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Understanding Young Adults' TikTok Usage

----- *Real People, Creative Videos that Makes Your Day*

Abstract

This paper provides a general map in understanding how young adults make meanings in the popular short-video platform TikTok. To explore this process, two methodologies, walkthrough methods with the unstructured interviews, were adopted to investigate user's motivations and interactions as well as the capabilities of TikTok platform in mediating these practices. The study found that while escapism and the mood-boosting are the main motives for users, expressing the hidden self and socializing with friends were the subsidiary reasons. The study also discovered that TikTok, as a platform that celebrates real human experiences, stimulates users' creativity by designing simple and easy-to-operate user interfaces and comprehensive and functional editing tools. In addition, several addictive natures of the app design will be discussed as the probable causes of user addiction.

This research paper will start from introducing background information of TikTok and relevant theoretical framework, to explaining the research questions of the study and the methodologies adopted. Then, research findings will be displayed in an order of TikTok environment of expected use, to TikTok technical walkthrough, to interview findings. Finally, key findings will be selected and discussed in the discussion section, in an effort to answer three research questions of this study. Finally, conclusions and practical implications will be presented to address the meanings and values of this research.

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Background and Theory

1. What is TikTok?

TikTok is a video-sharing social network service owned by ByteDance that, according to its website, seeks to "inspire creativity" of users and "bring joy" to the users (TikTok - Real Short Videos, 2020). It is a typical User-generated content platform (UGC), where content is produced by users, rather than the company. Accessible via mobile phone, the application allows users to create short lip-sync, dancings, gaming, DIY, food videos, etc., in 3 to 15 seconds or 3 to 60 seconds.. Other than video production, users engage in TikTok by viewing, sharing, and commenting on videos created by other users. Among various interaction of users, memes, the remix and reinterpretation of catchphrases, storylines, and songs, and other formulaic elements, were often used to reflect user's thoughts and culture, which is similar to the meme practiced discussed by Ryan Miller in other social media platforms (2018). Through the process of constantly producing video content, some users gradually gain more followers or recognition from the community. These community-recognized users are called "microcelebrities" or "influencers".

"Microcelebrity" introduced by Senft, characterizes users who systematically manage its platform practices to amp up its popularity. It involves techniques of self-branding, such as "curating, rearranging and recirculating" videos to present themselves in what they think as the best way to do it (Senft 2008, 349). "Influencers" introduced by Abidin are "high profile micro celebrities" who "accumulate a relatively large following" on their digital platform (2015,1). They gathered their following through narration of their personal lives and lifestyles using images and texts, interacting with their audiences online and offline, and commodifying their

followers by inserting native advertising to blog or social media posts (Abidin, 2015). In a platform where contents have chances to display in front of millions of users, microcelebrities and influencers who exist on TikTok ambitiously attract followers and in the meantime shape their follower's content.

Launched in 2017, TikTok soon grew to be one of the most downloaded apps worldwide (Sensor Tower, 2019). In the U.S., 60% of the TikTok active users are aged 16-24 year olds (Reuters, 2019). In fact, TikTok users in the US open the app eight times a day and spend an average 46 minutes on the app each day (Kerry Flynn, 2019). Why do they spend so much time on this particular platform? What social meanings they acquired in using TikTok? And how do microcelebrities in their communities and TikTok itself influence their creative practices on TikTok?

Though TikTok has only been in existence for three years, there is a surprising amount of scholarly research about it. User experience Researchers like Qiyang Zhou studied the users' behaviour in relation to the user interface of TikTok. In utilizing methods like content analysis, interview and regression analysis to study the creative practice of users, Zhou discovered that users on TikTok are more willing to create and upload contents on TikTok than on those of other platforms, and are more likely to copy, repeat and imitate content produced by others that may be influenced by the intended design functions of TikTok. She also found that numbers of followers a user has is not associated with the reactions and rewards a user receives. Therefore distribution of content on TikTok has a tendency to be a decentralized UGC platform (a user-generated platform that recommends contents to users not based on likes and comments of the video). (2019). While her findings around the user interface of TikTok are far reaching, in her research

through design approach, Zhou did not explore and explain the deeper motivations behind user's behaviors. Following her findings, my research, conducted from a cultural studies perspective, will seek to discover users' embedded reasons for their behaviors.

In the field of communication, Simsek et al studied musical.ly, the app which was later acquired by Bytedance in 2017 and merged with TikTok. They examined the content produced by teenage girls in relation to microcelebrity inspirations and aspirations. And they found that teenage girls in the study took the face (appearance), status (relative position in the group) and value (ideology) within their social networks seriously and produced and perfected content on the basis of normative and appropriate face, status and value. Microcelebrities or influencers in their communities affect teenage girls a lot, however none of the girls treat them as role models and intentionally avoid "too much fame", decoupling "inspiration" and "aspiration" in the concept of microcelebrity (Simek 2018, 41-56). As the author acknowledged, his findings are limited since musical.ly has since merged with TikTok, and the ecologies of the platform have changed accordingly. My research will, therefore, take into account the differences between these two platforms, and examine how microcelebrity influencers affect the users' TikTok videos viewing and creating.

Several scholars have also exmained the issue of TikTok addiction: Zhang et al. proved that social interaction anxiety and social isolation have positive influences on short-form video apps (2019), and Kumar and Prabha predict that narcissism and insecurity will lead to excessive use of TikTok (2019). However, these studies focused more on the types of personal traits and characteristics of users that are vulnerable to TikTok and did not consider the design of the

platform's interface that may trigger addiction. In my research, I will take account of the technology, specifically user interface, in shaping users' addiction issues.

2. Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework draws from three distinct literature from the field of communication. These include " uses and gratification models," the "ritual view" and the "social shaping" of technology. I draw on the first to detect specific motivations or satisfactions of users in regard to contents they consume. Expanding from individuals' motives to their interactions on TikTok, I included the "ritual view" of communication to my research framework. Finally, in seeking understanding how technology mediates users' motivations, I added the "social shaping" of technology.

Uses and gratifications theory

Uses and gratification theory is an approach introduced by Katz and Foulkes to understand why and how individuals actively seek out and use specific media to satisfy specific needs (1962). Over the years, this model has served as the basis for many research projects on media content. However, McQuail criticized them for a "lack of a common model, set of procedures or purposes informing the tradition" (1984, 181). He then proposed two models in understanding the audience from the culture side (its origin, production, meaning and use). The factors that influence media experience are multiples, and models proposed by McQuail focused on cultural content as he considers it as the "true determinant of (audience) response" (1984, 183). He proposed the cultural model and cognitive model to separate "cultural" kinds of content from the more informational kinds.

The cultural model involves the following four steps

    1）audience's general expectation of involvement that differentiated according to
    2）individual taste and lead to choice from and attention to
    3）accessible media content for
    4）imaginative experience of arousal, excitement, sadness, empathy, value
        resonance, wonder, etc. (Mcquail 1984, 189)

Whereas the cognitive model stems from:

    1) audience' general interest/curiosity that differentiated according to
    2) individual preference leading to choice from and attention to
    3) accessible media content for
    4) experience of benefit or use such as guidance, surveillance, application, social
exchange, orientation etc. (Mcquail 1984, 189)

This framework adds precision to the description and classification of content in media research, and helps me identify the kinds of creative content users circulated on TikTok and understand what satisfactions users gained from them.

Ritual view of Communication

As a complement to the cultural model outlined above, the ritual view of communication proposed by James W. Carey deepens the understanding of the shared culture community on TikTok. This ritual view of communication emphasizes the "sharing," "participation," "association" qualities of communication. In this perspective, communication is the representation of our shared beliefs and "it constructs and maintains an ordered and meaningful cultural world" (Carey 1989, 19). In the context of TikTok, the ritual view of communication implies that users join TikTok for engagement, sharing and socializing instead of merely receiving information and content. Treating TikTok as a platform that is similar to a real-world community, users on TikTok follow certain norms and have desires to express themselves, gain

recognition or support from the community. In addition, opinion leaders for a community or group existed in reality also emerged on TikTok as microcelebrities. Understanding their influence on users in their groups were included in my paper.

Social shaping of technology

Both of the theories above allow me to understand users' original motives for using TikTok, but didn't don't aid in uncovering how TikTok, as a technology, modifies users' intentions through mediating the content and forms of interaction. Therefore, it is necessary to add "social shaping" of technology perspective into my theoretical framework. This theory suggested that the consequences of technologies arise from a mix of affordances- people, technologies and institutions- that altogether influenced the development and subsequent use of technology (Baym 2010, 44). From this perspective, Baym proposed three steps to study the use of technologies: How do societal circumstances give rise to technologies? What specific possibilities and constraints do technologies offer? And what actual practices of use as those possibilities and constraints are taken up, rejected and reworked in everyday life? In my research, using a walkthrough method, I identified TikTok visions and purposes and how they relate to the social conditions. I then explored the TikTok interface to understand its limits and possibilities; This approach helped me understand how TikTok users negotiated with the designers' intentions in ways of using TikTok.

Each of the theories discussed above provides different approaches in understanding how users make meanings through their creative practices on TikTok. Uses and gratification models refined by McQuail allow me to understand how users choose creative contents to consume and

how those contents satisfy them in cultural and informational ways. The ritual view of communication emphasizes on the social forces in this virtual creative community on users' engagement. Whereas the social shaping of technology examines the limits and possibilities of TikTok as a technology that influences and shapes users' creative experience. In my research, I used these approaches in complementing each other to help me examine users' creative practices in a more holistic perspective.

Research Questions

The main question that led this research is : "How do users make meanings from their creative practices on the TikTok? " To start to understand this phenomena, this research developed through several perspectives.

I first examined the motivations of individual users. Grounded by MacQuail's uses and gratifications models, my first research question is:

RQ1: What leads users to play TikTok?

Through this question, I hoped to examine the choices of users over the creative contents and gratifications they gained from using TikTok. I found specific satisfactions or arousals users gained through consuming what Mcquail suggested "cultural" and "informational" contents. Considering previous audience research based on this model, my research tested common motivations that users adopting social media, such as the need for socialization and self expressions, on users of TikTok. As motivations may vary across individuals, I considered gender, ethnicities and age differences as well as the social environment they are situated in.

Then, guided by social shaping of technology theory,

R2: How does TikTok mediate the creative practice of users?

raised to examine the affordances and capabilities of TikTok. In this section, designers' visions and objectives for TikTok were investigated, and the ways interfaces and algorithms of TikTok in fostering users' creative practices, practices include viewing, sharing and producing contents, were explored; I attended to the norms, values, and behaviors which TikTok encouraged in the process. Both audiences and producers on TikTok were involved in this section to understand the effects of technology.

Furthermore, I drawed on the theory of ritual view of communication to examine the shared cultural meanings and interactions between users on the platform.

R3: How do users interact on TikTok?

Following R3, I examined ways users interact on the platform, such as commenting, chatting and sharing and the influences to users' TikTok experience. Furthermore, I looked at how trend leaders, microcelebrities and influencers, affect users' video production in aspects of video genre, gestures, dressing and editing. Going further, what is the role of users in these complex networks? How do users agree or negotiate with the values and norms of TikTok ? How willingly do users want to become professional creators? These questions will be raised to dig out the user's understandings of the platform.

Methodology

1. Walkthrough method + Textual Analysis

As I explained above, the affordances and capacities of the technology may modify users' motivation and shape users' creative practice. It is, therefore, important to begin my research by carefully "walking through" the platform design, its visuals and key functions. For this reason, the first site I chose to study is TikTok, the software itself. And I used walkthrough methods to discover its design mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users motivation and experiences. Two steps were involved in the walkthrough method proposed by Light et al: online research around the TikTok "environment of expected use", how app designers expect its user's behavior, and then "technical walkthrough" several key features of TikTok (Light et al. 2016, 9-15). The expected use of TikTok involved three aspects of examination including the:

    1) **Designer's Visions:** purpose, target user base and scenarios of use of TikTok;

    2) **Operating Model**: business strategy and revenue sources; and

    3) **Governance**: management and regulation on the app that sustain their operating model and their vision.

To find TikTok' visions, I looked at TikTok official website, app descriptions in the app store (iOS and Google); to understand its operating model, I digged into TikTok advertisers' portal; and to learn about governance, policy and community guidelines on the TikTok website were examined. In the process, textual analysis was involved to uncover the emphasis, impressions and opinions TikTok intended to convey. Overall, Examining these three aspects of TikTok helped me to discover the app provider's expectations of its users' creative practices.

After gaining enough knowledge about the ideal use of TikTok, I conducted a technical walkthrough of several key features and functions of TikTok in the TikTok's entrance page, video watching page and video creating page.

2. Interviews

In this part, by conducting unstructured interviews, I investigated why users adopt TikTok and how they use it. Due to the time constraint as well as the limited resources available in the coronavirus quarantine, I narrowed down my research subjects to college students; but I do wish to widen up the participant groups in the future study, if possible. My recruiting strategies included posting Facebook posts on UCSD community, publicizing my research in classrooms and utilizing snowball sampling.

Below were the main questions in the interview:

1. Tell me how it feels to use TikTok? How do you feel when you open the app? During the app? And after leaving the app?

2. When do you usually play TikTok? In what settings?

3. What are your favorite contents? Can you describe your feelings when you saw your favorite contents?

4. Have you ever created videos on TikTok? What motivates you to start it?

5. Describe the process of your TikTok video production?

6. In what ways do think your TikTok peers and microcelebrities influenced you?

7. What kinds of interaction do you have on TikTok?

In my interview, I carefully follow the training of Social Behavior research provided by the Institutional Review Board. I wrote the participant consent form and asked my participants

for an agreement on the form before I interviewed them. With their permissions, I also recorded our conversation for data collection.

Walkthrough TikTok

The Environment of Expected use

Starting from this section, I will display my findings of this research. Examining the TikTok environment of expected use provides us with a deeper understanding of TikTok as a commercial entity, which will aid my future analysis on ways and to what extent it impacts practices of users.

1. TikTok Visions

To examine how TikTok will be used, who will be use it and other conceptions the app conveys, home page of the official website, apps store description of Apple and Google will be explored in this part, as they are the most enriched materials the company provided to the public about the app.
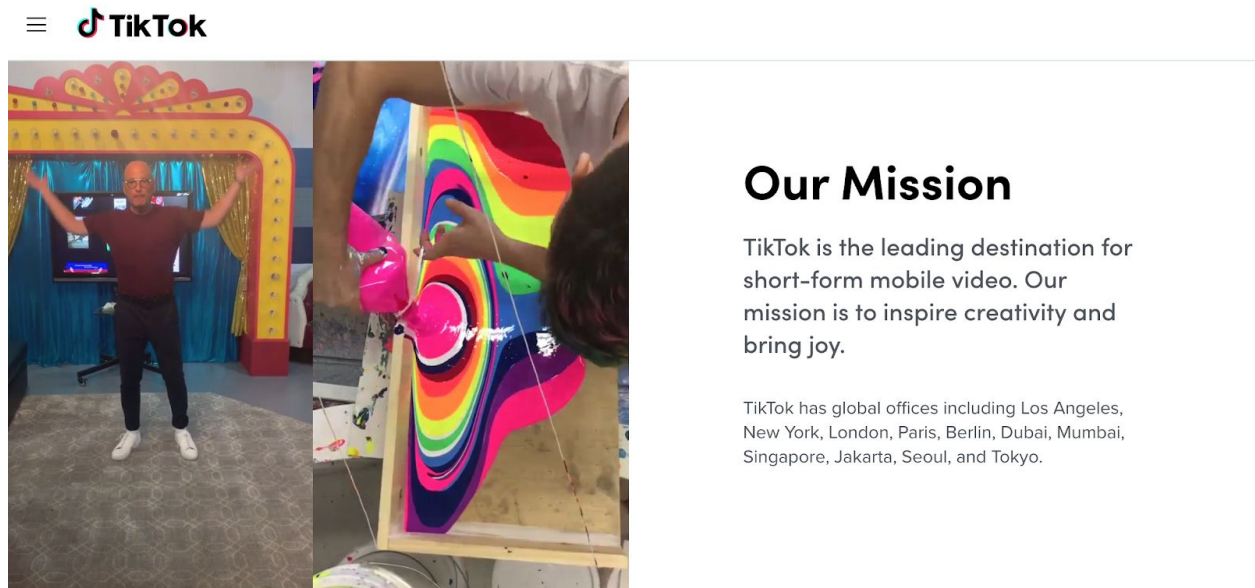
Official website:

Figure 1. Accessed April 24 2020.https://www.tiktok.com/about?lang=en.

Figure above is the screenshot of the TikTok official website's home page. The home page of the official website often is simple and concise, which allows me to decode those characteristics or elements of TikTok that designers recognized as important information. In the top left corner, TikTok logo is shown, connecting every feeling and experience audiences have with the websites into this logo. The TikTok logo itself is an iconic sign, which means that the shape of the symbol physically resembles the meaning it conveys. The "d" like character imitates the musical notes, and the main color of logo black with the blue, red shadows under it are the color we encountered when we are at a party at night; the logo communicates a fun and exciting musical experience users will have in TikTok.

Immediately under the logo, two video frames on the website create a mini-TikTok experience; not only videos displayed in the frames are the typical video genres and experiences users will have on TikTok, but also the transitions of each videos are similar to the effects when

users scrolling down a video on TikTok. Through my examination, approximately 22 TikTok videos play in loops on the website: dancings videos of a middle aged male and a young adult female are shown, while the awkward moves of the former one dance is funny, the special effects the latter one used is creative; sporting videos like playing footballs and swimming, art-related videos like making paintings or making food arts, and pets videos, life related videos all in an extent showcase the creative and positive sides of life. People in the videos are teeangers, young adults and middle aged, which indirectly suggests people in all these age groups are the potential users of TikTok. One clip that really struck me is a woman constantly laughing in front of the screen for about 10 seconds; putting this clip on the official website shows that designers of TikTok expect users to have a funny and cheerful feeling, just like the girl in the video, in TikTok; these pleasant and upbeat feelings pleasants imply that TikTok can be used to adjust a user's mood.

Whether it is football practices, dancings, jokings in the videos, these 22 videos all managed to show a moment in our real life without too much filtering, or posturing or editing. Corresponding to the slogan "real people, real life that makes your day", TikTok utilizes authenticity, the quality of being real and true (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020), as cultural and literal capital to attract people who deem authentic self-expression as essential part of their life; setting itself apart from the massive of other User-Generated-Platforms.

In the right side of the video frames stated TikTok missions(figure 1). Several keywords in the paragraph are "short-form mobile video", "inspire creativities" and "bring joy". These words capture the essence of the TikTok videos shown in the video frames and emphasize the

most important characteristics associated with this app. TikTok also shows its global-wide scope by stating its offices across the globe.

The homepage of the TikTok official website introduces the app in an immersive way by bringing audiences directly to this short, creative and delightful video watching experiences that are powered by global-wise creators. It also subtly suggests that TikTok's target users are people aged from 13 to 64, which is across teenagers, young adults and middle-aged; And people can use it to adjust their mood from negative to positive.

App stores descriptions:

Unlike the home page of the official website, app stores' descriptions have more spaces for designers to explain the key functions and uses that can attract people to download the app. Below is my analysis from the app descriptions:

a. Watch endless of TikTok videos and getting inspired

Aligning to its mission of bringing joy to users, TikTok videos are designed to be short, mood-boosting and personal, which ends up encouraging users to spend so much time watching endless videos. Videos on TikTok include "Comedy, Gaming, DIY, Food, Sports, Memes, and Pets, to Oddly Satisfying, ASMR, and everything in between" that really incorporate every kind of video that is entertaining to watch. "There's something for everyone", stated in the Apple app store description, whether you are a "sports fanatic, a pet enthusiast, or just looking for a laugh", you can find "exciting, spontaneous, and genuine" videos that "personalize" for you. However, TikTok does not only stop at satisfying users with interesting videos, designers want users to be inspired, and they want to trigger user's desires to express themselves by making TikTok videos.

b. Becoming one of the creators in global video community

Being a user-generated content platform, TikTok is aware of the importance of stimulating users to constantly produce creative contents; therefore TikTok designed many different functions enabling creators "wild and free" expressions. "Massive music library" in TikTok provides "a sea of music libraries with a fresh editor's pick daily", including "Hip Hop, Edm, Pop, Rock, Rap, and Country, and the most viral original sounds", that takes creators' creative potential to the next level. "Mobile Studios" in video making page not only unlock hundreds of filters, special effects and AR objects for users to add on, but also makes editing easier for users by integrating editing tools like trim, cut, merge, and duplicate video clips, etc. Furthermore, to facilitate creators' creative expressions, TikTok also worked on facial recognition technologies to capture users' "cute, cool, silly, goofy and outrageous expressions" in high speed and display them in a perfect quality that "load instantly, smooth interface, and lag free".

From the descriptions of the app stores, it is clear that TikTok is a platform to watch entertaining, sometimes funny videos, and to express creativity. The target users of TikTok are people who want to be entertained and to entertain through expressing themselves in a creative way. While the home page of the official website shows that it is a video watching app, app store descriptions emphasize its function as a video creating app as it encourages users to be inspired by videos they watch and become creators themselves. This means that TikTok is creating a cycle that users on the platform can both be entertained by contents produced by other creators, and creating contents for other users to enjoy.

The CEO of Bytedance, the parent company of TikTok, once spoke about his visions of the company: "Our vision is to build global creation and interaction platforms " (Herrman,

2019). Having billions of users across the globe who rely on TikTok to explore creative contents and express creative selves, TikTik's success is only the first move of the Bytedance for its global planning and operations. Aiming to cover up wider range of audience, TikTok is trying to age-up its user group by bringing more middle aged people on the app; though currently, the majority of the TikTok users, 41% of the users (Beer, 2019), are in the age group 16-21,.

2. TikTok Operating Models

As the product of the commercial company Bytedance, the ultimate goal for TikTok includes generating profits. Advertising, In-app purchase are two ways TikTok monetizes itself.

Advertising

Similar to the most user-generated platforms' business model, TikTok's main business strategy is advertising its audience. With billions of users' data on hand, TikTok is able to help its clients find their target audience; and by copying styles of user's content, TikTok produces more authentic TikTok advertisements to publicize client's products that could raise the purchase intentions of the audience. Written on its official web page that addresses the privacy issues, TikTok collects nearly all the data users generated on the platform, which includes users' "profile information", "content and behavior information", "location" and "Information from the third parties" (TikTok- Privacy Policy, 2020). This data is the core and fundamental resource for TikTok to attract businesses globally.

TikTok provides six types of advertising services, or what TikTok named as "brand solutions" for businesses to publicize themselves. The name "brand solutions" weakens TikTok's

real intention of attracting capitals and rather highlights their help that can boost companies ' popularity. These six advertising services are: Topview, Brand Takeover, In-feed ads, branded hashtag challenge and branded effects. Top view advertisements are the first TikTok videos users watched, it provides "up to 60 seconds of full-screen and long-form video, with auto-play and sound". Ads in the Brand Takeover plan are placed immediately after users open the app, supporting "3 second JPG and 3-5 second video" that covers the users' full screen. In-feed ads will appear on the audience's screen as the regular TikTok videos where users can like, comment, and follow the videos. To promote the company in a more interactive way, the Branded Hashtag challenge is designed for companies to publicize itself by inviting users to do the TikTok hashtag campaigns; hashtag is used by TikTok creators to characterize and categorize in their video content, and once the video is linked with certain hashtag, it will become part of that hashtag that will be shown if one searched that hashtag in TikTok; For Branded Hashtag challenge, TikTok intends to raise users' engagements with the company's brands by creating brands related hashtag and encouraging users to play with it. Branded effects are designed to embed and transform businesses' commercial messages into fun TikTok stickers, filters and special effects.

In-app Purchase

Estimates from Apptopia (a company provides app analytics, data mining, and business intelligence for the mobile industry.) show that in Q4 of 2019, TikTok in-app purchases topped 50 million worldwide, 310% rise from last year (2019). This is a significant quantity of revenue for TikTok, the quantity that allows the company to go public. Users can buy TikTok coins in exchange for the real money; the TikTik coins exchange rate can vary through times, but for

right now, April 2020, 65 coins costs for 0.99 dollars. Users can use it to buy virtual gifts like emojis, diamonds and send them to their favorite TikTok creators during a live stream as appreciation for their performance. It is surprising to see this single use of the TikTok coins can actually generate so much revenue for TikTok, therefore it is reasonable to assume that contents generated by creators can really attract users to an extent that they are willing to spend money.

From the analysis above, we can see that TikTok monetizes itself through commodifying its authenticity by infiltrating ads into users' regular uses and keeping ads as natural and unnoticeable as possible. Borrowing users' love towards TikTok creators' fascinating contents, TikTok persuades users to show their love by purchasing TikTok coins. According to the Barron's news, TikTok generated 176.9 million revenue in 2019 (2020). So far, both these strategies seem to be successful and are more than enough to support TikTok operations.

3. TikTok Governance and regulations

"Platforms are not platforms without moderation", Gillespie stated in his book about content moderation (2018, 21). TikTok, similar to any other platforms, needs regulations to ensure the information flow on the platform not only is legitimate legally and culturally in the context of its markets, but also matches with the visions of the company. In the TikTok official website, there is a page called "Community Guidelines" where lists of regulations are pointed out; these rules reflect shared values of the platform and define a common code of conduct on TikTok.

One goal of the community guidelines is to ensure users' safety, and thereby defend the company from liability. In the guideline, TikTok manages potentially unsafe conduct by removing the contents, deleting or banning the account to manage, and under serious

circumstances, reporting the accounts to relevant legal authorities. To further define unsafe or unacceptable behaviors of users, 10 topics were discussed in the guidelines, with detailed descriptions provided: 1. Dangerous individuals and organizations, 2. Illegal activities and regulated goods, 3. Violent and graphic content, 4. Suicide, self-harm, and dangerous acts, 5. Hate speech, 6. Harassment and bullying, 7. Adult nudity, 8. Minor safety, 9. Integrity and authenticity, 10. Threats to platform security. At the bottom of the page, TikTok left instructions to report on inappropriate contents if users came across them. (TikTok-Community Guidelines, 2020) These guidelines show a great effort of TikTok to, at least, brand itself to be a "safe" to minimize legal attacks and to attract more users.

TikTok is a platform for creative expression, however, not for all the expressions. TikTok makes selections for what users should see and perform. As several types of contents have been prohibited in the community guidelines above, it shows a hard work in creating not only a safe public space, but also a virtual space that teems with positive energy and is appropriate for all ages.

Technical Walkthrough

After a gaining knowledge around contexts TikTok situated in, in this section, I will show some of my insights in its technological architecture by walkthrough TikTok as an everyday TikTok user from open TikTok to watch TikTok videos, create TikTok videos and leave TikTok. Several key functions and features will be explained and analyzed from a cultural rather than simply a technical description.

1. Entrance
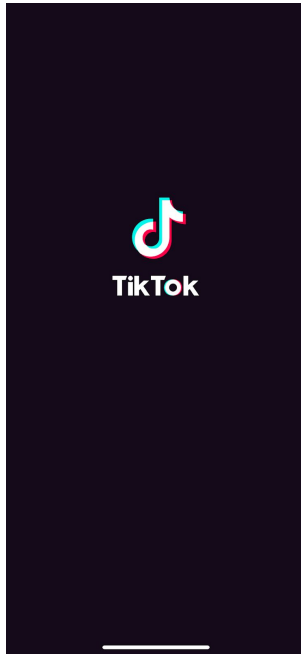
Right after I clicked the TikTok button on my homescreen, the animation in Fig 2 appeared for about half of a second. The animation is covered with black background, with the TikTok logo along with its name "TikTok" in the middle of the image; together, they act not only as a gate or buffer that prepared users for TikTok experience, but also implied the certain personalities of the app, even functions of the app. The music notes hinted that the app is to a certain degree dealt with music, and the colors encompass the symbol and the text, as well as the black background intended for the "coolness" or fashionable of the app.

Fig. 2 Screenshot of TikTok Entrance

2. Video Watching Page

Passing through the entrance page, I directly face the video watching page of TikTok. The TikTok videos shown here covered the entire screen, creating an immersive experience for users to really concentrate on contents. Users spend most of their TikTok playing time on this simple page, sometimes hours; hope to uncover the magic of this page, descriptions of most of the buttons and functions on the video watching page (Fig 3) below will provide background knowledge of it.
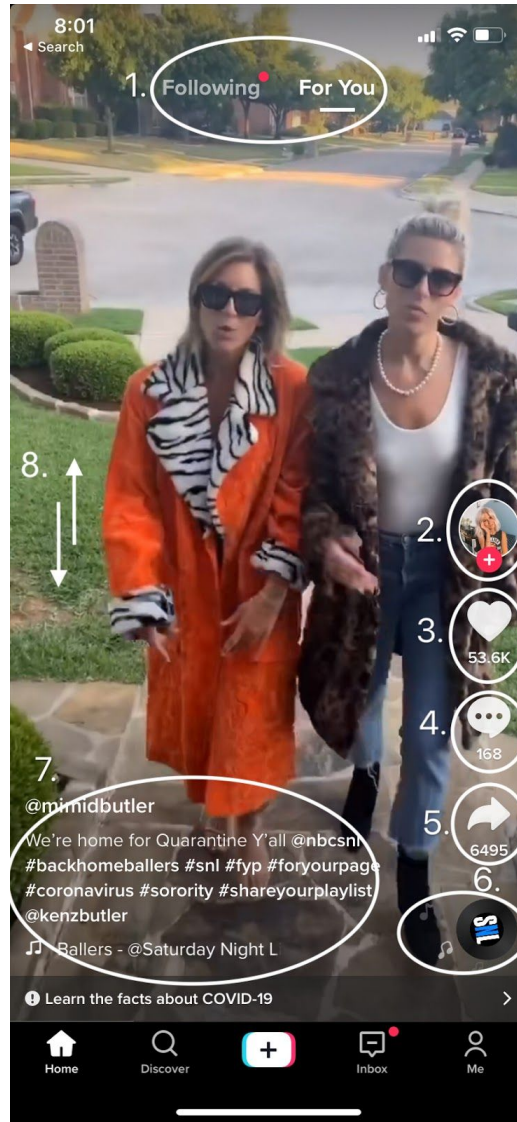
Fig. 3 Screenshot of TikTok Video Watching Page

1. For you & Following Page

On the top of the video watching interface, options to choose either viewing "For you" or "Following" pages are provided. The fundamental differences of these two pages are the kinds of contents TikTok sends to users' feeds. Following page only serves the contents of the creators that the users followed, while the For You Page pushes the contents that match with the user's taste, interests and preference predicted by TikTok's secret algorithm.

2. Profile

In the circle of this button, the profile of the creator is shown. When users click the button, it will direct users to the channel of the users, where it displays all he/her videos. The small red plus button below the profile is a shortcut of the "following" button in the creator's channel.

3. Likes

Similar to those of other social media platforms, the "likes" button is designed for viewers to express their gratification over the contents. To perform the "like" action on TikTok, users can simply double tap anywhere on the screen, which is really a simple and convenient operation for even the laziest users. In the meantime of double tapping, a big, red animated heart will appear on screen to symbolize the user's positive feelings towards the contents.

4. Comment

Comment section is hidden in a normal video watching experience, and only when users press the comment button, the comment section will slide up from the bottom of the page, covering up the third quarter of the screen. In the comment section, users can comment on others using texts, "@", mentioning specific users, and emojis provided by the app. Users can also "like", reply to others comments, and the ranking of the comments from top down is base on the number of "likes" users received.

5. Share

Similar to the comment section, the choices available for the sharing only slides up from the bottom when users press the share button. There are four rows on the sharing interface, the

first row are friends (mutual following) in TikTok that users can send the videos to, the second row shows other platforms users can send the link to, and the third row included relevant functions other than sharing, like "report" the video, "save" the video, "duet" and "react" with the creators who made the video, "add the-" videos to the "-favorites", convert and download the video as "live photo" and "share-" the video with "-GIF".

6. Music disc

Music disc button has one of the most distinctive designs: a vinyl continuously revolving in clockwise direction with music notes constantly pops out of the vinyl; in the middle part of the vinyl, the profile of the song is shown. Clicks into the music disc will arrive at a certain song page where the entire original song can be played here, the uploader of this song, number of times the song has been used in TikTok videos, and all kinds of videos that used this song are displayed here. At the bottom of this page, there is a camera like symbol with "use this song" text surrounded by a red oval; clearly, this is the symbol that motivates users to record their own TikTok videos with the song they like.

7. Interactive text

In the bottom section, descriptions of the video written here. Different from plain texts where information of the creator, the brief depiction of the video reflected here, the music, special effects the videos used, along with all kinds of TikTok activities the videos joined by using "#" as a hashtag, and using "@" to mention other TikTok users, etc can add to the texts. Other than the description of the video, all other information embed certain links that can direct to certain pages. For example, when users click the hashtag, users will arrived at a page where all the videos that attached with the same hashtag, sometimes this hashtag means an activity, like

#TikTok Travel or #theboxchallenge, other times the hashtag pointed out certain characteristics of the video, like #beautytips or #visco(an image-editing app).

8. Scroll

Scroll is an action users do to shift the videos they're watching. Using fingers to scroll up everywhere on the screen means "next video" that new TikTok videos will appear; conversely, scrolling down means "go back" that the previous video users saw will appear. The action users take to shift to new videos is really easy and convenient that people may unconsciously overuse TikTok, or in other words, spend too much time watching videos.
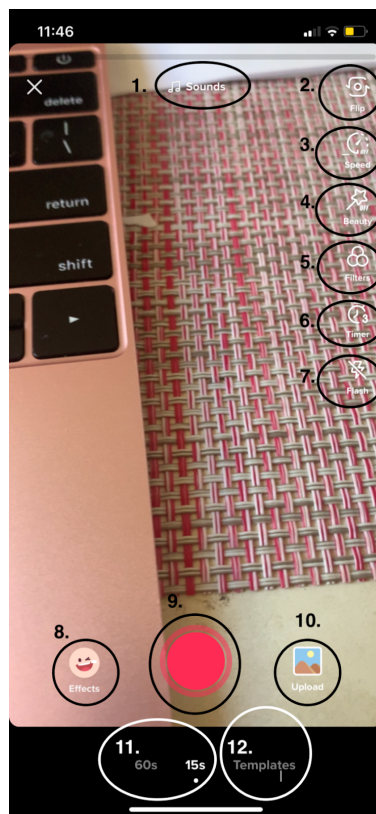
3. Video Creating Page

Fig. 4 Screenshot of TikTok Video Creating Page

1. Sounds

On the top of the Video Creating Page, "sounds" button, the most important feature of TikTok videos, is available. The sound button directs users to a music selection page, where music with different length, genres, and types are provided and sorted. The music page also allows users to search the music or sounds they want to find, and archive them to their lists of favorites. When users confirm their selection of music, the music will automatically play in their video recording process.

2. Flip

The flip allows users to switch from back camera to front camera, or vice versa. This feature adds more flexibility to the user's creative practice.

3. Speed

TikTok provides 5 speed options, they are "0.3x" and "0.5x" for slow motion, "1x" for normal speed, "2x" and "3x" for fast motion. Again, users can choose them according to their own creativities.

4. Beauty

The beauty mode can be seen as a filter that softens a user's skin, covers up the user's blemishes on skin and brightens up the skin tone, etc. The ultimate goal of the beauty mode is to give users a flawless skin in the video.

5. Filters

Filters is a layer of colouring that users can add to their image or video. There are four kinds of filters available on TikTok: "Portrait", "Landscape", "Food" and "Vibe". Each type is targeted to specific content for a specific feeling of coloring.

6. Timer

There are two functions embedded in the timer button. Users can choose the delaying time they want, whether 3 seconds or 10seconds, after they pressed the record button; this feature gives more convenience for users who record by themselves. Another function in timer is to set the time duration to the number of seconds users want to record in one take. For example, if a user want to make a 15 seconds video with 7 seconds indoor and 8 seconds outdoor, he/she can set the timer to 7 seconds for indoor shooting that in this take, there will only be seven seconds of recording; after he/she finalize this 7 seconds, he/she can then go out and record the rest.

7. Flash

The flash option is only available when the back camera is recording. It controls the on or off of the flashlight of the back camera.

8. Effects

Effects in TikTok provide different variations, animations or elements users can add to their videos, such as distortion of one's face, decorations on the videos or even games one can play in recording videos, etc. There are 8 categories of effects provided by TikTok, "Trending", "New", "Interactive", "Editing", "Beauty", "Funny", "World" and "Animal", with around 200 effects in each category. Most effects have high definition, and are interested to play around.

TikTok tries hard in "effects" to provide users with more variations of tools to make creative contents.

9. Recording

Lightly pressing the red recording button, users can start the video recording; another press of users on the button can end the video. After the video recording is over, TikTok will automatically jump to the page where users can edit and adjust the video; when the editing is done, users can press the "next" button where they can choose how to post their videos.

10. Upload

"Upload" button on the right bottom of the interface allows users to upload videos or images as materials to create contents.

11. 60s or 15s limit

Users can choose whether to record 60 seconds or 15 seconds limit videos by shifting left or right on the screen.

12. Template

TikTok provides 10 video templates for users who want to quickly make a video. The template TikTok is similar to a digital photo album that only allows users to insert pictures, not videos.

Interview Findings

Findings in the walkthrough above demonstrate how the company envisioned its products and what purposes it served. While in the interviews, I examined how users think, feel and

respond to the platform. In this research, I interviewed 8 people. 7 of them are female, while 1 of them is male. They majored in different kinds of fields in college and are aged between 18-24. Abby, a Chinese recent graduate from a public research university in Southern California, majored in Urban studies and minor in psychology; Angel, an Indian American majored in Chemistry in public research university in Southern California; Blair, an Australian majored in law in an Australia public university; Justin, a caucasians majored physics in public research university in Southern California, and my only male participant; Cathy, a recent graduate from public research university in Southern California majored in biology; Sophia, an architecture student in University in Canada; Miley, graduate student in a distinguished business school in Southern California majored in marketing; and Olivia, a student in nursing school. These names are all pseudonyms instead of their real names for privacy reasons. They are all active users of TikTok, though they approach TikTok with different motivations. Below, through sorting their answers in different topics, I will unveil their thoughts around TikTok.

1. Experience with the user interface

I began my interview with the participants by asking their feelings about the interface design of TikTok. I suggested several interfaces, buttons, and effects to discuss, but I also gave them free spaces to talk about other functions that they have strong feelings with.

I provided the basic explanations of the TikTok digital architectures in the Technical Walkthrough section above, in case readers need more information to understand the discussion.

- **Entrance**

After clicking through the TikTok icon on the homepage of smartphones, the screen turned black with the TikTok icon and the text "TikTok" appeared in the middle; this animation is what I consider as entrance of TikTok, and it only lasts for half a second. Of the 8 people I interviewed, 3 of them do not associate the animation of entrance with any cultural objects, but they do think that the black background is really comfortable for their eyes when they open the TikTok at night, the time that most of them open; while other 5 participants attach some degree of cultural symbol to the animation: Abby thought the logo of TikTok reflects the moving element of the software that they as users always dance in using TikTok, Angel regarded the entrance as a theater's curtain that is about to reveal something, Sophia associated this with the loading status of softwares and she also though this is good marketing strategy to get users familiar with their logo, and Blair thought the blackness symbolize sophistication, and the colorful logo accentuates the creative side of TikTok. Almost all of them told me that the entrance reminded them of the relaxed, delightful and surprised experience they were about to have in TikTok; it also prepared them to actually play it.

- **Video Watching Page**

Likes

"Likes" is the act of expressing appreciation to content. Interviewees reported that they used the "like" button both to show approval and to create a history of favorite videos.Three of the participants also favored the action of double tapping to trigger the "like" function, because it is not only really easy to operate, but also, as Justin mentioned, the heart animation that appeared after his action can appropriately express his gratifications towards the content creators.

Comments

Comment section is where users express and exchange their opinions with each other. Commenting itself implies an extra effort and work users need to put, which discourages some of my participants from using this function. But if the contents really struck my participants (gives them enough satisfaction), as Cathy and Justin mentioned, or in some ways raise their desire to question, clarify or even argue, as Sophia suggested, they will likely to comment. Other times, when participants have enough TikTok playing peers that they are familiar with, situations that are similar to Abby's and Blair's, they comment to interact with each other and to improve each other's videos.

Profile, Music and Hashtag

For every video user watched on TikTok, the creator's profile, music that was used, and hashtag the creator created for that video will be displayed in the video watching page. All the participants agree that the "+" button under the creator's profile picture in the video watching page is really convenient for them to follow them immediately; as they do not need to open the creator's profile page and follow them. For users who like the music on TikTok or have a desire to dance on TikTok, they like to click into the music disk button, checking for the names of the song and more videos created with this song. Users who take a serious attitude in creating videos, for example, Abby, likes to use "hashtag" to get inspired by varieties of videos under the same hashtag topic, while other users rarely use hashtags.

For You page VS Following Page

For you page and Following page are two video watching interfaces that push different contents feeds for users; while the former page shows the contents that base on TikTok algorithm's prediction on user's preference and interest, the latter page only sends the contents

that were made by creators, whom users are following. 7 out of 8 participants I interviewed use the "For You" page on TikTok often, and most of them choose this page because of its accurate prediction on what they like to watch on TikTok. Blair even finds that "users who live in the same area always have the same video pop up", and "I always see my friends' videos on the "For you" page even though I don't follow them". Other than the "accuracy" of the algorithm in predicting their video pereferrence, several participants mentioned that "For You" allows them to explore more new videos and creators rather than stick to what they followed in the following page. The only participant I interviewed who uses the following page more often is Miley. She likes to use the following pages more often because she wants to control the contents she sees, and avoid watching random videos that she doesn't like.

Scroll

Scrolling is the action when users want to shift the video they are watching, scrolling up allows users to see the next video and scrolling down allows users to go back to the previous video. All the participants I interviewed think the easiness and convenience of this action trigger them to watch more videos; especially when the action of scrolling is combined with the short length of the TikTok video that catches their attention, users easily lose track and stay on TikTok for hours, "even when you don't get good videos, you want to keep going to see if the next one is the good one", Olivia said.

- **Video creating page**

Filters and Beauty Effects

A filter is a layer of coloring to the images or videos, and the beauty effects are a set of mixed effects that perfect the user's skin. Participants' opinions towards filters and beauty effects

of TikTok are different, as everyone's aesthetic standards are different. Generally, participants think that filters in TikTok are not as natural, authentic and aesthetic pleasing as those of Instagram; but some participants think these exaggerated filters correspond to the rawness and humor of TikTok videos. As for beauty effects, some girls like to use it as it "makes you beautiful without trying", while others think they don't need it.

Effects

Effects are tools users can use to distort images, add stickers or create unrealistic or magical animations for their videos. Participants in my research choose different effects to serve their purposes in creating videos. Abby likes to make funny and hilarious videos, therefore she likes to use the "in and out" effect, "shadow color" and "split" effect; while Blair also likes to make the video aesthetically pleasing, therefore she likes to use the Blink effect(when you move around, everything sparkles). Other participants want to keep the video natural and simple, therefore they rarely use them.

Music

Easily adding their favorite music to the videos they are making is one of the biggest attractions for them to use TikTok. Blair thought, by doing this, TikTok normalizes lots of music that once were special and hard to find. Abby stressed the importance of the music in creating videos; she explained that when adding background music or her own sounds to certain videos, "the whole vibe (of the video) is changed". For example, she once made a comedy video that without the music she felt her action was so silly, but after putting "club music" on it, the video suddenly becomes so "decent" and her action is appropriate in this situation.

2. Scenarios of Entering and Leaving TikTok

My 8 participants usually open TikTok in these 4 situations: before bed, during a time gap, whenever they feel bored and during socializing with friends.

After a day of work and get ready to sleep, users open TikTok to release the stress and take all the matters out of their mind. TikTok acts as a buffer for users to enter a good sleep. During the day, when there is a time gap between things they do, like taking buses, waiting for classes to start and in-between study time, users will open TikTok to either pass time, boost up moods or cope with stress. Boredom is another reason users play TikTok, however, it does not mean participants have nothing to do, but instead, "have so much to do and want to procrastinate"; some participants also define boredom as "tired of doing one thing". Boredom in their narration can be seen as an emotional state that results in their procrastination in homework or career preparations, and frustration during coronavirus quarantine. Under these scenarios, TikTok allows users to escape from realities and find a moment of gratifications. Another occasion users open the app is when they discuss interesting contents on TikTok and desire to show and share the contents with each other. TikTok can be seen as a tool to facilitate user's socializing activities. Other motivations for users to play TikTok include discovering and following new trends, and simply just want to dance.

Participants often leave the app when their mood has been adjusted or as what participants said "feel better", or when they realize that they spend so much time on it. Angel said that when she is "filled with the positive energy and good feelings that she cannot get from real life", she is ready to close the app. Justin told me he felt hopeful after he discovered and saw all these cool and entertaining contents that were worth checking out. Most participants also

admit that they easily lose track of time in using it, and when they realize they spend hours and hours on it, they will forcely stop themselves from it; and interestingly, sometimes even TikTok will push a video to their content feed that reminds them to take a break.

3. Content Satisfactions

In this part, I organized participants' answers around types of content they watched and their feelings and satisfaction around these contents.

- **Comedy**

The most frequent types of content on TikTok that all the participants watched is what they called "comedy" on TikTok. Comedy includes a range of different topics videos that make users laugh and can provide them with an instant gratification. Based on participants personality and interests, the kinds of comedy they watched are slightly different: Lively Abby who is Christian likes to watch pranking videos and Christian memes; Justin likes to watch formulaic point of view video, a first-person perspective video that the creator followed a existed dialogue and talked intimately to the screen, and the reaction videos that the creator reacting to certain movies or songs; Angel and Blair who love dancing likes to watch funny dancing videos and also college memes videos; due to the quarantine, Cathy sees lot of funny staying home videos to comfort herself in staying home 24 hour; Miley is aspired to become a professional content creator analyzed lot of trending funny videos to find more inspirations.

- **Dancing video**

Apart from comedy, the second most popular types of content they watched is dancing videos. Dancing videos usually refers to creators who make moves in accordance with the

rhythm of the music. In most cases, the movements of dances are choreographed by the most popular TikTok dancing creators like Charlie D'Amelio, and other creators followed these movements with small adjustments. From my own observation and my only male participant's conversations that he doesn't have a desire to dance, I predict that dancings videos are consumed predominantly by female participants. They like to watch dancing videos because they think they are "cool", the moves look fashionable and music is so catching and appealing.While some participants like Blair likes to follow mainstream TikTok dancers, some, like Angel, appreciate those who perform Indian dancings, those from her cultures and some, like Abby, choose to watch and follow the random dancers as long as they are fun to watch. And for Miley, who wants to become a professional content creator, she watches TikTok dances just for learning and getting inspired, even though she called these dances "stupid" dances.

- **Tutorials**

There are a range of videos on TikTok that can serve as tutorials to help users learn certain skills, these videos include DIY videos, cooking videos, workout videos and make up videos. Most of the participants find it useful in real life and in most of the time, they can successfully make a trendy Dalgona coffee, a kind of whipped coffee, cook a delicious meal or have a set of workouts. They think these 15 seconds or 60 seconds tutorials are interesting and concise, "I don't need to see someone chop vegetables for 10 minutes" Blair said, and are easy and fun to follow. However, some participants doubt the credibility of these tutorials as they are too short and placed in a facetious and not serious enough platform. They rather see them as a show or performance that is not relatable to those of real life.

- **Other videos**

Other types of videos participants watched on TikTok include gaming, cartoon and paintings, travel, sports videos, etc. Types of videos they choose to watch depend highly on their interests or are the expansion of their interests. Skating and gaming on the computer are always the hobbies of the male participants I interviewed, and therefore he watched a lot of videos around skating and gaming tutorials and jokes or discussions of them; because of his interest in outdoor activities, he also adores travelling videos. Angel cares a lot about her life in college and her future career, and therefore, she watches videos related to these topics. She feels relatable to these videos because she has the same experiences; watching these contents also allow her to reflect on her life and relationship with others.

4. Video Production

- **Motivations**

Referred back to TikTok's app store descriptions analyzed in the visions of TikTok above, TikTok ardently encourages its users to become creators. Despite its desire to generate large numbers of creators on the platform, TikTok does not guarantee any forms of monetary payment to them; but still, creators on the platform are growing, and it is interesting to examine the reasons they want to become a creator.

Participants I interviewed have various reasons to create videos, and most of them fall into these categories: having fun, expressing a part of themselves, acquiring recognition, and a way of socializing with friends.

My participants started their creator's journey by simply thinking "it is fun to do". For them, their initial motivations to create videos is similar to watching videos on TikTok, pure

entertainment and having fun. Cathy suggested that creating TikTok videos lighten up her mood as she maintains a certain seriousness in her real life. Sometimes, when they are not motivated enough to create videos, people around them push them into it; Justin mentioned that the only time he records TikTok videos is when his girlfriend asked him to be the dance partner in TikTok dances, though he is in the passive side, he still had a pleasant experience. Through these video creating processes, some of them discovered a different part of "selves" that they didn't realize before. These new "selves", according to their explanations, means new personalities of theirs or new strengths of theirs. In most cases, their new "selves" presented in the videos were appreciated by not only themselves, but also people around them; and these recognitions motivated them to invest more efforts in producing more videos. Abby discovered that she can be really humorous and funny when it comes to making TikTok videos. Her roommate-pranking videos not only received her friends laughs, but also drew her roommates closer to her. Angel, who was a dancer in the school Indian dancing team quit the team as she can no longer cope with the increasingly difficult dances and the increasing amount of time needed to commit; with her dancing backgrounds, she found herself really skilled at TikTok dances, which has simplified choreography. Similar situation also applies to Cathy, though she had no dancing background, she also found herself good at it. Praised by their friends and families, Angel and Cathy become more serious about their TikTok videos and perform more dances. Angel even stated that she might consider becoming a professional content creator if she gets enough followers and likes.

As most participants followed the pattern I explained above, there is an exception. Having a sharp business mind, Miley, who is trying to become a professional content creator,

sees the potential of this rapidly growing creative platform, and thus creating videos on TikTok as a career.

- **Types of content created**

Matching with types of content they most frequently watched on TikTok, participants in this study create dancing videos and comedy contents the most on TikTok.

Dancing videos on TikTok can be seen as videos involving music and dances. And the most typical and popular dances on TikTok are those of dance movements that match the rhythm of the music. Most participants start their dancing videos by mimicking other dancings, some like Blair, Cathy, and Sophia followed mainstream TikTok dancers who had the most followers, such as Charlie D'Amelio, while some like Abby, Angel followed the dancers that they appreciated regardless of dancers' follower number. The exception goes to Miley, who creates her own dances in hope of being the leading person of the dancing trend on TikTok. In mimicking dances, participants put their own personalities into the video. Cathy, for example, catches on 80% of the movements of the dance she mimics and improvises the rest. She adds the goofiness and humor of her own to the videos, such as wearing pajamas in videos, and shows the energetic self in the dance video.

Comedy is a broad term to describe videos that are funny, and each participants has their own funny contents: Abby especially likes to create pranking videos as mentioned above, because she thinks it "gives her excuses to be stupid that she cannot be in reality", Angel favored creating funny life-related videos, as she thinks "it's a nice memories of her life.", while Olivia likes to do voiceovers, TikTok challenges and also pranking videos, etc. In the process of creating those videos, they usually start by selecting existing videos to mimic; videos they

choose to mimic that have quality content, which have really funny lines or memes, or something relatable to them. And As they become more familiar with content creation on TikTok, they start to put more of their own creativities into the videos, but still borrow certain attributes from videos they like and put them on their own. Olivia always borrows sounds from other videos, because, according to her, it can establish the same mood as those of others in her video in the quickest and easiest way; though she told me she is reluctant to add more special effects to her videos, she often apply filters to as a way to express her own creativities in editing.

- **Time spent on creating videos**

Time participants spent on TikTok can vary between persons and between videos, and it depends on their seriousness to their videos, and kinds of contents they make. Miley told me that she spent 10-20 minutes creating a dance video, while spent a half of the day creating an original script comedy. Blair, who is really conscious about the videos she made, recorded and edited videos for hours to post it, while Cathy, who treats video creation as an experiment, only takes under 30 minutes to create a video.

5. Interaction on the Platform

Participants from my interview interact with other users on the platform in a limited way. They never build personal relationships with the creators or other users on TikTok, but rather limit their communication around TikTok videos. To respond to the TikTok videos, they double tap the "like" button to show their appreciation and type their opinions to the videos in the "comment" box. They sometimes film similar videos or reaction videos as a way of communicating with that creator, if they encounter contents they really connect to. Blair in the

interview told me that sometimes she "duet" on TikTok, creating mimicking or reaction videos alongside the original video, with the creators she loves. Though they have superficial interaction with people on the platform, outside of TikTok, they share TikTok videos with their friends in real life, discussing about their funniness, comparing videos and creators, or even using TikTok memes in their life; note here that TikTok meme referred to the phrases, storylines, a dialogue, or a section of songs that are memorable for the users. Besides that, Angel, Blair and Justin often dance or create other videos on TikTok with their friends and family to bond and have fun.

Discussion

More than a dozen pages of research findings are demonstrated above, and in this section, to answer three research questions of this study, key findings will be selected in research findings and discussed below.

RQ 1: What leads users to TikTok?

1. **Kill the Boredom**

In the interviews I did with several of my participants, most of them revealed that boredom is one of the most frequent mental states they experience when they decide to open TikTok. Two kinds of boredom are identified in participants experience: leisure boredom, a perception that available leisure activities are not sufficient enough to satisfy needs for optimal arousal (Iso-Ahola and Weissinger 1990, 4), and the boredom that understood in psychological field as a negative state of mind, reflecting an inner conflict between expected optimal and perceived actual experiences (Lin et al. 2009, 994).

During the time I conducted my interview, unfortunately, the global outbreak of coronavirus kept everyone in their home for a quarantine, including those college students or recent graduates who participated in my study. All the classes and work moved online, and students or employees can stay home 24-hour while receiving their education or completing their tasks. Though education or jobs were not interrupted by coronavirus quarantine, the once colorful and vivid lives of people were undermined. After work or school, people have to spend their leisure time, the time that once belonged to hiking, partying, shopping, watching movies, etc, at home, only. For most of my participants, apparently, home is not enough for them to stress out and have fun, which leads to the raise of leisure boredom among them. And to kill this boredom, a lot of people came to TikTok to raise their arousal and find more gratifications: Blair found joy while watching and dancing trendy dances; Cathy found a great consolation from TikTok videos that trying to make fun out of the quarantine life that as well experienced with; Abby found excitement when she saw and conduct some hilarious pranking videos, etc.

The mental state that having so much time and so less fun things to do is what we usually understood as bored, which discussed above; however, in my interviews, participants showed that their boredom also comes out from the conflict between their expectation and the reality they are facing (Lin et al. 2009, 994): described by Olivia as "tired of studying", by Abby as "have so much to do and want to procrastinate", or Angel as "don't know how to begin with my career planning, and what I really want?" also lead them to useTikTok. To be more specific, bored for Olivia is when she feels really tired in studying that she really needs to relax, for Abby is overwhelmed with work assigned by her job, and for Angel is confused and perplexed in life.

They approach TikTok with a mind of escape, throwing their problems in real life off to the back of their head, and hope that TikTok could provide them with moments of peace and laughter.

2. Boosting up mood

Stress, loss, fatigue, anxiety...etc, these are the emotional states my interviewees had when they opened TikTok, and when they left TikTok, "hopeful, refreshment, been entertained, and prepared" are what they retrieved. Through our conversations, I discovered that people's moods were being adjusted by TikTok from mostly negative to mainly positive.

In previous TikTok walkthrough TikTok vision section, I mentioned that TikTok deliberately regulates its creative contents to make sure that they bring a positive energy to users; its efforts include encouraging its users to create contents that are entertaining and joyful, and constraining contents that include violent actions or hate speech been produced by setting up community guidelines. Types of content that are fun to watch from Comedy, Gaming, DIY, Food, Sports, Memes, and Pets, to Oddly Satisfying, ASMR soon occupied the platform, and were consumed by TikTok users in a large dose. No matter how bad users felt before they entered TikTok, after consuming varieties of warm and creative contents, it is hard that they don't cheer up a little.

Though overall contents on TikTok could bring a positive vibe to users, gratifications that each type of them brought to users are slightly different, as uses and gratifications theory implied (McQuail, 1984). And specifically when it comes to adjusting user's mood, observed from my interviews, these types of videos were particularly effective for users. ASMR, Autonomous sensory meridian response as its full title, is a kind of video that makes sounds like scraping,

whispering or crunching to please and relax the viewers; Blair often watched them to stop herself

overthinking after a busy school day and calm herself to sleep. Videos that teach various DIY

(Do It Yourself) skills, such as cooking or crafting, inspired Miley a lot as these videos are

usually very outside the box that even seems pretty unrealistic, but still Miley found them

intriguing. TikTok content that include memes of Christian life and quarantine life often soothe

Abby's heart as she thought they are so relatable to her own daily routine that there are people

going through what she's been facing; these kinds of understanding brings hope to her life. Not

to mention other kinds of comedy, like pranking, lip-sync, odd dancings that make several of

participants laugh and feel pleased; by immersing themselves into this delightful world, their

stress levels are alleviated.

3. Expressing the True Self

Living in modern society, every one of us is always constrained by the environment we

are situated in; things we have to do, routines we have to follow, roles we have to fulfill, etc. Part

of our true self is being buried in our heart by our daily duties or at least confined to the few

loved ones. This case certainly applies to the young adults I interviewed who have heavy school

work or pressures in entry jobs that leave them no space for part of their true self to be expressed.

The appearance of TikTok allows them to release the self that has been hidden in real life, and

the short length of the TikTok video makes the production easier and faster. For Angel, tough

STEM courses spare her no time to practice Indian dances in a professional dance team, while

TikTok gave her a stage that gathered eyes of the world to perform the dances that only need

pieces of her college time to learn. For Abby, a serious industry job she had gave her no chances

to be hilarious, but in the process of filming pranking roommates or her silly but humorous daily

practices on TikTok, she found a more passionate self that balanced her seriousness in work. And for Cathy and Miley, though in real life, they do not hide their goofiness and vivacious personality to their friends, TikTok provides them a safe place to develop their peculiarities in producing more creative and amusing short videos.

Different motivations of TikTok users can be analyzed in cultural and informational models Mcquail suggested grounded by uses and gratification theory(1984). In my observations in the interviews, people adopt TikTok largely for emotional needs, just like what I explicate for three motivations above; these three motivations, which are killing boredom, adjust mood and express part of the self, can be justified by Macquail's cultural models that people use TikTok for various kinds of imaginative experiences that allowed them to disconnect with the reality they face (Mcquail 1984, 189) . However, there are also people who seeks TikTok for more a practical use, though in a smaller proportion, which fit with Macquail's cognitive model. For instance, Justin told me he learnt how to do dalgona coffee, and gathered some tips on skating from short tutorials from TikTok. Macquail described these kinds of content as informational; and the process that Justin acquired his satisfactions can be explained in Macquail's cognitive model as: Justin's interest in culinary and skating leads him to choose TikTok cooking and skating tutorials as guidance to excel at these skills. Miley treated the process of viewing and making contents on TikTok as a job, in hope of what she did can lead to a decent amount of salary; her motivation for using TikTok can be explained in Macquail's cognitive model as a social exchange (Mcquail 1984, 190).

From analysis above, we can see that what really leads users to TikTok are their dissatisfaction for reality, an immediate need to alleviate their negative moods that results from

these dissatisfactions, and a desire to express the part of themselves safely in TikTok. The positivity which arises from the authenticity of the TikTok contents attaches users tightly. Users feel relatable and relevant when they see videos that, for example, show various ways people having fun during quarantine using trendy music templates like "bored in the house" song; or they feel entertaining and refreshed when they see videos that are ludicrous like pranking families, or videos that are outside of box like using special effects to transform the home to Harry Potter's world; or they've been impressed by the richness of human culture celebrated on TikTok, for example, dances and drawings in different ethnicities. What's more, as TikTok videos are easy to make, since they are short and usually based on one's true life, every user can live up to this positivity by creating these videos themselves. TikTok with its Positivity, authenticity and convenience, brings users an instant relief, and a quick escape from the lives they are not satisfied with.

R2: How does TikTok mediate users' creative practice?

1. **Authenticity and Creativity**

"Real people, real videos that make your day" is one of the TikTok most used advertising slogans. In fact, in my investigation through TikTok's visions and interface design, authenticity, the quality of being real or true (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020), is one of the key values and design principles that TikTok tightly follows, and which sets itself apart from other similar platforms. The creativity of TikTok then grew out from the slight modification of real life; TikTok and its creativity is a more dramatic, hilarious and absurd version of reality.

To better mediate the "realness" embedded in the content that users produced, TikTok constructs its interface to be as simple and plain as possible, directing the user's attention to the contents themselves; this can be evident by interface design of video watching page that the full-scale video displaying frame that covered up the entire screen with all the interactive buttons scattered around the video. In addition to the mapping of this interface, design of several functions and buttons are symbolic which makes them even closer to the meanings they represent. For example, when people double tap the screen to express their appreciation to the content, a red animated heart will appear; a red heart connote the meaning of gratitude and also love, loving and being loved by others, in western culture; moreover, the button "music", which direct to the page of music used by video that is playing currently on the page, designed to be a playing vinyl that is constantly bursting out music notes; this vivid vinyl design associates the meaning of music can be well understood by users.

Similarly, tools that are designed by TikTok in video creating pages also in many ways assist its users to create short videos that are authentic and outside the box. Description of the TikTok app in the app store pointed out that the facial recognition technologies developed by TikTok enable it to capture a range of users' real expressions at high speed and display them in a legitimate quality that "loads instantly, smooth interface, and lag free". Sound is an indispensable part of TikTok video, and sound templates for popular songs or lip-sync of real life dialogues and anecdotes are being widely used by creators as they make the video creating process much quicker and easier. TikTok provides options of recording original sound and editing existing soundtracks for users to design their own soundtrack; this allows users to speak out their own thoughts in real life while playing around a little bit to highlight the entertaining message. Filters

and Special effects provided by TikTok are abundant, much more than Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook, and provide enough tools for users to build on their creativity. According to Olivia and Angel, the filters on TikTok have a stronger and more exaggerated coloring and the special effects it provided are much more diversified and outside of the box compared to those of other platform; what Olivia and Angel described are effects such as blinking effect (when users move around, everywhere sparks), magnifier effect (when users move part of their face, that part of the face will be enlarge many times) or games effect (playing various little games on screen), etc. It is evident that the theatrical element in TikTok content is in fact encouraged by the editing tools in TikTok.

2. Addiction

Recent news reports around TikTok are filled with the concerns over teenagers and young adults' addiction in use, as the data shows 60% of the TikTok active users are aged 16-24 year olds (Reuters, 2019), and they open the app eight times a day and spend an average 46 minutes on the app each day (Kerry Flynn, 2019). The seriousness and urgency of this issue not only lies on the debate in management of their precious time, but also the mental health of theirs; studies have affirmed that internet addiction may have negative consequences on their mental health, such as decreased learning and work performance, and poor interpersonal quality (Ho et al., 2017).

I first discovered that TikTok users might have an addiction problem on TikTok when I noticed all of them spend an hour or more on TikTok everyday. The excessive use is an important characteristic of addiction. When I dig deeper, I discover that most of them do not know how much time has passed when they use it and they cannot control themselves to close

the app. This strengthens my thought that they are having addiction problems since addiction is the inability to stop doing or using something, especially something harmful (Cambridge Dictionary). Furthermore, as Abby told me she has difficulty concentrating on lengthy articles after using TikTok, I realized this addiction is now having a negative influence on users daily life, though not all of them.

Aligning with the excessive use of TikTok by participants with their description of their feelings in using several functions on TikTok, I came up with the prediction that the full-scale of the video screen, the scrolling feature, the length of the TikTok video, and the recommendation algorithm might be the factors that lead users to addiction. Scrolling or Swiping up and down are the actions to switch videos on the screen. Participants reported to me that they feel this action is so easy to operate that by doing it overtime, it becomes an inertia or a habit. Olivia described this habitual movement as "keep scrolling", which drives her to watch more and more videos unconsciously, even when she does not have strong desires to continue watching. Add on to this habitual muscle movement, the full-width and full-height of the TikTok video displaying screen can carry users to the video in a short time; Cathy felt a more intimate relationship with the performer on the videos, and Justin the details he could see through the full screen allows him to concentrate. Another factor I discovered that might cause user's excessive use of TikTok is the short length of the video in which it allows users to get instant satisfaction in seconds, and by keeping switching videos, users can get multiple stimulations in a relatively short period. Justin and Sophie described their experience with it as "I enjoyed that I can quickly get the point or essence of the video". Last but not least, I noticed the recommendation algorithm of TikTok did

fairly well in predicting users' video preference; thus, with their favorite contents kept appearing on the screen, users can hardly leave the platform.

Several interface designs I analyzed above in their own ways extend users' time spent on TikTok, sometimes without users' notice. To note that, predictions I made above are only based on my own walkthrough of TikTok and other 8 participants interviewed, thus this small sample may not convey the whole story; thus, further data collection needs to be done to affirm these predictions.

Simplicity, functional, and alluring is what I describe the interface design of TikTok. Features are simple for users to learn and operate, while tools are functional and comprehensive to stimulate users' creativity from real life; combining all the features, buttons and animations together, TikTok interface is alluring and even addictive for general users.

R3: How do users interact on TikTok?

Interaction is the fundamental element of TikTok. It is this vibrant communication among users that begets the creativity that TikTok survived on.

1. **Peer Interaction**

TikTok valuing interaction is evident in its design of interface, where likes, comments, direct texts and shared buttons were built. However, most of my participants seldom likes comments and texts on TikTok as they consider them as extra work that they are lazy to do; the few times they interacted these ways were times when they were been stimulated by contents they saw, for instance, when contents are so well-made and pleasing, or in opposite, when contents are so against user's belief. Sharing, in other hands, is used more frequently. All my

participants like to share interesting videos they saw on TikTok with their real-life friends; and if their friends do not have TikTok, participants didn't mind sharing these contents to the third platforms where their friends were at. Enabled by the third platform sharing feature, users could include TikTok video critique into their everyday conversation with their real-life friends.

Several interactive features discussed above can be seen as the basic or superficial interaction users had on the platform, through my interviews and walkthrough, I also found that the process of producing content is actually the most effective interaction in stimulating creativities and creating a sense of community. As most of the videos produced by users on the platform are not purely original, or in other words, involve some kinds of mimicking or quoting, the communication between the creator and its peers starts at production design (creator conceiving what videos to make). In this step, from viral trends or templates of lip-sync sounds, dance movements and activities, such as experimenting with strawberries to see if there are bugs inside, etc., users can choose what videos they specifically want to re-enact or respond. From my observation of TikTok content and interviews, most of them end up choosing either mimicking dance movements choreographed and performed by popular TikTok dancers, following lip-sync dialogues that are most relatable or funny to them, or doing certain activities that are most meaningful for them. The loose management, or barely no constraint, of video copyrights gave creators more sources to work on and mixed with, which stimulates more creative contents being conceived and produced. Then, in the video making process, most users do not tightly follow the templates they choose, but rather slightly modify them to insert their own personalities and thoughts. For example, Cathy likes to dance the movements in a goofier and humorous way, Abby, who is a christian, likes to mixed with some christian message into the pranking she

conducts, and Olivia likes to use vintage filters to change the style of the lip-sync video she mimics. This flexible template interpretation, also can be seen as one of the TikTok culture, grants users more freedom to express their ideas, which gives birth to innovative and individualized content. TikTok creators can also choose to respond to certain videos by "duet" with that video. In a "duet" interface, the creator's video will play hand in hand with the video they choose to respond to. "Duet" are usually used by users who want to sing simultaneously with those in the video, or comment on certain videos or disclose certain video's tricks. Before publishing their videos, to connect their videos in the context of the TikTok community, users can link their videos to some existing discussions on the platform by adding certain hashtags, typing "#" before the topic, or mentioning someone by typing "@" before that user's name.

On TikTok, interactions are the fuel of creativity. Viewer's interactions, such as likes, comments, and sharing, provide feedback for creators to expand their creativities and motivations for them to keep producing; while for creators, their interactions with the platform are embedded in the process of video productions where they connect their videos to the fun TikTok trend or templates and provide their own streams of thoughts to the creative pool. All these Interactions generate an open and tolerant culture where creativity explodes.

2. Microcelebrities and Influencers

In any of the real or virtual communities, there will be a group of opinion leaders that other members in the community respect and follow. In TikTok, this group is the microcelebrities or influencers, creators who have a significant amount of followers, often around 10K or beyond. In my walkthrough and interviews, I discovered that users followed microcelebrities or influencers who are more close to their lives and share similar values. For

example, Abby, as a christian, followed many influencers who "spread the god's word" and made memes about christian life; as for Angel, who has a cultural bond with India, followed microcelebrities who perform traditional Indian dances. Following their favorite TikTok stars, users not just simply watch their content, but create similar contents that are inspired by theirs. Though the extent to which users mimic their videos can varied, but as flexible interpretation and outside box thinking are the culture of TikTok, users tend to only copy the gestures, movement, or the essence of the video, while the clothing, background, numbers of people participate could change according to users' preference. This means that popular creators are only able to set the basic structure of videos circulated on TikTok whereas the rest elements can be negotiated by users. But still, they have enough culture power to lead the trend on TikTok. Some of the popular creators tried to transform their culture power to economic power by selling related products in their videos, but from my research, these kinds of commercial activities currently are not effective as users disfavored them. When asked about to what extent do they want to become professional microcelebrities or influencers on the platform, participants thought they might be more serious to their content if they have more followers, but they would only treat it as a hobby and doubt that professional creators could actually make a living.

In the network of TikTok, each individual, in its own little effort, contributes and disseminates the creativities, as well as authenticity; he/she selflessness offers their ideas, presents moments in their real life, negotiates the norms and values posed by those in power. In the scope of ritual view of communication, all these interactions on TikTok can be seen as the necessary building blocks and fuels to maintain a creative, positive and authentic digital world (Carey 1989, 18-19). However, from a business perspective, this world also gathered massive

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user's data that can be sold and advertised. And all the human experiences in this world, in Zuboff view, are the "free raw materials for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales" in surveillance capitalism (2019, THE DEFINITION). In fact, in TikTok privacy policy, they acknowledged that they collected user's registration information, preferences, behavior information for personalized advertisement, and they also collected user's profile, location, their party engaged, purchasing history, etc., for uses they do not clearly indicate (TikTok, 2020). In this sense, TikTok is never free, that users pay their tickets by unconsciously selling their privacy information to TikTok. In the meantime of passionately contributing to the shared creative world, users should be aware of the surveillance taking place in TikTok, and carefully select which information to share and what needs to be preserved.

Conclusion and Implication

This research intends to provide a basic understanding of the emerging popular app TikTok users. Using walkthrough methods and unstructured interviews, capabilities and social consequences of TikTok as well as the motivations and the interactions of the users were examined. Three questions were raised, answered and discussed in an effort to uncover how users make meanings on TikTok : what leads users to TikTok? How does TikTok mediate users' creative practices? How do users interact on TikTok? To answer the first question, I conducted interviews with 8 TikTok users with different background, and I recognized that the boredom and the dissatisfactions in real life lead users to TikTok for an instant mood-boosting; and to extend and intensify this positivity, some users start to express themselves in video production. For the second question, through examining environment of use, content flows, interface design

of TikTok using walkthrough method and gathering users' feedback towards interface design of TikTok in interviews, I believed that TikTok stimulates user's creativities by encouraging creators to modify and exaggerate their real life in a dramatic and hilarious way; besides that, I also discovered that users are easy to lose track of time when they play TikTok, and in response, I discussed my predictions on several features and functions that leads to this addiction. In the last question, through interviews and TikTok textual analysis, I examined various ways of user interacts on the platform, likes, comments, shares and video production, and regarded them as the construction and maintenance of the creative TikTok world; and I also detected that microcelebrities or influencers have a certain degree of cultural power over users, as they are capable of setting the trend on the platform, but users were alert to any commercial activities influencers trying to conduct.

This study has several practical implications. Firstly, as I discovered users who claimed to overused TikTok have a certain degree of frustrations and confusions in reality, to mitigate this addiction issue, users should actively seek advice from relevant professionals instead of procrastinating and escaping. On the other hand, to prevent the addiction, TikTok should come up with certain features to interrupt users' immersive experience every once in a while. Secondly, though TikTok might have certain addictive natures, it still has its value and positive effects. By engaging in this funny and creative version of reality, users alleviate their stress, express their hidden self and uncover the positive sides in their lives. Thirdly, users should be cautious of the information they are sharing and the activity they engaged on TikTok, as TikTok is constantly collecting their information and using it for their advantages.

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