with Data Download Packages (DDPs) from digital platforms. While these datasets offer access to detailed data about both usage and content, they also present analytical and ethical challenges. Sampling is necessary to make the data manageable in qualitative analysis, and researchers must adhere to the principle of data minimization by collecting only what is essential. At the same time, participants' ability to review or withhold parts of their data enhances the ethical integrity of the method. However, it is important to underscore that it is highly unrealistic for participants to possess a comprehensive overview of their data, given the complexity and size of DDPs.

Overall, the methodological findings demonstrate that data donation holds considerable promise as a qualitative research tool. It provides more valid and detailed data than self-reports, avoids the reactivity biases of tracking methods, and offers participants an active and empowered role in the research process. However, the method also demands significant time, communication, and technical adaptability from researchers and remains dependent on the data structures and policies of digital platforms. Taken together, these findings suggest that data donation represents a promising, though still evolving, methodological framework for conducting responsible, participant-centered research in an increasingly datafied media environment.

Combining data donation with qualitative interviews offers a particularly valuable methodological approach for studying user practices on digital platforms such as TikTok. This combination enables a dual perspective: the data donation reveals users' actual digital traces, while the interviews foreground how they interpret and make sense of their experiences. By aligning what users *do* on the platform with how they *express* and *understand* their practices, this approach captures both behavioural and interpretive dimensions of digital media use.

Chapter 7: Discussion

This chapter brings together the key findings of my project and situates them within the broader theoretical and empirical landscape surrounding TikTok, algorithmic media, and contemporary digital culture. The purpose of this discussion is not only to synthesize the empirical results but also to interpret what they reveal about TikTok's role in everyday life and its wider cultural and societal implications. While the previous chapter focused on presenting and connecting the empirical findings in relation to how users use, experience, and make sense of TikTok, this chapter takes these findings a step further by discussing their broader meaning and implications. In particular, it brings together and discusses insights that could not be fully developed within the individual articles, providing a space to integrate and expand on points that cut across them. By connecting the users' perspectives with existing scholarly debates, this chapter seeks to deepen our understanding of how TikTok operates as both a technological system and a social environment.

7.1. What is TikTok (to its Users)?

This first part of the discussion synthesizes my empirical findings, presented in the previous chapter, and examines what they reveal about what TikTok *is* – particularly in relation to its users' everyday lives and how they make sense of it as a media platform.

The findings collectively illustrate that TikTok occupies a deeply embedded and multifaceted role in users' everyday lives. TikTok has become an integral part of their daily routines, woven into ordinary moments such as waking up, commuting, taking breaks, or winding down before sleep. It operates as an easily accessible source of entertainment, inspiration, relaxation, and distraction, providing users with brief moments of relief and escape from daily stressors. At the same time, it serves as a form of social connection, where users often share content privately with friends, using TikTok as a site of shared humor, interests, references, and cultural participation.

Users' understanding of TikTok positions it not primarily as a social medium but as a distinct kind of media environment – a personalized, algorithmically driven entertainment platform. They compare it to YouTube, Instagram Reels, and traditional television, yet emphasize that its unique qualities – especially, rapidness, personalization, and immersive flow of content – distinguish it from other forms of media. The experience of scrolling on the FYP and 'watching TikTok' resembles a

televisual flow experience (Firth & Marinelli, 2025; Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025), where the algorithm continuously delivers content requiring little effort or decision-making from the user. Moreover, the content is curated to align with users' preferences and interests and often incorporates appealing elements such as entertainment, comedy, and recognizable references, thereby enhancing – and further sustaining – the flow experience. This sense of easy engagement produces a state of relaxed absorption, where users describe themselves as passive receivers and the algorithm as the active agent that delivers content to them. In this relationship, a form of hybrid agency emerges, where human and algorithmic actions intertwine to shape the media experience (Hepp, 2022).

The algorithm acts not only based on users' preferences and engagement patterns but is also governed by monetization models that push sponsored content to generate revenue for the platform (Abidin & Kaye, 2021). Moreover, it values and promotes norms created by elite users (Leaver et al., 2020), further shaping the composition of the FYP. This raises the question of how much agency can truly be attributed to users if their actions on the platform are not only interpreted but also partly constrained by an algorithmic system driven by commercial interests. Hence, the statement on TikTok's website, "For you, by you" (TikTok Newsroom, n.d.), might be somewhat of an overstatement. The findings on TikTok-ness and the recurring aesthetic and structural patterns across content, conceptualized through templatability (Leaver et al., 2020; Abidin & Kaye, 2021), also reflect this balance – or imbalance – between user agency, engagement, and creativity on one hand, and algorithmic constraint on the other. This illustrates how digital expression and culture on the platform are simultaneously open and guided. Users participate in an evolving digital vernacular that feels spontaneous and authentic while being subtly standardized through TikTok's design and recommendation systems.

The findings also reveal a deep ambivalence in how users experience and perceive TikTok. The platform is simultaneously experienced as relaxing and stressful, enriching and addictive. Many respondents describe it as a space for mental disconnection, yet also as generating overstimulation, time loss, and dependency. Users also expressed a conflicted relationship with TikTok's algorithm, appreciating its accuracy and sense of personal relevance while finding it uncomfortably invasive or 'too knowing'. This tension captures the dual nature of TikTok as both a comforting space but also a source of unease.

Taken together, the findings depict TikTok as a platform of paradox – it integrates creativity and standardization, activity and passivity, agency and automation, pleasure and compulsion. It is thus experienced and perceived as a complex and contradictory media platform, one that users value as part of their everyday lives while also regarding it critically. Through this synthesis, TikTok becomes representative of broader transformation in, especially, digital culture, where media use is marked by

ambivalent feelings and reflexive awareness, even as media remain a fully embedded and indispensable part of contemporary life.

I have devoted much of this dissertation, including the current section, to comparing and discussing the broader tendencies in users' experiences and perceptions of TikTok. However, when studying TikTok, it is important to remain attentive to the platform's strong individualization aspect, which the following section will explore further.

7.2. The For You Page & Hyper-Fragmentation

What I will argue here may appear somewhat contradictory to my above discussion of user agency – or more precisely, the lack thereof. I want to emphasize that, even if users' agency is more limited than it might seem, they still encounter a feed tailored to their interests, as this is, ultimately, a fundamental aspect of TikTok's business strategy – the For *You* Page is in fact curated to fit *you*. This personalization is a key mechanism through which the platform encourages continued engagement. By tailoring content closely to individual users' preferences, TikTok maximizes the time users spend on the app, which in turn increases the opportunities for monetization through advertising and sponsored content. The more a user engages with the feed, the more data the platform collects about their interests, habits, and patterns. This data allows TikTok to refine its recommendation algorithms further, creating a feedback loop that enhances both user retention and ad targeting efficiency. In this sense, users are guided subtly yet consistently toward content that reinforces their interests and habits, which can create a sense of agency even within highly structured recommendation systems. The majority of the respondents in the interviews also expressed experiencing their FYP as curated specifically for them, a finding that has also been supported by other studies (see, e.g., Lüders, 2024; Schellewald, 2023). This section of the discussion will examine the concept of *audience fragmentation* (Napoli, 2011) in relation to TikTok and current developments in the media landscape.

Audience fragmentation is a term used to describe how media audiences have continually been divided into increasingly smaller groups (Napoli, 2003; 2011). This development has occurred because of the dramatic expansion in media types, platforms, and devices (Sullivan, 2013, p. 217) – an occurrence that has only intensified over the years. Today, audiences are typically 'spread out' across various digital platforms, streaming services, news apps, and handheld devices, among others. Of particular relevance here, *intramedia fragmentation* refers to "the expansion of a medium's ability to deliver multiple content options" (Napoli, 2003, p. 136) and how audiences are also fragmented

within the individual medium. In the context of more traditional media, television and radio companies have long applied this principle by developing programming strategies designed to reach different audience niches through the same channel (Roncallo-Dow & Arango-Forero, 2017). Intramedia fragmentation has also been present on digital platforms for quite some time, where one's feed has been shaped by who one follows or subscribes to, thus, to some extent, creating a separation between users who do not follow or subscribe to the same profiles.

However, when recommendation algorithms, with TikTok's being the prime example, are introduced into the mix, users begin to experience an individually curated feed based on their actions and engagement rather than their following lists. I argue that this development calls for considering a new form of *hyper-fragmentation*. On TikTok, users with the same demographics (age, gender, location, etc.) would still likely experience very different FYPs, because the curation is driven primarily by individual interests. Hypothetically, even if you and another user share identical demographics, follow exactly the same profiles, and have the same interests, the algorithmic tailoring of your respective FYPs would still differ substantially, depending on your individual behaviors, such as which specific videos you like (and not like) and exactly how long you linger on a video before scrolling. Based on these algorithmic logics, fragmentation can potentially occur even among users who would otherwise be clustered together based on demographics, interests, follows/subscriptions or other similarities. As previously mentioned, the respondents highlighted the algorithmic personalization as one of the key appeals of TikTok, thus underscoring their experience of the FYP as being genuinely tailored 'for you'. Several respondents in the interview study described having friends whose FYPs they assumed were similar to their own – often based on the content they shared with each other through private messages – but also friends whose feeds they perceived as significantly different, typically due to divergent hobbies and interests. This suggests that TikTok's recommender system not only personalizes content on an individual level but also reinforces distinctions between users based on their behavioral patterns and preferences. As a result, even among socially connected individuals, the platform can produce highly differentiated media environments, indicating that the logics of the algorithm have the potential to intensify audience fragmentation.

Gerbaudo (2024) refers to a current development in the media landscape as the "TikTokification" of social media, describing how other digital platforms have adopted similar features, such as algorithmic content curation and feeds that copy TikTok's FYP (p. 2). The most well-known example is Instagram's *Reels*, but, for instance, Facebook's *Watch* and YouTube's *Shorts* have also mimicked features from TikTok. Consequently, if the "TikTokification" continues, this idea of hyper-fragmentation may soon become a more general characteristic of digital platforms. Sullivan (2013) emphasizes

that audience fragmentation “is threatening to make traditional forms of audience measurement obsolete”, as it becomes increasingly difficult and costly to capture a representative snapshot of audiences (p. 217). As I mentioned earlier in relation to the emergence of recommendation algorithms (see 4.1.3.) and their impact on reception research, the resulting fragmentation further underscores the challenges facing the future of audience studies, making it even harder to identify patterns and generalize across groups.

This account of fragmentation and individualization on TikTok may make it seem as though I argue there is no foundation for creating publics or communities on the platform, which is not the case. As I have also highlighted throughout this dissertation, there are strong elements of repetition in the content users encounter on TikTok. For instance, in Article 2, I discuss four recurring characteristics of TikTok content: the mundane, the comedic tone, the use of platform features, and the significance of audio. Moreover, there are distinct ways of communicating on TikTok, which respondents referred to as a particular ‘TikTok language’, heavily influenced by memes, irony, and references to internet culture. Therefore, I also align with the current debate on how *publics* are transforming, rather than disappearing, on newer digital media platforms – a discussion I turn to in the following, and final, section of this chapter.

7.3. From Networked Publics to Clustered Publics

The rise of TikTok and the technological logics behind it have led to a renewed debate about publics on digital platforms (Abidin, 2021a; Gerbaudo, 2024; Hautea et al., 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Gerbaudo (2024) differentiates between “the first generation of social media” and “the second generation of social media,” with TikTok considered the prototype of the latter (p. 2). The first generation includes platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, where the social aspect primarily alludes to networking based on one’s personal connections with other users (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The concept of *networked publics* (boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2014) has been used to describe the types of digital communities that these logics produce. On these platforms, the content users encounter is largely determined by their contacts, those they are friends with (on the platform), follow, or subscribe to, meaning users explicitly select their social networks and, as a result, influence directly what appears in their feeds (Arnaboldi et al., 2017). The communication logic of networked publics is people-centric, as users can browse and edit their lists of contacts and thereby also remain aware of the social structures underlying their online experience (Gerbaudo, 2024).

However, the logics of TikTok have led to a different type of online public – namely, *clustered publics* (ibid.). The most significant difference between networked and clustered publics is that the social element is no longer based on interpersonal connections but on shared interests. Clustered publics are groups of users who gather around content deemed of interest by recommender systems such as the TikTok algorithm (ibid.). As explained earlier (see Section 3.1.1), recommender systems identify similarities among users based on their responses to the content they are exposed to, using complex statistical calculations. Thus, the information used to recommend content does not originate from users’ chosen contacts, but instead from interest clusters based on similarity in interests between users (Aggarwal, 2016). For instance, users who engage heavily with videos about cooking, music, or fashion will be clustered accordingly. Of course, users across platforms have long ‘clustered’ around interests, for example, by engaging in specific fan cultures, but the significant development here is that clustering is now controlled by the algorithm and how it interprets users’ behavioral patterns.

In line with this, as TikTok is known for constantly producing new memes and trends, it is interesting to consider how these algorithmic logics shape how content circulates among users. In a recent *New York Times* article titled “Is ‘Going Viral’ Dead?”, reporter Madison Malone Kircher (2025) reflects on how original content shared by people from all over the world “made the internet a fun place to be. It’s more complicated now”. With the rise of algorithmically driven platforms, where each user’s feed is individually tailored, viral moments experienced by what feels like the entire internet are becoming less common. As Kircher (2025) writes, “no one sees the same version of the internet” and, consequently, these ‘universal’ shared cultural reference points no longer exist in the same way. This shift marks a move from a more collective, participatory internet culture toward a more individualized experience, where connection and shared understanding are increasingly filtered through the lens of personalization. Perhaps, then, virality today should, to some extent, be understood as being more *localized* – that is, ‘going viral’ within specific, delimited online communities or publics. On the other hand, certain individuals, such as pop star Taylor Swift or President Donald Trump, or events, such as Coldplay’s ‘kiss cam’ incident in Boston accidentally revealing an affair (Omar, 2025), break this logic of fragmentation and achieve visibility across multiple communities. In this way, there remains immense – and perhaps even greater than before – power in the ability to transcend these boundaries and ‘go viral’ in a more traditional, widespread sense.

Gerbaudo (2024) highlights “the danger of growing fragmentation produced by interest clustering” (p. 12) as one of the most significant ways in which TikTok has transformed social media publics and their broader implications. Clustering around interests, as facilitated by recommender systems, tends to favor niche groups. On TikTok, these groups manifest in subcommunities such as

BookTok, WitchTok, and JazzTok (Kaye et al., 2022b, pp. 91ff.), each organized around specific user interests. This structuring of communities can lead to *silosociality* (Abidin, 2021b, p. 4) – that is, siloed communities – to which users are automatically assigned through algorithmic recommendation rather than proactive choice or subscription as would be the case on other platforms. While users have long formed clusters on digital platforms, these were typically based on active decisions, such as following specific creators or participating in particular digital communities. The significant difference in TikTok’s case is that clustering now occurs based on an algorithm’s interpretation of users’ behavior rather than their explicit choices. This again connects to the concept of *hybrid agency* (Hepp, 2022) and the question of how much control users truly have over their platform experience. Gerbaudo (2024) warns that a potential risk of this increasing fragmentation and siloing of the public sphere is a further fueling of political polarization, making it even more difficult for people to find common ground.

This discussion of fragmented publics and algorithmic clustering inevitably connects to the longstanding debate about *filter bubbles* (Pariser, 2011) and *echo chambers*, and whether they truly exist. Bruns (see, e.g., 2019; 2021), among others (e.g., Dubois & Blank, 2018), has dismissed the idea of impermeable filter bubbles and echo chambers multiple times. In the context of TikTok and its FYP, (Kaye et al., 2022b) highlight that it is “effectively impossible” for the recommender system to completely restrict what content users are presented with, due to (1) the “black box” nature of the algorithm and how it is unknown exactly how it decides what content to show, and (2) the “randomness of virality,” meaning that a ‘random’ video can suddenly reach a wide, mixed audience – including people who do not share the same views or interests (p. 114). Additionally, even if users only consumed content through their Following page – which exclusively shows content from the profiles they follow – they would most likely still encounter other types of content via TikTok’s socially creative features, such as “Stitch” and “Duet”, as material from profiles they do not follow would be included there (ibid.). Based on this, it can be argued that TikTok’s design and algorithm make complete isolation from differing viewpoints virtually impossible. Even if users gravitate toward familiar content, they remain part of a broader, interconnected environment where diverse voices and ideas circulate. This aligns with how respondents in the interview study noted that they sometimes encountered content on their FYP that they were confused about, as it did not align with what they usually saw or with their interests.

I agree that users cannot be fully detached from TikTok. However, following Gerbaudo (2024), I believe there might still be a need to revive the debate on filter bubbles and echo chambers. Gerbaudo (2024) argues that we are moving toward almost entirely algorithmically curated feeds,

which risks intensifying the fragmentation of platforms, as I also argued earlier, more significantly than when the filter bubble and echo chamber theses were first proposed. As noted earlier, other platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have begun to adopt recommendation systems similar to TikTok's FYP, and it may only be a matter of time before other media, such as streaming services and news apps, follow suit to adhere to, especially, young audiences. If this development continues, we may increasingly encounter content tailored to our interests, including, e.g., our political views, across the majority of media we use daily. Consequently, it may become ever more difficult to avoid or step outside one's clustered and siloed communities, potentially exacerbating the polarization we have already observed in recent years.

I do not subscribe to the idea of fully impermeable filter bubbles or echo chambers on digital platforms. However, I do believe it is crucial to consider seriously how contemporary algorithmic systems affect not only what users *do* experience, which much of this dissertation has focused on, but also what they *do not* experience in their feeds – and how this absence may contribute to further separation between us.

7.4. Concluding Reflections

This chapter illustrates that TikTok is not merely a platform for entertainment or social interaction but a paradigmatic case through which to understand vital algorithmic developments in digital media culture. As the discussion has shown, TikTok exemplifies a media environment characterized by deep personalization, hybrid forms of agency, and an ambivalent interplay between creativity, control, and commercialization. Users experience TikTok as both intimate and impersonal – a space that feels uniquely 'for you', yet one that operates through opaque systems of data extraction and algorithmic governance.

This duality runs through the broader transformations discussed here – the individualized online experience, hyper-fragmented audiences, and the rise of clustered publics. Together, these dynamics reveal how sociality on contemporary digital platforms is increasingly mediated by algorithmic systems that both connect and divide. While users encounter a degree of diversity through the platform's unpredictable circulation of content, the very mechanisms that personalize the experience also risk narrowing the horizons of what is seen, known, and collectively shared.

In this sense, TikTok can be viewed as both a symptom and a driver of a wider cultural and technological shift in the sphere of digital media – one in which the boundaries between, especially,

agency and automation and community and separation are being continuously renegotiated. As algorithmic curation becomes a defining feature not only of TikTok but more broadly of the media landscape, these questions extend beyond a single platform. Understanding TikTok, therefore, is not only about understanding a popular app but about grasping the evolving conditions under which digital publics are formed, fragmented, and sustained in the algorithmic age.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

In this final chapter of my dissertation, I present the overall conclusions of the project's findings. First, I address each of the three sub-questions of the dissertation individually. Second, I provide a final conclusion in response to the main research question. Finally, I discuss the limitations of the project and suggest directions for future research that could build on my work.

8.1. The Three Sub-questions

In this section, I summarize the findings of the dissertation in response to each of the three sub-questions, which respectively focus on: (1) the content and digital culture of TikTok, (2) the everyday use and motivations for using TikTok, and (3) the experiences and perceptions of TikTok.

1. What characterizes the content and digital culture encountered by young Danes on TikTok?

TikTok's content and digital culture among young Danish users are characterized by a tension between creative diversity and structural repetition. The content analysis of 1,200 videos revealed seven overarching genres – *daily life*, *performance*, *self-expression*, *instructive*, *external*, *meta*, and *advertising* – that together illustrate the breadth of UGC on the platform. Beneath this diversity lies a recognizable set of recurring forms and aesthetics that reflect how TikTok's infrastructure and algorithm logic shape what creativity and content look like on the platform. Drawing on the concept of *templatability* (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Leaver et al., 2020), the analysis identified three levels of content templates, from rapidly evolving trends and memes to more stable genre conventions and overarching characteristics. These templates exemplify how user practices both respond to and reproduce platform norms, revealing a dynamic interplay between user agency and algorithmic influence. Across genres and templates, four recurring features emerged as defining elements of what can be described as *TikTok-ness*: *the mundane*, *the comedic tone*, *the use of platform features*, and *the significance of audio*. Taken together, these elements encapsulate TikTok's distinct cultural logic, with their interplay characterizing the content shared on the platform. While some of these characteristics echo earlier UGC cultures, such as those on YouTube, the prominence of audio and in-app features, which are

considered more native to TikTok, highlights the platform's specific infrastructural agency in shaping user expression.

In sum, these insights show that TikTok's content culture reflects a continuum between innovation and standardization, defining TikTok as a platform of both freedom and regulation in digital culture. Its content forms, while diverse, are embedded in a broader media logic that personalizes experience, structures participation, and subtly governs cultural production. Thus, understanding TikTok's content culture also means understanding the changing nature of contemporary digital media itself – how creativity, connection, and digital culture are being continually reshaped within algorithmically curated spaces.

2. How and why do young Danes use TikTok in their everyday lives?

Young Danes use TikTok as an integral part of their everyday lives, blending entertainment, social connection, and habitual media practices into their daily routines. The platform is deeply embedded in their day-to-day rhythm, with most respondents using it multiple times a day – particularly in the morning, during short breaks, and in the evening – as a source of, especially, relaxation and distraction. TikTok is a significant part of their media repertoire, occupying a central position as a habitual activity intertwined with everyday transitions and idle moments. Their use is largely characterized by more passive engagement – scrolling through the FYP, liking and saving content, and occasionally sharing content with friends. Active content creation is rare, and communication about everyday life generally occurs on other platforms. This indicates that TikTok primarily serves as a content-driven platform rather than a tool for direct social communication.

The motivations behind young Danes' TikTok usage are closely tied to their patterns of everyday use. Entertainment, convenience, inspiration, relaxation, and social connection all drive engagement. The app's personalized algorithm, short-form format, and intuitive interface facilitate effortless discovery and quick consumption of content, making it ideal for brief, routine breaks. TikTok also provides a space for managing stress, boredom, or concentration challenges, highlighting its role as a tool for both leisure and mental respite. Social motivations, such as sharing videos with friends and staying up to date with cultural trends, reinforce daily engagement and contribute to FOMO, further embedding the platform into everyday life.

Overall, young Danes' use of TikTok is shaped by its ability to combine entertainment, inspiration, and social connection in a highly accessible, habitual, and personally meaningful way, making it a central component of their digital and everyday experiences.

3. How do young Danes experience and perceive TikTok as a media platform?

Young Danes experience and perceive TikTok as a distinctive and ambivalent media platform that goes beyond conventional media categorizations. While often compared to platforms like Instagram and YouTube, TikTok is consistently described as unique in its speed, immersive qualities, and algorithmic personalization. Users highlight the platform's continuous *flow* of short-form content, which provides effortless engagement and fosters a sense of cognitive relief. This flow experience allows users to consume content more passively while feeling both absorbed and relaxed, often enabling them to temporarily disengage from external stressors. The *hybrid agency* (Hepp, 2022) between user and algorithm, where the algorithm actively curates content while the user assumes a receptive role, is central to this experience, enhancing the sense of immersion. Users do not necessarily view this reduction of control negatively; instead, they appreciate not having to decide what to watch and simply letting the algorithm do the work. This preference can be interpreted as connected to a form of media-related decision fatigue, emerging in a media landscape defined by constant choice, where audiences can select between countless options at any given moment. TikTok's algorithmic flow offers a reprieve from 'the burden' of continuous decision-making that characterizes much contemporary media use.

At the same time, users' perceptions of TikTok are marked by a deep ambivalence. While the platform offers entertainment, inspiration, and moments of relaxation, it simultaneously generates stress, overstimulation, and feelings of addiction. The algorithm, praised for its accuracy and personalization, is simultaneously experienced as intrusive when it seems too attuned to personal interests or emotional states. TikTok's immersive and accessible design, which underpins its appeal, also underlies its capacity to provoke tension, dependency, and time mismanagement.

Overall, young Danes perceive TikTok as a highly engaging yet paradoxical media platform. Its distinctive combination of personalization, continuous flow, and short-form content makes it simultaneously a source of pleasure, distraction, and creative inspiration, and a site of stress, compulsion, and ambivalent experience. This duality defines their relationship with the platform, highlighting how TikTok is both deeply integrated into everyday media practices and a space of ongoing negotiation between enjoyment and unease.

8.2. Final Conclusion

This section provides a final conclusion in response to the overall research question of the dissertation:

How is TikTok embedded in young Danes' everyday lives, and how do they make sense of the platform as part of their media practices?

TikTok is deeply embedded in the everyday lives of young Danes, functioning as a habitual, highly personalized, and culturally significant part of their media practices. It is interwoven into ordinary daily routines – waking up, commuting, taking short breaks, or winding down before sleep – providing moments of entertainment, relaxation, inspiration, and social connection. For most respondents, the platform is not simply another social media app but a distinct media environment, experienced as immersive, algorithmically curated, and tailored to individual interests. Its design enables effortless scrolling and receiving viewer practices, where users feel both absorbed and relaxed, yet remain subtly guided by the platform's recommendation algorithm. This relationship exemplifies a form of hybrid agency, in which human actions and algorithmic governance intersect to shape the media experience.

The content users encounter on TikTok reflects a balance between creative diversity and structural repetition, characterized by recurring genres, templates, and platform-specific features such as the centrality of audio and comedic tone. Users recognize and engage with this *TikTok-ness*, participating in a dynamic digital culture that is simultaneously innovative and standardized. While they enjoy the ease, entertainment, and inspiration TikTok offers, their experiences are also marked by deep ambivalence. The features that make the platform engaging – personalization, flow, and accessibility – also evoke feelings of stress, dependence, and unease. Users often express both trust in and discomfort with the algorithm's predictive capacity, illustrating the tension between agency and automation that defines contemporary digital media use. Therefore, they also perceive TikTok as a highly paradoxical element of their everyday media practices.

On the platform, users are grouped algorithmically in *clustered publics* (Gerbaudo, 2024) around shared interests rather than personal connections, enabling engagement within subcommunities while also contributing to *hyper-fragmentation*. This structure reconfigures how young Danes experience collective culture, participation, and shared trends in a highly individualized and algorithmically mediated environment. Furthermore, these patterns underscore a broader transformation in the media landscape, in which the role of content curation has shifted from human-based to algorithmically driven. TikTok's design embodies this shift, reducing the cognitive burdens of choice and

creating immersive flow experiences, which align with young users' desire for immediacy, ease, and minimal decision-making. In this sense, the platform exemplifies a cultural moment in which the 'programmer' is often the recommendation algorithm itself, while users negotiate meaning, pleasure, and social connection within this mediated environment.

In sum, TikTok is not only a central component of young Danes' media repertoires but also a lens through which broader shifts in digital culture can be understood. Young Danes make sense of TikTok as both a space for personal enjoyment and cultural participation, navigating its pleasures and pressures while reflecting on its influence on their routines, attention, and social connections. TikTok, therefore, exemplifies the complex interplay between user agency, algorithmic governance, and ambivalent experiences that increasingly characterize media practices in the algorithmic age.

8.3. Limitations & Future Research

I have already reflected on some of the limitations of this project, specifically in the methodology chapter (Chapter 5), for instance, the challenge of not being able to fully 'catch up' with TikTok as a research object. The first part of this section will address additional limitations that I have not yet disclosed.

In this study, TikTok has been examined from a user-centric perspective through a predominantly qualitative approach, specifically by employing mobile data donation and semi-structured interviews. This qualitative framework has facilitated an in-depth exploration of numerous relevant aspects and enabled the project to build upon existing research within the field. However, this methodological choice has simultaneously prevented me from studying other aspects of the phenomenon. Incorporating a significant quantitative component and thereby adopting a mixed-methods design could have introduced a large-scale dimension, thereby increasing the generalizability of the findings. For instance, it would have been valuable to quantify the data donation study and to base the content analysis on a substantially larger dataset, which would have allowed for a more robust generalization of the results.

Conversely, at the other end of the methodological spectrum, the project could have been rendered even more deeply qualitative through the inclusion of a more ethnographic approach. This would have provided closer access to TikTok users' lived experiences and situated practices, thereby developing a stronger closeness to the users. Furthermore, following a single participant group throughout the entire research process – rather than two, as justified earlier (see 5.4.1.) – could have enhanced the internal coherence of the study and further deepened this closeness. Similarly, rather

than focusing on a broad age group (15–29 years), a more narrowly defined age group would most likely have allowed for deeper insights related to that particular age range. As discussed earlier (see section 3.2.1.), the decision to include a broad age span was motivated by my wish to compare similarities and differences between the, at the time, ‘newer’ relatively older users and the younger users who had already been on the platform for a long time. The analyses have revealed both similarities and differences within this broader age group, which have undoubtedly generated valuable insights. Nevertheless, a narrower age focus might have enabled a more profound and detailed understanding of age-related patterns and experiences on the platform.

Regarding future research, there are several aspects that I have not had the opportunity or time to explore within the scope of this project, and I will highlight some here. Methodologically, I encourage other scholars to further investigate the use of mobile data donation in qualitative studies and to explore the method’s potential in greater depth than has been possible here. I am convinced that this method can be developed further from a qualitative perspective and integrated more broadly into research practices, not only within media and communication studies but also across other disciplines concerned with digital media.

An empirical dimension that has only been briefly touched upon in this project relates to the broader discourse surrounding TikTok, and digital media platforms more generally – namely, that of *media panics* (Drotner, 1999). These debates have primarily centered on children and teenagers but have increasingly extended to discussions about older users’ digital media practices, especially in this current algorithmic age. In this regard, I encourage future research to examine more specifically how the social and cultural discourses surrounding TikTok influence users, both younger and older, particularly in relation to feelings of shame. Shame has been an underlying theme throughout this project, but it is not something I have been able to fully grasp through the data I have collected and analyzed. Such an investigation could usefully build on this project’s focus on users’ ambivalent feelings towards TikTok and more directly explore how these emotional responses may be shaped by societal narratives about the platform.

Another avenue, closely related to this project, could involve examining TikTok and its users through the lens of affect theory. Such an approach could offer a more nuanced understanding of how users experience, negotiate, and respond to algorithmically curated content, extending the dimensions emphasized in this project. By focusing on the dynamics of affect, research might reveal patterns of engagement and social connectedness that provide new insights into phenomena such as algorithmic personalization and audience fragmentation. I hope that future research will take up this

perspective, building on the foundation laid here to further illuminate the emotional and experiential dimensions of TikTok use.

Concerning how TikTok reflects and shapes broader changes in digital media – where the boundaries between user control and automated systems, as well as connection and separation, are constantly shifting – these developments raise questions that extend beyond the platform itself. Whether they should be considered a cause for concern remains an open question. While this project does not directly assess potential risks or harms, other studies might explore how TikTok’s algorithmic personalization affects, for example, knowledge exposure or social cohesion in digital publics. Future research could examine whether there are long-term consequences of highly fragmented and algorithmically curated communities, providing empirical insight into the social and cultural implications that fall beyond the scope of this project.

In relation to the broader field of media reception research and my earlier discussion titled “*Towards Media Reception Research 3.0?*” (4.1.3.), I wish to encourage other reception scholars to explore the implications of the growing integration of generative AI within users’ everyday media practices. Given my lack of expertise in this area, I have deliberately chosen not to include it in my earlier discussion. I regard one of the key challenges for contemporary media reception research to be the increasing presence of AI-generated content within users’ feeds. This development raises crucial questions about how audiences distinguish – or fail to distinguish – between AI-generated and human-generated content, and how this affects their experiences of digital media and processes of sense-making. Additionally, just as users place trust in algorithms to curate their content feeds, many now also rely on generative AI tools, e.g., ChatGPT, to provide advice or information. I argue that this ‘lean back and enjoy’ orientation, previously described in relation to algorithmically curated feeds, reflects a broader cultural shift towards a more passive engagement with media technologies. Consequently, reception research must pay close attention to how audiences interact with AI, both as a content source and as a mediating technology, if we are to understand its implications for sense-making, interpretation, and engagement in the digital media environment.

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PART 2

The Research Articles

Article 1:

Exploring the Qualitative Potential of Mobile Data Donation in Studies of Digital Trace Data

Under review at *Qualitative Research*

Exploring the Qualitative Potential of Mobile Data Donation in Studies of Digital Trace Data

Abstract

This article explores mobile data donation (MDD) as a user-centric method for studying digital media usage and content, highlighting its qualitative potential as well as its methodological and ethical advantages. MDD involves participants actively requesting, downloading, and donating their own digital trace data to the researcher. Using a case study of 24 Danish TikTok users aged 15–29, the article illustrates the full workflow of MDD, from recruitment and guidance to data request, donation, and sampling. It demonstrates that donated Data Download Packages (DDPs) provide rich, detailed, and diverse data, enabling nuanced qualitative analyses of content and digital practices. The method fosters participant collaboration, offering a flexible, ethically robust, and qualitatively powerful alternative to conventional platform-centric or self-report approaches. The insights presented are relevant to scholars in various humanistic and social science disciplines who study digital life.

Keywords: mobile data donation, qualitative research methods, digital media, digital trace data, TikTok

Introduction

A significant part of many people's lives now takes place on and is shaped by digital media. Digital life and its many facets have long been studied within academic fields such as media and communication studies, where the digital dimension has become almost inseparable from analyses of media content and media use. As everyday practices increasingly unfold online, interest in examining digital phenomena has expanded beyond media and communication scholars to researchers across the humanities and social sciences. Consequently, a wide range of empirical research relies on digital trace data (Howison et al., 2011). These data are created when individuals interact with digital platforms, such as social media or streaming services, which in turn collect and store these interactions. In quantitative research, such data are often accessed through platform Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) or (unauthorized) data scraping (Ohme et al., 2023), enabling the collection of large datasets.

This article introduces mobile data donation (MDD) (see, e.g., Boeschoten et al., 2020; Breuer et al., 2022; Ohme et al., 2021; Van Driel et al., 2022) as an alternative to such methods. MDD refers to the process in which participants retrieve digital trace data from their own devices and donate them to the researcher. Since the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018, platforms that collect and store user data are legally required to provide it to users upon request in the form of a so-called *Data Download Package* (DDP) (Boeschoten et al., 2020). This article focuses specifically on the donation of DDPs, though donated data may also include screenshots or other types of data. MDD as a method offers access to detailed and valid data while ensuring transparency and informed consent. Because participants actively request and transfer their own data, MDD incorporates a degree of collaboration that centres the users and strengthens the ethical aspects of digital trace data collection.

Although MDD has primarily been used in quantitative research (Brinberg et al., 2021; Thorson et al., 2021; Verbeij et al., 2024; Zannettou et al., 2023), this article argues that the method also holds significant potential for qualitative and small-scale studies across media and communication and the broader humanistic and social sciences. Because the donated data originate directly from participants' devices, they offer a more accurate reflection of everyday digital practices and algorithmically curated media environments than traditional self-report methods (Ohme et al., 2021). A case study involving donated TikTok DDP data from 24 Danish users aged 15–29, conducted in 2022, is used throughout the article to illustrate the practicalities, opportunities, and challenges of applying MDD.

The article begins by describing MDD in detail and outlining the reasons for its growing popularity, including key methodological advantages. It then presents the case study, followed by a step-by-step account of how to conduct an MDD study. Next, the outcomes of the case study are outlined to highlight the method's potential. Finally, the article discusses the limitations, challenges, and ethical considerations associated with MDD.

The Method of Mobile Data Donation

MDD represents a user-centric way of working with digital trace data. Unlike platform-centric approaches – where researchers obtain data directly from platforms through methods such as data scraping – MDD involves users actively sharing their own traces (Ohme et al., 2023). In a MDD study, the researcher receives data already collected by participants about their media usage (see, e.g., Boeschoten et al., 2020; Breuer et al., 2022; Ohme et al., 2021; Van Driel et al., 2022).

Participants gather the data from their devices or through apps by requesting and downloading their data, after which they donate it to the researcher. MDD, and user-centric methods in general, allow researchers to study users individually (Ohme et al., 2023), while still being able to compare them across groups and analyze differences and similarities. In recent years, scholars have developed and used various data donation platforms, through which consenting participants can submit their digital traces (see, e.g., Araujo et al., 2022; Boeschoten et al., 2023). The method I present in this article, however, is more hand-held and therefore, I would argue, well suited and more approachable for specifically small-scale studies. My approach is researcher-facilitated, as the participants donated their data directly to me rather than through a platform. As mentioned in the introduction, the qualitative potentials of the MDD method are relevant not only to media and communication studies but to any field working with digital media in one way or another. However, because the field of digital media adopted the method early, and it is also the field I belong to, most of the references will naturally relate to this area.

So far, empirical MDD studies conducted within media and communication research have primarily been quantitative and large-scale. These include studies investigating exposure to news and politics on Facebook through surveys combined with interest categorization data (Thorson et al., 2019); relationship development through texting patterns based on the analysis of more than one million text messages (Brinberg et al., 2021); expressions of happiness and sadness in adolescents' direct messaging on Instagram examined using neural topic modeling (Verbeij et al., 2024); and user engagement with TikTok videos analyzed through behavioral data from 9.2 million TikTok videos (Zannettou et al., 2024). Several studies have also focused on testing MDD as a method, for example by comparing the accuracy of self-reported data with donated data (see, e.g., Breuer et al., 2022, 2022; Coyne et al., 2023; Ejaz et al., 2023; Kmetty & Németh, 2022; Wu-Ouyang & Chan, 2023). In addition, MDD has been discussed methodologically in relation to various procedural challenges and its potential for future research (see, e.g., Ohme et al., 2023; Van Driel et al., 2022). Building on these studies, this article argues for the potential of implementing MDD in qualitative and small-scale research and, thereby, demonstrates how this method can also be used to collect data that can be used in qualitative analyses.

This article focuses specifically on the donation of *Data Download Packages* (DDPs) (Boeschoten et al., 2020). As mentioned in the introduction, since the implementation of the GDPR in 2018, all platforms that collect and store user data are legally required in Europe to provide these data to users upon request (ibid.). Thus, any user of these platforms can request and gain access to

their DDP. The content and scope of DDPs vary across platforms depending on the type of data collected. DDPs from digital media platforms typically include information about users': (1) activity (e.g., likes, comments, watch history, search history, uploaded content, direct messages, followers/following), (2) app settings (e.g., public/private profile, language preferences), (3) profile information (e.g., username, bio, birthday), and (4) ads (e.g., information about third-party ads). For more detailed information about DDPs from Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok see, respectively, van Driel et al., 2022 (p. 32, Figure 1), Breuer et al., 2022 (p. 14, Table 1), and Zannettou et al. (2023, p. 4).

I believe there is significant potential in using MDD to open new avenues for qualitative research across the humanities and social sciences. A wide range of digital platforms collect user data that could be repurposed for research, and I can easily imagine MDD being used to access many of these materials. In relation to media, outside social media platforms, streaming services such as Spotify provide listening histories for music and podcasts, while platforms like Netflix offer viewing histories for films and series. Beyond media platforms, numerous other types of apps also generate data that could enrich qualitative studies. For example, health and fitness apps offer insights into well-being and everyday routines, dating apps capture forms of social interaction and self-presentation, and shopping apps reveal consumption patterns and preferences. I can also imagine MDD being used to track users' exposure to political campaigns, advertisements, and news content. Together, these possibilities suggest that MDD could become a valuable resource in qualitative research for studying contemporary social and cultural life in greater depth.

Why Use MDD?

Relating to the study of mobile media usage, MDD is currently gaining momentum as a method for collecting digital trace data due to several advantages over comparable approaches. So far, the potential and advantages of MDD have primarily been used to argue that it overcomes various limitations of methods commonly used in quantitative studies. These arguments are briefly outlined here to introduce why the method has become increasingly popular in recent years.

One of the most commonly used methods for accessing digital trace data is the use of platform-specific APIs. However, this practice has become more complicated as access to APIs has been restricted in recent years (Freelon, 2018). In addition, APIs allow access only to selected types of data, typically public content, and not, for example, private messages (Ohme et al., 2023). Obtaining informed consent from users is often infeasible when collecting data through an API because

datasets are typically large, making it difficult to identify and contact individual users (ibid.). MDD overcomes these limitations because access to data is obtained directly from users, who grant permission to share non-public content and give informed consent to researchers

Another common method for collecting digital trace data is to install tracking software on users' devices. Although this approach requires informed consent, it introduces methodological challenges, including the risk of reactivity bias, where users alter their behavior because they know they are being monitored (Ohme et al., 2021). In contrast, MDD studies rely on data that users have already generated, meaning researchers receive the data retrospectively and the collection process therefore does not affect users' behavior. The method also provides access to similar types of data as in tracking studies but without requiring researchers to interfere with users' personal devices by installing tracking software.

Studies of digital media have often relied on users' self-reporting, for example through surveys or interviews, requiring participants to estimate, for instance, how much time they spend on social media or what types of content they engage with (ibid.). However, studies have documented substantial discrepancies between self-reported and actual media use, which raises concerns about the validity and reliability of such data and the conclusions drawn from them (ibid.; Lee et al., 2017; Vanden Abeele et al., 2013). MDD mitigates this limitation, as the donated data provide researchers with more valid and detailed insights into users' actual behavior (Ohme et al., 2021). Instead of relying on memory or subjective estimates, researchers gain access to precise, often, time-stamped records of user activity, offering a more accurate picture of media use and content, enabling analyses that self-reports cannot capture. It should be emphasized, however, that methods such as surveys and interviews remain essential for examining other aspects of media use, such as users' perspectives, experiences, feelings, and opinions, which cannot be captured through MDD.

Another significant advantage of MDD is that data from different participants consist of the same components, which increases comparability and enables both individual-level and cross-user analyses. In qualitative contexts, data types such as video and photo content, comments, and direct messages may be particularly relevant to collect through MDD. In other studies, these kinds of data are typically gathered through digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016) or approaches inspired by it, where researchers retrieve data from, for instance, selected comment sections, hashtags, profiles, or groups. In such studies, data are often collected using the researcher's own profile or a newly created 'clean' profile. This constitutes a platform-centric collection approach, as the data are collected directly from the platform without user involvement (Ohme et al., 2023). In contrast, MDD is a

user-centric method in which data are collected in collaboration with users. This user-centricity allows researchers to study individual users in depth and examine precisely what content they have engaged with and how – something platform-centric approaches cannot fully offer. Moreover, with MDD, researchers are more distanced from the data collection process, as it is not carried out through the researcher's own device or profile. Therefore, there is no risk that the data have been influenced by how the platform's algorithm has adapted to, for example, the researcher's behavior during data collection or their demographic characteristics – factors that can otherwise pose limitations.

In sum, MDD overcomes several limitations of existing approaches to digital trace data collection. It provides direct, user-granted access to rich and often non-public data, avoids the reactivity and intrusiveness of tracking software, and offers more accurate behavioural insights than self-reports. Its user-centric design enhances comparability, enables detailed analyses of individual media practices, and minimizes algorithmic interference tied to researcher profiles. Together, these strengths make MDD an increasingly valuable and robust method for studying digital media use.

The Case Study: Donated Data from TikTok

To illustrate how MDD can be applied in a qualitatively study, I use one of my own studies as a case to describe the process, practicalities, and outcomes. Later in the article, examples from this case study will also be used to discuss the methodological challenges and limitations of the method, as well as its ethical aspects.

The case study examines the characteristics and genres of video content presented to young Danes on TikTok (Author, forthcoming). Using MDD, selected files and folders from TikTok's DDP were collected from 24 Danish users aged 15–29. From these data, 1,200 short-form videos were sampled from the file titled *Video Browsing*. It should be noted that the case study is part of a larger project and is therefore quite extensive, however, the sample size can be easily scaled up or down depending on the needs of the specific study. MDD was chosen as method because it provides valid and detailed insight into the content users actually encountered on TikTok. As noted, MDD overcomes the limitations of self-report methods, as it does not rely on participants' ability to recall the specifics of their media use. Given TikTok's rapidly changing environment and the typically short duration of its videos, relying on memory alone would have posed a significant limitation for accurately capturing the content users encountered. To contextualize the case study, the following will briefly introduce TikTok as a platform.

TikTok is a platform where users can view, engage with, and create content (Miltsov, 2022). Since its international launch in 2017, TikTok has become one of the most widely used platforms worldwide, with over one billion monthly active users, including 1.3 million in Denmark, the majority of whom are aged 15–29 (Green & Skinbjerg-Holm, 2023; Lange, 2023). TikTok is especially known for short-form video content, but it also allows users to post content in “Photo Mood” and as “Stories” (which disappear after 24 hours) as well as livestream. Content is primarily consumed through the algorithmically driven For You Page (FYP), which serves as the app’s main feed (Miltsov, 2022). The recommendation algorithm tailors each user’s FYP based on their preferences, past engagement patterns, and demographics such as location and age, making each FYP highly personalized (ibid.).

Mobile Data Donation Step-by-step

This section describes the process of collecting DDP data using MDD in a qualitatively study and illustrates it with the case study. In broad terms, MDD consists of three simple steps: (1) the researcher recruits participants, (2) the participants gather the desired data based on guidance from the researcher, and (3) the participants donate their data to the researcher. In reality, the process often consists of more steps and can be further complicated by, for example, technical circumstances – this will be discussed further later in the article. The following section is divided into five steps: the first three, which involve preparation for data collection, are carried out solely by the researcher, while the last two, which involve the actual data donation, are primarily carried out by the participants with the researcher’s assistance. The data collection in the case study took place from June to September 2022.

1. Preparational tests:

DDPs typically consist of large amounts of data, even when collected from a small group of participants. Therefore, conducting preliminary tests can be advantageous for gaining a better understanding of the data before conducting the actual data collection.

In the case study, I conducted several preparatory tests using my own DDP and that of a pilot participant to gain insights into the structure of TikTok’s DDP and how the donation process could be made manageable for participants. The tests helped determine which folders were relevant for the study and how participants could feasibly complete the donation. They also served to validate the data. As van Driel et al. (2022) also note in their study of Instagram users, DDPs often lack

clarity about the specific functionality of each file. To validate the data and identify what activity was recorded in different files, I screen-recorded small sessions while viewing, swiping, and interacting with TikTok content. I then downloaded my DDP and matched the recorded sessions to the data in my *Video Browsing* file. This allowed me to check, for example, whether only videos watched in full were registered or whether videos I had viewed only briefly were also included (which they were).

2. *Recruitment:*

In the case study, 24 participants aged 15–29 were recruited: 14 women and 10 men (none identified as non-binary). Recruitment took place through social media and by contacting various Danish primary schools, high schools, and boarding schools. Recruiting participants proved more difficult than expected – and issue I return to later in the article. An important consideration when recruiting for MDD studies is the technical literacy of the desired participant group – are they able to collect and donate their data without difficulty? This can be assessed during the preparatory phase.

3. *Information and guide:*

Before donating, the participants in the case study were asked to read two informational documents. The first document (“Information about the data collection”) described the aims of the study, the type of data to be collected, from whom and why it was being collected, how the data collection would be carried out, and how participants would be pseudonymized. The second document explained how the participants’ data would be processed and was mandatory under GDPR regulations at the university at which I am employed. After reading both documents, participants were asked to sign an online consent form. They then received a detailed guide (see supplementary material) outlining how to collect and donate their data – a resource that proved crucial for ensuring that participants completed the full data donation.

4. *Request of data*

Most platforms require users to request their DDP before they are able to download it. After providing consent, the participants in the case study requested their TikTok DDP directly through the settings in the TikTok app (see supplementary material). They then waited for TikTok to process their request, which typically took a few days, before the DDP became available for download. Because

TikTok does not notify users when their DDP is ready, all participants agreed to receive an email from me a few days after submitting the request to remind them to check whether it had been processed. This request-step in the process caused several issues, which will be discussed later in the article.

5. *Download and donation of data*

This is the final collection step in MDD studies – the actual donation. In the case study, when the DDP was ready to be downloaded from the TikTok app, the participants downloaded the full DDP to their devices. They then selected the required folders, *Activity*, *App Settings*, and *Videos*, and donated them to me (see supplementary material), thereby completing the data donation. All communication between the participants and me, as well as the actual donations, took place via email. Ideally, the participants would have uploaded their data to a secure server instead of sending it by email.

Data Download Package

To provide insights into the structure of DDPs and the types of data they contain, the following section presents the contents of the donated data from the case study. In addition, it highlights the potential this type of data holds for qualitative studies of media use and content.

As mentioned above, the participants were asked to donate three specific folders from their TikTok DDP: *Activity*, *App Settings*, and *Videos* (see Figure 1). Each of these folders (first image in Figure 1) contains one or more files (second image in Figure 1), which can then be inspected individually:



Figure 1: Visualization of the participants' donated data, showing the donated folders, the files within those folders, and the data contained in the *Video Browsing* file.

The third image in Figure 1 shows a screenshot of the *Video Browsing* file, which served as the dataset for the case study analysis. At first glance, the data appears purely quantitative in form and structure, but its qualitative potential lies in the listed URLs. Each link in the *Video Browsing* file corresponds to a video the user has encountered on TikTok, providing insight into exactly which videos were presented to the user. Through the previously mentioned data tests, it was discovered that the file records every instance a video appears in the user's app, whether on the FYP, the Following page, via direct message, from a specific profile, or through any other pathway within the app. Opening a URL leads to a page showing the video along with its caption, hashtags, sound, applied filter (if any), the number of likes, comments, saves, and shares, as well as the comment section – essentially replicating how it would appear to the user in the app.

The presence of these URLs is one of the key features that makes DDPs suitable for qualitative studies. The URLs allow researchers to access posted content (videos or photos) as well as

related data, such as captions and comments. Several other files from the *Activity* folder are structured similarly, including users' liked content, favorited content, shared content (sent via direct messages), and content uploaded by the users themselves. Additionally, users' posted comments and direct messages are included in the full TikTok DDP but were not part of the case study. Overall, DDPs provide multiple avenues for accessing diverse types of data – videos, photos, text, sound, and more – which can all be analyzed qualitatively when exploring digital media content and/or usage.

Outcome of Case Study

To illustrate the potential of applying MDD in qualitative research, the following section will briefly present the analysis process and findings of the case study.

In the case study, as previously mentioned, 1,200 videos were sampled from a dataset of *Video Browsing* files from 24 Danish TikTok users aged 15–29 years to analyze the characteristics of TikTok content. The videos were sampled from three selected weeks in April, May, and June 2022. Because the participants downloaded their DDP at different times and the video browsing data only spans six months backward, the decision to sample these three months ensured that data from this specific period were included in all donated files. The videos were retrieved through the URLs provided in the file. The importance of sampling in MDD studies will be discussed later in the article.

The aim of the study was to investigate the diversity of TikTok video content presented to young Danes by analyzing both the genres of the videos and their overarching characteristics. Thus, the focus was on the content itself and not on the participants' usage of the app. The first part of the analysis consisted of an extensive coding procedure involving three cycles of coding based on a *phronetic iterative* analysis approach (Tracy, 2020, pp. 428ff.). This process identified seven primary genres of TikTok content: *daily life*, *performance*, *self-expression*, *instructive*, *external*, *meta*, and *advertising* along with a wide range of subgenres. A subsequent analysis of characteristics across genres revealed four overarching features of TikTok content: *the mundane*, *the comedic tone*, *the significance of audio*, and *the use of platform features*. Together, these characteristics constitute the shared atmosphere, tone, and aesthetic of the sampled videos (Author, forthcoming).

The case study is, of course, only one example illustrating the qualitative potential of MDD. Beyond examining digital media content, MDD can also be used to explore digital media usage. Files containing information about users' activity on a platform – such as likes, shares, saves, and

comments – can be analyzed to uncover patterns of use and engagement. These data can also indicate whether users belong to particular digital subcommunities or have specific interests, as reflected in the content they interact with. One of the key advantages of MDD is that it provides access to multiple forms of data, which can be analyzed individually or in combination to generate in-depth insights into digital media content and usage based on valid, user-generated information.

Limitations & Challenges

MDD offers valuable access to digital trace data, but the method also involves notable limitations and practical challenges. These stem from issues such as potential sample biases, platform-dependent data access, the need for close collaboration with participants, and the large size of donated datasets. This section outlines these challenges and illustrates them with examples from the case study, highlighting how they shape what can be studied and how MDD research must be conducted.

Sample Biases

Research on MDD increasingly examines who is willing and able to donate data and why many who express willingness ultimately do not follow through (Hase & Haim, 2024; Keusch et al., 2024a; Silber et al., 2022; Strycharz et al., 2024; Welbers et al., 2024). Studies consistently show a gap between stated willingness and actual donation. Factors associated with higher likelihood of donating include being younger and higher educated (Corten et al., 2024; Silber et al., 2022), digitally skilled (Strycharz et al., 2024), and trusting researchers (Keusch et al., 2024a). Findings on privacy concerns, however, are mixed – while such concerns often reduce intentions to donate (Hase & Haim, 2024; Pfiffner & Friemel, 2023), they do not consistently predict actual donation behavior (Keusch, et al., 2024a; 2024b; Silber et al., 2022). This suggests that MDD decisions are often context-dependent, varying by platform, such as whether it is centred around entertainment or social relations, and by data type, for example whether it reflects more passive behavior (e.g., view history) or active behavior (e.g., likes) (Groot Kormelink et al., 2025; Pfiffner & Friemel, 2023).

Recruiting participants for the case study proved more difficult than expected. Several factors likely contributed to this, but two are especially relevant. First, concerns surrounding digital media platforms' data storage and sharing practices are widely discussed, with TikTok in particular facing substantial public scrutiny regarding potential privacy and security violations. This heightened attention may have discouraged potential participants or, in the case of minors, their parents. Indeed, one participant under 18 had to withdraw because their parents declined consent. Although

the exact reasons remain unknown, the broader discourse surrounding TikTok's data practices likely played a role. Such public debates can influence willingness to participate in MDD studies and thereby contribute to sample biases. At the same time, because potential participants are active users of the platform, their continued usage suggests that, despite media concerns, they may not be sufficiently worried about data protection to alter their behavior.

Second, because MDD is still not a commonly recognized research method – unlike, for instance, interviews – potential participants may have been unsure about what participation entailed and therefore declined to engage. While increased familiarity with the method may reduce this issue over time, it currently highlights the importance of clear communication from the outset of recruitment. Trust between researchers and participants is essential, particularly given the detailed and potentially sensitive nature of donated data. Additionally, as noted by Ohme et al. (2021), participants' privacy and security worries may increase when they see the size and content of their downloaded dataset, which can discourage participation. Ensuring a comfortable and transparent process through careful explanation of data collection procedures and subsequent data handling is therefore crucial. In the present case study, none of the participants withdrew after downloading their data; in fact, a few donated more data than required – providing their full DPP from TikTok despite being instructed to donate only three specific folders. This suggests that these participants were not particularly concerned about sharing extensive personal data.

Digital literacy represents another potential source of sample bias, as highlighted by several scholars (e.g., Boeschoten et al., 2020; Ohme et al., 2021; Breuer et al., 2022). Limited digital skills may hinder participation, particularly when data collection is complex or requires substantial effort. In the case study, however, digital literacy did not appear to be an obstacle: the relatively young participant group required no assistance in understanding the data donation guide or completing the necessary steps.

In sum, MDD studies face several potential sources of sample bias – from privacy concerns and public discourse to method unfamiliarity and varying levels of digital literacy. Recognizing and addressing these factors during the preparational phase, recruitment, and data collection is essential for ensuring more inclusive participation and strengthening the validity of MDD-based research.

The Power of the Platform

Data donation comes with a fundamental constraint: the data are not created for research purposes (Lazer et al., 2021) and are therefore shaped by the platforms' logic, limitations, and changing

policies. This dependency means that researchers must work on the platform's terms, which can introduce unpredictability and technical challenges (see, e.g., van Driel et al., 2022).

The case study illustrated this clearly. One example occurred during the preparatory phase, when TikTok abruptly changed how far back downloadable user data extended. In my initial tests, both the pilot participant and I could retrieve *Video Browsing* data that stretched back to the first time we used the app, providing a view of content exposure for several years. This long-term perspective was a central part of the initial research design, as it would have allowed for analyses of developments in content and the digital culture of TikTok had evolved over time. However, shortly before data collection was set to begin, I downloaded my DPP again and discovered that it only contained the most recent six month of *Video Browsing* activity. The sudden restriction made the planned longitudinal component impossible and, therefore, the study had to be adapted. This example demonstrates how a single platform decision can reshape research possibilities and outcome significantly.

A second example relates to TikTok's data-request system, which proved substantially less stable than anticipated. Initially, the waiting time between a participant's request and the availability of their downloadable DDP file aligned with the platform's own estimate of up to four days. As data collection progressed, however, turnaround times became highly inconsistent, and some participants waited more than a week. Others experienced another issue, namely that their request disappeared entirely, as if it had never been submitted. In these cases, participants contacted me to report that the app showed no pending request despite having initiated one days earlier. They had to restart the request process, and only after one or more retries did the system register it correctly. These issues slowed down the collection process and could potentially have affected the dropout rate significantly (Breuer et al., 2022). Fortunately, all but one participant ultimately completed the process, but only through persistent follow-up and repeated attempts.

An additional challenge emerged when the DDP files were ready to be downloaded. TikTok made the data available for only a four-day period but offered no in-app notification of file availability. Therefore, if participants were busy, overlooked the download window, or could not be reached in time, they had to begin the process again from the start. These conditions made effective, responsive communication essential. To reduce the burden on participants – especially those dealing with technical issues – I made a point of replying promptly to emails, often outside normal working hours. For future studies, researchers might consider establishing clearer communication guidelines

in advance, assigning communication duties across team members, or preparing automated reminders, depending on the scale and complexity of the project.

Taken together, these experiences underscore the methodological vulnerability inherent in platform-dependent data donation. Platforms' technical limitations and unpredictable system behavior are not minor issues but built into the method itself, shaping what can ultimately be studied, how data must be collected, and how much support participants require throughout the process.

Collaborating with Participants

As described in the section "Mobile Data Donation Step-by-step", the actual data collection and donation processes are carried out by the participants, with support from the researcher. Consequently, data collection often becomes a form of collaboration between the researcher and the participants, and the quality of this collaboration has a considerable impact on the success of the study.

In the case study, continuous collaboration between the participants and the author was essential. Without ongoing communication and contact, it would not have been possible to collect data from all participants. As previously mentioned, participants received a data donation guide (see supplementary material) before the data collection began. The guide explained how to locate, retrieve, and donate their data and served as the first important step in establishing effective communication.

Several participants relied on being able to contact me when they encountered technical issues, and I likewise depended on being able to reach them throughout the process. Most participants opted to receive an email reminder to check whether their TikTok data request had been processed, which generally helped ensure timely downloads. However, for some participants who were difficult to reach, data requests expired before they could complete the download, requiring them to start the process anew. For these cases, the donation process typically took two to three weeks, whereas participants without such issues completed it within four to seven days.

This demonstrates why a well-functioning collaboration between the researcher and participants is crucial in MDD studies and can become a significant disadvantage if absent. Although this aspect of the method is often demanding and time-consuming, it was essential to the successful completion of the case study. As noted earlier, several data donation platforms have been developed in recent years to help streamline this process (see, e.g., Araujo et al., 2022; Boeschoten et al., 2023). These solutions simplify the MDD method and reduce the need for extensive communication between researchers and participants. For example, the "Data Donation Module" is an open-source

web application that facilitates the secure submission of digital trace data for academic research (Data Donation Lab, n.d.).

Large Datasets

When working with large datasets, such as DDPs, in a qualitative context, it is important to consider both the size of the dataset and, consequently, the sampling strategy. DDPs are typically very large and contain multiple types of data, which would typically be an advantage in a quantitative MDD study. However, in a qualitative study, where the goal is to conduct an in-depth analysis of selected parts of the data, it is necessary to create a much smaller, manageable sample of the full dataset. This reinforces the importance of testing the data beforehand to determine which parts are relevant and how much of the material is needed.

In the case study, I sampled 1,200 videos from a dataset that covered only three weeks of activity and originated from one specific file donated by 24 participants. The full three-week dataset contained links to 113,595 videos, despite representing only a relatively small fraction of the total donated data. In most cases, it is difficult to avoid collecting large amounts of material when working with activity-related data (e.g., browsing histories, likes, and shares) because these files typically contain thousands of data points. This type of data accumulates very quickly: many users spend substantial time on such platforms daily, and they can consume and interact with large amounts of content in a short period of time. Together, these behaviors cause the number of data points to grow rapidly. Avoiding the collection of large datasets would require participants to sample their data before donating it. This approach would demand considerably more effort from participants and would require the researcher to guide and oversee the process closely. It would also introduce additional methodological challenges, including concerns about the validity and completeness of the resulting data.

Given the rapid accumulation of data and the large size of DDPs, careful sampling is essential in qualitative research to make the dataset manageable while still capturing relevant content. By selecting a smaller, targeted subset of the full dataset, researchers can conduct in-depth analyses without being overwhelmed by volume, ensuring that the study remains feasible and focused only on the aspects relevant to the study in question.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are central to MDD studies. This section discusses key ethical aspects, including challenges related to data minimization and complexity, the possibilities and limits of anonymity, and the ways in which participants can regain ownership of their data. Drawing on the case study, it highlights how these considerations shape both methodological decisions and the ethical integrity of the research process.

Data Minimization & Complexity

This point extends the point in the previous section about how the size of donated datasets can pose a challenge. As noted, it is often impossible, particularly in qualitative studies of DDPs, to avoid collecting far more data than is actually needed. This conflicts with the principle of *data minimization*, which requires researchers to collect only the data that is relevant and necessary for the specific study (GDPR, 2016). This constitutes both a methodological and an ethical disadvantage of the method, and it should be carefully considered prior to conducting an MDD study, including in relation to the characteristics of the participant group and the sensitivity of the data. Currently, there is no sustainable solution to this challenge, but researchers should take measures such as clearly informing participants about the contents of their donations and deleting unnecessary data as soon as possible.

The size and complexity of these datasets also present a different challenge. Because participants collect their data themselves, they technically have the opportunity to review their files before donating them and potentially withhold elements they do not wish to share. This is a substantial shift from traditional studies of digital trace data, where participants have typically been passive and unaware data sources, for example, through scraping without consent. In practice, however, it is unlikely that participants can meaningfully review their DDPs due to the sheer volume and complexity of the data (Groot Kormelink et al., 2025, pp. 9ff.). Even when researchers, as in the case study, provide detailed explanations of the required data, it is still difficult for participants to fully understand what their files contain based on descriptions alone. Consequently, participants cannot fully control which information they give the researcher access to – simply because they are not necessarily aware of all the types of information their data might reveal. This issue is particularly important in studies involving sensitive data or vulnerable participants (franzke et al., 2020). In studies where only a small and manageable amount of data is required, clearly presenting participants with the option to review or withhold specific data can strengthen the ethical foundations of the study.

Anonymity

In some cases, it is ideal to conduct MDD studies in a fully anonymous manner. In the case study, however, anonymity was not possible as several participants were recruited through social media, and all communication as well as the actual data donations occurred via email. If the study had been conducted through a MDD platform that allowed recruitment, communication, and data submission to take place anonymously, it would have been possible to maintain the collaborative approach while also ensuring participant anonymity. As previously mentioned, such platforms have since been developed, representing an improvement that strengthens the ethical standards of the MDD method. In some situations, however, anonymity is not feasible – for example, if participants are to be interviewed about their donated data at a later stage.

Regaining Ownership

A significant ethical advantage of MDD is the increased opportunities it provides for participants to regain some form of ownership over their data. This stands in stark contrast to traditional studies of digital trace data, where participants are often passive contributors. In MDD studies, participants actively collect and download their own data, making them a central part of the process. In some cases, this ownership is further enhanced by allowing participants to review their data and withhold any information they do not wish to donate.

In the case study, continuous collaboration and communication between the participants and the author were essential to successfully completing the data collection. Without this well-functioning collaboration, the study could not have been completed. Participants requested, downloaded, and donated portions of their DDPs while receiving tailored guidance and troubleshooting support, reinforcing their active role. Combined with the ability to give informed consent, a feature not guaranteed in all digital trace studies, a collaborative approach like this enhances participants' ownership of their data and places them, rather than just their data, at the center of the research process. By granting participants visibility and control, MDD redistributes power in digital media research, making it a more ethically robust alternative to extractive methods such as data scraping, where participants are typically unaware that their data is being collected.

Conclusion

This article has examined mobile data donation (MDD) as a methodological approach for studying digital media usage and content, highlighting its practical, ethical, and qualitative advantages. MDD

offers a user-centric alternative to conventional platform-centric methods such as data scraping. By allowing participants to request, download, and donate their own digital trace data, the method ensures transparency, informed consent, and ethical engagement – elements often missing in traditional digital trace research. The TikTok case study involving 24 Danish users aged 15–29 illustrated the full workflow of MDD, from recruitment and participant guidance to data request, donation, and sampling for analysis. This step-by-step account underscores both the opportunities and challenges inherent in MDD, including platform dependence, large dataset management, and potential sample biases. Ethical considerations, such as data minimization, anonymity, and participant ownership, further distinguish MDD from standard digital trace methods, highlighting its capacity to embed ethical rigor throughout the research process.

Beyond its technical and ethical benefits, MDD offers substantial potential for qualitative research and small-scale studies. Unlike self-report methods, which are prone to recall bias and misreporting, or platform-centric approaches, which often provide limited insight into individual experiences, MDD delivers detailed, participant-authorized data that reflect users' actual interactions with digital platforms. In the TikTok case study, for instance, data from the *Video Browsing* file enabled the examination of the diversity and the characteristics of digital content, supporting nuanced qualitative analyses of digital culture.

The collaborative nature of MDD further enhances its potential. Participants in the case study were active co-creators of the dataset rather than passive data sources. Through continuous communication and tailored guidance, they selected and donated relevant data while retaining the option to withhold sensitive information. This active participation increases participants' ownership over their data, redistributing power in research contexts typically dominated by researchers or platforms. By positioning participants as central actors, MDD fosters trust and ethical accountability in studies of digital practices.

MDD also provides methodological flexibility for qualitative inquiry. Researchers can strategically sample portions of donated datasets, focusing on files or content relevant to their study. In the TikTok case study, for example, 1,200 videos were sampled from three weeks of activity across 24 participants, producing a dataset small enough for in-depth coding while retaining richness and diversity. Beyond videos, DDPs often include other content such as photos, direct messages, and activity logs (e.g., likes, shares, and comments), offering multiple avenues for qualitative investigation. These data allow researchers to explore not only the content users encounter but also how they interact with it, revealing insights into algorithmic influence, digital habits, and social practices.

Despite its promise, MDD is not without challenges. Large datasets require careful management and sampling, participant support can be time-consuming, and research outcomes remain contingent on platform functionality and policies. Recruitment can be affected by public discourse, privacy concerns, and varying levels of digital literacy, which may introduce sample biases. Nevertheless, these challenges are offset by MDD's ethical and methodological strengths. By engaging participants as collaborators and centering them in the data collection, MDD ensures that research is both participant-centered and ethically robust.

In conclusion, MDD represents a powerful tool for qualitative and small-scale studies of digital media across various fields and disciplines. It combines access to rich, user-generated digital trace data with participant collaboration and ethical transparency, providing researchers with valid, detailed, and contextually grounded data. Its qualitative potential lies particularly in the diversity of data types it provides, allowing researchers to explore them in different ways. By embedding participants in the research process and granting them more control over their data, MDD fosters ethical rigor while producing insights that are both meaningful and empirically grounded. As digital media continue to shape everyday life, MDD offers scholars a qualitatively rich and ethically sound method for studying digital practices, content, and culture.

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Article 2:

Decoding TikTok-ness: An Analysis of TikTok Video Content Genres and Charac- teristics in Denmark

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of the Internet*

Decoding TikTok-ness: *An Analysis of TikTok Video Content Genres and Characteristics in Denmark*

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Abstract

This article examines the characteristics of video content that young Danes have been presented with on TikTok. Drawing on a dataset of 1,200 TikTok videos collected through mobile data donations from 24 Danish users aged 15-29, the study applies the concept of templatability – proposed here as operating across multiple template levels on TikTok. A comprehensive mapping of the sample identified seven overarching genres: daily life, performance, self-expression, instructive, external, meta, and advertising. Each genre exhibits distinctive storytelling strategies, structural patterns, and aesthetic nuances. Analysis of content templates further revealed a continuum of fixedness, from rigid meme templates to adaptable genre templates. Across the sample, four recurring and defining characteristics emerged: the mundane, the comedic tone, the use of platform features, and the significance of audio. Together, they represent core elements of the content and what makes it recognizably ‘TikTok-esque’. I term this cluster of qualities TikTok-ness, denoting the shared digital culture embodied in the videos analyzed.

Introduction

With more than one billion active monthly users (Green & Skinbjerg-Holm, 2023), TikTok has established itself as one of the most popular platforms today, primarily known for its short-form video

content, which is the object of research here. When creating content on TikTok, several editing features, such as different filters and text layers, are available (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). The most prominent content creation feature is “Use This Sound”, which allows users to add *a sound*, such as a snippet of a song, to their video. Another significant element that separates TikTok from similar platforms is the algorithmically driven *For You Page* (FYP), which serves as the app’s main feed (Miltsov, 2022). The algorithm tailors each user’s FYP based on, e.g., their preferences and past engagement, which makes each FYP highly personalized.

The rapid change in trending content on TikTok and the videos’ short length create the basis for an ever-changing platform. Despite its dispersed and volatile nature, scholars have argued that various repeated elements permeate TikTok content, resulting in aesthetic similarities (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Schellewald, 2021). Through a mapping of 1,200 TikTok videos, this article aims to investigate both the variety as well as the recurring characteristics of TikTok video content in the context of Denmark. Theoretically, this is explored through the concept of *templatability* (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Leaver et al., 2020), which describes how the combination of vernacular norms, algorithmic promotion of those norms, and the users’ attempts to ‘please the algorithm’ result in aesthetic similarities and *templates* across digital platform content (Leaver et al., 2020). I build on this concept by exploring how *templates* exist on different content levels on TikTok – namely, (1) singular trends and memes, (2) genres and subgenres, and (3) overarching and defining characteristics.

According to TikTok, 1.3 million Danes use TikTok (Lange, 2023), and, similar to other countries, teenagers and young adults constitute the largest group of users (Molsing et al., 2024). Although TikTok is a global platform, aspects such as trending content, digital culture, and regulations often vary significantly across regions (Boffone, 2022, p. 3). Therefore, to contribute new insights and broaden the understanding of TikTok – specifically its video content in this case – it is essential to study the app within different local contexts, such as the Nordic region, with Denmark as the case in point.

By investigating a sample of 1,200 TikTok videos collected from 24 Danish users aged 15-29 through mobile data donation (Boffone, 2022), this study specifically investigates the characteristics of video content that young Danish users are presented with on TikTok. Additionally, it examines how these videos reflect the recurring traits that are typical of TikTok content more generally. The article aims to provide new and deeper insights into the digital culture and communicative significance of TikTok, while also contributing to ongoing debates about how to conceptualize the platform within the contemporary media landscape. First, I briefly account for the similar existing literature focusing on categorizing and characterizing TikTok content on a broader level, whereafter the theoretical framework is introduced. Then, the research methodology of the study is explained before I, based on the data donations from 24 users, get to the analysis. The diversity of the content is explored through a mapping of content, identifying different genres and subgenres. Thereafter, the similarities and recurring characteristics of the videos across the different genres are investigated.

Content Analysis of TikTok

The field of platform studies is primarily characterized by studies of topics related to production, monetization, data, and political economy (Lin & de Kloet, 2023), creating a need for approaches that examine other significant aspects, like visual culture and users. Relating to studies of TikTok, the specific characteristics of the content, such as its memetic and audio-focused nature, unarguably impact the creation process, the reception, and the digital culture. Therefore, studying TikTok content gives insights into several defining aspects of the platform and creates the basis for both comparisons of different platforms and discussions of how these platforms are constantly evolving.

In recent years, numerous studies have been conducted on TikTok content, including a few that categorize and characterize TikTok content in a broader sense. Aliaksandra Shutsko's study (2020) is based on a sample of 1,000 TikTok videos and categorizes them into transferable categories to

compare with other short-form video platforms. Shutsko argues that TikTok is similar to platforms like YouTube and Vine, as the category “Comedy & Joke” is the most popular, which is also the case on the other platforms (ibid., p. 121). However, the study lacks emphasis on TikTok’s unique characteristics and nuances, making it incompatible with my aim to investigate the specificities of the content and digital culture.

Andreas Schellewald’s digital ethnography study (2021) examines communicative forms on TikTok, defined as “shared ways of expression or platform-specific languages” (p. 1451). He identifies six forms, which can be summed up as follows:

- *Comedic* includes content that specifically delivers a joke, sketches, and content that is simply just funny.
- *Documentary* content expresses the creator’s self and life, often done in a comedic tone.
- *Communal* content is created communally and often consists of a group of people participating in a trend or challenge together.
- *Explanatory* content mainly consists of tutorials or life hacks, often edited as a montage.
- *Interactive* content highlights how TikTok can be transformed into an engaging space with playful elements such as filters.
- *Meta* content addresses TikTok itself, e.g., “if you see this” videos that comment on how the algorithm places content on your FYP.

The communicative forms were used as an inspiration and in the initial coding of the 1,200 videos. Methodologically, this study differs by collecting data from 24 different TikTok users rather than only one TikTok profile, providing a broader dataset than the previous studies. Additionally, exploring TikTok content through the framework of templatability – which will be elaborated on in the following section – offers an alternative approach to analysis, focusing on content templates: how they

emerge, take shape, differ from one another, and reflect the nature of the platform. This provides new insights into both the characteristics of TikTok content in general as well as the platform itself. In addition to Shutsko's (2020) and Schellewald's (2021) studies, many studies focusing on more specific types of TikTok content have been carried out, whereas several will be referenced throughout this article, amongst other TikTok studies.

Theoretical Framework

Templatability

In *Instagram - Visual Social Media Cultures* (2020), the authors Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin introduce the concept of *templatability*. The concept is used to describe how a combination of (1) vernacular norms created by elite users such as influencers with many followers, (2) an algorithmic recommendation system that values and promotes these norms by pushing it onto users' feeds, and (3) how the users then internalize this recommendation logic by trying to 'please the algorithm' result in aesthetic similarities across the content on digital platforms (2020, p. 217ff.). Interactions between platforms and users shape specific aesthetic choices, content creation practices, and attention-grabbing strategies that lead to content *templates* (Abidin & Kaye, 2021). Collectively, the three mechanisms - vernacular norms, algorithmic promotion of those norms, and the users' attempts to 'please the algorithm' - create visually memorable and highly replicable templates that streamline the content on the given platform (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 217ff.). Monetization models further influence the templates by pushing sponsored content to generate advertising revenues for the platform and elite users with promotional partnerships incorporating popular templates into their content to earn more money (Abidin & Kaye, 2021). Meme templates are common on TikTok, and they usually share characteristics such as being humorous, memorable, and easy to replicate (Abidin & Kaye, 2021). TikTok video memes stand out from most other internet memes because of the importance of the audio, which

drives their creation. Thus, it is the audio element that is repeatedly used and to which users add new visual and/or textual elements – Abidin and Kaye (2021) describe this as an *aural turn* in memes. Thereby, templates on TikTok can be both visually and audibly memorable. Even though TikTok has heavily popularized audio memes, audio-focused memes also existed before TikTok on, e.g., YouTube (Kaye et al., 2022, p. 162). A typical TikTok audio meme template consists of a fixed audio element and a flexible visual and often also textual element, shaped and created by individual creators to fit a specific context. Depending on the specific template, the flexible elements can be very similar to the original or differ to varying degrees. As pointed out by Abidin and Kaye (2021), while templates offer the users a degree of agency to choose which kinds of scripts they want to incorporate into their own content, they simultaneously limit originality (p. 60).

Circumscribed creativity

Coined by Kaye, Chen, and Zeng (2020), *circumscribed creativity* builds on templatability. Circumscribed creativity draws from the concept of *circumscribed agency* in media organizations, where media workers are granted limited freedom within set boundaries (Lotz, 2014), which can foster a sense of autonomy even within rigid organizational structures (Havens, 2014). Circumscribed creativity refers to how platformization shapes creative potential (Kaye et al., 2021). Similar to other platforms, TikTok does so by offering templates and guides that simplify content creation and promote trend replication, setting them apart from other similar video platforms (ibid.). TikTok circumscribes creativity by nudging users to use features, such as the “Use This Sound” feature, as well as the “Duet” and “Stitch” functions, that facilitate interaction between them and the platform. Similar to the “Use This Sound” feature, users can also easily create videos by tapping to reuse the same filter or effect from the video they were just watching. TikTok also circumscribes creativity by presenting users with suggestions for content creation through, e.g., trending pages and hashtag search filters (ibid.).

Zulli & Zulli (2022) argue that mimesis – the acts of imitation and replication – is not only the basis of sociality on TikTok but also of the platform infrastructure itself. They extend Shifman’s (2012, 2013) *internet meme* to the level of platform infrastructure by arguing that “TikTok can be read as a mimetic text in and of itself” (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1876). One of the ways the platform structure encourages users to engage in mimesis practices is through the “Use This Sound” feature (ibid.). On the app’s FYP, this feature is embedded in three ways when watching content with added sound (Image 1, red markings). Thereby, the users are nudged to create content with the same sounds, resulting in similar content on the platform (ibid.).

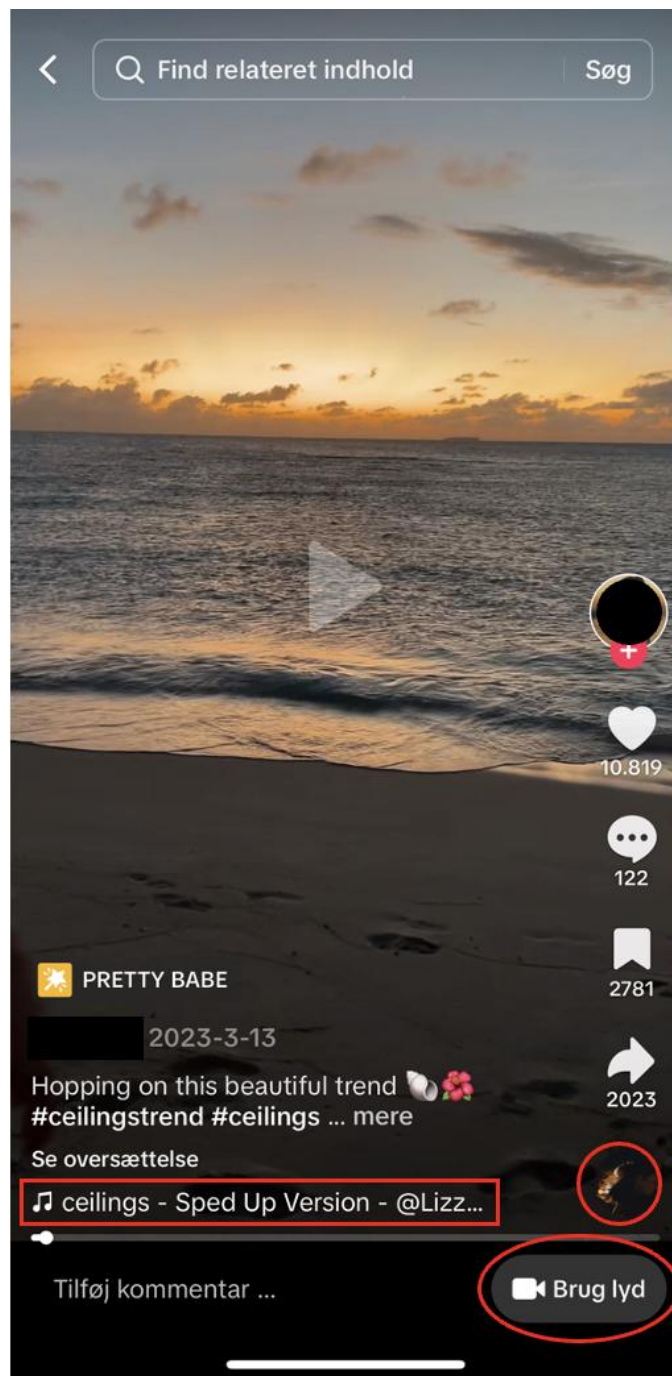


Image 1: Screenshot showing three different places where the sound is visually placed on a video.

Compared to other digital content platforms, the platformized encouragement of mimesis is augmented on TikTok because these different features – e.g., “Use This Sound”, “Duet”, and “Stitch” – are embedded in the app’s infrastructure (Kaye et al., 2022, p. 88).

In addition to how the platform itself can circumscribe creativity through nudging, users can also do so by adding a “call to action” to their content (Abidin & Kaye, 2021, p. 60). Users can do this by encouraging their viewers (other users) to create content based on a template, e.g., a dance challenge, they are trying to promote (ibid.). They can also address the viewers directly and encourage them by saying, e.g., “Duet this video if you have X”. TikTok users are, therefore, nudged and pushed by both the platform itself and other users to create content based on specific templates, which adds an extra layer to the concept of templatability.

The interplay between platform design and user practices on TikTok illustrates how templatability and circumscribed creativity jointly shape the production of highly replicable content, which forms the basis for a platform characterized by significant and distinct content similarities.

Method

Data Collection

The data, in the form of 1,200 TikTok videos, was collected using mobile data donation (Ohme et al., 2021). As such, the videos were sampled from the TikTok *Data Download Packages* (DDP) (Boeschoten et al., 2020) of 24 Danish users aged 15-29. The sample is a mix of *typical instant* and *maximum variation* (Tracy, 2020, p. 82ff.). Firstly, the sample is typical instant, as people within this age group are the most frequent TikTok users in Denmark (Green & Skinbjerg-Holm, 2023; Molsing et al., 2024). Secondly, within the sample, I aimed for maximum demographic variation in terms of age, gender, place of residence, and occupation (see supplementary material). Furthermore, it is important to note that none of the users earn a wage through TikTok or have a large following, thereby

representing the typical everyday users. Before conducting the donations, participants received two informational documents about the project, signed an online consent form, and were provided with a detailed guide on collecting and donating their data. The data collection took place from June to September 2022. The overall data donation process consisted of three steps:

1. The participants requested their DDP from the TikTok app.
2. The participants waited for TikTok to process their request.
3. When the DDP was ready to be downloaded, the participants downloaded it from the app and donated selected files.

Sampling of Videos

The 1,200 videos are sampled from the DDP file titled “Video Browsing” (50 videos from each participant), which consists of a list of dates, timestamps, and links to all the videos that the participants have been presented with on TikTok throughout the last six months (Image 2).

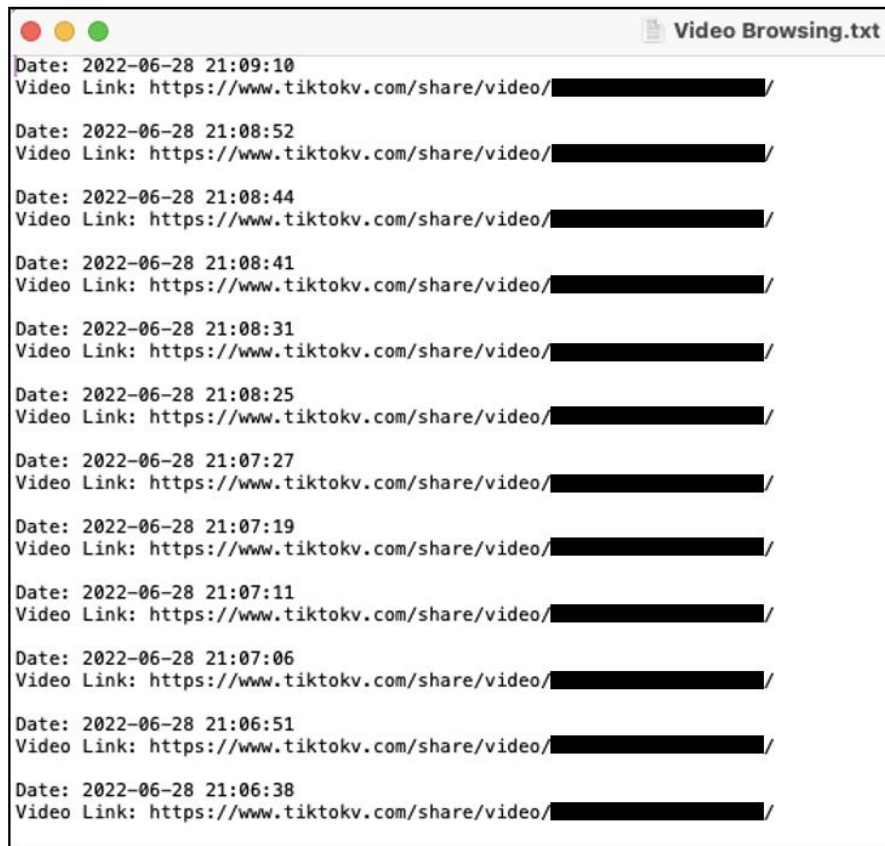


Image 2: Example of data as shown in the Video Browsing file.

As shown in the image above, the data does not specify where each video was presented to the participant on the app, making it impossible to determine which videos are from, e.g., the FYP, and which are from chat messages. The 1,200 videos were retrieved through the links in the video browsing file.

Because the participants downloaded their DDP at different times and the video browsing data only dates back six months, I decided to sample from April, May, and June 2022, as data from these three months were included in all participants' DDPs. The sampling of the videos was inspired by the probability sampling approach *systematic sampling* (Eskjær & Helles, 2015, p. 55) and was chosen to make the sample as representative as possible of the videos from the selected months. Firstly, I selected three weeks – one at the end of April, one in the middle of May, and one at the

beginning of June – to sample from. Secondly, I sampled 50 videos from each of the 24 participants on three different days (one day from each week) and at different times during the day (morning, mid-day, and night). The 1,200 videos correspond to 1.06% of the total number of videos in the three-week sample (113,595) and are therefore representative of that sample. Videos that occurred several times in the data of the 24 users are only included once, resulting in a total of 1,200 unique videos.

Coding

The videos have been coded using a *phronetic iterative* analysis approach (Tracy, 2020, p. 428 ff.), which is a reflective process in which the researcher alternates between considering existing theories and research questions and emergent qualitative data (ibid.). Image 3 is an example from my coding book, which shows the *first-level codes* (orange), the *second-level codes* (green), and the *hierarchical codes* (purple) (ibid., p. 449-469):

<i>First-level codes</i>				<i>Second-level codes</i>		<i>Hierarchical codes</i>
Caption	Length	Audio	Keywords	Trend	Communicative forms (Schellewald, 2021)	Genres
I'm just smarter than they are 🤪 #dogs #dogsoft-iktok #doglife #golden-retriever #goldenretrieverlife #funny	00:06	Sound	Dog Pet owner Meme	"I am José Mourinho" sound/meme	Documentary Comedic	Daily life

Image 3: Example for the coding book.

The first-level codes are created in the *primary-cycle coding* and consist of words or phrases that capture the essence of the data (ibid.). Here, they include the videos' caption, length, audio, and summarizing keywords.

The second-level codes are created in the *second coding cycle*, where the first-level codes are examined and categorized into "interpretive concepts" (ibid., p. 463). Unlike the first-level codes, they are analytic and interpretive. In this context, they include trends, such as a popular sound, and Schellewald's communicative forms (2021). Some trends were identified because I already knew them from TikTok, while others continuously appeared in the sample and were classified as trends after a search on the app.

As previously mentioned, Schellewald's communicative forms were used as an analytical tool in the initial clustering of the videos. The videos were coded with the form(s) that best encapsulated each specific video (Image 3). Some of the videos did not fit any of the six forms, and, therefore, two additional codes were added – *external* and *advertising* – which ended up becoming part of the final genres. Schellewald (2021) highlights various recurring components and characteristics of TikTok video content through the six communicative forms but does not specify classification requirements or boundaries for each form. This also explains why several of the 1,200 videos were coded with more than one form in the second coding cycle (Image 3). Since mapping the videos by assigning one predominant category to each video, which was one of the main aims of this study, was not achieved in the second coding cycle, I decided to conduct a third and final cycle using *hierarchical codes* (Tracy, 2020). In this coding process, some codes (the communicative forms) were merged, while others were separated into new categories. In this part of the coding process, the seven overarching genres of TikTok content were created – *daily life*, *performance*, *self-expression*, *instructional*, *external*, *meta*, and *advertising*.

The genres are conceptualized based on the formats of the videos, such as the structure and repeated elements, rather than their topics and themes. Attempting to map the latter would result in a very short-lived and quickly outdated representation due to the rapid changes in trending content on the platform, making it a volatile basis for this study. My use of the term *genre* is inspired by the late film scholar Steve Neale's work on genre theory. Neale stated that "genres are instances of repetition and difference" (1980, p. 48), meaning a film must conform to genre conventions to be recognizable while also subverting them enough to avoid being a mere replica of existing films. This concept applies to this study: TikTok video genres exhibit distinct features that define them, yet individual videos also diverge, creating numerous sub- and sub-subgenres, which are defined as specific groupings within broader genres (Neale, 2000, p. 7).

Analysis and Findings

As previously mentioned, the concept of templatability can be used to explain how aesthetic similarities appear across content on digital platforms (Leaver et al., 2020). The overarching characteristics of templates are their memorability and replicability, but, as pointed out by Abidin and Kaye (2021), they come in "all shapes and sizes" (p. 60). So far, I have described singular meme templates, but I argue that templates can be conceptualized in a broader sense. The analysis will highlight how the templatability of TikTok roughly exists on three different content levels:

- Level 1: singular trends and memes.
- Level 2: content genres and subgenres.
- Level 3: overarching and defining characteristics of content.

Level 1 – singular trends and memes – is characterized by very rigid templates that include, e.g., the same sound or dance moves. Due to the rapidly evolving nature of trending content on TikTok, these

templates are frequently replaced with new ones, resulting in their short lifespan on the app. On level 2 – content genres and subgenres – the templates are less rigid, but generally, there are significant repetitions in terms of structure, storytelling, and characteristics. The genre and subgenre templates are reshapable and adaptable, making them more volatile but also longer lasting on the platform compared to the level 1 templates. Finally, level 3 – overarching and defining characteristics of content – cannot be conceptualized as specific, delimited templates but rather as expressing the overall templatability of the content. This level contains the most significant characteristics embedded in the videos across the entire sample, in different variations and combinations.

Exploring TikTok video content through this theoretical framework allows for a deeper understanding of the different layers in the categorization – specifically through the three template levels – and how these emerge, take shape, and develop over time. This further contributes to the understanding of the digital content culture on TikTok and the platform’s nature, which are characterized by platform-specific norms, rapidness, creativity, and algorithmic logic. The following section will demonstrate this theoretical conceptualization of templates through the analysis of the identified TikTok video content genres and subgenres.

TikTok Content Genres and Subgenres

Daily Life

Daily life is the largest genre in this analysis and consists of 339 videos, corresponding to 28% of the sample. The mundane is a prevalent characteristic in TikTok videos, often surrounding the topics of the videos, which are typically recorded during what seems to be the creators’ day-to-day lives (Boffone, 2022, p. 5ff.). What makes *daily life* stand out as a genre on its own is the specific way of *documenting* daily life, which is the main characteristic of these videos.

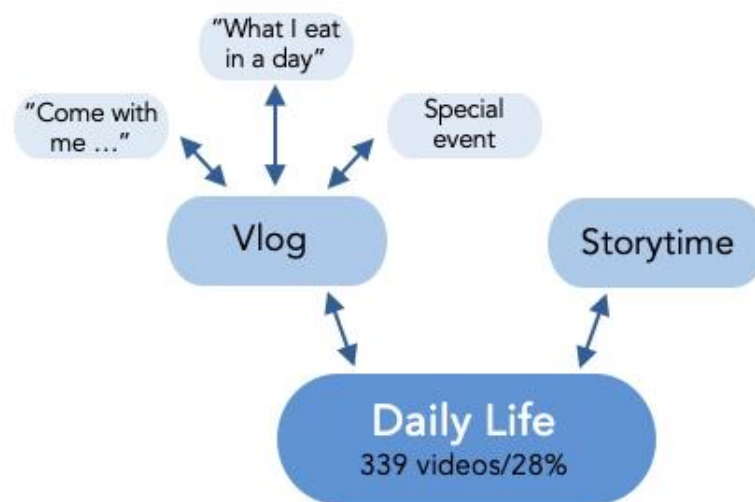


Figure 1: Visualization of daily life genre and subgenres.

One way of doing this is through a *vlog*-style video (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 39 ff.), where the creator shows clips of one or several selected parts of their day. This specific way of structuring a video, which can vary in editing, is part of the template of this subgenre. Vlogs (short for video blogs) are one of the most central cultural forms of user-generated content on YouTube (ibid.), TikTok has previously been defined more generally as “bite-size YouTube” (Kaye et al., 2022, p. 11). Image 4 shows screenshots from a vlog-style video, where the creator documents her dad during a family vacation. The caption reads “fars fede ferie [smiley emoji] ingen ved hvor sjovt det har været at iagttage ham hele ugen” [dad’s awesome vacation [smiley emoji] nobody knows how funny it has been to observe him all week], which underlines the actual *documentation* of her dad’s behavior as a core element of the video. Simply *documenting* a specific situation, day or event without a performative setup and script is a key element of the identified vlog template. Another element that can be considered part of this template is the ‘memefication’ happening in the video. For instance, the creator comments on her

dad's behavior through the textual layer inserted in the video, e.g., “mad bc [because] no beer yet”. The way TikTok creators ‘memefy’ everyday situations has also been noticed by other scholars (e.g., Schellewald, 2021, p. 1445ff.) and can be considered a common practice in the creation of this type of content.

As shown in Figure 1, three different sub-subgenres were identified in the analysis, namely “Come with me [insert activity]”, “What I eat in a day”, and videos documenting a special event. They differ from regular vlogs as they are narratively structured around a specific activity and are thereby strictly limited. Besides vlogs, *story times* were the only other identified subgenre of *daily life*. Story time videos mainly consist of the creator telling a story directly to the camera about something they have experienced – typically shocking, funny, or in other ways out of the ordinary.

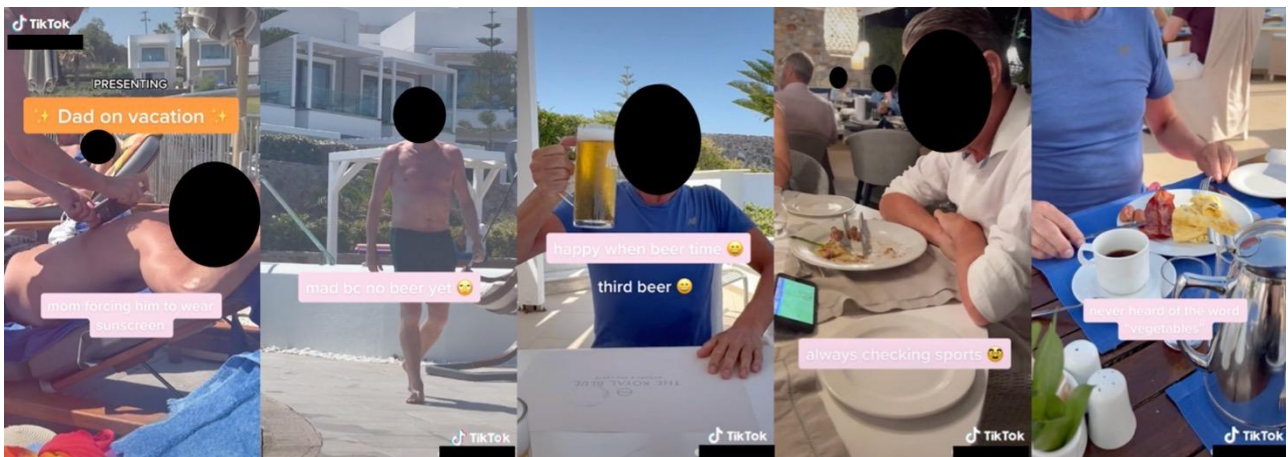


Image 4: Screenshots of different frames from a vlog video.

Performance

The *performance* genre contains some of the most widely known types of TikTok content, such as dance, lip sync, and point of view (POV) videos. *Performance* is the second largest genre and consists of 307 videos, corresponding to 25.5% of the sample. One of the most prominent characteristics of

this genre is the high level of (self-)staging, with the creator *performing* in the videos in one way or another. This genre contains seven subgenres: *lip sync*, *dance*, *sketch*, *meme*, *POV*, *music*, and *challenges*.

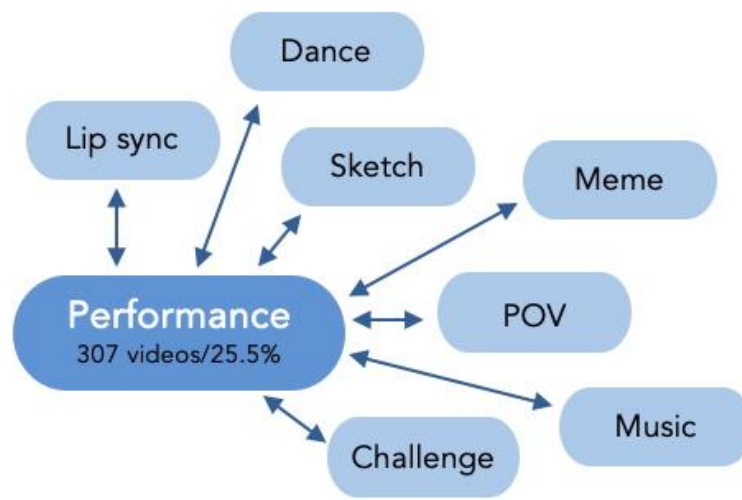


Figure 2: Visualization of the performance genre and subgenres.

Image 5 shows screenshots from the meme subgenre. In the video, the creator uses a trending sound to create the “When you get thrown into a dance circle but...” meme, which was a popular audio meme template on TikTok in spring 2022. The video shows a made-up situation where the creator is ‘thrown’ into a dance circle, initially appearing shy and unsure of how to act, while the sound consists of people cheering as a song starts to play. When the lyrics of the song begin, the creator’s expression suddenly changes, and they confidently start dancing in a way reminiscent of a specific dance scene from the teen series *The Vampire Diaries*. The reference to a popular piece of pop culture makes

this meme highly relatable and, in some cases, nostalgic for fans of the series. Furthermore, it also makes the meme easy to replicate, as other creators can simply add a reference to other memorable dance moves from other movies or series. Therefore, this is also an example of how specific meme templates can be flexible and adapted to different contexts. The video showcases how “in-jokes”, *identification humor*, are often an important component of audio memes, just as they are of memes more broadly (Miltner, 2014, p. 4). In-jokes facilitate online communities and group identity through exclusively shared knowledge – in this case, a pop cultural reference to a teen series. Therefore, possessing this type of shared knowledge is often a necessity to fully understand memes. Structurally, the template of this subgenre simply consists of a stable and repeated audio element, along with changing visual and, often, textual elements.



Image 5: Screenshots of different frames from an audio meme video.

Self-expression

The *self-expression* genre covers a range of videos in which the creators express themselves in various ways. *Self-expression* consists of 144 videos, corresponding to 12% of the sample. As shown in Figure 3, the genre contains four subgenres: *transition*, *reaction*, *thoughts*, and *audiovisual selfie*.

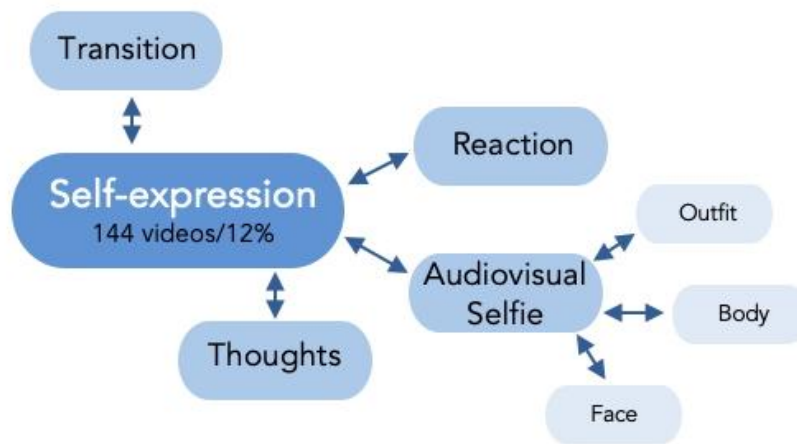


Figure 3: Visualization of the self-expression genre and subgenres.

Image 6 shows an example of a transition video where the creator first appears in a towel without makeup and then ‘transitions’ to reveal herself fully made up, with styled hair and a complete outfit. Using a *transition* is a way to make a seamless cut from one clip to another in a video, which can be done in numerous ways. Transitions often involve starting a movement in the first clip, then cutting to the next clip where the movement continues and is synchronized with the sound used in the video. The template of this subgenre is therefore quite fixed, as it is always structured around the transitional

element and the added sound. Sometimes, this also includes the creator lip-syncing lyrics to underline the transition effect even more. The three other subgenres can briefly be described as: *Reaction*: the creator expresses their immediate reaction to something they are eating, drinking, opening, etc., *Thoughts*: the creator expresses their thoughts, opinions, or feelings about a given topic or a general aspect of life, and *Audiovisual selfie*: the creator shows off their look, focusing on their outfit, face (makeup and/or hair), or body.

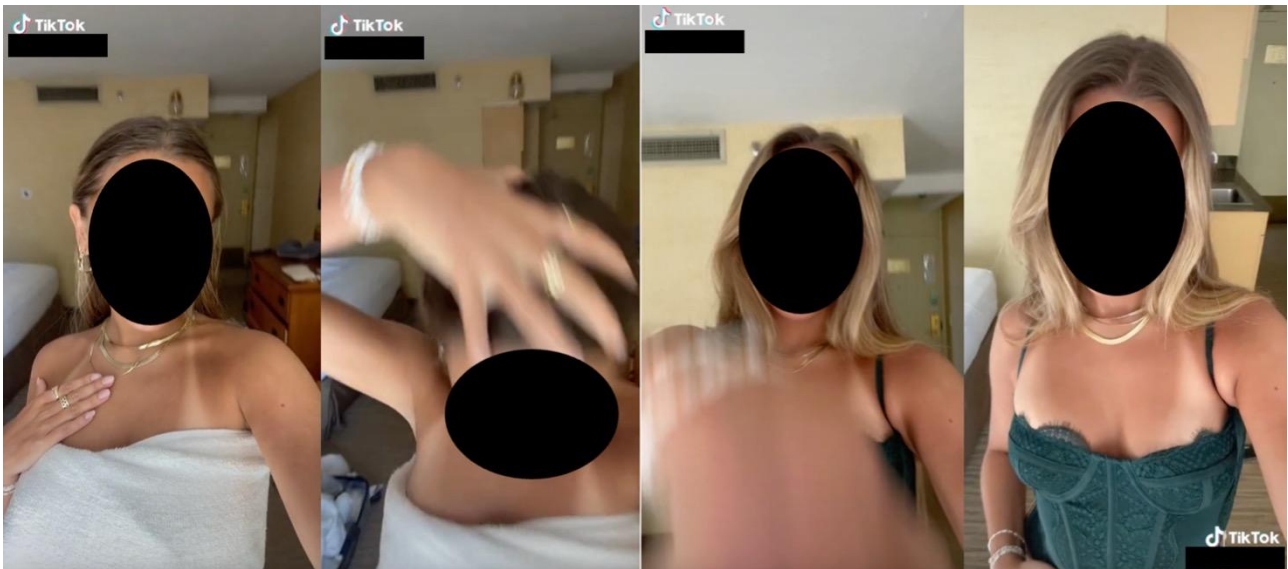


Image 6: Screenshots of different frames from a transition video.

Instructive

This genre mostly consists of different tutorial videos relating to a wide range of subjects, such as food, fitness, and do-it-yourself (DIY). The *Instructive* genre consists of 106 videos, corresponding to 9% of the sample. Tutorial or life hack videos are a well-known type of video on YouTube, where they, just like vlogs, have been present for many years (Burgess & Green, 2018). This type of video, often structured like a montage, is also highlighted by Schellewald as a specific communicative form

on TikTok (2021, p. 1448). Besides the more practically focused tutorial videos, the sample also includes videos where the creator explains a topic on a more theoretical, educational level, where the purpose is not to show viewers how to do a task but to educate them about a topic the creator finds important.

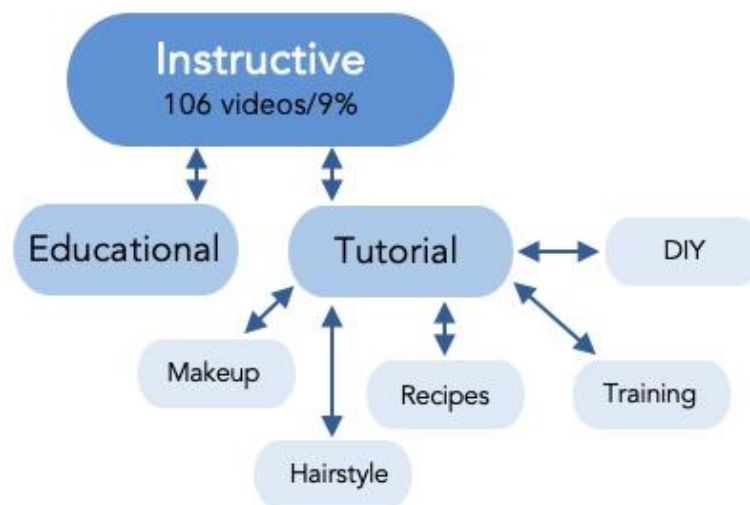


Figure 4: Visualization of the instructive genre and subgenres.

Image 7 shows two examples of classic tutorial videos – a recipe video and a **DIY** furniture video.

These two videos follow a common tutorial template, where the needed supplies are first showcased, followed by the different steps, and finally the finished product. The visual process in such videos is typically supported by a guiding voice-over by the creator. As shown in Figure 4, the identified tutorials also included videos related to makeup, hairstyle, and training.



Image 7: Screenshots of different frames from two tutorial videos.

External

The *external* genre consists of various videos where the visual content, or parts of it, has not been recorded by the creator but instead originates from another source. *External* consists of 210 videos, corresponding to 17.5% of the sample. As shown in Figure 5, two different subgenres were identified in the sample: *clip* and *fan edit*. The clip videos consist of a single clip of audiovisual material from either a movie or series, TV, or from another source (e.g., a public security camera recording).

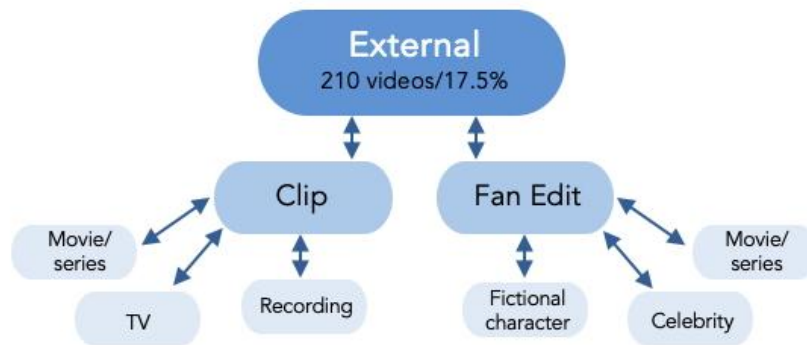


Figure 5: Visualization of the external genre and subgenres.

Image 8 shows an example of a fan edit video. In this type of video, the creator typically puts together several clips to make a tribute to whatever or whomever they are a fan of, such as a fictional character or a celebrity. The screenshots are from a fan-made video of the character Steve Harrington (played by Joe Keery) from the Netflix series *Stranger Things*. In this video, clips of the character have been edited together, and various elements have been added. The creator has added a textual layer to the video with captions (left and right screenshots) and parts of a made-up inner monologue (middle screenshot). This is an example of how traditional media content – here, clips from a fictional series – is mixed with user-generated content, thereby creating new content. This way of mixing content is not exclusive to TikTok but is also popular on, e.g., YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2018). John Hartley has previously described this mode of cultural meaning-making as *redaction*, which he defines as “the production of new material by the process of editing existing content” (2008, p. 112). Videos in this genre generally do not follow a specific template and are, to some extent, restricted by the available content of the embedded piece of media. However, it should be noted that specific fan edit templates

similar to singular meme templates, e.g., related to a specific celebrity, exist on TikTok, but none were identified in the sample.



Image 8: Screenshots of different frames from a fan edit video.

Meta

This genre contains videos that can be described as “contents that address TikTok as such” (Schellewald, 2021, p. 1449). This is the smallest genre, comprising only 11 videos, which corresponds to 1% of the sample.



Figure 6: Visualization of the meta genre, which contains no subgenres.

Image 9 shows an example of a typical video in this genre. Meta videos generally follow a fixed template (Schellewald, 2021, p. 1449-1450), starting with a ‘call-out’ directed at the viewer, here: “If this cursed audio is on your FYP...”, which is followed by the reveal: “you are NOT on the mentally stable side of this app”, and, in this case, ended with a ‘call to action’: “Send this to other unstable friends ;)” (Image 9). The meta element lies in how the creator hints that the algorithm tailors the viewers’ FYPs based on their mental state. The so-called “cursed audio” consists of a mix of the flute from “My Heart Will Go On” by Céline Dion and the song “All Star” by Smash Mouth, which, together with the creator’s dance moves and the underlying aspect of mental instability, creates an element of funny absurdity.

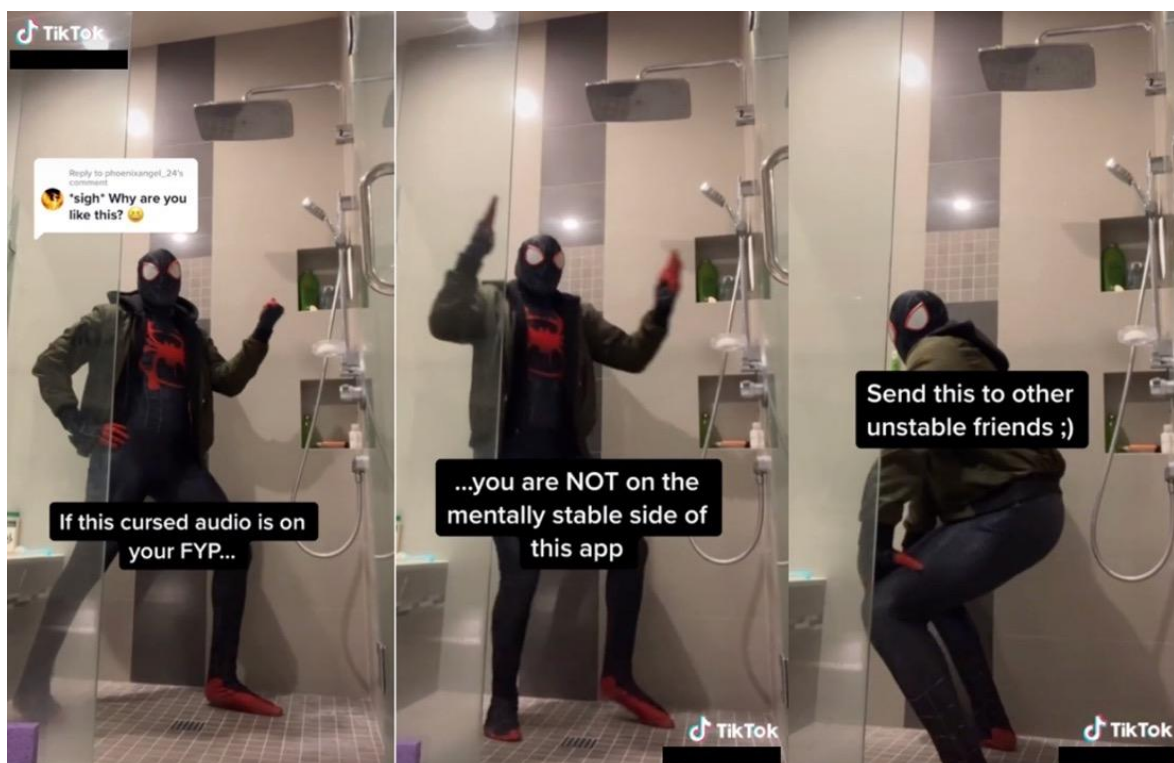


Image 9: Screenshots of different frames from a meta video.

Advertising

This genre includes different kinds of advertising videos in the data, such as sponsored videos from creators, videos from company profiles, and regular ads⁶ appearing on the platform in between the user-generated content. *Advertising* consists of 83 videos, corresponding to 7% of the sample⁷.

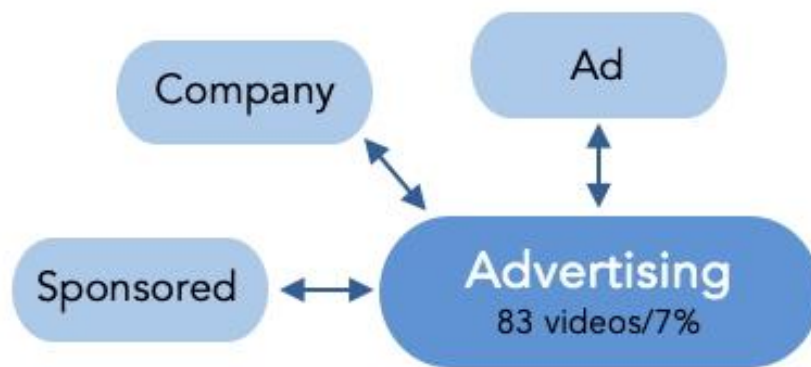


Figure 7: Visualization of the advertising genre and subgenres.

⁶ The ads on TikTok are one of the ways the platform generates revenue. Brands can use *TikTok for Business* (<https://www.tiktok.com/business/en>) to advertise their products and services.

⁷ Regular ads are most likely a more prominent part of the participants' FYPs than it appears in this analysis. Because the dataset consists of 1,200 unique videos, any recurring ads across the participants' data are only represented in the dataset once. Therefore, even if an ad was shown to all the participants several times, it will only 'count' as one video in this analysis.

The sponsored content in the sample is very similar to that on Instagram and YouTube and is typically created by individuals who, at least to some extent, profit from content creation. Depending on the aim of the sponsored video, such as advertising a product or an experience, the templates vary. Generally, the videos follow a structure where the creator first introduces and shows the product, then demonstrates how it works and reacts to it, and finally highlights information such as a discount code and where to buy it. On TikTok, a currently popular sound or trend is often part of the sponsored content as an attempt to try to ‘please the algorithm’. The videos are tagged with either a “Paid Partnership” button or hashtags like “#ad” in the caption (the advertising rules vary depending on the country in which the creator resides).

Image 10 shows screenshots from an advertising video from a company profile, which is an example of how companies and organizations adapt their advertising and communication to the digital culture of TikTok. The video follows the template of the meme “It’s so bad I want to give you a 0, but that’s not possible, so I give you a 1”, which is an audio clip from an episode of the TV show *America’s Next Top Model* where the host and judge Tyra Banks comments on one of the contestant’s photo. The video is from the Danish organization Rådet for Sikker Trafik [The Council of Safe Traffic] and aims to remind people to wear a helmet when using an electric scooter. In this fictional setup, a police officer stops a young man riding an electric scooter without a helmet, while the first part of the sound is playing (“It’s so bad I want to give you a 0”). Then, the next part of the sound (“but that’s not possible, so I give you a...”) appears as a textual layer on the video, creating a buildup regarding what the police officer will do. When the audio says “one”, the text instead shows “1.500 kr. bøde” [1,500 DKK fine), which underlines the consequence of not wearing a helmet. Similar to the other meme example (Image 5), the sound is the stable element of the template, to which the creator can then add a new context through video and text.

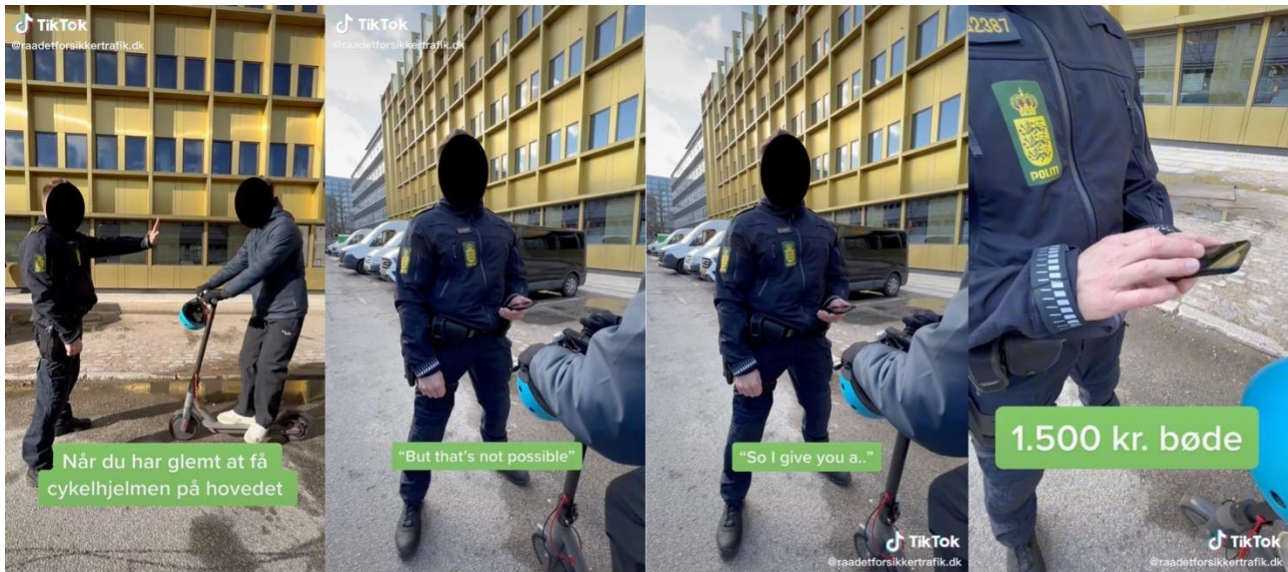


Image 10: Screenshots of different frames from an advertising video.

TikTok Templates

As I implied earlier in this article – templates *do* come in different shapes and sizes. This is particularly emphasized by the varying degrees to which the different templates are fixed in terms of structure, content, and characteristics. Not surprisingly, the singular meme templates – level 1, exemplified by the audio memes (Image 5 and 10) – are the most rigid. Some of the level 2 subgenres, *vlog* and *tutorial*, also present a quite fixed structure. These two subgenres are well-known types of user-generated content and have been prevalent on YouTube for many years (Burgess & Green, 2018), and, therefore, the subgenres build on the already existing YouTube templates, which have been adjusted to TikTok in different ways, e.g., being shorter in length. These well-known subgenres evolved over the years into fixed templates. Early examples of vlogs were typically webcam monologues (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 40), which differs significantly from the template we know today, showing how templates form and solidify over time. Singular meme templates have a short lifespan on TikTok, where they quickly rise to fame, peak, and then fade away. Because these types of templates are born with

fixed elements, such as a specific sound, they are also almost instantly cemented as templates on the platform.

Returning to the point that well-known subgenres have more fixed templates, this can also be applied to their overarching genre. *Daily life*, which contains the well-known subgenres *vlog* and *story time*, has a significantly more stable template than most of the other genres. The *daily life* template is overall characterized by including *documentation* of a limited sequence, one or more clips portraying everyday life, and an element of ‘memefication’. On the contrary, e.g., the *performance* genre cannot be conceptualized as a template based on this sample, which is, at least partly, due to its wide variety of subgenres that all contain their own templates and characterizing elements. Overall, *performance* as a genre is characterized by simply containing a ‘staged’ performance of an act, which cannot be considered a template as such.

As previously mentioned, the templatability of digital platforms is shaped by vernacular norms, algorithmic recommendation, and users’ desire to ‘please the algorithm’ (Leaver et al., 2020). On TikTok, this is reinforced by circumscribed creativity (Abidin & Kaye, 2021) and, closely related, mimesis embedded in the infrastructure (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). When users create well-known types of content, they are likely aware of how to follow the template and thereby ‘please the algorithm’ to achieve more engagement. The algorithm on TikTok can be further pleased by adding elements like a trending song, which viewers are then encouraged to use through the “Use this sound” feature. This results in further streamlining of the content on the platform.

Exploring TikTok content through the theoretical framework of templatability enables an analysis that considers both individual videos and their characteristics, and how they can be grouped into broader genres. This approach sheds light on how these genres are formed, what characterizes them, and the similarities and differences across them, thereby offering a deeper understanding of TikTok content beyond this specific sample of 1,200 videos. Additionally, the framework facilitates reflection on how various templates and levels of templates have emerged, evolved, and, in some

cases, transformed over time. As TikTok is fundamentally a content-focused platform, this analysis not only provides insights into contemporary digital content culture but also into the dynamics of one of the most prominent and influential platforms in recent years.

The Core Elements of TikTok-ness

Through the analysis, I identified four overarching, defining, core characteristics of the TikTok videos in the sample: (1) *the mundane*, (2) *the comedic tone*, (3) *the use of platform features*, and (4) *the significance of audio*. The first two are related to the narrativity and storytelling of the videos, the third one to the platform features, and the fourth one falls in between. These characteristics are present in different ways and combinations across the entire sample of videos, and therefore, several of them are often collectively present in the same videos. The four characteristics express the overall templatability of the analyzed TikTok content, as elements of them are repeatedly embedded across different templates and levels. Collectively, they can be understood as core elements of what makes the content ‘TikTok-esque’ and, to some extent, differentiates it from content on similar platforms. I refer to this quartet of characteristics as *TikTok-ness*, which constitutes the common digital culture expressed in the content. The following section will elaborate on these points.

The Mundane

The mundane element has been defined by several scholars as a general characteristic of the content on the platform (Barta & Andalibi, 2021; Boffone, 2022; Kennedy, 2020; Schellewald, 2021). TikTok is not the first user-generated content platform where creators share their everyday lives (Schellewald, 2021, p. 1446), but due to its rise in popularity during the first COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, this characteristic seems to have been further reinforced. Back then, the majority of the content on the platform was recorded in the creators’ homes. Kennedy (2020) argues that the combination of

TikTok's rise in visibility and the circumstances of the lockdowns can be seen as contributing to the transformation of *bedroom culture* (McRobbie & Garber, 2006). Private and safe spaces, such as a creator's teenage bedroom, were made very visible and public to other users of the app. Showcasing these types of spaces is not exclusive to TikTok, but because of the app's status as authentic, unfiltered, and relatable, the mundanity of such spaces is further encouraged (Boffone, 2022, p. 6; Kennedy, 2020). Generally, this characteristic is visually expressed through the settings of the videos, which, in addition to homes, include other everyday locations such as schools and workplaces (Schellewald, 2021, p. 1445). An example that highlights this characteristic is the "When you get thrown into a dance circle but..." meme (Image 5). The video showcases what is assumed to be the creator's teenage bedroom, where piles of items on the floor, an unmade bed, and a bottle of alcohol placed on top of the mirror in the background are clearly visible. Kennedy describes how this type of showcasing becomes a signifier of a "discursively constructed normality", which encapsulates TikTok's aesthetic, tone, and relatability (2020, p. 1072).

Closely tied to relatability is *authenticity*, which is embedded in different ways in the content on the platform, e.g., through the portrayal of mundane experiences (Barta & Andalibi, 2021; Trillò, 2024). One example is the vlog video where the creator documents their dad's behavior during their family vacation (Image 5). The video shows stereotypical 'dad behavior' as seen through the eyes of the creator, which many viewers will recognize from their own families. Authenticity is valued by the users (Barta & Andalibi, 2021), and it is therefore assumed that they also engage more with content that contains this quality.

The Comedic Tone

Humor is a central part of the digital culture on TikTok (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023). The comedic tone in much of the content on the platform is likely one of the key reasons behind its popularity and is also emphasized by several scholars as an overall characteristic of the content (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Schellewald, 2021; Trilló, 2024). As noted by Schellewald (2021), the comedic tone spans different types of content and is not only embedded in videos portraying comedy more directly, which is also the case in this study. The audio memes (Images 5 and 10) showcase the comedic aspect through a combination of audio, visuals, and text, demonstrating how these elements complement each other and ultimately deliver the humorous point in unison. This is a key characteristic of both internet memes in general and audio memes on TikTok. As previously mentioned, many TikTok videos contain the ‘memefication’ of everyday situations, as in the exemplified vlog (Image 4). This approach is also applied to content covering more serious topics, such as the political culture of young people (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). In contrast to the more ‘obviously’ funny videos, such as the audio memes, more understated humor can also be found in the sample, e.g., as part of the *Stranger Things* fan edit video (Image 8). Here, the comedic element is expressed through the inserted inner monologue, which underlines funny aspects of the clips from the series while also serving as commentary from the creator. As previously mentioned, TikTok humor often relies on in-jokes (Miltner, 2014, p. 4) requiring shared pop or internet culture knowledge. As exemplified through the audio meme (Image 5), the viewer needs to be familiar with the series *Vampire Diaries* to understand the funny aspect, making TikTok more appealing to certain groups.

The Use of Platform Features

The video examples in the analysis showcase that it is common practice to use TikTok’s platform features in the creation of content, as all of them contain at least one, the most used ones, being added sound and text. The different features are very easily accessible on TikTok, as most of them can be accessed and added to videos through the editing page, which is the same page where the recording of

videos takes place. As pointed out by Burgess and Green, experiments with aesthetic trends and different types of technology – such as filters and layers on TikTok – are a common characteristic of user-generated content in general (2018, p. 78). Because of the embedded in-app features, TikTok is not only a content distribution platform but also a content creation platform, in contrast to, e.g., YouTube, where the content is recorded and edited beforehand and then uploaded to the platform. A key feature is adding text to the videos, often in the form of captions (Image 7), contextualization (Image 4), or as part of a meme (Images 5 and 10). The most used and dominant feature is “Use this sound”, which I have also previously highlighted as a very important element of content creation and the platform in general. Out of the 1,200 videos in the sample, 859 videos (71.6%) contain added sound in the form of an audio bit or a song, highlighting the significance of this element in TikTok content. This point will be elaborated on in the following section.

The Significance of Audio

I conceptualize the element of audio in TikTok content as a separate characteristic, and not only as part of the above feature-focused characteristic, because it is such a vital part of the content and the digital culture. When TikTok became widely known in 2020, the app was most famous for its dance and lip sync videos (Savic, 2021), and, therefore, audio has always been a significant part of the content on TikTok. The audio often serves as a driving factor in the storytelling of the videos, and its significance is one of the defining characteristics that distinguishes TikTok from other similar platforms (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Trillò, 2024; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). As previously mentioned, the added sound in memes typically serves as the punchline or otherwise emphasizes the comedic aspect. In the “When you get thrown into a dance circle but...” meme (Image 5), the added sound narratively structures the video. In the first part of the video, the audio consists of people cheering, and then a song

starts to play, while the creator appears shy and unsure of how to act. This completely changes when the lyrics of the song start, as the creator simultaneously begins to dance confidently.

Besides how the sound can function as a direct narrative part of a video, it can also function as a more underlying aspect of the storytelling. In the sample, the song “Love You So” by *The King Khan and BBQ Show* appeared several times. The song is used both as the primary sound and as background music in videos where the creator typically speaks over it. “Love You So” is upbeat and happy, thereby instantly adding good vibes to a video and being very recognizable to the viewers. As previously mentioned, adding a popular sound to a video can be a way of trying to ‘please the algorithm’, thereby hopefully increasing the chance of the video being shown to more viewers. In TikTok’s yearly report from 2022, they state that 13 out of 14 number one songs on the *Billboard Hot 100* were driven by trends on TikTok (TikTok Newsroom, 2022). Therefore, more and more people in the music industry have TikTok in mind when producing and promoting music, because a viral hit on TikTok can potentially lead to millions of streams (Oddershede, 2022).

Mapping of Content

The figure below shows the mapping of the identified genres, subgenres, sub-subgenres, and the defining characteristics – a visualization of the comprehensive analysis conducted in this article.

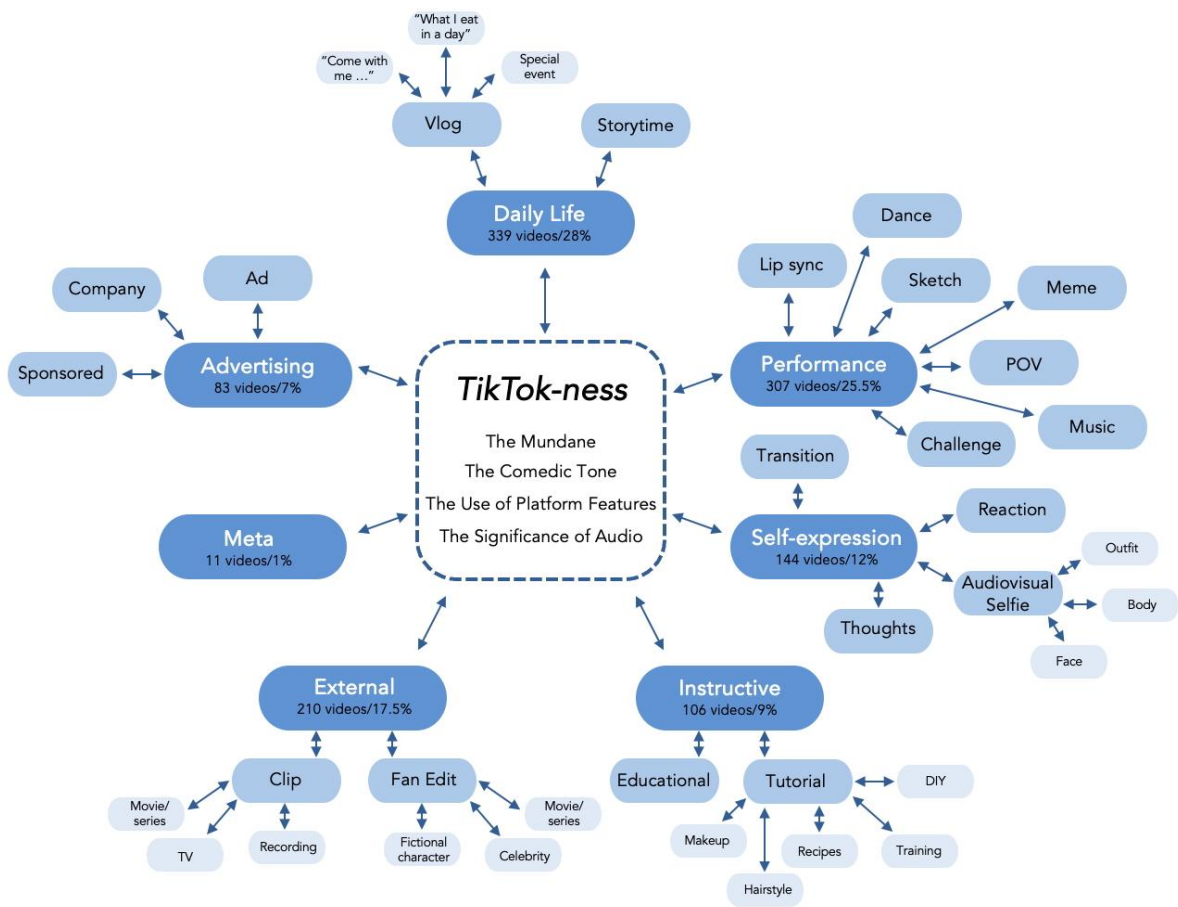


Figure 8: Overview of the TikTok genres, subgenres, and defining characteristics.

The different types of genres, represented by the blue-colored boxes, showcase the complexity and diversity of the content in the sample. The four characteristics – embedded in *TikTok-ness* – in the middle emphasize that, despite many differences, there are significant repeated elements across the content. The arrows, going both ways, visualize the interplay between the identified genres, templates, and levels of templates, and how they reciprocally affect one another.

Conclusion

The video content that young Danish TikTok users are presented with on TikTok is characterized by being diverse while also containing significant repeated elements. Through the mapping of content, seven overarching genres – *daily life*, *performance*, *self-expression*, *instructive*, *external*, *meta*, and *advertising* – were identified in the sample together with several subgenres and sub-subgenres. The video examples highlighted in the analysis show how the genres differ from each other through elements such as storytelling, structure, and aesthetic complexities. The analysis of content templates revealed a spectrum of fixedness, where singular memes, born with a rigid structure, and well-known subgenres such as vlogs, which have been molded over many years, appear to be the most fixed. The latter underlines how templates develop and gradually take form over time. The template-focused analytical approach in this study offers insight into how digital content emerges and evolves, as well as how templates exist on different levels, which is not only relevant in the context of TikTok but also valuable in the study of content across other digital platforms.

The range of different genres, subgenres, sub-subgenres, and video examples highlights the complexity of TikTok content and, more generally, represents the volatile and ever-changing nature of the platform. Moreover, four recurring characteristics across the 1,200 videos were identified: *the mundane*, *the comedic tone*, *the use of platform features*, and *the significance of audio*. These overarching and defining characteristics express the overall templatability of the analyzed TikTok content as they are repeatedly embedded across the different templates. They represent the core elements of the content and thereby what makes it ‘TikTok-esque’. Collectively, I refer to them as *TikTok-ness*, which constitutes the shared digital culture expressed in the TikTok video content collected from Danish users. Elements of this characterization are not exclusive to video content on TikTok. As previously mentioned, mundanity has been prevalent in user-generated content for a long time, e.g., as a very central aspect of the content on YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 38ff.) and, similarly,

comedy has long been cemented as one of the appealing factors of digital content in general, e.g., in internet memes. This highlights how TikTok is not only shaped by the present but also by digital culture and platforms that came before. Contrary, *the use of platform features* and *the significance of audio*, and how these are embedded in the platform's structure, is considered more native to TikTok. These characteristics are very prevalent on TikTok and, often, play a significant part in the structure, expression, and narrative of the content. Additionally, because they are features embedded in TikTok's infrastructure, they represent a form of added agency to the platform itself concerning the users' creation of content. Their prevalence in the sample implies that TikTok successfully circumscribes creativity (Kaye et al., 2021) through nudging users to use the features in their content creation.

The interplay between the four elements of TikTok-ness – *the mundane*, *the comedic tone*, *the use of platform features*, and *the significance of audio* – is what defines and distinguishes the content and digital culture of TikTok. A seemingly mundane moment, framed in a comedic tone, paired with a trending audio bit, and enhanced by on-screen text, becomes a rich, multilayered form of expression. As the content, the digital culture, and the platform itself continuously change, the elements of TikTok-ness might also develop and reshape – new elements might be added, and others fade away – reflecting the nature of TikTok. Capturing elements and aspects of this constantly changing platform is difficult. This study has attempted to do so by analyzing 1,200 videos, contributing new insights into the content of this complex platform and its digital culture. I hope that this study will benefit future research in the field and serve as an inspiration or a starting point for other scholars who wish to investigate the complexities of TikTok content.

Limitations

Given that this study is based on a qualitative sample of 24 Danish users and considering the ever-changing nature of TikTok, the mapping of genres should not be expected to represent other similar samples collected in different geographical or temporal contexts. Because the content on TikTok constantly changes, the mapping risks becoming quickly outdated and should be considered more of a snapshot than a long-lasting display. This specifically relates to the level 1 templates – singular trends and memes, which will undoubtedly be quickly replaced by new ones, and to the level 2 templates – content genres and subgenres, which will be reshaped to varying degrees by the continuous changes in content. I have tried to reduce this concern by categorizing the videos into different genres (Neale, 1980) based on repetitive elements and structure rather than the ever-changing topics and themes. The defining characteristics of the genres and subgenres, as well as the four characteristics of TikTok-ness, constitute longer-lasting findings, which are also validated by their comparability to other scholars' work.

Further, it is important to note the limitations of employing the method of data donation for this study. Firstly, there are several potential sample biases to be aware of, which might have deterred potential participants from participating. Data donation is still a relatively new method – especially outside of academia – and therefore, potential participants might be unsure of what is required of them if they choose to participate. Additionally, the often critical discussions of TikTok might also have deterred potential participants from participating, specifically, the ongoing discussion about TikTok's possible violations of the users' data privacy, relating to the collection of users' data and who can access this data (Milmo, 2024). Additionally, some might not want to give access to data, as they do not fully know what it contains and therefore cannot control what information they provide access to. As mentioned by other scholars (Boeschoten et al., 2020; Breuer et al., 2023; Ohme et al., 2021), the level of digital literacy amongst the desired target group can also lead to sample biases. However, given the young age group of this study, this was not a concern here. There are other limitations of the method, and, in general, methodological and ethical discussion points, which would be interesting to

unfold, but given the scope of this article, those discussions will not be made here. Other scholars have made such discussions related to data donation studies, e.g., focusing on the iOS Screen Time function (Ohme et al., 2021), Instagram (Van Driel et al., 2022), and Facebook (Breuer et al., 2022).

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Article 3:

**The Experience of TikTok: Scrolling,
Algorithmic Flow, and Shared Agency
among Danish Users**

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Communication Research*

The Experience of TikTok: Scrolling, Algorithmic Flow, and Shared Agency among Danish Users

Abstract

This article explores how young Danes (16–29) experience TikTok, focusing on its role in everyday life, comparisons with other media, and users' perceptions of agency within the platform's algorithmic flow. Drawing on 24 in-depth interviews, the study shows that TikTok functions as a dynamic, immersive hybrid media platform, combining features of Instagram, YouTube, and televisual flow. Users describe their engagement as largely passive – 'leaning back' and receiving personalized content – yet their practices, such as liking, saving, and scrolling, actively shape the algorithmic feed. This interplay produces a continuous, tailored content flow in which human and algorithmic agency are co-constituted. The findings highlight TikTok's hybrid, negotiated user experience, demonstrating that understanding the platform requires moving beyond simple active/passive dichotomies to consider the mutual shaping of user behavior and algorithmic processes.

Keywords: TikTok, user-study, youth, algorithmic flow, agency

Introduction

During recent years, TikTok has become an integrated part of many young people's media practices and everyday lives. Known for its strong recommendation algorithm and highly personalized For You Page (FYP), TikTok offers a tailored user experience that seems to play a central role in its appeal to users. While prior research has examined users' understanding of the algorithm and content curation on TikTok (Felaco, 2025; Issar, 2024; Klug et al., 2021; Schellewald, 2022; Siles et al., 2022), less attention have been brought to how users experience and perceive TikTok more broadly, and how they experience the interplay between their own agency and the platform's algorithmically structured flow.

This article argues that understanding TikTok requires looking beyond its features and functions to consider how users themselves experience and co-construct the platform. TikTok is actively shaped by the practices of its users: through content creation, circulation, and interaction, they contribute to the platform's distinctive digital culture, generating a shared aesthetic, tone, and atmosphere (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Schellewald, 2021; Author, forthcoming). Mimesis plays a central

role, embedded in both the affordances and the content, with much of the material involving users imitating or adapting others' videos, for example via the "Use this sound" feature (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). In addition, even non-creating users influence the platform by liking, saving, or in other ways interacting with content, they shape the recommendations that appear on others' FYPs (TikTok Newsroom, 2020), illustrating the continuous negotiation between human action and algorithmic operations. In this context, the concepts of *agency* and *flow* are crucial for understanding TikTok. Users do not simply act on the platform, nor are they completely acted upon; instead, their actions and the algorithmic processes of the platform co-constitute each other. Through practices such as scrolling, liking, and saving, users train the algorithm, which in turn structures the flow of content in ways that sustain engagement, attention, and immersion. This hybrid interaction generates a unique form of digital flow, where the platform delivers a continuous, algorithmically tailored stream of content, and users negotiate their role within it.

By examining how Danish users aged 16–29 experience TikTok, how they relate it to other media, and how they articulate their own agency in relation to that of the platform, this article contributes empirically and conceptually to research on TikTok and digital platforms more broadly. Empirically, it offers in-depth insights into young users' everyday experiences of TikTok, including how they understand the platform and perceive the role of algorithmic processes in shaping their engagement. Conceptually, the article advances discussions of agency in platform studies by foregrounding the intertwined and relational nature of human and algorithmic agency as it is experienced from the users' perspectives. More broadly, the article contributes to ongoing debates about how digital platforms mediate everyday life and how TikTok, in particular, should be conceptualized within the contemporary media landscape. By centering users' experiences as a key analytical entry point, it highlights the cultural and communicative significance of TikTok as a hybrid media platform rather than a purely user-driven or algorithmically autonomous system. While TikTok practices vary across regional contexts (Boffone, 2022, p. 3), the findings have relevance beyond the Nordic setting, as many patterns of use, perception, and engagement resonate with existing international research.

Firstly, the theoretical foundation, focusing on *agency* and *flow*, is explained, followed by a description of the methodology of the study. Based on 24 in-depth interviews with young users, the findings focus on (1) TikTok's role in users' daily routines, (2) how users perceive and compare TikTok to other media, and (3) how users articulate their agency in relation to the platform's algorithmically structured flow, revealing the hybrid, negotiated nature of their experiences.

Theoretical Foundation

The concepts of *agency* and *flow* form the theoretical foundation of this article and are closely intertwined in contemporary media environments, particular in relation to algorithmically curated platforms such as TikTok. While the terms originate from different scholarly traditions, both are applied here to illuminate how users influence and are influenced by TikTok.

Agency

In media contexts, agency is often associated media producers, yet within media theory it denotes broader ideas of autonomy, creativity, and self-determination (Buckingham, 2017). Debates about the relationship between media and audiences have frequently framed agency in binary terms – powerful media versus powerful audiences, manipulation versus resistance, passivity versus activity (ibid.). Media audience research has historically oscillated between emphasizing powerful media (structure), as in media effects research, and powerful audiences (agency), as in U&G and active audience theory. These approaches have typically been treated separately, and in the 1980s and 1990s this led to a division between audience scholars and political-economy scholars, often resulting in mutual mischaracterization and a polarized field.

With the rise of digital and social media, claims about ‘powerful audiences’ re-emerged, framing users as active participants. Buckingham (2017), however, argues that this optimism overlooks the commercial interests of platforms that monetize user data – user participation does not necessarily equal agency. When media sociology primarily addressed legacy mass media, the question of agency was simple as it was associated with media producers and audiences, whereas the agential capacities of digital media – especially in relation to algorithmic systems – are far more complex (Hepp, 2022). Building on this, scholars have increasingly reconsidered agency, drawing on *Actor-Network Theory* (ANT), which showed that non-human entities can act as actants when interacting with human actants (Latour, 1991). In digital environments, agency concerns not only how humans act through technology but how algorithmic systems themselves act and intertwine with human practices (Esposito, 2017; Guzman, 2018). Hepp (2022) therefore points to *hybrid agency* approaches, which conceptualize media technologies as neither mere extensions of human intent nor fully autonomous actors, but as co-constituting agency through their interaction with users. This perspective challenges traditional human-centered models of agency, which assume full human control and see technology as merely instrumental – assumptions that may no longer capture

the behavior of modern, increasingly autonomous media technologies (ibid.). In this article, we examine how respondents understand their own agency in relation to the platform's, highlighting the hybrid form of agency that arise in these interactions. This dynamic becomes especially significant when considered together with the concept of flow.

Flow

The concept of flow has multiple meanings across academic fields. While Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) used the term to describe a psychological state of deep absorption, media studies have adopted flow to discuss the continuous streams of content. Raymond Williams (1975) famously argued that flow is the defining characteristic of television, which presents not discrete programs but a planned, seamless stream of images and sounds.

Contemporary scholarship extends Williams' concept to digital environments. Siles and Valerio-Alfaro (2025) identify three dimensions of flow that increasingly apply to algorithmic platforms: agency, reception, and technology. First, agency relates to who controls what is watched. Whereas television producers initially controlled flow, and later streaming services enabled user-driven choice (Uricchio, 2004, 2009), algorithmic platforms complicate this division. On TikTok, neither producers nor users fully shape the sequence of content, but, instead, flow is shaped through interactions between users, technologies, and corporate interests. This echoes the previously mentioned notion of hybrid forms of agency.

Second, the reception dimension concerns the audiences' experiences of flow. Algorithmic flow is optimized to capture attention, sustain engagement, and guide affective states (Brown et al., 2024). These processes, that can be described as "algo-rhythms" (Lupinacci, 2024), shape human behavior by creating repetitive content flows that guide social interactions and serve economic goals (Carmi, 2020). Drawing on Williams (1975), Coleman (2018) frames flow as an "infrastructure of feeling" that structures affective and temporal experience. Continuous updates, notifications, and autoplay features create a continuous, anticipatory present that shape how time is experienced in digital culture.

Third, flow as media engagement, focus on the material and technological aspects of viewing. On television, flow structured domestic life by keeping viewers 'glued' to the screen and part of daily routines (Oswald & Packer, 2013). This dynamic continues in the digital era, now spanning multiple screens and platforms, with users actively navigating flows across devices, reflecting both flexibility and deep entanglement with digital media (ibid.; Brown et al., 2024). Algorithmic flow is

not entirely stable. For instance, when scrolling on the FYP on TikTok, it can be disrupted by unwanted content, notifications, or social interactions that draw attention away from the FYP. These disruptions highlight the limits of both human and algorithmic agency, underscoring the negotiated, hybrid nature of user experiences on TikTok. In this article, we explore (algorithmic) flow in relation to users' experience of TikTok and, as mentioned previously, in close connection with the notion of agency.

Method

The analysis is based on 24 in-depth respondent interviews (Tracy, 2020, pp. 159ff.) with Danish teen and young adult (16-29 years) TikTok-users conducted in May and June of 2024 by the principal investigator (Author 1). All included quotes from the respondents have been translated from Danish to English. This specific age group was chosen as they are the most frequent TikTok users in Denmark, making this a *typical instance* sample (ibid., p. 82ff.). We chose to recruit within a relatively broad age group to be able to identify whether usage, experiences, and perceptions of TikTok varied according to age. Furthermore, we also aimed for *maximum variation* (ibid.) within the sample in relation to gender, place of residence, and occupation. As shown in Table 1, demographic variation was achieved. Additionally, all five main regions of the country (Copenhagen, Zealand, Southern Denmark, Central Jutland, Northern Jutland) are represented and three of the respondents have a minority ethnic background. It is important to note that none of the users earn a wage through TikTok or have a large following. The 24 respondents thereby represent the typical Danish users within the most prevalent age groups.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Most watched content on TikTok ⁸
Nadia	Female	26	Physiotherapist	Film/series/tv, food, lifestyle, workout, music
Bjørk	Non-binary	17	Vocational school	Politics, news, music, film/series/tv, food
Zander	Male	20	High school	Sport, music, food, film/series/tv, news
Vanessa	Female	27	Consultant	Food, workout, film/series/tv, rants
Jonas	Male	29	Self-employed	Music, food, lifestyle, workout, personal development, spirituality
Camilla	Female	29	Office apprentice	Fan, lifestyle, inspiration, music, gaming, book recommendations

⁸ These are results from an exercise that were embedded in the interviews. See supplementary material ("Exercise 2") for screenshots of the exercise.

Holly	Female	21	Student (business administration)	Fashion, beauty, music, food, film/series/tv, lifestyle, live, Somali culture
Mehmet	Male	19	High school	Gaming, lifestyle, sport, workout, food, inspiration, edits, politics
Lise	Female	25	Student (veterinary medicine)	Film/series/tv, fan, fashion, inspiration, food, cat videos
Morten	Male	17	Vocational school	Music, politics, inspiration, fan, film/series/tv, news
Anders	Male	23	Student (occupational therapy)	Sport, fashion, news, workout, film/series/tv, music, lifestyle, food
Kristoffer	Male	27	Student (information studies)	News, film/series/tv, memes, comedy, personal stories, animals
Mads	Male	25	Student (value chain management)	Music, news, food, sport, history, film/series/tv, politics
Samira	Female	16	Middle school	Inspiration, music, sport, beauty, food, fashion, dance
Josefine	Female	24	Gap year	News, sport, workout, DIY, music, fan, ASMR, film/series/tv, food, crochet
Anne	Female	18	High school	Beauty, music, fashion, food, film/series/tv, fan
Frida	Female	22	Gap year	Politics, news, food, beauty, music, fashion
Eva	Female	17	High school	Music, food, beauty, fashion, inspiration, film/series/tv, lifestyle, sustainability, news, politics
Per	Male	24	Student (digital design)	Music, memes, trends
Niels	Male	17	Vocational school	Film/series/tv, history, comedy, life hacks
Vilma	Female	22	Student (nursing)	News, politics, inspiration, beauty, fashion, lifestyle, fan, comedy
Clara	Female	23	Accountant	Fan, film/series/tv, news, animals, tarot cards, food
Rasmus	Male	27	Self-employed	Workout, food, film/series/tv, news, inspiration, fashion
Marie	Female	16	Primary school	Film/series/tv, beauty, fashion, fan, news, music, inspiration

Table 1: Overview of respondents' pseudonym, gender, age, occupation, and most watched content on TikTok.

After transcription, the principal investigator (Author 1) listened to each interview recording while writing down recurring themes, whereafter the transcriptions were coded in NVivo. The code book (see supplementary material) ended up consisting of 87 codes and sub-codes. As previously mentioned, this interview study is part of a larger project, and therefore not all codes in the code book are relevant in the context of this article.

TikTok Usage in Everyday Life

This section will briefly present the findings in relation to the respondents' everyday usage of TikTok and their motivations for this usage. As several other studies have already concluded similar findings, which will be referenced throughout, this section mainly serves as building block for the following sections of the analysis.

The respondents' main activity when using TikTok was scrolling and watching content (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Langlais et al., 2024; Schellewald, 2022, 2023), and it was clearly highlighted that this specifically took place on the *For You Page* (FYP). They regularly liked and saved content but rarely commented, and while some had posted videos, creating content was not a typical part of their everyday use. While scrolling on the FYP, most of the respondents would also share content with friends through the private chat (Schellewald, 2024), but they rarely used TikTok's chat for actual conversation, relying instead on apps like Messenger or Snapchat. As argued by Schellewald (2023), TikTok quickly become a fixed part of young users' everyday routines and lives, which our findings also suggest. Several respondents expressed how they would open up TikTok 'unconsciously' while on their phone and that it had become a (bad) habit: "You automatically just open up TikTok. It's just become this kind of automatic thing I do" (Holly, 21). Many of the respondents mentioned mornings and nights as times they regularly use TikTok. Camilla (29) explains that in the morning it is "almost a wake-up ritual" and at night before going to sleep she routinely does a "night-scroller". Additionally, the majority of the respondents mentioned that they use TikTok in smaller breaks throughout their day, e.g., in public transportation, during smoking breaks, or as a breather when they get home from school or work.

Throughout the interviews, the respondents expressed various motivations for using TikTok. One of the main motivations for using TikTok is it simply being entertaining and fun (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Firth & Marinelli, 2025; Jung et al., 2025; Martinez et al., 2024) and, additionally, the big variation in content (Lüders, 2024; Martinez et al., 2023). This is closely connected to how the respondents experience the algorithm's tailoring of their FYP, which most of them think fits them well (Lüders, 2024; Schellewald, 2023). Another reason that was often mentioned is how *easy* they think it is to use TikTok and how they can just open the app and start scrolling without having to decide what to watch first contrary to when they were using, e.g., YouTube or Netflix (Firth & Marinelli, 2025). Generally, users often use TikTok to pass time when they are bored or have nothing else to do (Jung et al., 2025; Schellewald, 2023), which was also the case for

many of the respondents in our study. Another common motivation was to be presented with or specifically seek inspiration, which was connected to a wide range of topics including food recipes, fitness exercises, outfits ideas, and movie recommendations. As argued by several scholars (Martinez et al., 2024; Omar & Dequan, 2020; Schellewald, 2022, 2023), a general motivation among users for using TikTok is to get a break, relax, and ‘escape’ for a little while. This was also highlighted by the majority of our respondents: “I definitely think it’s something about just winding down and sitting with the phone and just being yourself” (Marie, 16). Metaphors such as ‘turn one’s head off’ and ‘disconnect the brain’ was commonly used to describe the need they sought to get fulfilled when using TikTok. Finally, all the respondents mostly used TikTok when they were alone, but many of them expressed socially motivated reasons to use the platform, for instance, being able to understand references their friends would make to content, trends, and memes on the platform.

TikTok as a Media Platform

If you were to ask random people on the street, most of them would probably refer to TikTok as a social media platform due to the many similarities with other platforms, e.g., Instagram that are classified as such. However, in the scholarship, there does not appear to be consensus on what to call TikTok: Some scholars refer to as social media (Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025, p. 3), while others use terms such as ‘short-video content platform’ (ibid). Bhandari and Bimo (2022) argue how TikTok fits into different categories of platforms, but also none at all: “it can be seen as a microblogging site, a social networking site, and a content community, and yet, it departs significantly and fundamentally from each type” (p. 9). The people representing TikTok have stated on multiple occasions that TikTok is an entertainment platform rather than a social media platform (Honigman, 2022; Ritzau, 2021).

Beyond questions of classification, Siles' (2023) work offers a useful perspective for understanding how users make sense of TikTok. Siles argues that interpretations of the app and its algorithm are shaped not only by experiences within TikTok but also by the broader *media manifold* (Couldry, 2016) – the interconnected set of platforms people use in everyday life (Siles, 2023, pp. 77ff.). The participants in Siles’ study consistently understood TikTok in relation to other apps, drawing on past and present platform experiences. Based on this, four strategies in this cross-platform meaning-making were identified: (1) *differentiation*, where users contrast TikTok with platforms such as Instagram, emphasizing TikTok’s defining characteristics; (2) *aggregation*, where they place TikTok within the general category of social media, drawing on expectations from other

platforms to make sense of it; (3) *retrieval*, where memories of older or discontinued platforms like Vine inform their interpretations of TikTok; and (4) *export*, where TikTok becomes a reference point for understanding other platforms and cultural phenomena (ibid., pp. 79–84). These different strategies of meaning-making also echo how the respondents in our study expressed their interpretations of TikTok, which is explained in detail below.

This perspective is central for our analytical approach. As underlined by the above, there is no clear definition of what kind of medium TikTok is. In this article, we are not interested in precisely classifying what TikTok is, but rather we wish to explore how TikTok – and what it does – is experienced and perceived by the users. As mentioned in the introduction, because users constantly influence and shape the app through their usage, they are a significant part of TikTok and how it develops, contributing to the digital culture of the platform. Therefore, we find investigating the users' experiences and perceptions of TikTok an inevitable part of trying to understand this complex, impactful, and highly debated platform. As part of the interviews, the respondents were asked: “If you were to describe TikTok to a person who does not know what it is, how would you describe it?” and “Does TikTok resemble any of the other media you use or is it something of its own?” The following part of the analysis will partly be based on the answers to those specific questions, but also on how the respondents throughout the interviews more ‘organically’ described TikTok in often different ways.

“I don’t know if it’s just my Instagram that’s far behind”

When asked if TikTok resemble any other media, 20 of the 24 respondents mentioned Instagram and, specifically, its video-based feed *Reels*, which were added to the platform in August 2020. Nine of the respondents also mentioned Facebook’s *Facebook Watch* and three mentioned Snapchat’s *Discover*, which both consist of a short-form video feed similar to TikTok’s FYP, while four mentioned the, no longer available, app *Vine*. Generally, the respondents express that these types of platforms have become more alike, and that the others have ‘copied’ TikTok’s video feed. Instagram is highlighted as the most similar but still with significant differences, which Mads (25) expressed like this:

Reels is perhaps a little, well, a little outdated, at least compared to what I see, anyway [...] I just feel that on Instagram I see a lot of older trends where TikTok has

already been there and then moved on [...] I don't know if it's just my Instagram that's far behind, but that's how I see it.

This is echoed by other respondents, who also points out how a lot of the same video content ends up being present on both TikTok and Instagram after a little while. A few also describe how when their friends, who do not use TikTok, send them reels on Instagram, it is often videos that they had already watched on TikTok several weeks ago. Additionally, some respondents mention the ever-changing nature of TikTok (Boffone, 2022, p. 127; Miltsov, 2022; Schellewald, 2021; Author, forthcoming) as a significant characteristic that differentiates it from other similar platforms:

TikTok trends. Which really come and go crazy fast. It can be little songs, it can be little sounds [...] You can put them over your videos, which kind of become memes in themselves, I feel. That's a big aspect of TikTok, that there's some kind of social element to it in terms of trends, which isn't really on Reels or on Shorts. There's a very internal language on TikTok, which is also evolving a lot and quickly, and changing or shifting a lot all the time. (Per, 24)

This quote highlights how the general rapid pace of TikTok – in trends, memes, and language – is considered a defining aspect of the platform. In addition, the TikTok algorithm and its personalization is also underlined by several respondents as being different and better from Instagram, which is considered “a bit more broad” and not so tailored to one's specific interests (Frida, 22). Finally, Vanessa (27) highlights TikTok's status as unfiltered and relatable (Boffone, 2022; Kennedy, 2020) as being a significant difference:

There's also something like, yeah, almost aesthetic about people posting more shit on TikTok than they do on Instagram. And that's just what I love to see, yeah, people who are just unhinged.

“Like YouTube on crack”

This is Eva's (17) immediate response when asked about how she would describe TikTok. Again, this relates to the fast pace of TikTok, which is also expressed through the, often, very short length of the videos. As pointed out by Kaye et al. (2022), TikTok was discussed as “bite-size YouTube” in

the early stages of this scholarship (p. 11) and scholars have also carried out studies comparing TikTok and YouTube (Jung et al., 2025; Shutsko, 2020). Additionally, some of the well-known content categories on TikTok, e.g., recipes videos, make-up tutorials, and vlogs, can also be considered shorter versions of content that has been prevalent on YouTube for many years (Author, forthcoming). Over half of the respondents mention YouTube as a platform with similarities to TikTok in relation to the video-based content but also how they use it:

I don't use [TikTok] as a social media platform. I use it almost like type of YouTube. Yeah, I don't comment on things, I don't do all sorts of crazy things and stuff like that. To me, it's just how YouTube would have been if they had wanted to make a mobile app. (Jonas, 29)

This comparison is further emphasized by several respondents noting that TikTok has replaced a significant portion of the time they previously spent on YouTube. Some express that there is not big difference in the content they watch, respectively, on TikTok and YouTube – except for the length – and that they now watch many of the same creators on TikTok as they used to on YouTube. Others, however, explain that they turn to TikTok and YouTube to fulfil different needs:

On TikTok, there's such a big shift between whether I see someone doing their nails, or whether I get short recipes, or whether I see edits of artists and series and everything. Whereas on YouTube, I use it more for, okay, maybe I have a favourite musician who comes out with a music video, so I'll watch that [...] So, if there's nothing specific, I want to watch, I'll go to TikTok. If there's something specific where I think, 'oh, I'd like to watch a vlog with someone who's in the US' or something like that, then I'll go to YouTube instead. (Anne, 18)

The quote echoes Jung et al.'s (2025) qualitative comparison of TikTok and YouTube, which highlights that YouTube is used for specific purposes, e.g., seeking information, whereas TikTok is used mainly for entertainment purposes and killing time – and thereby also spontaneously and sporadically during the day. This emphasizes how the specific experience of scrolling on a feed (the FYP), without knowing what is going to show up next, is a motivator for using the app and an integral part of the TikTok experience. Also, as previously mentioned, the respondents consider TikTok to be a very easy platform to use and just open on their phone, which they also mention as distinguishing it

from YouTube. Finally, they highlight being able to consume a larger amount of content quicker on TikTok:

On TikTok [the creators] shorten it down to one minute, so they have to cut, for example, everything they do in a day down to a minute, where on YouTube that's maybe 20 minutes. So that's the thing about it being a little faster and that you can watch a lot of videos in a short time. (Marie, 16)

“A flow TV like on turbo or something like that”

During recent years, a growing body of research has explored TikTok as a televisual experience and compared TikTok to television in different ways (Faltese et al., 2023; Firth & Marinelli, 2025; Kendall, 2021; Lin et al., 2023; Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2021). Especially the algorithmic *flow* on TikTok is highlighted as a similarity:

When we say that TikTok is television, we mean that it is the form of television that is not an on-demand feature film, but the cultural and technical form flow media for which you do not have full control. (Faltese et al., 2023, p. 11)

Additionally, different forms of televisual content, e.g., clips from series and films, have become an integrated part of the content on the platform (Firth & Marinelli, 2025; Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025). Firth & Marinelli (2025) argue that TikTok theoretically meets the criteria traditionally used to characterize television – namely, the capacity to generate liveness, maintain flow, and aggregate audiences (Uricchio, 2009). Furthermore, they highlight how respondents in their study compared times they chose to watch TikTok with times they previously would have spent watching television, e.g., at the end of the day (p. 10-11), suggesting parallel with traditional television consumption, which were echoed by our respondents as well. In our study, three of the respondents, Rasmus (27), Vanessa (27), and Jonas (29), compared TikTok directly to television:

Well, imagine that you have a flow TV that just keeps running, where you can change channels, that is, as quickly as you want, and you get the impact and punch-lines, or whatever you are looking for, you get it after a maximum of 5-10 seconds of

watching [...] So a flow-tv like on turbo or something like that, where you can just keep going through it, right? (Rasmus, 27)

Well, if you compare it a bit to flow TV, it's that thing where I don't have to decide what I want to watch while also having that 'Gen Z brain': I can't concentrate for more than 13 seconds at a time', so I'm just constantly being stimulated without having to engage with anything. (Vanessa, 27)

Not surprisingly, the respondents who compared TikTok directly to flow television are all in their late 20's and have therefore grown up with flow TV as a natural part of their media usage. The younger respondents did not mention television explicitly, but several of them described the experience of *flow* with phrases such as 'It just keeps going' and 'It just runs'. Mads (25) also described his experience of flow as following:

Compared to [other platforms], where you might spend more time reading the articles like on Facebook and where not as many videos pop up but it's more just static images, this is more in motion I would say.

These different examples show how the respondents generally connect movement, drive, and something that 'keeps going' with TikTok, which highlights the significance of *a flow* as part of their experience when using the app. Furthermore, several respondents mention having tried to impact the algorithm to show them more or less of different types of content on their FYPs by, e.g., liking content they wanted to see more of or scrolling quickly past content they disliked. Siles & Valerio-Alfaro (2025) describe these acts as part of "Co-programming the Flow", which, besides these attempts to manipulate the algorithm, also includes simply 'going with the flow' and allowing the algorithm to tailor ones FYP (p. 6). In sum, this section of the analysis illustrates how several of the respondents experience and perceive TikTok as televisual, particularly due to its algorithmically driven flow that mirrors a style of consumption associated with traditional television.

Additionally, though not relating directly to the comparison with television, Eva (17) and Kristoffer (27) compared their flow experience of scrolling on TikTok to the experience of swiping on the dating app Tinder:

But [TikTok] kind of the same thing [as Tinder], where you say ‘no, that’s not exciting, I’ll just scroll. No, that’s exiting, I’ll just save that’ or ‘no, that’s really exciting, I’ll follow’. Yeah, so the thing about you making those decisions very... Quickly.
(Eva, 17)

What Eva is describing is a particular state of flow, where *small acts of engagement* (SAOE) (Picone et al., 2019) – here, scrolling, saving, and following, seems to be an integrated, rather than a disruptive, part of the flow experience. These SAOE are incorporated in Eva’s routine when scrolling on TikTok and are acts she is comfortable performing, thereby not requiring her to step out of the “comfort zone” (ibid., p. 2018) of her daily routines, which would ultimately disrupt the flow. This also seems to be the case for many of the other respondents. As previously mentioned, all respondents explained that their main activity when using TikTok was ‘just scrolling’. However, when asked about whether they ever interacted with the content, e.g., liked or saved it, which most of them regularly did, it became clear that these acts were considered part of the ‘just scrolling’ practice. Picone et al. (2019) use the concept of engagement to describe “a more active way of using media content that nevertheless does not qualify as participatory” (p. 2015). This seemingly encapsulates how the respondents describe the action of scrolling and watching content on TikTok. SAOEs such as liking, saving, and sharing content through the chat with friends are natural parts of the experience and integrated in their flow when scrolling on the FYP, whereas actions of participation as such, e.g., writing a comment or creating content, are not as it requires ‘too much’ and would therefore disrupt their flow.

This section emphasizes how flow is not only a characteristic of the platform design but a felt condition that shapes how users navigate and make sense of their time on TikTok. Yet flow does not unfold independently of users’ choices. As the respondents’ attempts to ‘co-program’ their feeds and their integrated use of SAOE illustrate, they negotiate, adjust, and sometimes subtly redirect the algorithmic stream. In this interplay, flow becomes a site where agency is continuously practiced, distributed, and reconfigured. In the final section of the analysis, we examine these patterns of agency more closely – particularly how the respondents describe what *they* do versus what *TikTok/the algorithm* does. These linguistic cues reveal how agency is distributed and shared within the fast-moving flow that characterizes their everyday use of the platform.

Patterns of Agency

This final part of the analysis focuses on how the respondents express agency in relation to, respectively, what they do and what TikTok does when they are scrolling on the app. During the analysis process, we started to notice a pattern in how the respondents used different verbs when describing, respectively, their own actions and the actions of TikTok and the algorithm.

On one hand, the tendency was that they mainly used verbs (see italics) that can be defined as more passive when talking about their own actions in relation to using TikTok:

So, I *get* a lot of Gaza, Israel, Palestine. I *get* a lot of that. (Anders, 23)

And then suddenly, you've just been *sitting* on [the app] for ages. (Vilma, 22)

It's relaxing to *lie down* and *look* at videos. (Marie, 16)

The transcriptions contain numerous of these examples with variations of verbs expressing how they get/receive content, look/watch/view content, or are just *on* the app, all of which indicates that they have a 'lean back and enjoy' attitude when using the app (Siles, 2023; Siles et al., 2022). As emphasized in Siles' work, when the users have 'trained' the TikTok algorithm to their satisfaction, so it continuously presents them with content they like, they can lean back and enjoy the personalization. 'Training' the algorithm should be understood as how the users, while using the app, interact with content, e.g., like content they enjoy and scroll quickly past content they do not enjoy, resulting in the algorithm getting increasingly tuned into what they are interested in and adjusting to their preferences. This also aligns with how, as previously mentioned, some respondents compared TikTok directly to flow TV and thereby also highlighted a more passive and consuming role.

Siles (2023, p. 57ff.) highlights how this 'leaning back' should not be considered inaction but rather a form of *active passivity* referencing Hennion (2013) – "it is not about moving from activity to passivity, but to act in order to be acted on", following a similar vein as Picone et al. (2019)'s concept of engagement. Both argue how we should not divide users and usage into two separate categories of, respectively, active and passive, but rather consider different kinds and levels of engagement. As all our respondents have used TikTok for several years, and many of them also mention the personalization as a positive aspect of the app, it can be assumed that they have already trained their algorithm to 'act' for them. Thereby they can take on this more receiving and consuming role when using the app – also aligning with their experience of flow. Additionally, several of the respondents express that they feel the algorithm 'knows them well' – sometimes even a bit too

well: “It can almost be a bit scary, yeah, where you think ‘you must be able to read my mind’ or something like that” (Clara, 23) – which further emphasizes how they have trained it to personalize their FYPs. However, as previously mentioned, when presented with content they disliked, they try to impact the algorithm, suggesting that they still have to maintain it from time to time to keep it tuned into what they enjoy watching (Siles et al., 2022).

On the other hand, when talking about what TikTok and/or the algorithm does, the respondents tend to use verbs that can be defined as more active:

The algorithm is good at *sending* me things I’m interested in. (Lise, 25)

And then I think they just think ‘yeah, we’re *putting* that on’. (Frida, 22)

The algorithm often *shows* me something from my own culture. (Holly, 21)

My TikTok *posts* a lot of Liverpool content to me. (Anders, 23)

It implies that they experience that the app or the algorithm actively does something, such as sending or showing them content or making content ‘pop up’, which is contrary to how they describe their own actions. This further underlines the previous point about how they tend to have a ‘laid back’ attitude and lets TikTok do, the majority of, the work for them when scrolling on the app. While the respondents often describe themselves in passive terms and the algorithm in active ones, this division should not be read as a simple opposition between human passivity and technological control. As previously mentioned, contemporary media environments require a hybrid agency perspective, in which neither users nor technologies act alone, but co-constitute each other’s agency through ongoing interaction (Hepp, 2022). In this light, the respondents’ ‘lean back’ mode and the algorithm’s apparent activity are not contradictory – rather, they illustrate how agency on TikTok is distributed across human routines and algorithmic operations. Users’ subtle acts, such as scrolling past unwanted content, liking preferred videos, or simply spending time on the app, enable the algorithm to act more effectively, while the algorithm’s tailored flow, in turn, shapes how users can act. The agency observed here is therefore hybrid – emerging in the interplay between what users do and what TikTok does for them.

This also aligns with how the respondents describe TikTok as being a televisual flow experience, where content is being ‘served’ to them on the algorithmically tailored FYP. As opposed to traditional television, where the programming is curated by the specific channel programmers, the algorithm does the content programming on TikTok and specifically based on each user’s

preferences, which is one of the significant differences between the two. The respondents' more passive role is also emphasized through how they trust the algorithm to adhere to their needs (Siles, 2023, p. 56ff.), e.g., when they come across content they are not interested in: "I usually just scroll past it. Then I kind of think it'll fix it for me" (Samira, 16), "No, I just scroll past them quickly. Because then I also feel like, that it figures out that I'm not interested in it" (Vanessa, 27). The respondents generally have a faith in that the algorithm will 'know' what content to show them on their FYPs, and when that does not happen, they expect it to quickly 'understand' their nudging and adapt thereafter.

This is further underlined by their descriptions of how they can 'turn their brain off' and 'not think' when scrolling and watching content on TikTok as it implies that they feel comfortable by letting the algorithm control the flow because they have already done the work and trained the algorithm to fit their needs. Additionally, all respondents explained that they could not scroll on TikTok while also paying attention to something else on a different screen: "I feel like you forget what's on in the background and then you're just trapped in [TikTok]" (Marie, 16), "I think there's something about it... That it requires quite a bit of active attention anyway, so it's hard to think about anything else [while using it]" (Vanessa, 27). This experience of immersion was related to the continual change and short length of the videos – and, therefore, constantly having to familiarize yourself with something new – but also the significant audio element of the content. For example, Kristoffer (27) explained that he was not able to use TikTok while watching a movie, but that he would be able to do that with Instagram or Reddit because: "then I'm still able to hear what's going on in the movie". The audio in TikTok content often serve as a driving factor in the storytelling and can be described as one of the platform's most distinctive characteristics (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Trillò, 2024; Zeng & and Abidin, 2021; Author, forthcoming). Their experience of this immersive state underscores TikTok's captivating – even absorbing – qualities, reinforcing the respondents' 'laid back' receiving role and, conversely, the app's active, driving presence.

Conclusion

This study has examined how young Danes experience TikTok by analyzing their everyday usage, their interpretations of the platform, and the ways they articulate the sense of flow and agency. Drawing on contemporary theories of agency and flow, the analysis highlights that users' experiences cannot be understood through a simply dichotomy between active and passive media engagement. Instead, the respondents' descriptions consistently point toward *hybrid forms of agency*

In digital environments, agency concerns not only how humans act through technology but how algorithmic systems themselves act and intertwine with human practices (Esposito, 2017; Guzman, 2018). Hepp (2022) therefore points to *hybrid agency* approaches (see, e.g., Fink & Weyer, 2014; Hanson, 2009) in which human actions and algorithmic operations mutually shape one another.

Across the interviews, TikTok emerged as an integrated and strongly habitual part of everyday life. Respondents largely framed their use as entertainment, distraction, and relaxation, emphasizing the ease of simply ‘leaning back’ and letting the FYP deliver an endless stream of tailored content. Yet this apparent passivity is better understood as *active passivity* (Hennion, 2013, as cited in Siles, 2023, p 57.): users continuously train, negotiate with, and subtly maintain the algorithm through SAOE such as liking, saving, and scrolling past unwanted videos. These micro-practices allow the algorithm to ‘act’ on their behalf, producing a flow that feels both personalized and effortless.

A key finding is that users interpret TikTok through comparisons with other media in the wider media manifold – particularly Instagram, YouTube, and, for the older respondents, flow television. These comparisons reveal that TikTok is perceived as faster, more dynamic, and more algorithmically attuned than competing platforms, while still carrying recognizable qualities of, for instance, televisual flow. Respondents often described TikTok as something that “keeps running” or resembles “flow TV on turbo”, underscoring the significance of continuous, algorithmically driven movement as a defining feature of their experience.

Finally, the linguistic patterns through which respondents contrasted what *they* do – “get”, “sitting”, “look” - with what *the algorithm* does – “sending”, “shows”, “posts” – reveal an implicit understanding of agency as shared, distributed, and negotiated. TikTok is not experienced as a tool fully controlled by users, nor as a system acting independently; rather, users see themselves and the algorithm as co-shaping the content flow. In this sense, TikTok becomes a site where agency is continually reshaped through everyday interactions with the platform.

Taken together, this study demonstrates that, based on users’ experiences, understanding TikTok requires moving beyond oppositions of active versus passive, or human versus technological agency. Instead, young users encounter and enact TikTok as a hybrid media platform, in which human routines, expectations, and engagements are deeply intertwined with algorithmic processes. As a hybrid platform, TikTok cannot be reduced to either a digital platform shaped solely by user

interactions or a fully autonomous algorithmic system driving content delivery. Rather than encountering TikTok as either something they fully control or something that simply acts upon them, young users describe engaging with the platform as a hybrid media environment, in which their routines, expectations, and engagements are deeply intertwined with algorithmic processes. From this experiential standpoint, TikTok cannot be reduced to either a digital platform shaped solely by user interactions or a fully autonomous algorithmic system driving content delivery, but as something that emerges through the ongoing interplay between users and the platform.

Users perceive it as combining elements of multiple media forms – video content reminiscent of YouTube, similar features to Instagram, and the continuous, immersive flow of traditional television – yet configured in a distinct, algorithmically personalized environment. In this space, users subtly guide the algorithm through actions such as liking, saving, and scrolling past content, while the algorithm continuously adapts and presents a tailored flow that shapes how and what users watch. This co-constitutive relationship defines TikTok's as a platform, making it simultaneously responsive to individual preferences and structured by the algorithmic logic that underpins its FYP. This hybrid agency is central to the appeal of TikTok's algorithmic flow – and crucial for understanding how users situate the platform within their broader media lives, balancing consumption, engagement, and participation in a continuous, mediated experience.

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Article 4:

The Duality of TikTok: Exploring Ambivalence in Danish User Experiences & Perceptions

Under review at *Nordicom Review*

The Duality of TikTok

Exploring Ambivalence in Danish User Experiences & Perceptions

Abstract

Drawing on the theoretical concepts of *group-level* and *within-person duality* in digital media use, and a methodology consisting of 24 in-depth qualitative interviews with 16-29-year-old Danes, the article shows that users' experiences with TikTok are marked by profound ambivalence. On one hand, users value the platform as a source of relief, distraction, and inspiration, providing moments of ease and a way to 'switch off' in their everyday lives. On the other hand, these very same qualities fuel feelings of stress, loss of control, and addiction, where immersive use blurs the line between relaxation and dependency. The study further demonstrates how this ambivalence is shaped not only by personal experiences but also by the broader Danish public discourse surrounding the perceived risks of TikTok usage. Overall, the findings underscore that interactions with TikTok are rarely straightforward and are instead characterised by ongoing, coexisting tensions.

Keywords: TikTok, user study, youth, media experience, media perception, duality

Introduction

Since its rise to worldwide fame in 2020, TikTok has become an integrated part of many young people's everyday lives. Known for its algorithmically driven and highly personalised *For You Page* (FYP), ever-changing trending content, and meme culture, TikTok offers a tailored content experience to its millions of users. The users enjoy TikTok because of endless entertainment and

inspiration as well as its relaxing qualities, and the app has quickly become a vital part of their daily routines (Jung et al., 2025; Lüders, 2024; Martinez et al., 2023; Omar & Dequan, 2020; Schellewald, 2023; Authors, forthcoming). In recent years, TikTok users in Denmark has passed one million users (Lange, 2023) in a country of about six million, primarily teenagers and young adults (Green & Skinbjerg-Holm, 2023; Molsing et al., 2024). However, alongside the growth in popularity, TikTok has also been the subject of considerable global debate. The platform has especially been criticised in relation to its Chinese ownership, and concerns about data security and the well-being of its predominantly young users. In Denmark, TikTok has also been under considerable scrutiny in public debate during recent years. For instance, in 2023, Denmark's *Centre for Cyber Security* advised against having the app installed on state employees' devices due to a risk of espionage (Styrelsen for Samfundssikkerhed, 2023), which caused the Danish Parliament (*Folketinget*), all universities, and several media institutions to either completely ban or restrict access to TikTok.

As a result of TikTok's popularity and this critical public discourse, the platform exists within a sphere of diverse opinions, thoughts, and feelings, making it especially interesting to investigate how users navigate this multiplicity of perspectives. In this article, we explore the complex and ambivalent perceptions of TikTok that young users have. This is investigated through an in-depth interview study with Danish TikTok users aged 16-29, which is part of a larger 4-year project on young Danes' usage, experience, and understanding of TikTok. Theoretically, we build on scholarship concerning the relationship between users of digital media platforms and their general well-being, and in particular the notions of *group-level duality* (Beyens et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2024; O'Reilly, 2020; Valkenburg, Beyens, et al., 2022) and *within-person duality* (van der Wal et al., 2024; Weinstein, 2018).

By examining the tensions in respondents' experiences with TikTok, the article offers insights into young Danish users' complex and ambivalent perceptions of the platform. The analysis

shows a nuanced blend of enjoyment and discomfort, where appreciation for certain features coexists with criticism and unease toward others. TikTok is thus positioned within a dualistic spectrum of contradictory feelings, both at the group level and within individual users. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing debates on digital media use, well-being, and algorithmic culture by demonstrating that everyday engagements with digital platforms are shaped by ambivalence, contradiction, and shifting emotional negotiations.

Firstly, we situate TikTok within the context of Denmark and elaborate on the national public debates and critiques of the app, after which we introduce the theoretical foundation of the article and explain the research methodology of the study. Based on in-depth interviews with 24 users, we explore the users' perceptions of TikTok, focusing on their experiences of relief and stress, their feelings of addiction, and their relationships with the algorithm.

TikTok in a Danish context

During recent years, the number of Danish TikTok users has grown to over one million (Lange, 2023), which is a substantial number in a country with a population of around six million, most of them being teenagers and young adults (Green & Skinbjerg-Holm, 2023; Molsing et al., 2024). As mentioned in the introduction, TikTok has been heavily debated in Denmark since it gained popularity in 2020. In February 2023, *The European Commission* banned TikTok on employee phones (Ritzau, 2023), which led to Denmark's *Centre for Cyber Security* stating that they advised against having the app installed on official devices due to concerns about data security and a potential risk of espionage (Styrelsen for Samfundssikkerhed, 2023). As previously mentioned, this caused the Danish Parliament (*Folketinget*), all Danish universities, and several media institutions, e.g., *The Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR)*, to either restrict access or completely ban the TikTok app on employee phones. These media institutions, therefore, also stopped producing content to share

on TikTok and have not been doing so since. As a result of this, *The Danish Media Council for Children and Young People* stated that they recommended all users under the age of 18 to either delete TikTok or change their settings significantly due to concerns about, e.g., data security and illegal content being shared on the platform (Nielsen, 2023).

Over the past five years, TikTok has repeatedly faced criticism in Danish media for problematic and sometimes unsafe content circulating on the platform. In October 2024, the organisation Børns Vilkår (Children's Welfare) reported 700 self-harm videos to TikTok, yet only 20 were fully removed, while 400 were merely restricted to the uploader – prompting strong criticism (Slyngborg, 2024). That same month, a TikTok trend involving exploding acid bombs and instructions for making them was linked to the discovery of undetonated and exploded acid bombs near two schools in Odder, East Jutland (Solgaard, 2024). Additionally, two public broadcaster documentaries, *Alene hjemme på nettet* [*Home Alone on the Internet*] (DR, 2024) and *Spionerne bag skærmen* [*The Spies Behind the Screen*] (TV 2, 2023) created substantial media coverage and public debate. During our interviews, a few respondents particularly mentioned having watched these two Danish documentaries that *both* address Danish children's and teenagers' problematic use of digital media when it comes to their encounters with highly inappropriate and sometimes illegal content and manipulative retention mechanisms of digital gaming companies. Although neither documentary specifically targets TikTok, they highlight issues – such as exposure to inappropriate content and concerns about data security – that TikTok has also been criticised for.

Looking at the broader landscape of digital media platforms, it is, of course, not only TikTok that has been subjected to scrutiny; such concerns have been present ever since these types of platforms became integrated into everyday life. The latest development in Denmark is that, as of November 2025, the government has agreed to ban social media for children under 15 as part of broader efforts to strengthen online protection for young audiences (Digitaliseringsministeriet,

2025). These developments illustrate a climate marked by strong public concern and a growing political appetite for restrictive interventions. So, while our respondents did not explicitly state that public scrutiny of TikTok, or digital media platforms in general, had influenced their views, it is reasonable to assume that their experiences and perceptions are shaped, at least in part, by this broader context.

Theoretical Foundation: Duality in Young People’s Digital Media Usage

Theoretically, we draw on the notion of *duality* (van der Wal et al., 2024; Weinstein, 2018) as a clear pattern emerged during the initial coding of the interviews: The respondents often expressed both highly positive and highly negative experiences with and perceptions of TikTok – in several cases, within the same passage or even sentence. Our understanding of duality stems from a growing body of research that in recent years has explored if, how, and why digital media platform usage impacts young users’ general mental and emotional well-being (Valkenburg et al., 2022). Within this body of work, some studies conclude the finding of both negative and positive influences (Beyens et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2024; O’Reilly, 2020; Valkenburg, Beyens, et al., 2022), for instance that some users report negative influences and some report positive influences. Other studies report less binary ‘good’ and ‘bad’ influences, but instead point to a greater complexity in digital media’s impact on young users’ well-being (van der Wal et al., 2024; Weinstein, 2018). Here, the notion of *duality* comes into play.

According to van der Wal et al. (2024), Weinstein (2018) was the first to report what they label as *within-person duality*, which is defined as “the co-existence of both positive and negative effects of social media on an individual” (Van der Wal et al. 2024, p. 2). Weinstein (2018) investigates how daily use of social media apps influences adolescents’ affective well-being in a two-part study consisting of a survey and interviews. Overall, the survey responses depict social media

use as mostly positive, while the interviews show that adolescents still acknowledge and experience negative emotions. These positive and negative feelings relate to four inductively identified dimensions of social media use: (1) self-expression, (2) relational interactions, (3) interest-driven exploration, and (4) browsing. Weinstein (2018) adopts a modified version of Dodge et al.'s (2012) see-saw metaphor to illustrate the findings of the study – a “social media see-saw” (Figure 3):

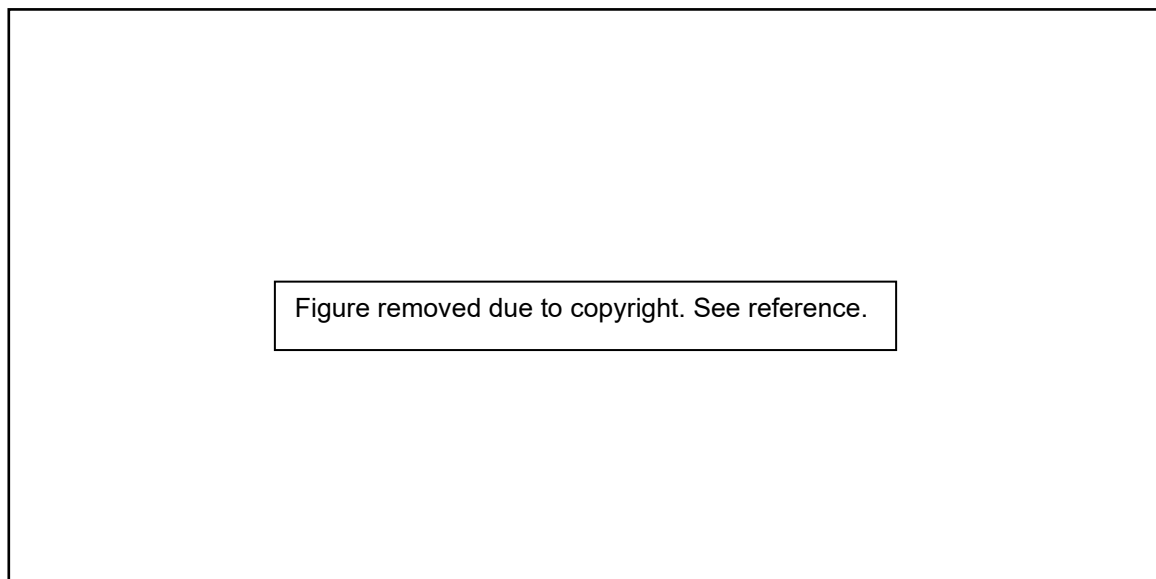


Figure 1: Social media see-saw: positive and negative affect influences (source: Weinstein, 2018, p. 3617).

The study illustrates that negative elements do not make an experience wholly negative, nor do positive elements guarantee purely positive use. Adolescents may feel bad in one dimension while benefiting from another, and both feelings can coexist within the same dimension. Thus, the study highlights that adolescent well-being and social media use operate not as either/or, but as both/and.

With inspiration in Weinstein's study, Van der Wal et al. (2024) explore both homogeneity (commonalities between adolescents), heterogeneity (differences between adolescents), and within-person duality (differences within adolescents) in the relationship between adolescents'

usage of social media and their general well-being. This is investigated through 8 focus groups with adolescents' aged 14-17. One of their findings reveal that within-person duality appeared in different ways when adolescents experienced conflicting feelings: (1) concurrently (when they experienced conflicting feelings simultaneously, e.g., feeling both envy and inspiration), (2) alternately (when they shift between experiences, e.g., feeling connection and then isolation), and (3) sequentially (e.g., when enjoyment gradually turn into boredom) (ibid., p. 8).

While our study focuses on respondents' experiences and perceptions of TikTok to better understand the platform itself – rather than its impact on mental well-being – Weinstein's (2018) and Van der Wal et al.'s (2024) concepts of group-level and, especially, within-person duality offers valuable theoretical insight into the complexities we examine. We argue that within-person duality extends beyond the relationship between digital media use and well-being; it also shapes how users experience, perceive, and relate to TikTok.

Method

The article is based on an interview study, which is part of the previously mentioned larger project, with 24 Danish TikTok users between the ages of 16-29. The interviews were conducted online in May and June 2024 by the principal investigator (Author 1). The sample is a *typical instance* sample (Tracy, 2020, p. 82ff.), as teens and young adults are the most frequent users of TikTok in Denmark (Green & Skinbjerg-Holm, 2023; Molsing et al., 2024). Furthermore, we aimed for *maximum variation* (Tracy, 2020, p. 82ff.) in relation to gender, place of residence, and occupation. Besides the demographic variation shown in Table 1, all five regions of Denmark (Copenhagen, Zealand, Southern Denmark, Central Jutland, Northern Jutland) are represented, and, additionally, three of the respondents have a minority ethnic background. None of the respondents have a large following

or earn a wage through TikTok, and thereby they represent the typical ‘everyday’ users. All included quotes from the respondents have been translated from Danish to English.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Most watched content on TikTok⁹
Nadia	Female	26	Physiotherapist	Film/series/tv, food, lifestyle, workout, music
Bjørk	Non-binary	17	Vocational school	Politics, news, music, film/series/tv, food
Zander	Male	20	High school	Sport, music, food, film/series/tv, news
Vanessa	Female	27	Consultant	Food, workout, film/series/tv, rants
Jonas	Male	29	Self-employed	Music, food, lifestyle, workout, personal development, spirituality
Camilla	Female	29	Student	Fan, lifestyle, inspiration, music, gaming, book recommendations
Holly	Female	21	Student	Fashion, beauty, music, food, film/series/tv, lifestyle, live, Somali culture
Mehmet	Male	19	High school	Gaming, lifestyle, sport, workout, food, inspiration, edits, politics
Lise	Female	25	Student	Film/series/tv, fan, fashion, inspiration, food, cat videos

⁹ These are results from an exercise that were embedded in the interviews. See supplementary material for screenshots of the exercise.

Morten	Male	17	Vocational school	Music, politics, inspiration, fan, film/series/tv, news
Anders	Male	23	Student	Sport, fashion, news, workout, film/series/tv, music, lifestyle, food
Kristoffer	Male	27	Student	News, film/series/tv, memes, comedy, personal stories, animals
Mads	Male	25	Student	Music, news, food, sport, history, film/series/tv, politics
Samira	Female	16	Primary school	Inspiration, music, sport, beauty, food, fashion, dance
Josefine	Female	24	Gap year	News, sport, workout, DIY, music, fan, ASMR, film/series/tv, food, crochet
Anne	Female	18	High school	Beauty, music, fashion, food, film/series/tv, fan
Frida	Female	22	Gap year	Politics, news, food, beauty, music, fashion
Eva	Female	17	High school	Music, food, beauty, fashion, inspiration, film/series/tv, lifestyle, sustainability, news, politics
Per	Male	24	Student	Music, memes, trends
Niels	Male	17	Vocational school	Film/series/tv, history, comedy, life hacks

Vilma	Female	22	Student	News, politics, inspiration, beauty, fashion, lifestyle, fan, comedy
Clara	Female	23	Accountant	Fan, film/series/tv, news, animals, tarot cards, food
Rasmus	Male	27	Self-employed	Workout, food, film/series/tv, news, inspiration, fashion
Marie	Female	16	Primary school	Film/series/tv, beauty, fashion, fan, news, music, inspiration

Table 1: Overview of respondents' pseudonyms, gender, age, occupation, and most-watched content on TikTok.

After transcription, the principal investigator (Author 1) listened to each interview recording while writing down recurring themes, whereafter the transcriptions were coded in NVivo. The code book (see supplementary material) ended up consisting of 87 codes and sub-codes. As the interview study is part of a larger project, not all codes in the code book are equally relevant in the context of the particular aim of this article.

As part of the interviews, two post-it exercises, carried out through the online platform *Miro*, were embedded. Part of the analysis in this article will be centred around the second exercise, which was divided into two parts, of which the first is relevant here. In the exercise, the respondents were presented with an array of words (Image 1, yellow post-its) and asked to choose the words they thought described TikTok most accurately and place them under the green “TikTok” box. They could also add their own words by writing on the orange post-its (Image 1) and placing them under the green box. The results of the exercise will be discussed throughout the analysis.



Image 1: Illustration showing how Exercise 2 were presented to the respondents (see screenshots of exercise in supplementary material).

Ambivalence in User Experiences and Perceptions

The analysis will focus on uncovering the ambivalence, on both group-level and within-person, in how the respondents perceive TikTok based on their experiences with the platform. We will specifically explore this by looking at how they express their experiences of relief and stress, their feelings of addiction, and their relationship with the algorithm.

As mentioned above, part of this analysis is based on data (screenshots and transcriptions) from the post-it exercise. Firstly, the screenshots of the exercise show some indicators of complexities in the respondents' perception of TikTok. As shown on the graph below (Figure 2), a significant amount of the respondents chose positive words to describe TikTok with such as "Entertaining"

(22), “Fun” (20), “Relaxing” (17), and “Educational” (15). At the same time, 18 respondents chose “Addicting” and a few chose “Unpleasant” (4), “Stressful” (3), and “Boring” (1), implying a more negative view of TikTok. These results indicate that there is a duality present across the group in their perceptions of TikTok, which will be further investigated in the following.

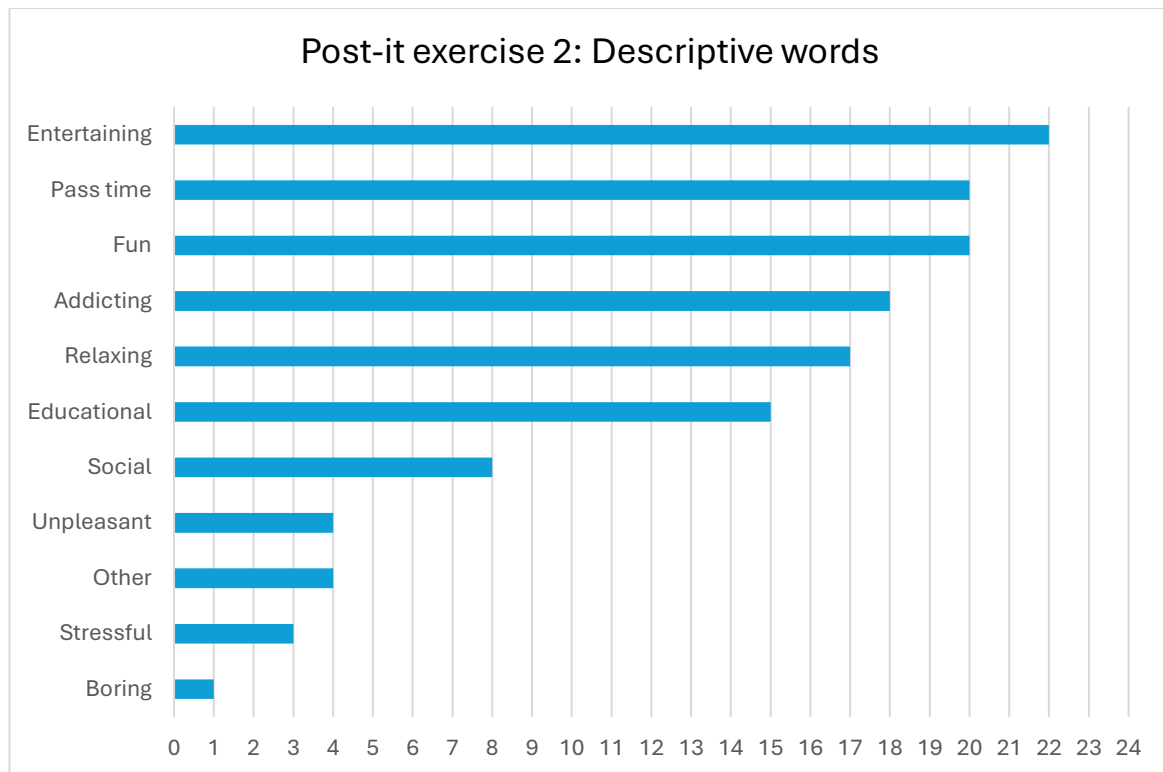


Figure 2: Graph of screenshot data from the post-it exercise. “Other” refers to the words on the orange post-its, which the respondents could add themselves.

Experiences of Relief

When Clara (23) was explaining why she chose “Relaxing” as one of the words to describe TikTok, she said: “I use it mostly to like watch some videos and just relax my head and completely disconnect”. Different variations of phrases such as ‘disconnect the brain’ and ‘turn one’s head off’ were often used by the respondents when describing scrolling on TikTok as a way to wind down in the

afternoon or evening (Authors, forthcoming). Aligning with other comparable studies (Martinez et al., 2023; Omar & Dequan, 2020; Schellewald, 2023), this highlights how the respondents use TikTok to get a break, relax, and escape for a bit. Martinez et al. (2024) specifically point to “Emotion/stress management” as one of the aspects users like about using TikTok and describe how this indicates: “a liking for the low cognitive demand of using the app and/or access to calming/inspiring videos” (p. 8). In our study, this is also further emphasised by how the respondents describe the app as very ‘easy’ (Authors, forthcoming). This easiness was typically linked to how they can just open the app and then a video, algorithmically tailored to their personal preferences, starts playing on their FYP. Throughout the interviews, the majority of the respondents talked about how scrolling on TikTok had become an integrated part of their off time from work or school. Josefine (24) explained how scrolling on the app had become a fixed part of her routine before going to bed:

I think it’s because it’s a bit of a habit that I’ve gotten into, and it’s one of the last things I have to do before I go to bed. Then I know that when I start watching TikTok, I can start to relax. And then I think my TikTok knows when I go to bed because I start to get these ASMR¹⁰ [videos] in the evening when I lie in bed, so I get a little extra sleepy.

The *flow* experience when scrolling on TikTok has, in recent years, been explored by different scholars¹. Integrated in this experience of flow is a more ‘laid back’ attitude, also reflected in Josefine’s description, as the users take on a receiving role when watching the algorithmically curated

¹⁰ ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) is a physical and psychological tingling, calming sensation triggered by specific stimuli (e.g., soft sounds).

content on their FYP (Siles, 2023; Siles et al., 2022): “You don’t have to think about what you’re watching, and you don’t have to react to these videos. It’s just something that like, it just keeps running” (Clara, 23). Additionally, several of the respondents highlighted ‘not having to decide what to watch’, contrary to when using a streaming service, as part of the appeal when using TikTok in moments of relief. Thereby, the algorithmic flow experience, where users get to ‘sit back and relax’ and scroll through their algorithmically curated FYP, seems to be a key aspect of the app’s relaxing qualities.

Experiences of stress

Only three respondents chose “Stressful” as a word to describe TikTok in the exercise (Figure 2), but throughout the interviews, several other examples occurred. The following three quotes accentuate how the respondents, at times, experience TikTok as being extremely fast-paced and ‘a lot’: “It’s like YouTube on crack” (Eva, 17), “TikTok is just the internet on steroids” (Jonas, 29), and “A flow TV on turbo” (Rasmus, 27).

In their literature review, Steele et al. (2020) conceptualise *digital stress* as: “the subjective experience of an event, condition, or stimulus (i.e., a “stressor”) in the context of the individual’s social and relational contexts and coping resources” (p. 17-18). They identify four different components of digital stress: *availability stress*, *approval stress*, *fear of missing out* (FOMO), and *connection overload* (ibid., pp. 18ff.), of which the latter two are present in our study. FOMO is described as distress stemming from (actual, perceived, or anticipated) social consequences of being excluded from experiences in which others take part (ibid.). When Marie (16) was asked about why it would be difficult for her not to have access to TikTok, which she had stated earlier, she answered:

Well, I think it's something a bit FOMO-like, that you have to see what others are doing all the time and like what your friends are doing and talk to them and stuff [...] So if you see that they've posted something on TikTok, then you go in and like and see it. I think it has something to do with how you're constantly updated when you're on those types of media.

In a similar vein, Vilma (22) answered the following when she was asked if she had ever considered deleting TikTok from her phone:

I've considered it... Because I think it's insane how long you can stay on that app. But at the same time, I think I've been a little nervous about deleting it, maybe, because all the things that go viral and stuff like that, and things you can talk to others about are typically on there. And I think it's a lot to do with 'fear of missing out' if you delete it.

Even though none of the respondents directly linked 'stress' to their experiences of FOMO, the two examples highlight that they do not wish to be 'missing out' and how that fear contributes to their ongoing use of the app.

The other form of digital stress present in our study is *connection overload*, which is defined as distress stemming from subjective experiences of receiving excessive input, e.g., notifications, messages, and posts (Steele et al., 2020, p. 20). In our interviews, and arguably in the context of TikTok, this type of stress is connected to the fast pace, the short length of videos, and the content simply being 'too much' rather than an excessive number of notifications or messages. Bjørk (17) expressed that they found content on Instagram to be more "quiet and calm" compared to

what they encounter on TikTok, with a reference to TikTok's split-screen videos where two types of content appear simultaneously:

On TikTok, there it's like, they do those... It's a lot like that where they do those [videos] where there's a game running on one side [of a split-screen video] and someone talking on the other side. And it just becomes something like... I think it's a bit too much.

Samira (16) also explained how TikTok can be too much when talking about when she sometimes would rather want to watch videos on YouTube:

If I'm bored and it's become a bit too much with TikTok and I'd rather just relax a bit, because with TikTok, you have to focus a bit more if you want to be able to follow along, because it's moving so fast and all that.

Björk's and Samira's quotes underline how the experience of TikTok can be overwhelming at times and specifically relate this to the form and style of the content. As Steele et al. (2020) point out, the feeling of being overloaded is subjective (p. 20) and, therefore, what some users might find stressful or 'too much' might not be the same for others. Samira's (16) quote indicates that she would rather use YouTube than TikTok when needing to relax, which contrasts with the previous quote by Clara (23), where she describes that she scrolled on TikTok when she needed to "completely disconnect" and relax.

“So now I’m like, do I put “Relaxing” or “Stressful” on?”

The above part of this analysis separated the respondents’ perceptions of TikTok into, respectively, relaxing qualities and stressful aspects – whereas this part of the analysis will highlight the complexities and examples of *within-person duality* (van der Wal et al., 2024; Weinstein, 2018). The title of this section is what Kristoffer (27) asked himself when considering whether to choose “Relaxing” or “Stressful” to describe TikTok in the post-it exercise (Image 1). Both he and Samira (16) had difficulties choosing between the two contradicting words:

I feel like you can experience a bit of both on it, depending on what kind of content you’re watching. Even though they’re contrasting, yeah, you can experience different things [...] So now I’m like, do I put “Relaxing” or “Stressful” on? [...] There’s such a strong contrast between the content, and it can be downright unpleasant to use the app. Yeah, so those really big shifts can sometimes happen between some very short [videos] and everything you get through in such a short time. I think I had one [time] where one was a cute cat video and the next was someone sitting in their car having a mental breakdown due to something really horrible. (Kristoffer, 27)

Maybe “Stressful” should also be over there [under the green box], but not quite... Because it can be stressful because it takes up all your time, and then you’re like, ‘oh no, where did my time go?’. But yeah, but it’s still also very... I don’t know... I can’t really choose between “Stressful” and “Relaxing”. (Samira, 16)

When then asked if it was difficult to choose between the two because she often used TikTok when she needed to relax, which she had previously stated, Samira replied: “Yes, exactly!”. Kristoffer

ended up placing both words under the green “TikTok” box, whereas Samira ended up not placing any of them, which, in two different ways, further emphasises the ambivalence and presence of within-person duality in their experiences. Along the same lines, Vilma (22) explained that she found TikTok relaxing because she uses it when she needs to “disconnect a little” but at the same time also stressful due to some of the content she gets presented with on her FYP. Specifically, she used the metaphor ‘being bombarded with’ to underline how there was a lot of content about Israel and Palestine on her FYP. Vilma emphasised that she thought it was important that content about Israel and Palestine was present on TikTok, but the overwhelming amount of it was “unpleasant”, indicating her experience of *connection overload* (Steele et al., 2020, p. pp. 18ff.).

Despite the fact that all the respondents expressed that they found TikTok relaxing in some ways and/or used it in moments when they needed to relax, 7 out of 24 of the respondents did not choose “Relaxing” as a word to describe TikTok in the exercise (Image 1). Holly (21) was one of these respondents, and her explanation might point to a tendency in the perception of the app:

I wouldn’t say ‘Relaxing’, but of course it’s relaxing, but I wouldn’t define it like that. But of course, it is, but that’s not what came to mind when I thought about TikTok [...] I use it when I’m lying down and relaxing, and use it like that, but I don’t go on to TikTok and think that I do it because it’s relaxing. That’s not what comes to mind when I think of it, but it probably is, it’s just not [that word] I’m thinking about.

Holly explains that she both experiences TikTok as relaxing and that she uses it when she needs to relax, but she does not draw a direct parallel between TikTok and the word ‘relaxing’. Most people would probably associate the word relaxing with adjectives such as calm and quiet, which is a contrast to how TikTok is often described as being incredibly fast-paced, always moving, and

constantly changing. Therefore, there does not seem to be a natural connection between what is associated with, respectively, the word ‘relaxing’ and TikTok. However, what many respondents expressed a need for when choosing to use in their off time was to “completely switch off the brain” (Clara, 23). In those situations, a highly immersive content platform that easily occupies one’s thoughts seems like a suitable option and an easy way to unwind. In this sense, TikTok may offer a different kind of relaxation that represents other values than the ones we usually associate with the word ‘relaxing’ – rather than fostering a serene environment, it provides an immediate and absorbing escape from external stressors. This suggests that for some users, the act of relaxing does not necessarily involve stillness or silence, but instead the ability to mentally disengage through fast-paced, entertaining content. For these users, TikTok offers a form of *intentional overload*: a deliberate immersion in rapid, attention-grabbing content that temporarily suppresses external worries and provides cognitive relief.

Feelings of Addiction

Throughout the interviews, only three of the 24 respondents – Nadia (26), Rasmus (27), and Jonas (29) – did not directly use the word ‘addicted’ or ‘addiction’ in relation to TikTok. However, the three did describe how they easily got immersed in the app for longer periods and had a habit of using it routinely in their daily lives, which were some of the elements the other respondents connected to feelings of addiction. It is important to note that we will explore the respondents’ expressions of feeling addicted, but we will not discuss how ‘addiction’ is defined or whether the respondents can be categorised as addicted to TikTok or not.

In Martinez et al. (2024), the “addictive nature” of TikTok was the number one dislike reported by the participants as 19.8% of them were worried about being addicted to the app (p. 13). This was also a concern for many of our respondents:

I have to be a little careful about how much I use TikTok. Well, it's something where I have to set limits for myself because otherwise it can get a little out of hand as it's easy to just sit and scroll all day. (Lise, 25)

The highly immersive nature of TikTok and, specifically, the scroll experience were elements that several of the other respondents also connected to feelings of addiction. Again, this can be linked to the algorithmic flow experience that takes place on the users' FYPs, where they can lean back, enjoy, and "scroll all day" (Lise, 25). Findings from Marengo et al.'s (2022) study indicate that TikTok, compared to other similar apps, was the most addictive app during the COVID-19 pandemic, while Qin et al. (2022) found that the flow experience on TikTok – comprising concentration, time distortion, and enjoyment – affects addictive behavior both directly and indirectly. Concentration has the strongest positive effect on addiction, followed by time distortion, while enjoyment slightly reduces it. Flow also mediates the impact of TikTok's technical features: higher information and system quality increase addiction through concentration and time distortion, whereas enjoyment has a small protective effect. Overall, they highlight flow as the central mechanism behind addictive use (ibid.). The results from these studies, thereby, align with the respondents' feelings of getting sucked in and 'trapped' by the app when scrolling on their FYP. The respondents' experiences of FOMO, as previously mentioned in relation to the stressful elements of TikTok, were also connected to feelings of addiction:

I've thought about it myself that I sometimes use it a lot, and then you're just like, 'whoa'. It's almost to the point where you think it's unhealthy yourself, and it can be

kind of addictive. Maybe it's also something about not wanting to miss out when you see your friends sending messages, you want to open [TikTok] to see what they've sent, and you also want to send something yourself. (Mads, 25)

I think it's weird that you're sort of... addicted in a way. Yeah, I just think it's about constantly getting something or watching something new and receiving more knowledge. Like, you don't know what's coming and then it's like, a bit exciting and like... You can't really stop scrolling, somehow, because now you've been doing it for such a long time, so you just keep doing it. And like, what if there's something you need to watch on the next scroll, then you don't want to miss out on it. (Samira, 16)

Mads' (25) description is directly connected to maintaining his friendships, whereas Samira talks about a constant curiosity to see what is next and not wanting to risk potentially missing out on anything. Because TikTok's FYP is endless and shows content beyond just the profiles you follow, you can never reach the bottom or get to a point where you feel like you have 'seen everything' as one might experience on other similar platforms. There is no natural stopping point when scrolling on the FYP, which reinforces the fear of potentially missing out on something. Additionally, the constantly changing trending content on TikTok reinforces this, as you have to use the app routinely to keep up and 'stay in the loop'. In this way, TikTok fosters habitual usage, where staying updated becomes both a part of daily routines but also a perceived necessity to not feel left behind.

“I almost feel like it must have fucked up some chemistry in my brain”

When asked about whether they had ever deleted or had considered deleting the TikTok app, five respondents answered that they had deleted it at some point, 14 had considered deleting it, and five had not considered it. The 14 who had considered deleting TikTok mainly did so because they felt they were spending too much time on it, while two of them, Per (24) and Mads (25), also mentioned data security concerns as a reason. The five that had the app deleted at some point stated different reasons as to why, e.g., Hanna (21) explained that she had deleted it during an exam period where she: “didn’t need time-wasting things”, and Eva (17) explained that she sometimes deleted it to: “detox my brain a little”. Eva’s quote indicates that she, occasionally, needs to take a break from TikTok, suggesting that her usage of the app, to some extent, affects her negatively. These feelings are echoed by some of the other respondents:

It has definitely done some damage to my brain. Sometimes I kind of fear that it has somehow given me ADHD. When I think back, how it has impacted my difficulties concentrating in some way. (Kristoffer, 27).

Like, I sometimes find it hard to fall asleep if I’m not lying in bed watching TikTok and stuff like that. I almost feel like it must have fucked up some chemistry in my brain... So, when I think about it, it’s really scary and like... But I kind of think that Instagram Reels and Facebook are just as guilty in this [...] it’s just generally tech fucking with my brain, right? (Vanessa, 27).

In the three examples, the respondents express how they feel that using TikTok has damaged their brains. During recent years, several studies exploring users' *folk theories* in relation to media have been carried out (DeVito et al., 2017; Eslami et al., 2016; Nielsen, 2016; Schellewald, 2022; Siles et al., 2020; Toff & Nielsen, 2018, 2018; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). The studies focus on how users understand algorithms and develop their own 'theories' about their workings based on personal experience. In this case, however, the respondents do not theorise about how TikTok and its algorithm work, but rather about the perceived damage their repeated use of it has caused. They express that they feel a difference, e.g., in their ability to concentrate or in their behaviour, and connect it to their substantial use of TikTok. Even though they express concern, this does not lead them to reduce their usage or delete the app. They explain that this is because TikTok has become such an integral part of their daily routines, particularly as a way to unwind.

“And that’s also connected to “Relaxing””

When Camilla (29) was asked to explain why she had chosen the words “Addicted” and “Relaxing” to describe TikTok in the post-it exercise, she answered:

Well, “Addicted” because I can’t really avoid it. I can feel that if I, for example, am sitting at work or something, then I might need to take it out, just to distance myself a bit from what else is going on. And that’s also connected to “Relaxing”, because my mind is running quite a lot all the time, so it’s really nice to be able to just switch it off for a while [...] So I also think that’s kind of what makes me addicted to it, the thing about it being a bit of a ‘get away’ sometimes, so the two are also a bit connected.

Camilla emphasises how she uses TikTok as a coping mechanism when she needs to distance herself and switch off for a while, which is also the reason why she feels addicted to it. Thereby, she recognises that the feelings of addiction and relaxation are closely linked – what relaxes her is also what she has become dependent on. In a similar vein, Holly (21) and Nadia (26) mentioned that they experienced TikTok as something that took up a lot of their time but, at the same time, also provided them with many positive inputs. Hanna (21) explained that she learned a lot on TikTok: “A lot of the things I’m interested in pop up, and then I gain more knowledge about them,” while Naja (26) explained that when she had deleted the app, she missed, e.g., getting inspiration related to food, work, and books: “So I also feel that it contributes in a good way”.

Together, these reflections illustrate the complexity of the respondents’ relationship with TikTok. On one hand, they experience the platform as a valuable source of knowledge, inspiration, and relaxation, and generally, contributing something positive. On the other hand, the qualities that make TikTok appealing are also what fuel the respondents’ feelings of dependency, leading to ambivalence between perceiving it as enriching as well as addictive.

Relation to the Algorithm

The final part of this analysis will focus on the respondents’ relationship with the infamous TikTok algorithm. The recommendation algorithm, which is the driving force behind the content curation on the FYP, is one of the defining features of the platform. It tailors the appearing content on each user’s FYP based on their past activities and engagement patterns as well as their demographics, making it a highly personalised experience (Miltsov, 2022). Throughout the interviews, similar to the diarists in Siles et al.’s study (2022), the respondents used “TikTok” and “algorithm” almost interchangeably, which underlines how the platform has practically become synonymous with its algorithm. As noted by other scholars (e.g., Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Lee et al., 2022; Martinez et al.,

2024; Schellewald, 2023), users generally appreciate the TikTok algorithm and the personalization it provides, which is central to its appeal.

“It's probably TikTok that knows me the best”

The respondents in our study also expressed that they appreciated TikTok's algorithm. They particularly highlighted its ability to curate their FYP to their liking and emphasised that it worked better than the algorithms on other similar platforms:

That is also one of the reasons as to why I use TikTok a lot, because I think the algorithm is better [compared to Facebook and Instagram] in relation to what type of videos it shows me. Like, I feel it's better at showing me stuff I'm interested in watching. (Lise, 25)

Lise's description represents how the majority of the respondents experience the algorithm – that it is well ‘tuned into’ them and their interests. Phrases like ‘it knows me well’ were often used by the respondents to describe their relationship with the algorithm and why they like it. Holly (21) very clearly highlighted this with her answer as to whether the algorithm curated her FYP to her liking:

Yes, I definitely think so. So, TikTok... I think, well, compared to all the people who know me best, so my friends and family, then it's probably TikTok that knows me the best. Knows what I like to see, what type of person I am, and, generally, TikTok just knows me very well.

Holly (21) expresses a sense of perceived intimacy with the TikTok algorithm, noting that its recommendation system seems to understand her better than even her close friends and family. The sentiment is echoed by several other respondents, who, as mentioned above, to varying degrees, emphasise feeling as though the algorithm ‘knows them’ (Lee et al., 2022; Taylor & Choi, 2022).

“Sometimes it fits a little too well”

Despite the respondents’ generally positive experiences with the TikTok algorithm, a fourth of them also explained that they sometimes found its very accurate personalisation unsettling:

Sometimes it fits a little too well. It’s kind of creepy because it almost knows exactly who you’re thinking about at that time [...] You think ‘you must be able to read my mind’ or something. (Clara, 23)

Their algorithm is just insanely strong, so it can just figure out my life. I remember when my ex-boyfriend broke up with me, I started getting these heartbreak videos like two days after. (Vanessa, 27)

This somewhat unsettling feeling toward the algorithm is not unique to TikTok. For instance, Bucher's (2017) user-focused study of *the algorithmic imaginary* examines the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms and demonstrates that users, at times, feel uneasy about the ways algorithms shape their online experiences. In the case of TikTok, however, this sense of unease is amplified because its algorithm is highly personalised to the individual user – a quality the respondents also praise. As a result, the algorithm’s curation is experienced very intensely, producing the eerie impression that the algorithm ‘knows too much’. What makes TikTok’s recommendations so effective

and enjoyable is therefore inseparable from what makes them unsettling. The vary accuracy that users value also creates a sense of vulnerability, as if the platform infiltrates too deeply into their preferences and behaviors. This paradox underscores the presence of duality in their experiences and highlights their ambivalent feelings: the same mechanisms that foster delight and attachment also provokes discomfort and suspicion.

Conclusion

This study has shown that young Danish users' experiences with TikTok are marked by profound ambivalence. On one hand, they value the platform as a source of relief, distraction, and inspiration, providing moments of ease and an accessible way to 'switch off' in their everyday lives. On the other hand, these very same qualities also fuel feelings of stress, loss of control, and addiction, where immersive use blurs the line between relaxation and dependency. Rather than being experienced as purely positive or negative, TikTok is thus situated in a spectrum of contradictory affects – relaxing yet stressful, enriching yet addictive, familiar yet unsettling. These tensions exemplify both group-level and within-person duality, where the same respondents experience the platform as both beneficial and harmful depending on context, mood, and content.

The Danish context and public discourse help illuminate these findings. Widespread national debates over TikTok's Chinese ownership, data security risks, and potential negative effects on young users – amplified by media coverage, documentaries, and governmental restrictions – frame TikTok as a controversial platform. While the respondents only indirectly referenced these debates, the broader societal concerns likely inform their ambivalence, particularly regarding feelings of dependency, perceived cognitive impact, and unease with the algorithm's accuracy. This is especially evident when respondents articulate different *folk theories* or other perceptions that reflect their personal experiences but cannot be – or have not yet been – factually verified. For instance, when

respondents express concerns that TikTok may have harmed their cognitive abilities, it is reasonable to assume that these perceptions are at least partly shaped by the longstanding societal portrayals of digital media and their supposed effects on young people. Moreover, these societal narratives appear to influence not only what users think about TikTok but also how they negotiate its use in their daily lives. The findings show that young users demonstrate a nuanced awareness of risks and benefits, weighing media warnings and perceived social expectations against personal experiences. This creates a space for critical reflection and negotiation, where trust, curiosity, and caution coexist. In this way, it is illustrated how individual experiences with TikTok are entwined with structural and cultural factors, highlighting that ambivalence toward the platform is not purely personal but shaped by broader social, political, and technological discourses.

Within this context, where TikTok exists under heightened political and media scrutiny, this study, by centering young users' voices, adds nuance to public debates often dominated by security concerns and moral panic. Their reflections reveal that, while broader societal narratives inevitably shape perceptions, lived experiences with the platform are far more complex, oscillating between relief and stress, dependency and autonomy, intimacy and discomfort. Ultimately, this study contributes to scholarship on digital media, well-being, and algorithmic culture by demonstrating that everyday engagements with TikTok are rarely straightforward but characterised by coexisting tensions and contradictions. These coexisting tensions and contradictions highlight that young users' experiences with TikTok are far from straightforward. Recognising this ambivalence is crucial for future research, policy discussions, and platform governance, as it foregrounds the nuanced realities of users' digital lives – showing that interactions with platforms like TikTok are simultaneously captivating, challenging, and deeply intertwined with broader cultural narratives.

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