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TikTok and everyday life
Making sense of the meanings and politics of scrolling

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Andreas Schellewald, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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17.12.2023

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Abstract

Every day, millions of people take out their phones, open apps such as TikTok, and start scrolling. They watch videos, 'like' them, leave or read comments, and occasionally share the content they discover with others. A lot is being said about scrollers in debates. Yet, their stories, voices, and lived experiences rarely stand in the foreground. Without these millions consuming content on a daily basis, digital platforms like TikTok would not exist. Their popularity and commercial viability rest on continuous consumption, meaning, the formation of an audience attracting creators and advertisers alike. This thesis takes TikTok as a case and investigates it from an audience studies perspective. It ethnographically enters the world of scrollers in an attempt to unpack what it means to consume content online.

To do so, the thesis draws on data collected over one and a half years of fieldwork. During this period, the TikTok consumption of 30 young adults based in the United Kingdom was studied using methods such as interviews, media mapping techniques, participant observations, and digital fieldwork. Through the collected data, an ethnographically situated account of online content consumption was developed. This account outlines how scrollers engage with the TikTok "For You" page as an everyday technology and resource generative of pleasure, relaxation, stimulation, inspiration, and social connection. It discusses how scrollers navigate TikTok as a commercial online space and the challenges they experience in that process. In that course, the thesis confronts concerns about the addictive design of apps like TikTok and the growing personalisation of media environments.

Participants were found to appropriate TikTok in creative ways as an escape site to manage their degrees of social connectedness. TikTok enabled them to momentarily disconnect and

withdraw from social pressures or obligations. Simultaneously, the app provided a resource for meaningful reconnection through sharing content. Using TikTok was not unproblematic, however. Participants got carried away scrolling, and in response to that actively developed tactics to break the endless flow of the “For You” page. Likewise, they negotiated concerns about TikTok’s surveillance practices in a way that rendered their relationship with the app tense and fragile. Their trust in TikTok was conditional and continuously put to the test. Unravelling these dynamics of online content consumption, the thesis contributes to our understanding of social media like TikTok, digital everyday life, and their politics.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Passing time on TikTok

It is 07:45 in the morning. Tanja, a student in her early twenties, is sitting in front of a school in her home-town in the English Midlands. She is currently working there part-time to earn some money. The first child she is supposed to be looking after will only be dropped off at 08:30. Nonetheless, she is expected to already be there before 08:00. To pass the time, Tanja pulls out her phone and opens TikTok. Throughout a normal day, Tanja tells me, she will usually use TikTok on one, two, or three more occasions. According to her phone's screen time tracker, she's spending an average of 1 hour and 37 minutes on TikTok every day.

Out of the more than 1 billion people using TikTok (TikTok September 2021), the average time spent on the app per day has been sitting somewhere slightly below the 1-hour mark throughout my fieldwork on the app (Omnicores 2022). For some people, that amount of time spent using TikTok will already seem high. Tanja's 1 hour and 37 minutes might appear excessive even. Put in perspective, Tanja is spending almost 7% of a 24-hour day on TikTok. For many critics, such numbers are proof that social media are wasting people's time. For most of the young adults I worked with for this project, however, 1 hour and 37 minutes seemed a normal and comfortable amount of time spent using an app like TikTok.

People like Tanja had no strong negative feelings about TikTok. For her, TikTok is just a good app to pass the time when bored and usually scrolling on TikTok will "uplift the spirit", she tells me. To give an impression of what it would be like to scroll through TikTok back then, imagine the following hypothetical situation. A person like Tanja has a couple of minutes to spare, for

whatever reason that might be. They take out their phone and tap on the TikTok icon on their mobile phone. Once they have done so, their phone's screen turns black and the TikTok logo appears briefly. All of a sudden, the entire screen is filled by a video that immediately starts playing, without having done anything.

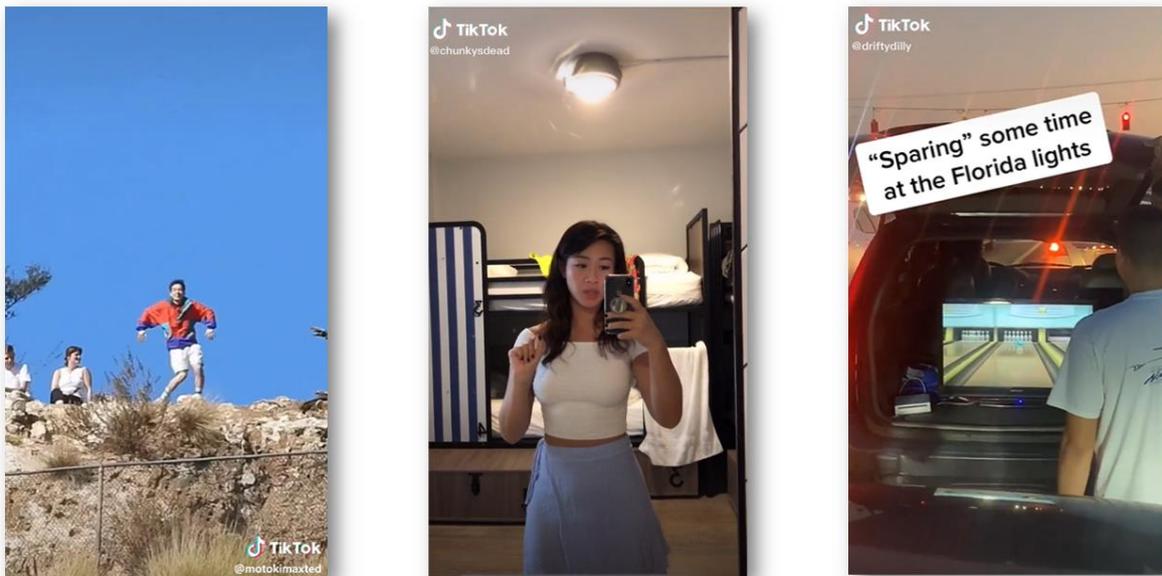


Figure 1 Screenshots of exemplary TikTok videos by @motoimaxed (2019), @chunkysdead (2020), and @driftydilly (2020).

Back in early 2020, one could have been shown a video like that of @motokimaxed. The video, 14 seconds in length, is titled "I looked like an idiot pls don't let this flop #foryou". The video opens with a shot of the Hollywood sign in Los Angeles. In the background, music plays and the camera slowly starts zooming in on a person standing on the hill above the Hollywood sign, surrounded by people looking at them. As the camera zooms in, we slowly start to see that the person is moving their hips from left to right in sync with the music whilst holding their arms as shown in the screenshot above.

A person who has never seen a video of that specific TikTok trend before will likely be confused by it. They might even find it a bit dumb, stupid, or silly. However, it might as well have made them laugh, and they tag it with a 'Like', as millions of people have done before them. Yet, it doesn't really matter what the reaction would be. TikTok will turn whatever happens into data and uses it to determine what videos to show next. For example, the next video that could have been shown is a comedy video like that of @chunkysdead. In the video, which is six seconds in length, content creator Melissa Ong films herself in a mirror saying the following line: "If you are not happy single then you will not be happy in a relationship because happiness does not come from relationships ... it comes from drugs".

Next, one might be presented with a clip like that of @driftydilly titled "Back at it with the Florida lights". The 12 seconds long video shows three people playing bowling on a gaming console placed in the back of their car. The video has a pop song playing in the background and a text annotation that reads: "sparing some time at the Florida lights". Besides that, like with many TikTok videos, there is no further information given. It just shows what has happened in a particular place at a particular moment in time. Usually, though, it will be something funny or at least mildly interesting, something that sparks curiosity and draws attention.

These three videos, all of which I encountered during my own fieldwork on the platform, will have taken at most a minute of time for one to consume, if one were to re-watch any of them or open the comments section. During all of that, TikTok has gathered more and more data on the person scrolling and their consumption behaviour. As they continue to scroll further and further, TikTok's recommender system starts testing hypotheses about what they like and refines the appearance of the "For You" page according to these assumed interests.

The “For You” page is the algorithmically curated content feed that people are placed on once they open TikTok. To reiterate, in our hypothetical scenario, we have done nothing more than tap the TikTok app icon and started scrolling. The “For You” page is vital to understand what people find appealing about the app. In and by themselves, the three videos I have mentioned appear a bit random, especially for an outsider not accustomed to short-video culture and its particular forms of humour. However, looking at them as discrete texts would be the wrong approach.

When people like Tanja open TikTok, they do not do so with the same intentions they might when turning to a platform like Netflix to watch another episode of a show they are following. What people like her are looking for on TikTok is the experience of scrolling through the “For You” page. Individual TikTok clips need to be seen as part of this ‘for you’ textual fabric of sounds and images. Scrolling through this environment is not a profound activity. Quite on the contrary, scrolling is rarely more than just a way of passing time for people, such as when waiting, for example.

It is exactly this ordinariness of scrolling that I explore in this thesis. However, this is not my only focus. As I have tried to illustrate throughout the hypothetical scenario above, scrolling on a platform like TikTok also means being continuously tracked in every action that one takes. TikTok not only seeks to create an entertaining experience ‘for you’. It also wants to construct ‘you’ as a targetable advertising category that can be sold to commercial partners. Moreover, through its design and algorithms, TikTok seeks to keep ‘you’ engaged for as long as possible to create more advertising opportunities.

It is this interplay between the meanings and politics of scrolling that I make sense of. The research questions I pose are: (1) What role do TikTok content consumption practices play in routines of everyday life? (2) How do people make sense of and navigate TikTok as a space of online surveillance? (3) How do people evaluate the meaningfulness of consuming content on TikTok? To answer them, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on TikTok over a period of one and a half years. During this time, I spent multiple months exploring the TikTok platform and conducted a series of interviews with 30 young adults based in the United Kingdom. I draw on this fieldwork to write an ethnographically situated account of TikTok consumption practices.

In what follows, I share more details on why I chose TikTok as a case, why I focus on content consumption practices, and in what wider socio-historical contexts my investigation was situated. After that, at the end of this chapter, I outline the main argument of my thesis and summarise the different thesis chapters.

1.2 Meanings and politics

A central inspiration for this thesis has been Ang's (1985) "Watching Dallas". In this study, Ang explored what exactly made watching Dallas, an American soap opera popular many decades ago, a pleasurable and meaningful experience for people. Ang framed this investigation through the debates surrounding the show. Within these debates, as Ang (1985: 2) writes, Dallas was frequently dismissed as an artefact of mass culture. Dallas was seen as a mere commercial product, low in quality and lacking depth. People saw it as reproducing questionable stereotypes and eroding cultural values. Yet for all that is wrong and problematic about Dallas, Ang (1985: 4) argued, "we must accept one thing: Dallas is popular because a lot of people somehow enjoy watching it".

TikTok presents us with a similar situation. TikTok is not just an app popular in the sense of being used by countless people. It also is a cultural phenomenon entangled in moral and political matters. TikTok is the international version of Douyin, the original Chinese version of the app. As such, TikTok can be seen as one of the first internationally successful social media apps that has its origins within China (Kaye et al. 2022, Stokel-Walker 2021, Su 2023). Towards the end of my fieldwork, in the summer of 2021, TikTok had crossed the mark of having over 1 billion people using its service worldwide (TikTok September 2021). This is a notable achievement if one considers that the app was only internationally released roughly five years earlier, in 2017. Equally impressive is the fact that by early 2020 TikTok had already managed to become one of the most downloaded apps of the 2010s (SensorTower 2020).

TikTok's growth, however, was primarily with younger people initially. Many 'older' people, meaning those above the age of 25, appeared at first to have a hard time understanding the appeal and meaning of TikTok (Hern 2019). Some described TikTok as a "relentless chaos" as they tried using the app (Spanos 2019). Others wrote on TikTok as the epitome of wasting time. For them, TikTok was withholding people, and youths in particular, from pursuing more meaningful things with their time (Odell 2019). Not only has TikTok been described as distracting in such sense, but also as being highly addictive. TikTok has repeatedly been described as a kind of "digital crack cocaine" that undermines individual autonomy and slowly turns scrollers into addicts (Koetsier 2020).

Within these debates, some have argued that TikTok is something in-between a parenting problem, given the high popularity of TikTok among kids and teenagers, and a national security threat, due to its Chinese origins (Sanger and Barnes 2020). Where shows like *Dallas* were once seen as advancing American cultural imperialism across the world, some commentators today

see Chinese geopolitical ambitions expressed in TikTok (Ferguson 2020). Simultaneously, journalists like Stokel-Walker (2021) crucially reminded people that TikTok is not equivalent to state-controlled media outlets such as Russia's RT or China's CGTN. Rather, Stokel-Walker (2021: 251) underlines that TikTok's success decentralised the power held by Silicon Valley-based tech companies and their regulators in the United States or Europe.

By becoming a key element in the global social media landscape, TikTok alters the depths to which Chinese government institutions can access this global landscape – be that on a policy level, or in terms of surveillance opportunity. As Su (2023) argues, the international success of TikTok reveals a shift in the “go out” strategy the Chinese government launched over two decades ago. According to her, TikTok marks a shift from soft power efforts in the promotion of Chinese stories and values towards digital power and infrastructural control. Analysing the case of India, where TikTok has been banned since 2020, Kumar and Thusu (2023) observe in consequence of such shifting dynamics a growing interest in the idea of “digital sovereignty”.

While these debates on TikTok's political implications started to unfold, other social media platforms tried to become more like it. YouTube and Instagram, for example, have added TikTok-like short-video features to their services, called Shorts and Reels respectively. Similarly, leaked documents have revealed that Facebook actively tried to make its algorithms more like that of TikTok (Heath 2022). Some describe this orientation towards TikTok and its ‘for you’ model as the “end of social media” (Mignano, 2022) and “sunset of the social network” (Rosenberg, 2022). That is because, as a TikTok executive himself argued, TikTok is primarily an entertainment platform (Sherman 2022). TikTok advertises itself on the Google App Store not as a tool that enables social connection, but first and foremost provides “an endless stream of short videos that feel personalized just for you” (TikTok 2022a).

From this angle, one could argue that, at least during the period of my fieldwork, TikTok was used as a case to point out all that was seen as wrong about social media. TikTok content was seen as lacking depth and distracting people from doing more meaningful things with their time. TikTok's design was described as addictive, as undermining personal autonomy. Its infrastructure was described as further eroding online privacy and enhancing global surveillance capabilities. TikTok was seen as exemplifying a paradigmatic shift towards principles of personalised entertainment and away from those of social networking, adding fuel to concerns that digital technology is devaluing the quality of social relationships (Turkle 2011).

Yet, despite all that might be wrong about TikTok, the app managed to become immensely popular. The billion people using TikTok must enjoy their experience to at least some degree. Scrolling through the app has to be an activity from which they can derive at least some meaning. If not, they wouldn't have picked up the app in the first place or keep returning to it again and again. Just like nobody was forced to watch Dallas many decades ago, nobody is forced to download and scroll through TikTok today. It is this conflicted nature of TikTok use that I explore. I investigate what meaning the app has in people's lives, yet also what kind of conflicts and tensions it sparks. I do so not just in the hope of better understanding TikTok. Rather, I want to better grasp the wider politics of popular culture mediated through the app, just like these dynamics were once mediated through Dallas.

1.3 Scrolling in the shadows

TikTok (n.d.) states that its mission is "to inspire creativity and bring joy". To this end, the TikTok app offers people a variety of features. People can create and edit their own videos on the app. Furthermore, on TikTok people can interact with others in comment sections, by

sending direct messages, or through duetting, meaning incorporating another person's video into their own. Among all the different ways people can use TikTok, it seems that scrolling through the "For You" page is amongst the least exciting. If one reads through public, industry, and scholarly debates on the app, it is the new dynamics of cultural production and community formation that are exciting about TikTok. To give you a sense of these dynamics, let me briefly review some of the themes shaping academic discourses on TikTok.

The practice of lip-syncing, for example, is one aspect that makes TikTok appear new in comparison to other social media apps. Early studies like that of Rettberg (2017) have looked at lip-syncing practices. Outlining the complexity of short-video communications, Rettberg specifically has pointed towards the emergence of a new emoji-like language in the form of hand gestures used whilst lip-syncing. Wang (2021) has continued Rettberg's work on the multi-modality of short-video communications. In particular, Wang showcases the breadth of modes – props, costumes, hand gestures, facial expressions, voice, text boxes, visual effects, filters, background music, sound effects, to name a few – that people use to express themselves in short-video form.

These creative processes have often been discussed alongside ideas of bottom-up creativity that some see as characteristic for social media (Jenkins et al. 2013). Another early study, by Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2019), has for instance shown that for youths TikTok is a vital means of political expression. They argue that TikTok's creative affordances enable youths to participate in political discourses in their own languages. Studies like that of Hautea et al. (2021) have noted in this context the complex dynamics of political discourse on TikTok, where memetic humour meets serious topics like climate change. Similarly, Stahl and Literat (2022)

showcase the myriad ways in which young people negotiate topics like generational identity on TikTok in creative and playful ways.

Especially among kids and teenagers, as De Leyn et al. (2021) have shown, TikTok takes shape as a playground they enter to connect with their peers. Further, TikTok has often been described as a safe space for young people. Barta and Andalibi (2021) note that on TikTok it is widely accepted to present oneself in more unfiltered ways. The reasons behind this are largely cultural. TikTok materialises an intimate reconfiguration of social media similar to how Xiao et al. (2020) have theorised it along the phenomenon of “finstas”, secondary Instagram profiles on which people present in more raw ways. Abidin (2020) argues that this has also caused a systematic shift in the influencer industry. Professional content creators even on platforms other than TikTok, such as Instagram or YouTube, now seem much more than before concerned with crafting relatable performances and fostering interaction across the creator/follower divide, Abidin (2020: 83) observed.

As Zulli and Zulli (2020) highlight in this context, practices of content remix and re-use are at the heart of TikTok. That is why they speak about TikTok as an “imitation public” in which mimesis is a core principle of social interaction and self-presentation. And it is here that TikTok more clearly sets itself apart from similar platforms such as YouTube as well. TikTok hosts a much more fast-paced dynamic of continuous content remix. This has led some to describe the app as the “internet’s hottest meme breeding ground” (Martin 2019). Doing so, people are referring to the fact that seemingly every new trend or meme had its origins on TikTok, spreading from there to other platforms (Walker 2022). Some commentators further describe TikTok as hosting a kind of “fame game” in which the winners, meaning those who manage to go viral on the app, “are influencing what we watch, listen to and read” (Arlidge 2021: para 1).

In short, what appears exciting and new about TikTok are its dynamics of cultural production. TikTok combines on its platform elements of multi-modality, content remix, creative collaboration, bottom-up participation, and playfulness. TikTok presents people an opportunity to create video content to participate in cultural gathering, events, and trends with other ordinary strangers. Implicit to this is, however, the assumption that people consume this content produced in new and exciting ways. After all, a person cannot remix a video they have not watched. They cannot participate in a debate they haven't followed. They cannot be influenced to buy a product, watch a film, listen to a song, read a book, and so on, if they have not encountered a video attempting to exercise this kind of influence.

Consumption, production, and participation are mutually constitutive (see also Green and Burgess 2008). All too often, however, it is the latter, production, which is deemed in need of explanation while the former, consumption, is taken for granted. Consumption practices like that of scrolling sit in the shadows of production, we could say. The position of the scroller thus appears somewhat similar to the magazine reading teenage girls that McRobbie and Graber (1975) famously studied many years ago. Scrolling is a cultural activity taking place in private spaces, largely invisible to outside observers. The scroller, other than the creator or community member, is thus a figure often absent in debates around TikTok, and social media more generally. When people speak about content consumption in popular debates, it is often through figures like the addict (Koetsier 2020) or an audience susceptible to media influence, for example in their purchase decisions (Aldrige 2021).

It is one aim of this thesis to fill this gap of audience representations in scholarship on TikTok and social media. As Gray (2017) argues, the semantics of 'audience' remain crucial in how media power and relevance are discussed today. Similarly, Baym (2013) underlines that

audiences have become increasingly visible on social media, for example in consumption metrics, along which the worth of content and platforms are assessed. At the same time, Baym underlines that such numeric abstraction conceals more information about audience activity than it reveals. Content consumption metrics serve, first and foremost, the purpose of informing content production and circulation. As Burgess and Green (2008: 41) have argued for the case of YouTube, metrics of audience activity are not just descriptive but performative. They structure what is perceived as popular, shaping both the activity of consumers and producers of content.

In this view, content consumption inadvertently is productive for TikTok commercially. As a business, TikTok is concerned with the production of audiences. It tries to get people to consume content on its platform to commodify their screens and attention, be that to present its platform as attractive for creators to find an audience, or to sell the opportunity to place ads on screens that are currently being attended to. To put it simply, if nobody would be scrolling, TikTok would not be relevant culturally, and it would not function as a business. The sustainability of TikTok as a platform relies on millions of people engaging in mundane acts of consumption of content day after day. These mundane acts, to follow Burgess and Green (2008), leave traces on platforms – in the form of engagement metrics, comments, and so on. In this thesis, I seek to explore these kind of traces more deeply, that is the doings of audiences, and in particular the figure of the scroller living in the platform's shadows.

1.4 Breakdown and recovery

TikTok had already been popular, especially among kids and teenagers, in the years prior to 2020 when I started my fieldwork. Back then, it was often described as “bringing the fun back to social

media” (Roose 2018). There, TikTok emerged on the international social media landscape through the acquisition of musical.ly, an app centred around lip-syncing and dance challenges. Further, while there is no direct relation between the two on a business level, for many TikTok is seen as a direct successor of Vine. Vine was an app on which people could upload six-seconds long, looping video clips. It became known for its unique comedy content and culture that developed around this short-video format. However, despite its popularity, Vine was shut down in late 2016.

TikTok, released internationally in 2017, filled this void that Vine had left in the global social media landscape. More so, it built on a culture of online video sharing that started on platforms like YouTube many years prior (Burgess and Green 2008). Seen from this angle, and discussed in the previous section, TikTok remediates (Bolter and Grusin 2000) such cultural dynamics of online content production, circulation, and consumption in short-video form (see also Kaye et al. 2022). However, this remediation is only one piece to the puzzle to understand the popularity of TikTok. The COVID-19 pandemic is another crucial piece. That is because it was in early 2020 that TikTok’s growth received a major boost. There, the joyful and playful culture of TikTok as an online space appeared the perfect destination for people struggling with lockdown boredom (Kale 2020).

At the time of writing this thesis, the global health emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic has been declared over by the World Health Organisation (2023). Yet, the virus and its many variants still remain a present part of everyday experience for many people, and will possibly never fully disappear. Nonetheless, I would like to briefly outline for future readers what exactly the COVID-19 pandemic was. When I speak about the pandemic in this thesis, I am referring to the global health crisis that emerged from the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its variants.

First discovered in late 2019, the virus quickly spread throughout many countries, with the World Health Organisation announcing a global pandemic situation in March 2020. Due to the airborne transmission of the virus, different kinds of lockdown and social distancing measures were put in place in 2020 and following years. Especially the early lockdowns in March 2020 are not to be underestimated in their disruptive force. Within a few days, normal rhythms of everyday life had been brought to a stop in many countries like the United Kingdom.

At the start of the first lockdowns, people were only allowed to leave their house for purposes such as getting groceries or medical reasons like seeing a doctor. Any contact in a setting of physical co-presence with other human beings was not just to be avoided at all costs, but also made illegal. Where people once commuted to work or school, many found themselves in work from home and remote learning settings. Those carrying out essential work – in the health services, public safety and security, or the production and transportation of essential goods – were able to travel to their place of work. Others, not engaged in such essential work, and unable to carry out their work remotely, often lost their job and income for many months. Likewise, people's leisure activities and social life had to be either carried out either by means of media technologies or simply not at all.

As Johnson and Dempsey (2021) show for the context of the United Kingdom, the role of the television had gained a central role in these times of the pandemic. This included, as they argue, a shift in what the television was used for in households in the United Kingdom. It became not only a source of credible information about the pandemic yet also a vital coping mechanism to avoid the grim news of growing pandemic related deaths and infection rates, for example. Morley (2022) advances a similar position, embedded in the wider history of television. He

argues that “the conditions of the crisis have reconsolidated television’s earlier position as master storyteller and as a platform for cultural citizenship” (Morley 2022: 93).

In this thesis, I argue that the pandemic not just reaffirmed the function of television in cultural contexts like that of the United Kingdom, but also clarified the role of similar everyday technologies such as TikTok. Digital media played a crucial role in how people coped with the disruptions the pandemic caused to their lives. In the United Kingdom, seemingly everyone used video conferencing tools like Zoom to reproduce rituals like the pub quiz, watched Netflix series like Tiger King, and created memes about it on social media, or socialised with friends in video games like Animal Crossings. TikTok was one of these mediated spaces that many people turned to. In early 2020, ‘everyone’ suddenly was on TikTok, even those people who just months prior still spoke about TikTok as being an app for kids.

This turn towards TikTok was not only due to the app being perceived as more fun than other social media. As Kendall (2021) shows, TikTok was a space where people, around hashtags like #lockdownlife, shared their experience of the pandemic and created a mediated space of belonging. Further, as Nouwen and Duflos (2022) highlight, TikTok was also a platform that many people used to express solidarity in the shared condition of lockdown life. As noted in the previous section, TikTok affords exactly such playful and creative ways to build communal bonds and publics. However, what interests me more are the mundane consumption activities through which the app became integrated into everyday lives.

Put differently, my fieldwork took place during a particular condition of pandemic life. However, my findings nonetheless speak on and are of value for debates in the future. As a disruption from the normal order of social life, the pandemic has created an almost quasi-experimental

setting. As Morley (2022) argued, in this condition many people re-oriented their position to media such as the television, despite the medium's days having been deemed over by many critics. For the case of TikTok, the pandemic allowed me to capture a similar re-orientation and clarification of its meaningfulness. For many people, and many of my participants, the pandemic had clarified the meaning of TikTok and consumption activities like scrolling they were not able to fully grasp before.

Forced to re-organise their daily lives, coping with anxiety and uncertainty, the pandemic made visible all kinds of practices and rituals integral to everyday life unfolding in a normal and enjoyable manner. The pandemic thus formed an immensely rich ground to my study. It provided me with a productive framework to observe how exactly people construct feelings of normalcy, the meanings such feelings have, and what role media like TikTok play herein. It is from this angle that my thesis speaks on the meaningfulness of media consumption in more general terms. It touches on the fundamental processes along which people turn to media technologies to manage their daily schedules, identities, relationships, and well-being.

1.5 Layers of complexity

I advance this argument on the meaningfulness of TikTok as an everyday technology by unpacking the complexity of scrolling as form of content consumption. In technical terms, scrolling refers to moving texts, images, or other forms of digital content across screens. Because of that, scrolling is often regarded as simple and self-evident. Scrolling is something that people just do and doesn't seem to warrant further explanation. Nothing profound appears to really come out of scrolling, of moving digital objects across a screen. It is because of this mundanity that scrolling becomes a target for cultural critics concerned with the distractive and

addictive nature of social media. In their view, to scroll means to be distracted from doing more meaningful things, it means to be helpless, controlled, and captured by an app like TikTok.

Taking an ethnographic stance, I challenge these critical views on scrolling, and TikTok as a site on which people scroll. Herein, I follow Morley (2012: 85) who writes that what we need today are “better thick (theoretically informed and empirically grounded) descriptions ... of media cultures in different contexts, rather than the development of any more media (or medium) theory in the abstract”. When I argue that scrolling is a complex practice, I do thus not intend to develop an abstract theory of scrolling. What I attempt to do is to make the complexity of scrolling, as a form of content consumption, tangible in a concrete way that allows us to look at platforms like TikTok from a different angle. More specifically, I unpack the complexity of scrolling across four interconnected levels. The below table provides a brief overview of these.

Table 1 Layers to the complexity of scrolling as consumption practice.

<i>Level</i>	<i>Description</i>
Cultural level	Scrolling creates different experiences on different platforms. Scrolling through TikTok and Facebook is not the same, for example. It requires a form of cultural knowledge and awareness for the differences of online environments to be able to produce a desired experience, like relaxation, through scrolling.
Practical level	Scrolling is an umbrella term for various consumption activities (selecting, evaluating, interpreting, interacting with content, navigating platforms, negotiating algorithms) and a skill that needs to be acquired and learned. Where the cultural level foregrounds

knowledge about online environments, this level highlights the practical operationalisation of that knowledge in embodied ways.

Social level Other than being an isolating practice of consumption, scrolling is generative of opportunities for social interaction. People do not consume content in a vacuum, and they actively share their experiences and articulate relationships in content consumption.

Political level In situations of scrolling, we are confronted with a concrete site where power relations play out and their consequences are negotiated by people in everyday life contexts. The scroller is not a set entity of a data subject or objectified target of control. It is a position that people assume and negotiation on platforms.

Each of these layers will be unpacked, to a different extent, in the empirical chapters later in this thesis. In each of these I will discuss a different way in which people engage with TikTok through scrolling, such as a ‘me space’, an everyday technology, an environment of surveillance, or as a socio-cultural resource. In each of these ways of consuming TikTok, we come to see how the practice of scrolling builds on cultural knowledge and practical skill, mediates relationships with others, as well as is shaped by the wider politics of TikTok as a commercial platform. These four layers thus serve as a guide. They are meant to help open concrete perspectives to reflect on how content consumption activities like scrolling are complex social practices.

Showcasing the complexity of scrolling across these four interconnected levels, I further argue for the importance of audience studies perspective in social media scholarship. In particular, I echo the argument of Livingstone (2018: 179) who writes that “all analyses of media power include, implicitly if not explicitly, claims about audiences, meaning that research with

audiences to examine these claims must be brought within in the critical project”. We cannot fully understand digital platforms like TikTok without paying close attention to content consumption practices like scrolling – or ancillary practices of content sharing, which are enabled through the discovery of content whilst scrolling. TikTok’s business is the production of audiences on its platform, as I have argued earlier and will theorise in more detail in Chapter 2. Likewise, the app’s popularity cannot be explained without attending to the fact that millions of people open TikTok each day and scroll through their “For You” page, interacting with and sharing content.

Advocating for the importance of audience studies perspectives, I do not ignore the contested nature of the term ‘audience’. TikTok clearly is an app that showcases how potentially anyone today can create content and might even become famous through one of their creations going viral (Stokel-Walker 2021). That is why I use the term ‘audience’ in a deictic way, similar to Ang (1991: 11). I use it to focus my perspective on the ‘audience’ side of TikTok. That is the side where people are consumers of content and objectified targets in commercial processes. From this audience studies perspective, I am interested in the range of activities that include watching content, scrolling through content feeds, sharing and discussing content with others, but also making sense of algorithms, platforms, and the wider socio-economic contexts these are embedded in. I look at TikTok from such an audience studies perspective to understand both the meanings and politics consumption practice in digital media landscapes environments.

In this way, my thesis makes a number of contributions. A detailed discussion of such is offered in Chapter 9. Overall, it can be noted, however, that my thesis broadly adds to and extends our understanding of personalised social media like TikTok. My thesis affirms the dialectical nature of media consumption (Silverstone 1994) and underlines that people’s engagements with digital

technology is marked by an oscillating dynamic of opportunity and dependency (Paasonen 2021). It provides evidence for the tactics that people deploy to navigate the domain of the “digital everyday” (Ytre-Arne 2023) and media landscapes characterised by abundance (Boczkowski 2021).

My thesis extends understandings of personalisation beyond the idea of the “technology of the self” (Karakayali et al. 2017), adds to emerging literature on how algorithms are used to negotiate self-other relationality (Siles 2023), and contributes to wider debates on how people navigate flows of content and information online (Bruns 2019). In that course, my thesis emphasises the complex feelings people have towards algorithms (Ruckenstein 2023) and it adds evidence to a “culture of resignation”, cultivated by ubiquitous surveillance (Draper and Turow 2019), in which people experience a sense of relative powerlessness (Baym et al. 2020).

In short, my thesis does not only help explain the popularity of TikTok, but it also clarifies more generally how tensions play out around the app as an online space that is set up to enable surveillance, behavioural control, and commercial value extraction. It debunks popular myths about the power that algorithms and apps supposedly hold over people. Put simply, by opening a different perspective on the meaning and politics of online content consumption, the thesis contributes more generally to wider debates on personalised social media, the consequences they have, and how we approach the task of regulating them.

1.6 Overview of chapters

The thesis is structured in the following way. Chapters 2 to 4 outline the overall research method that was used to find answers to my research questions. These three chapters unfold

in a successive order, first by outlining my analytical approach, second in developing my theoretical framework, and finally through operationalising it methodologically. Chapters 5 through 8 are where I write a situated ethnographic account of TikTok consumption practices through the stories of my participants. Finally, in Chapter 9, I reflect on this account and develop contributions and conclusions. Below, I provide a more detailed breakdown of the key contents of each chapter.

Chapter 2 opens the first half of the thesis by outlining my analytical position of audience studies. The main purpose of this chapter is of a reflexive nature, in the sense of positioning my thesis in relation to the way that I seek to make sense of TikTok as a case. The chapter opens by discussing the notion of ‘audience’ in the context of social media platforms, arguing that these continue to be structurally engaged in the business of delivering an audience to commercial partners like advertisers. The remainder of the chapter, then, engages with relevant literature on the particular, contemporary dynamics of audience commodification.

More specifically, in this chapter I outline technologies of behavioural monitoring and algorithmic personalisation as key mechanisms through which platforms like TikTok today address people as objectified targets of control. Resultingly, I theorise a tension between agentic opportunities for self-determination and forces of algorithmic control at the heart of platforms like TikTok. Here, I argue that the role of audience studies lies in unpacking the contingency and ambivalence that such tensions are productive of. Subsequently, I underline that of my key analytical interest will be understanding this complexity, manifesting in the ways that people respond to structures of algorithmic control and contemporary audience commodification.

Finally, the chapter closes with aligning my analytical approach with that of the tradition of ethnographic audience research on the one side, and relevant cultural studies approaches to algorithms on the other. A focus will be on engaging with the foundational work of Siles (2023) for the latter, through which I argue that algorithmic systems need to be studied as enactments in everyday life contexts. On the other side, I anchor my engagement with audience research in the work of scholars like Silverstone (1994) and Morley (1992) to conceive of TikTok as a form of content and technology that people engage with in dialectical processes of everyday media consumption.

Chapter 3 picks up the discussion from the previous chapter. The focus here is on complementing the analytical orientation towards TikTok that was developed in Chapter 2 with a theoretical framework. The purpose of this theoretical framework, as will be discussed, is that of creating a window within which empirical data can be laid out and its complexity be dealt with. For this purpose, the chapter is split into two parts. The first part is concerned with introducing three key concepts from the tradition of ethnographic audience research: everyday life, consumption, and ontological security. The second part, then, engages with more recent scholarship on mobile and algorithmic media environments to update this tradition.

Grounded in the tradition of ethnographic audience research, I will theorise everyday life as a dynamic process in which structural forces manifest and people work out, not always successfully, the meaningfulness of their lives and relationships (Silverstone 1994). In this context, I position the notion of consumption as a key practice of this working out of meaningfulness, and ontological security (Giddens 1991) as a particular desired outcome of these processes. Acknowledging the material changes the contemporary digital media landscape has witnessed, I update this understanding in the following way.

Firstly, I draw on the notion of polymedia (Madianou and Miller 2012) to argue that we cannot understand TikTok *per se*, but need to make sense of the role and purpose people have given it in their everyday lives as an app that can be used in various ways. Secondly, I turn to mobile media scholarship to foreground the embodied ways in which people navigate these landscapes and engage with apps like TikTok (Moore 2014, Pink and Leder Mackley 2013, Hjorth and Richardson 2020). Thirdly, I turn to research in the field of algorithm studies to theorise how people interact with algorithmic systems in such embodied ways and negotiate agentic capacities as they enact them in their everyday lives (Bucher 2017, Siles 2023, Suchman 2006).

Chapter 4 positions this theoretical framework in the tradition of methodological situationalism (Knorr-Cetina 1988) and operationalise it as an approach of digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2016a). The chapter starts by defining situations of consumption as the analytical unit. It is within moments of consumption that we can see tensions materialise and explore how people negotiate them in everyday life contexts. Related to this, I establish why ethnography offers the most effective methodological approach for the thesis, namely in providing a toolkit to produce situated descriptions of content consumption and analyse their meaning in everyday domains.

The remainder of the chapter covers four elements. Firstly, I discuss the reasoning behind using interviews, media mapping techniques, participant observations, and digital fieldwork as methods. Secondly, I provide an overview of my one and half years of fieldwork, and I describe the group of 30 UK-based young adults I worked with during this time. Thirdly, I reflect on research ethics, doing online research, working with young adults, and conducting fieldwork during a pandemic. Finally, I close the chapter by discussing my approach of data analysis and reflexive ethnographic writing.

Chapter 5 is where I first start discussing the data gathered during my fieldwork. This chapter has an introductory function and outlines what exactly TikTok was to my participants, yet also engage with perspectives on TikTok opened in the wider literature. I here talk about how participants positioned the app as a space of disconnection in their polymedia environments (Madianou and Miller 2012). The chapter analyses the form of TikTok content and the “For You” page, meaning the central site where my participants consumed TikTok content. Finally, in the second half, the chapter analyses TikTok as a commercial online space, highlighting its surveillance practices and potential harms it can cause to those engaging with it.

Chapter 6 is the first of the three main empirical chapters. In each of them I analyse, from a different angle, how a tension between self-determination and control materialises when consuming content on and through the app. I start by discussing TikTok as an everyday technology, and how it was integrated into daily routines. I frame people’s engagement around a desire to escape normal life, for example in moments of boredom, tiredness, stress, search for simulation, or a lack of inspiration and motivation. The chapter outlines this theme of escapism at the start to set the backdrop against which any following analysis of content consumption needs to be understood in the stories of my participants.

Around the notion of ontological security (Giddens 1991), the chapter discusses the appeal of TikTok, and especially in relation to the perceived convenience of the app. I position TikTok in relation to prior media consumption practices, like reading magazines (Hermes 1995), romantic fictions (Radway 1984), or listening to day-time soap operas (Herzog 1940). I demonstrate how people use TikTok as an everyday technology to manage everyday schedules, and I theorise such through the idea of polymedia rhythms. Through this idea, I locate TikTok within

habitualised routines of navigating through polymedia environments (Madianou and Miller 2012) to achieve desired experiences like relaxation.

After having established the usefulness of TikTok as an everyday technology, the chapter discusses disruptions to daily schedules. I turn to stories of unintentional TikTok uses, getting carried away while scrolling, or feeling increasingly bored by the content and experience of scrolling. Along these stories, the chapter provides a perspective on how people collided with TikTok's mechanisms of control. Along these tensions, I show how some deployed tactics to "make do" (de Certeau 1984) with TikTok, whilst others failed and quit using the app.

Chapter 7 continues discussing these tactics. I talk about how people navigated TikTok as a space of surveillance, and I try to answer the question of how people manage to enjoy being on the app despite it being problematic as such. The chapter takes as a cue that people expressed the appeal of TikTok around it being a highly personalised space. In this line, the chapter develops an explanation for how personalisation is achieved as a felt quality of TikTok.

Four mechanisms are outlined through which participants made TikTok manageable and enacted a pleasurable 'for you' feeling whilst scrolling. These are the mechanisms of 'algorithm awareness', 'situated trust', 'stories about algorithms', and 'reading for personalisation'. Along them, I discuss how people perceive and make sense of TikTok's surveillance, developing in that course a position of situated trust to engage with it. I underline how stories shared about algorithms by other people have an impact on these negotiations – creating not just awareness for TikTok as a space of surveillance, but also providing people with emotional support by feeling that their struggles are shared by other scrollers.

Moreover, the chapter underlines how people play an active role in performatively enacting personalisation as a felt environmental quality. I do so through the idea of reading and an effect I call 'content feed compression' in which unpersonal videos are skilfully and swiftly skipped so that they become virtually removed from the experience of the scroller. Highlighting this active role, I close the chapter in discussing the feelings of powerlessness participants experienced. Here, the chapter underlines that while people are capable of making TikTok work within their daily routines, they are not able to resist being figured and commodified as a data subject on the platform.

Chapter 8 looks at TikTok content consumption from the third and final angle, namely as a socio-cultural resource. I continue my discussion on personalisation and with a specific focus on the practices of content sharing that surround it. Aligned with Siles (2023), and earlier work by Silverstone (1994), the chapter looks at how people transform content encountered on their personal "For You" page into a meaningful artefact of interpersonal biographies. I describe how people mine content feeds they scroll through to find such videos which allow them to articulate social relationships with significant others. The chapter also outlines how personalisation does not necessarily have an isolating quality to it, but rather can equip people with new means to extend the private spaces, creating more communal and social forms of online content consumption. At the same time, I reflect on ideas of coerced digital participation (Barassi 2019) and how content sharing is productive for TikTok as a business, expanding its reach to ever more people and devices (Siles 2023).

Chapter 9 closes the thesis by summarising the findings and outlining the contributions of the thesis to current debates and scholarship. More specifically, I underscore the importance of audience studies perspectives in social media scholarship and internet research. Far from being

helpless victims of TikTok's algorithmic systems, I argue that we need to understand people as skilled actors that negotiate their relationship to apps like TikTok in creative ways. However, I caution against overly romanticised interpretations of this argument. Many people are skilled in their digital media use and navigation of surveillant online spaces. Yet, they are confronted with structural barriers that substantially limit their capacity to negotiate capitalist value extraction and control. From this angle, the final chapter makes a case for studying online consumption practices in how they can help us foreground a human element in discussions of media power. Ethnographically attending to online consumption practices helps us to outline how digital media become integrated into the people's lives, where frictions and tensions develop, and how these are dealt with by actual people.

2. TikTok and audience studies

The next two chapters have the following purpose. On the one side, I am going to establish the context of TikTok as a case. On the other side, I develop a theoretical framework that will aid the analysis and discussion of my fieldwork data. In this first chapter, I begin by establishing the context around TikTok as a case and its inquiry from an audience studies point of view. To do so, my focus lies on the dynamics of power that characterise TikTok as a platform on which people consume content. I will sketch the contours of these dynamics based on relevant literature and concrete examples, grounding this discussion in the circumstances of my fieldwork. To develop an ethnographically situated account from this fieldwork data remains paramount. This first chapter has thus a mostly reflexive function, other than providing an exhaustive summary of literature. It aims at developing my analytical approach of audience studies towards TikTok. Building on this discussion, in Chapter 3, I then develop a theoretical framework at the intersection of audience studies and related traditions, such as internet research, social media scholarship, and algorithm studies. This framework will theorise everyday life as a site where people creatively engage with media to make meaning and navigate structures of power.

2.1 The relevance of audience studies

As I have already mentioned in the introduction, in this thesis I take an audience studies approach towards TikTok. I hold the position that audiences and their activity are constitutive to the cultural and commercial viability of digital platforms like TikTok. At the same time, the term ‘audience’ is contested and thus needs some reflection. As Livingstone (2003) observed

some time ago, the internet has prominently made visible that content consumption is an active process marked by interpreting, commenting, discussing, and at times even creating content. Resultingly, the idea of ‘the audience’ has increasingly been put into question over the last years. Some commentators like Rosen (2006) claimed that we need to speak about “the people formerly known as the audience” as everyone had supposedly become a “writing reader”. In a more nuanced way, Jenkins et al. (2013: 159) argued that people’s experience of media was now profoundly shaped through an “awareness of their potential capacity to participate and recognition of lower barriers to contribute”. As an audience researcher, I have some concerns about these arguments, and especially how they have come to shape discourses around social media and their uses.

To put it differently, TikTok, like other social media platforms, resonates with observations like that of Jenkins et al. (2013). The corporate mission of TikTok (n.d.) is to “inspire creativity and bring joy”. To this end, the app has features which enable people to easily create content and interact with others online. Prominent scholarly representations of TikTok, moreover, take shape around ideas of community and participation. Zulli and Zulli (2020) theorise TikTok as a platform on which publics form through practices of continuous content remixing. Kaye (2022) has studied how communal gatherings form on the “For You” page through forms of algorithmically mediated creative practice. Boffone (2021) highlights how TikTok offers new means of communion in pre-existing cultural spheres, such as youth or hip hop culture, by facilitating collaborative creativity within them. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2019) have prominently evidenced how TikTok enables youths to participate in wider political debates. Likewise, Vizcaino-Verdu and Abidin (2022) demonstrate how in-group storytelling and communal bonds are maintained around music, dance, and lip-sync challenges TikTok is widely known for.

In short, the above studies illustrate how people use TikTok as a tool to express themselves, build community, and participate in public life through content creation. In my fieldwork, I did not seek out people who used TikTok in one way over another. Taking this approach, however, these rich creative and community experiences did not emerge as through line. Instead, like most people, my participants primarily took the position of audience members when they used TikTok. That is to say, they were people who first and foremost go on TikTok to consume content. These practices and experiences of content consumption stood thus out as important analytically. They stood out as a form of activity defining, at its core, the experience that most people have using TikTok. This, in return, created a need in the context of my thesis to revisit the idea of ‘the audience’. More so, however, I argue, that such a revisit of the idea is of more general relevance to make sense of social media platforms like TikTok today.

In saying so I follow Gray (2017: 81) who argues that beyond the phenomenon of fans and fan cultures – meaning, highly organised and committed content consumers (Jenkins 2006) – we seem to know “embarrassingly little” about how ordinary people consume online content. Gray (2017) makes this argument by pointing towards the continued relevance of audiences in an internet and social media age, for example as a signifier of capital. Similarly, I echo the point raised by Burgess (2015) that the internet has lowered not just barriers for content production and distribution, yet also those of its consumption. TikTok is no exception here, on the opposite it affirms the observation of eased access to content. Baym (2013), furthermore, highlights that audiences and their activities have, in fact, become ever more prominent in the social media context, for instance in the form of like, follower, or comment counts displayed alongside content. These data traces of audience activity, as Burgess and Green (2008) underline, do not just shape what content becomes popular, but also what kind of content is produced in response to such popularity and trends.

In this thesis, I build upon these arguments which have pointed towards the continued relevance of audiences and their activity in an internet and social media context. In my use of the term 'audience', I therefore follow Ang (1991: 11) who turns to it as a shorthand term for the various practices and experiences of media consumption subsumed by it. In my theoretical framework, the term 'audience' has thus a deictic function. I draw on it as a way to point and orient myself towards particular elements of TikTok, those which are related to the various practices and mechanisms of content consumption. Through this deictic function of the term, I do not deny that there are more ways in which TikTok can be used, and that people can and do occupy positions that extend beyond what the term 'audience' can possibly capture. Yet, my interest, simply put, lies in understanding these specific content consumption contexts that constitute a vital part of the whole that is the phenomenon of TikTok and people's experience of it.

My understanding of consumption is here derived from the field of anthropology (Miller 1987), and based on its application in audience studies (Morley 1992, Silverstone 1994). I am interested, so to speak, in forms of meaning-making that revolve around engagements with content on social media, be that watching, commenting, discussing, sharing it with others, and so on. I will outline this argument on consumption in more detail in Chapter 3. For now, I will continue by establishing the background against which these consumption practices unfold, and their inquiry becomes relevant.

It can be argued that companies like TikTok seek to, first and foremost, extract commercial value from content consumption processes. They do so in a way similar to that of broadcasting media, as Smythe (1981) has prominently studied them. As Smythe (1981) argues, the economic function of broadcasting media is to deliver an audience to their commercial partners,

such as advertisers. On this level of underlying logics, not much seems to have changed. For example, in his prominent paper on the politics of platforms, Gillespie (2010) has underlined that digital platforms such as YouTube present themselves as occupying an intermediary role, connecting for instance “ordinary users” with commercial partners such as advertisers. Put differently, then, we can say that while video-sharing platforms like TikTok (Su 2023), or similar sites like YouTube (Burgess and Green 2008), are engaged in this business of intermediation, of creating audiences, the ways in which they do so are different to that of earlier media like broadcasting institutions (Ang 1991).

One way in which we can make sense of such changes is by looking at the concept of flow. Williams (1974) has famously outlined that the cultural form of television viewing is that of following a unified flow of sounds and images, opposed to engaging with discrete units of content. Williams noted such as a historically substantial shift of cultural experience, one in which all kinds of cultural events became “available in a single dimension and in a single operation” of broadcasting (Williams 1974: 88). While reading a book might be comparable to watching a TV show, Williams argues that it is the emergent quality of the sequences of such shows that creates “the real flow, the real ‘broadcasting’” experience (Williams 1974: 91) – as if one were reading multiple books one after the other in a continuous sequence.

My interest in this thesis is less on the wider cultural diagnosis that Williams offers from this angle. More so, it lies in the ways these flow dynamics have historically been utilised to engage audiences. In a landscape of commercial broadcasters that compete with one another, Williams (1974: 91) discussed the desires of broadcasting planners “to retain viewers – or as they put it, to ‘capture’ them” over stretches of time that extend beyond singular shows, for instance spanning an entire evening. He points towards modes of media production and distribution that

aim at “grabbing attention in the early moments” and creating a sense of excitement for “things to come” (Williams 1974: 95). Today, on platforms like TikTok, we are presented with a similar picture. The content feeds that sit at their heart are designed, in other words, to generate unified flows of sounds and images in the hope of retaining viewers.

We can briefly turn here to the work of Su (2023) who, in her study on the Chinese media industry, interviewed engineers who worked at ByteDance, TikTok’s parent company. The account of these engineers illustrates the management of such flow experiences. Su (2023: 111) recounts how engineers spoke about the frequency at which they would show ads to people scrolling through TikTok’s “For You” page, the content feed sitting at the heart of the app. Herein, her account revealed a position in which ByteDance as an organisation was concerned with finding a balance in avoiding “user fatigue” when showing too many ads whilst at the same time showing enough ads to achieve commercial viability and growth as a platform. This view is backed by leaked documents on ‘the TikTok algorithm’. These documents confirm that TikTok arranges sequences of content on its platform that are most likely to keep people engaged for a maximum amount of time, according to computational models of consumption behaviour used to generate the “For You” page (see Smith 2021).

It is in this operation of algorithmic systems to generate flows that we come to see the subtle differences and changes in the social media context. Lupinacci (2022) has extensively studied people’s experience of scrolling through such flows on social media. Lupinacci (2022: 219) writes that the “televisual flow ... requires the individual to open the ‘tap’ ... which then provides a continuous, nonstop stream of content”. This configuration is structurally different to that of social media. There, as Lupinacci continues, people need to be convinced to “constantly come back to press the ‘water valve’” - for example, by opening specific apps and starting to scroll,

activating in that course the generation of these flows on their screens. Herein, Lupinacci (2022: 226) foregrounds the productive role that “‘jumping’ into the flow, swiping, clicking, tapping, scrolling a bit more” plays in enacting these streams of online content today.

It is here that I locate the relevance of audience studies for my thesis. I build on Lupinacci’s (2022) work in picking up this theme of productive audience activity, the continuous ‘pressing of the water valve’, that generates streams of social media content on people’s screens. I see the relevance of ‘audience’ as a concept in helping us unpack how, today, people navigate these commercial configurations of online content consumption. As Ang (1996: 19) writes, audience studies have traditionally asked questions like: “Which are the arrangements constructed by the television institution for attracting viewers? And ... in which ways do the modes of involvement inscribed in televisual discourse relate to the audience’s cultural orientations towards watching television?” Whether the parameters are television and viewers, or social media and scrollers, is important but also secondary. What matters, analytically, is the question of why and how people engage with media contents and flows, and how these consumption processes are shaped by the environments in which they unfold.

In short, I argue that digital platforms today draw on a different set of technologies than previous media institutions to create configurations of content consumption, like flow experiences, to achieve their commercial goals. TikTok, as a key content-centric platform (Kaye et al. 2022), exemplifies these shifts. This marks the platform a fruitful case for this thesis. And it renders audience studies as the relevant approach to make sense of it. In the next sections, I further elaborate on these points. In particular, I will do three things. Firstly, I will discuss the notion of algorithmic personalisation as a key logic along which platforms configure contexts of content consumption today. Secondly, I will reflect on how we should study the consequences

of algorithmic systems and the ways that their power manifests. Lastly, I will tie these reflections together by outlining the specific analytical position of audience studies from which I approach TikTok as a case and pose my research questions.

2.2 Data and algorithmic personalisation

Like many other apps, TikTok can be downloaded and used for free, without the need to purchase the app or a subscription to it. All that is needed are a mobile phone and access to the internet. Once downloaded, TikTok provides people with an endless stream of content they can scroll through, punctuated by occasional adverts. Until this point, TikTok does not seem fundamentally different from ad-funded broadcasting media like the television. Yet, using TikTok comes with additional hidden costs. To gain access to the services offered by TikTok, people do not pay with their money, but they do with their personal data. In this section, I outline how platforms collect this data in their attempt to construct and control people as audiences. At the core of this matter lies the operation of tracking and algorithmic personalisation systems. These systems represent a major shift in how digital platforms like TikTok manage people as audiences and attention commodities. They do so, namely, as individual targets of control.

Broadly speaking, platforms collect data for two main reasons. Firstly, to manage and develop their own services, for example by adjusting their content offering or improving features of their platform. Secondly, to measure their audiences so they can be traded as attention commodities, such as screens that are currently being attended to and on which an advertisement can be placed (Wu and Taneja 2020). Over the last few years, cookies and advertising pixels have become dominant forms of tracking technology that platforms use to collect such data. These

technologies are, essentially, small pieces of software that monitor what people do on and across various platforms and devices, for instance where and what they click on. These trackers, as MacKenzie (2021) underscores, do not just turn people's every step on the internet into data. They do so in a way that allows to aggregate data points to profiles that can be linked to individual people. This enables platforms, for example, to link a person's purchase of a product to an advertisement they had been exposed to prior. In short, it allows platforms to address individuals as objectified targets of control, which, following Ang (1991), we can see as a key goal of commercial audience construction.

A dominant logic that is shaping these processes of audience objectification on the internet is that of personalisation. For example, Turow (2012) has prominently studied this. He looked at the emergence of new digital media buying systems in the internet economy that utilised tracking technologies such as web cookies to profile individuals and execute personalised persuasive strategies in the form of targeted advertising. Turow underlines this shift as significant in how it imposed a personalisation of the internet onto people, often in opaque and hard to notice ways. Nowadays, we are confronted with the next iteration of such personalisation shaping online experiences, namely, that of algorithmic personalisation, which is the driving force of apps like TikTok and their content feeds (see Su 2023). And as I will discuss later, in Chapter 7, in this current iteration, personalisation has become both a highly noticeable facet of the internet, and a quality that people actively co-construct through their engagement with algorithmic systems.

For now though, I will continue with further establishing this context. Kant (2020) provides a dedicated analysis of the phenomenon of algorithmic personalisation. She defines algorithmic personalisation as “the computational tracking and anticipation of users’ preferences,

movements, and identity categorizations in order to algorithmically intervene in users' daily experiences" (Kant 2020: 10). Within forms of algorithmic personalisation, Kant argues that we can observe a crucial shift in that "audience identification is no longer a matter of representing people using established referents of 'who they are' as social subjects" but instead through "computational referents of correlational and networked positionality" (Kant 2020: 50). We can understand these computational referents here as a form of mathematically abstract representation of behaviour through which individual people are placed in relation to other behavioural profiles. These abstract representations of people and their behaviour are often processed as part of so-called recommender systems.

A recommender system is a software tool used to suggest and display various kinds of content to people, such as videos to watch, products to buy, news to read, people to follow, or ads that might interest 'you'. Recommender systems do so by utilising algorithms to compute consumption patterns of individuals and groups, and by ranking content based on these data models (Ricci et al. 2015). This ranking can be done based on many different desired objectives, so-called policies, like increasing the time a given person spends on the platform (Stray et al. 2023). Newer apps like TikTok are in some sense built around these software systems that generate the content feeds at the heart of their design. In her analysis, Su (2023) has outlined this. Tracing the history of ByteDance as a company, Su argues that ByteDance set itself apart from other Chinese tech giants – such as Baidu, Alibaba, or Tencent – through an organisational culture centred around the rapid creation of recommender-driven mobile applications. Douyin and later TikTok, the international version of the former, were the products of this culture (Su 2023: 37).

We can see the significance of algorithmic personalisation as a logic also in how ByteDance markets and promotes TikTok – namely, through its prominent “For You” branding. As I have mentioned in the introduction already, on the Google App Store, the TikTok app is presented as providing access to “an endless stream of short videos that feel personalized just for you” (TikTok 2022a). Kant discusses in this context the importance of the idea of “personal relevance” and how it has informed the creation of such systems. She argues that personalisation is often framed “as an instrumentally beneficial practice” by tech companies, and thus used as a justification to collect data about people (Kant 2020: 37). We can see the traces of this stance when looking at how older apps have introduced personalisation systems at later stages of their existence. Instagram is one of these apps. It was only in 2016, six years after its initial release, that Instagram announced that it will start to algorithmically curate people’s content feeds. Instagram justified this decision by evoking the semantics of personal relevance: “You may be surprised to learn that people miss on average 70 percent of their feeds ... To improve your experience, your feed will soon be ordered to show the moments we believe you will care about the most” (Instagram 2016).

In other words, personalisation systems enact what platforms believe people care about, respectively should care about, according to them – materialising, for instance, in the personalised content feeds they offer people. In both popular and scholarly debates, there has resultingly been a lot of concern around the influence and consequences of these systems. This concern has often been fuelled by numerous controversies. One of such was as the so-called “Facebook mood experiment” (Fishwick 2014, Hallinan et al. 2019). In 2014, Facebook conducted an experiment in which 689,000 people on the platform, without them knowing so, were presented either a greater amount of positive or negative posts in their Facebook Newsfeed. In return, the researchers of the study, Kramer et al. (2014), claim to have observed

a form of “emotional contagion” in which a person’s mood, or expression thereof in posts of their own, would mirror that to which they had been previously exposed to more strongly. Whether the findings of the study are true is, of course, secondary. What this experiment underlined, first and foremost, was that companies like Facebook have the means and will to manipulate the daily experience and mood of individual people through the data they produce from surveilling their behaviour.

In a much wider analysis, Couldry and Mejias (2019) theorise these kinds of developments of which algorithmic personalisation are a part. They write that the ubiquitous presence of tracking systems and algorithms in social life is eroding the “minimal integrity of the self”, understood as the “domain of possibility that the self has as its horizon of action and imagination” (Couldry and Mejias 2019: 156). Their position is none that claims that algorithms can, so to speak, remote control individual behaviour. Instead, they point towards the structural power that such systems hold. As Couldry and Mejias (2019: 155) importantly argue, people are “tethered to the discriminatory actions taken on the basis of the data gathered” about them, regardless of the accuracy of these data or the algorithmic systems using them. This structural power is crucial to acknowledge when making sense of TikTok, I maintain. We can find similar observations in work more closely focussed on recommender systems.

For example, in the context of Netflix, Hallinan and Striphas (2014) have prominently discussed how recommender systems have become powerful actors that make commercially oriented decisions about what is worthy to be consumed and experienced by people. Simply put, even though Netflix cannot dictate what kind of movies or shows an individual person watches, it can significantly shape the horizon of content that is presented to them. In his historical analysis of recommender systems, Cohn (2019) thus argues that digital platforms have created an

industry that has standardized processes of cultural circulation in the form of personalisation logics. Along such, he argues, digital platforms have created a false sense of autonomy under the guise of liberating people from a burden of choice and information overload.

While I do not disagree with these observations in principle, we have to approach them with caution, especially when working from a position of audience studies. Whether people are faced with an erosion of self-making capacities is, of course, a claim that is tricky to evidence. Not all technologies are equally intrusive, not everyone is affected equally a target of surveillance, not every person is equally vulnerable to the personalised persuasive strategies they are exposed to online. What is true, and where I agree with the referenced scholarship, is that digital platforms and their algorithms make powerful decisions that affect what individual people can engage with. Likewise, I agree with the observation that the structural mechanisms embedded in digital platforms like TikTok are increasingly geared towards enabling targeted surveillance, behavioural modulation, and commercial value extraction. Yet, in this context, I find the argument with which Cohn (2019) closes his book on the history of recommender systems to be vital.

Cohn (2019) criticizes that far too often have algorithmic systems and the recommendations they make been misleadingly represented as orders and not suggestions. He emphasises that “like any other form of expression, algorithms and the recommendations that stem from them can be understood, used, and interacted with in a wide variety of ways” (Cohn 2019: 187). Such observations strongly resonate with earlier ones like those Ang (1991) made when studying the discourses around broadcasting audiences and their commodification. Commenting on the work of scholars like Williams (1974), mentioned earlier, she reflects on the controlling force that can be exercised through the planned flows of television content. As Ang (1991: 34) notes

there, “the quest for conquering the audience remains, more often than not, a matter of trial and error: more often than not do programmes fail to attract the audiences they were intended to”.

In other words, it is essential that we make sense not just of what tracking technologies and algorithmic personalisation systems do to people, but also how people respond to these actions imposed onto them by platforms. This includes conceiving of these systems as fragile and imperfect, offering people room to navigate and circumvent attempts of being captured as audiences in particular ways. It is this angle from which an audience studies approach like mine moves towards personalised social media like TikTok and their underlying power dynamics. And it is from this angle that my approach engages with the literature discussed in this section, that is, by empirically qualifying some of the arguments and claims on these structural forces. In the next two sections, I will continue to further articulate this position.

2.3 Manifestations of algorithmic power

All the young adults that I met during my fieldwork were to at least some degree aware that what they see on TikTok is curated by an algorithmic system for them. And while they enjoyed TikTok for how personalised it was, they also were not entirely comfortable being surveilled and tracked in every step that they take on the app. Similarly, although they were aware of TikTok personalising their content feeds, they did not feel fully in control and on top of the content that they were shown on their feeds. As I will outline in more detail later, in Chapter 6 and 7, their engagement with TikTok was marked by tensions and latent senses of unease. Even during the very end of my fieldwork, some of my participants still felt occasionally creeped out by TikTok videos on their “For You” page that felt too personalised. They enjoyed that TikTok

showed them content on topics they cared about. At the same time, TikTok felt at times intrusive and became a disruptive force in their everyday life. In this section, I reflect on the nature of such tensions and the analytical consequences they have for studying algorithmic power.

Broadly speaking, in this thesis I understand these tensions as occurring on an axis between capacities self-determination and mechanisms of algorithmic control and persuasion. I argue that such tensions are inherent to the design of platforms like TikTok, the algorithmic personalisation systems they operate, and a wider condition of what we might refer to as digital platform capitalism, for which TikTok is a case. Work like that of Su (2023) has already outlined in more detail how TikTok fits within such condition. Namely, as Su (2023: 38) argues, TikTok exemplifies the interrelationship between data, algorithms, and centralisation of power that is characteristic of contemporary dynamics of capitalism. It is not my aim to analyse or theorise such conditions in these broader terms. Instead, my concern is to understand how underlying power dynamics manifest concretely, that is, in the lived experiences of my participants. Other than outlining a condition, it is thus the aforementioned local tensions and dynamics which are crucial to reflect on here.

That my participants had somewhat contradictory feelings about TikTok as a platform is not too surprising if we considered related literature. For example, investigating people's relationships with advertising algorithms, Ruckenstein and Granroth (2020) found that people often want contradictory things. They want less tracking whilst enjoying, and often desiring, personalised online experiences. Put differently, the participants of Ruckenstein and Granroth's (2020) study neither fully agreed with nor strictly opposed the politics of tracking and algorithmic personalisation. Their relationship to them was more so marked by ambivalence. It

is such themes of ambivalence, empirically discussed in the literature, which are of analytical significance for me. From an audience studies point of view, my analytical interest is to understand the complexity that arises from, to follow Cohn (2019: 187), algorithmic recommendations being powerful expressions that people respond to in different ways.

By conceptualising this complexity through the lens of ambivalence we naturally come to question some of the grand claims on the powerfulness of algorithms. And it is exactly here that Livingstone (2018) positions one of the roles that audience research should play today. Reviewing debates on audiences and their datafication, Livingstone (2018: 176) reminds us of the importance that lies in looking beyond the domain of economic effects in which people will mostly likely always appear as the victims of powerful media. Instead, she asks us to acknowledge the rich social contexts in which audience engagements with media are embedded, and within which we are resultingly to “check and qualify grand claims” about data and algorithms today (Livingstone 2018: 179). It is exactly this call that Livingstone voices which I seek to follow in this thesis through an approach of audience studies.

Many of the grand claims about algorithmic power have become common facets of popular discourses. In fact, many of my participants shared some of the views and believes about algorithms that we can find in these debates. There, algorithms like that of TikTok are often portrayed as having “mind reading” powers and the ability to identify in a short timeframe people’s most intimate secretes and emotional pressures points (Smith 2021). With that knowledge, they are said to create flows of content that are highly addictive, making people compulsively scroll on and on beyond their ability of self-control (Koetsier 2020). These popular discourses on technology addiction differ to clinical debates on phenomena such as social media addiction. Researchers are there mostly concerned with investigating the relationship between

excessive social media use and mental health issues such as depression, low self-esteem, or loneliness (Holmgren and Coyne 2017, Ryan et al. 2014, Kuss and Griffiths 2011).

Popular discourses differ in that they move away from person-specific mediators, like low self-esteem, and instead argue that every person is equally vulnerable to suffering from social media addiction due to how apps like TikTok are designed and create addictive flow experiences. Psychologists have frequently warned about making such generalisations. As Odgers (2018) notes, online activities often reflect, and at times even amplify, pre-existing vulnerabilities other than giving rise to entirely new issues. Furthermore, scholars like Aagaard (2020: 569) have criticized that the “neurobehaviorist” thinking that informs popular discourses has a fundamental flaw in that it runs on the logic that “whenever something is pleasant, it is also inherently dangerous”. However, this leaves us in a tricky situation.

As Vanden Abeele and Mohr (2021: 1538) argue in a review of smartphone addiction debates, “even though clinical diagnoses are exceptionally rare, as a cultural phenomenon smartphone addiction appears to be widespread”. To put it differently, the social media use of the vast majority of people would not qualify as an addiction in clinical terms, and likely just represents habitualised usage at most. Yet, simultaneously, many people struggle with controlling their social media use habits, including my participants. They feel, in other words, as if algorithms have at least some kind of control over them. As Tiidenberg et al. (2017) underline, addiction has become a popular metaphor that ordinary people use in their daily life to make sense of such struggles with the power of digital media. I noticed this during my fieldwork, where participants used the semantics of addiction and addictiveness to talk about their TikTok usage, especially when they felt their use of it was occurring at times unintentionally and had become a kind of muscle memory.

Barassi (2020) provides us with a productive way forward in this situation. Reporting from fieldwork with families, she notes how her participants described their technology use as a need, compulsion, and addiction. In short, they described it as something they felt is controlling their life in ways hard to resist. Reflecting on narratives of techno-addiction, Barassi found that they are hard to prove. Furthermore, she found that trying to do so would be counterproductive. As Barassi (2020: 1553) writes, we already have theories that allow us to “understand excessive technological use ... as the expression of what it means to live under surveillance capitalism ... In our data-driven economies, families have no choice but to constantly be connected”. The work of Barassi (2020) is an exemplary piece in that regard, highlighting how people’s relationships with digital technology are better explained as complex social consequences than through the lens of decontextualised psychological effects.

In this thesis, I am aligned with this position and the criticisms of technological determinism it echoes. As Baym (2015: 26) underlines, there are multiple variants of technological determinism, at their core, however, they share the view that technology exercises a direct and exogenous effect onto behaviour and society. To develop my analytical position on this matter, I chose to engage with Williams (1974) who has prominently opposed this view in his discussion of broadcasting media. At its core, Williams argues that technologies emerge from within societies, constituting the expression of social norms at a particular point in time. From this position, he argues that only “if we cancel history” could we arrive at a point where an abstract view of essential psychological needs exist (Williams 1974: 132) - and such can be met and exploited through technological cultural forms, creating, for example, some kind of generalised psychological effect like smartphone addiction.

Williams continues his thought on this matter by arguing that the failure of acknowledging the socio-historical situatedness of technology, and its uses, would amount to the “cancellation of the contemporary world” in which people “act and react, struggle and concede, co-operate, conflict and compete” (1974: 132). From this position, Williams writes that determination in reality is neither a direct nor external effect. Rather, it takes shape in the form of setting “limits and the exertion of pressures within which variable social practices are profoundly affected but never necessarily controlled” (1974: 133). Hence, as he goes on, to understand questions of media power and effects we need to look at how people deal with these limits and cope under these pressures. Herein, Williams underlines the importance of literacy, not just as a means to negotiate such limits, but as the very condition for media technologies to be adopted in the first place (1974: 134).

Drawing on his earlier work on literacy, Williams illustrates this position in the following way. He writes that “there was no way to teach a man to read the Bible which did not also enable him to read the radical press” (Williams 1974: 135). Similarly, we could argue in our case that there is no way for TikTok to promote its platform as being ‘for you’, that means, affording a personalised experience, without also creating an at least latent awareness for the fact that TikTok tracks and knows ‘you’. Like in Williams’ example, I am of course here speaking on the dimension of potentialities that arise from such audience awareness and literacy. I draw on his critique of technological determinism in how it opens productive angles on studying questions of power in more nuanced ways. His perspective simultaneously allows us to underline that “limits and pressures are real and powerful” (Williams 1974: 137) whilst acknowledging that any such forces manifest in the real world where they are met by people who react to them.

It is exactly these kinds of reactions and ways of dealing with manifestations of algorithmic power that are key to my thesis. Sense-making devices, such as metaphors of addiction (Tiidenberg et al. 2017), are part of these reactions of people in the face of powerful media. This is also why I have not yet provided a more detailed outline here of the concrete ways in which TikTok's algorithmic power manifests, for example, through the flows of content that people navigate on their "For You" pages. Put simply, the primary analytical value of outlining such manifestations rests to me on the dimension of empirical particularities, and not theoretically abstract arguments. As such, I will provide such an outline in Chapter 5, in closer dialogue with the experiences and perspectives of my participants.

What is relevant then to hold in our hand for now are the following two arguments. Firstly, as outlined in the previous section, systems of algorithmic personalisation are constitutive to the ways in which digital platforms like TikTok construct and shape people's experience as audiences today. Secondly, and as outlined in this section, people's experience on these platforms needs to be seen as shaped by a dynamic tension between the agentic capacities of self-determination that platforms afford, and the pressures and limits platform impose on people through their design and algorithmic systems. In the next section, I perform the final step in the development of this analytical position by outlining how I chose to make sense of these tensions in the tradition of cultural and audience studies.

2.4 The popular culture of algorithms

Over the past years, there has emerged a growing literature of works that seek to make sense of algorithmic systems in people's everyday life contexts. Siles' (2023) recent book "Living with algorithms" sits at the heart of this trajectory. It presents the culmination of a series of

foundational studies. At its core, these studies are concerned with developing empirically situated understandings of how people enact algorithms as part of their daily lives, and how we can develop better understandings of algorithmic power in doing so. Siles uses the notion of enactment to point towards “how people forge and sustain specific realities through sets of practices and relationships with heterogeneous actors (including such technologies as algorithms)” (Siles 2023: 6). According to Siles, we can only really understand any kind of consequence and influence that algorithms have on people once we understand these culturally situated relationships.

My thesis can be located in this tradition at the heart of which Siles’ (2023) work sits today. I associate with this emerging literature in how it aligns with my position developed in the past two sections around how algorithmic power manifests and resultingly needs to be studied. However, there is another reason why I align with this recent trajectory of scholarship, and that is through its grounding in earlier traditions of both cultural studies and audience studies. In relation to the former, Siles et al. (2022a) revisit the work of scholars such as Hall (1981) and Martin-Barbero (1984) in order to develop a popular theory of algorithms. In relation to the latter, scholars like Siles (2023; yet also Gillespie 2014 or Simpson and Semaan 2021, amongst others) engage with audience studies work such as that of Silverstone (1994) to unpack the interactive dynamics between people and algorithms.

At the heart of Siles et al.’s (2022a: 10) popular theory of algorithms sits the objective of “transcending the notion of universal algorithmic effects”. They draw on the theories of popular culture such as Martin-Barbero’s (1984) that have prominently – in Latin America and internationally – moved the analytical focus of scholars towards studying the processes through which ordinary people work with media as resources to shape and develop their own identities.

Doing so, as they argue, “opened a rich terrain of study because of the diversity of practices and possibilities for expression that it articulates” (Siles et al. 2022a: 3). In a similar vein, they engage and position the work of Hall (1981) and his notion of popular culture.

At its core, the argument of Hall (1981) sees popular culture as contradictory and a form of continuous social struggle. What makes Hall’s work relevant for this thesis is the following. He rightly puts into question the idea that highly commercialised forms of culture – such as those we might today see shaped by TikTok – are wholly manipulative and corrupt. That is because, as he argues, this would mean “the people who consume and enjoy them must either be themselves debased by these activities or else living in a permanent state of ‘false consciousness’”. This, as he continues, might be a position that makes those enunciating it feel good about themselves. Yet, it is also a position which analytically is simply not going to hold when faced with the lived realities of popular culture (Hall 1981: 232).

Instead, Hall argues that we should think of popular culture as something more dynamic. He argues that popular culture is marked by “complex lines of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation, which make the field of culture a sort of constant battlefield” (Hall 1981: 233). Siles et al. (2022a) pick up this view on the dynamics of popular culture to foreground the playful, imaginative, and at times resistant ways that people deal with algorithmic systems as part of their daily lives today. Drawing on Hall, they argue that contradictions are inherent to the popular culture of algorithms, which means that people can and often do occupy an in-between state in their relation to them – “that is, [people] can follow, negotiate, and resist algorithms at the same time” (Siles et al. 2022a: 10).

As discussed in the previous section, it is exactly these ambivalent and in-between states that are in the focus of this thesis empirically. Siles et al. (2022a) note that studying algorithms as something contradictory is challenging, however, and that therefore their popular theory of algorithms is not all encompassing. Instead, they write that it is meant to facilitate and enable further dialogue with other traditions of scholarship to tackle specific research problems. One of such further dialogues can be seen in revisiting ideas that have been developed in the field of audience studies to deal with similar questions of contradiction and in-betweenness. Siles (2023), for example, draws on the work of Silverstone (1994), which also informs my approach towards TikTok.

In this thesis, I anchor my analytical approach towards TikTok in the tradition of ethnographic audience research as it was developed in the 1980s and 1990s (see Seiter et al. 1989). The history of audience studies has been extensively discussed, most prominently by Livingstone (1998, 2003, 2018a), at numerous stages of the field. Similarly, in opening this chapter I have already outlined why I maintain that it is relevant to investigate people's use of TikTok as a form of audience activity. Other than providing an extensive historical overview of audience studies here, I thus want to introduce the particular strand of ethnographic audience research and outline the concrete elements of such that inform my analytical position in this thesis. More specifically, I draw on two key elements from this strand and bring them into dialogue with more recent scholarship. Firstly, I draw on the conceptualisation of audience activities as culturally situated and dialectical consumption processes. Secondly, I engage with the understanding of media as a form of both content and technology that people consume.

Following Morley (1996), we can define ethnographic audience research as an approach that is aligned with the theoretical assumptions of methodological situationalism. Methodological

situationalism holds that “to understand social life, we must find our feet in what people do and say in actual social situations” (Knorr-Cetina 1988: 22). Following this tradition, ethnographic audience research differs from other popular strands in audience studies, like the uses and gratifications approach (Katz et al. 1973), which works with assumptions of methodological individualism. As Morley (1996: 40) argues, uses and gratifications research is concerned with understanding media consumption on the level of the individual, its desires and needs. Ethnographic audience research, in contrast, is interested in understanding media (consumption) contextually, that means as a part of the fabric of everyday life.

As Knorr-Cetina (1988: 28) writes, “to describe human behaviour, let alone uncover its meaning, we have to make reference to the ... environment in which it occurs”. In other words, methodological situationalism simply looks at individuals and their behaviour from a different angle. Morley (1989) illustrates this position through the example of studying movies. He argues that “there is more to cinema-going than seeing films” (Morley 1989: 26). As he continues, ethnographic audience research studies media through the social situations and rituals they are part of, like that of going to the movies. In this thesis, I follow this approach. I maintain that we cannot understand TikTok consumption, or how people interact with algorithmic personalisation systems, as isolated activities. Instead, we need to approach them as integrated parts of different situations and contexts of people’s everyday social life.

For example, as I will demonstrate in my empirical analysis, TikTok content does not just create pleasure and enjoyment through its reception by people scrolling through the “For You” page. The short-videos people consume are a resource through which they deal with various feelings and moods they experience through a normal day (Chapter 6). Likewise, the TikTok videos my participants encountered on the app are artefacts that people share to interact with others and

shape interpersonal biographies (Chapter 8). Similarly, it is by reflecting on and interacting with the content that appears on their screens that people make sense of the algorithmic systems deployed to capture and target their attention (Chapter 7). Ethnographic audience research allows us to uncover these contextual determinants through which TikTok consumption becomes meaningful, forms of algorithmic power manifest, and such are responded to.

As Morley (1992: 18) notes, ethnographic audience research differentiates itself from related traditions here, like ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967), in that it turns analytical attention to the micro dimension of social life to be able to better explain the macro social questions of power. It is this link which is particularly important for my analytical position, and reason why I engage with this tradition. Silverstone (1994: 50) has theorised this when he conceptualised media consumption as a dialectical process. According to him, when people integrate a medium like the television into their everyday routines, that medium also changes the way everyday life is lived, and as such exercises a form of power. My interest in this dialectical nature stems here from the way in which Silverstone relatedly conceived media as both content and technology (Silverstone 1994: 40). This is important to my analysis for two reasons.

The first reason has to do with the fact that it ultimately is the content which people engage with on platforms like TikTok. This is an argument that resonates with foundational studies in the field. For example, drawing on extensive comparative ethnographic work on social media use, Miller et al. (2016: 1) find that “it is the content rather than the platform that is most significant when it comes to why social media matter”. During my fieldwork I made similar observations. While my participants enjoyed TikTok for its affordances of algorithmic personalisation, these mattered only in so far that they provided access to content that was useful to participants, for instance in helping them relax when tired or stressed. From this angle,

it is crucial to approach my fieldwork data from an analytical position that is able to grasp such engagements where content does still stand in the analytical foreground.

The second reason is, then, relatedly that it was through content recommendations that my participants imagined and tried to interact with TikTok's algorithmic personalisation systems. As I will outline in more detail in Chapter 7, my participants read their content feeds and videos on them for clues to understand how they are perceived by TikTok, adjusting, in return, their behaviour if they desired to be seen differently and served different content on their feed. Similarly, it was through specific content recommendations perceived as being too specific that my participants primarily reflected on and negotiated their position towards TikTok as a surveillant online environment, as pointed to earlier already. As such, the analysis of my fieldwork data necessitated an analytical perspective on TikTok as content and technology.

From this angle, I agree with the argument of Das (2012) who, evaluating audience research techniques for the study of social media platforms like Facebook, found significant limitations. Not everything that my participants, and people more generally, do on TikTok can be explained through audience studies perspectives – such as the metaphor of reading media as texts. These old metaphors can simply not sufficiently capture everything people do on digital platforms, as Das (2012: 21) rightly notes. At the same time, I agree with Miller (2021) who argues that the primary role of theory should be to help us clarify empirical findings. As such, I maintain that for platforms like TikTok, where content plays such a central role, paying attention to its consumption remains crucial, nonetheless. By returning to these traditions of audience research, I thus aim to develop a richer understanding for how my participants consumed content on and navigated TikTok, for example by reading their content feeds in particular ways.

In other words, the contradictions that are inherent to TikTok as a digital platform manifest not just in its technological form, such as its ‘for you’ design, but also the content recommendations which are expressions thereof. Returning to the tradition of ethnographic audience research provides us thus with a solid anchoring point to analytically capture how people engage with TikTok as a content-centric platform shaped by algorithmic systems. This position is one that studies TikTok consumption as culturally situated processes in which people make meaning with the app, its content, and technological affordances as a resource. This process is dialectical in so far that by integrating TikTok into their daily lives, people put the app into a position from which it can potentially shape and influence them – for example, by trying to shape consumption behaviour in ways that are at the service of the platform’s commercial goals. The resulting tensions between the agentic possibilities of self-determination and the mechanisms of algorithmic control are the key focus of the empirical chapters. That means, these tensions interest me in terms of where, when, how, and why they materialise and are negotiated by people in their everyday lives.

2.5 Positioning the case of TikTok

As Bogost (2020: para 21) aptly described when writing on TikTok: “it’s a bummer, but nothing is ever just an app anymore”. TikTok necessarily needs to be seen as part of a broader condition of digital platform capitalism, expressing its logics of datafication and behavioural control (Su 2023). TikTok is one of many platforms on which tech companies try to control and exploit configurations of content consumption, that is, audience activity – continuing the legacies of prior digital platforms like YouTube (Burgess and Green 2008) and broadcasting media institutions (Ang 1991). TikTok tracks how people consume content and tries to modulate their behaviour to extract an optimum amount of value from their screen-based attention (see Smith

2021). TikTok does so guided by the logic of algorithmic personalisation, aiming to construct 'you' as an objectified target of its control (Kant 2020).

In this chapter, I have developed my analytical position of audience studies in relation to this condition. I sketched the contours of the power dynamics that underly my chosen case of TikTok by drawing on relevant literature. Aligning with scholar like Siles (2023), I argued that power manifests in the moments that apps like TikTok are enacted in everyday lives. Here, I understand media content and technologies as being part of dialectical processes in which they both enable people to make meaning whilst shaping how people live their lives (Silverstone 1994).

Resultingly, I have argued that at the core of my analytical position sits a concern for understanding power through the tensions it creates. That is, tensions that arise between the agentic possibilities of self-determination that apps like TikTok afford and the control that they seek to exercise over those who engage with them. These tensions are not universal, but rather take shape differently across points in time and the people in question. For some people, scrolling through an algorithmically personalised content feed will be a largely unproblematic activity. For other people, however, it can be a struggle in terms of getting sucked in and carried away in endless streams of content that capture one beyond an ability of self-control.

Following Morley (2012: 85), I argue that to address these kinds of complexities we need "thick (theoretically informed and empirically grounded) descriptions ... of media cultures ... rather than the development of any more media (or medium) theory in the abstract". That is why I have not provided a more concrete analysis of these dynamics in this chapter, for the reason that such needs to unfold in close dialogue with the empirical data. In this thesis, I seek to

provide such thick descriptions by opening an ethnographic audience studies perspective on TikTok and the ways in which it shapes audience activities on its platform. Through these empirical descriptions, I aim to engage with and extend some of the more theoretically oriented work on consequences of datafication and algorithms – challenging some of the grand claims, and providing deeper insights into the role that people play in enacting and navigating power dynamics. From the position of audience studies outlined in this chapter, I therefore posed the following three research questions in relation to TikTok as a case.

(1) What role do TikTok content consumption practices play in routines of everyday life?

TikTok deploys tracking and personalisation systems regardless of how exactly people use the app. Nonetheless, mapping consumption across contexts of everyday life is crucial. By looking at the contexts of which TikTok consumption is part, we can see its consequences as the result of multiple and variable factors. The design of media technologies is only one such factor, albeit a powerful one. Moreover, by asking about the role that TikTok consumption plays in the domain of everyday life, we can better make sense of its impact on people's lives. For example, there are crucial qualitative differences between scrolling for hours at night and scrolling for five minutes while waiting for something to cook.

(2) How do people make sense of and navigate TikTok as a space of online surveillance?

People continuously reflect on the technological environments they engage with. To conceptualise people solely through their potential vulnerabilities to such environments, for example the persuasive technologies like personalisation systems embedded in them, is short-sighted. After all, as many computer scientists themselves argue, “recommendation is – to a large extent – a problem of human-computer interaction” (Jannach et al. 2022: 5). Thus, it is

imperative to take seriously how people respond to and learn how to deal with TikTok's "For You" page as a persuasive technology trying to figure them out, monitor their behaviour, and capture their attention for commercial purposes.

(3) How do people evaluate the meaningfulness of consuming content on TikTok?

Cultural critics often argue that TikTok is emblematic of a media landscape that withholds rather than empowers people from doing meaningful things with their life (see, for example, Odell 2019). These discourses, and other sense-making devices, such as metaphors of addiction (Tiidenberg et al. 2017), set the backdrop against which people reflect on the role that media and algorithms play in their lives. Researching these sense-making and reflection processes is thus vital to understand how people engage with TikTok, and the meanings that they attribute to its affordances. At its core, we need to see the meaning of TikTok, as well as its potential meaninglessness, as something situationally produced rather than given or inherent to its design or wider political economy.

In the next chapter, I develop a framework at the intersection of audience studies and related fields – such as internet research, social media scholarship, and algorithm studies – that allows us to answer these questions. I will stress the importance of investigating tensions between self-determination and control contextually by looking at the wider settings of everyday life in which apps like TikTok are used. Moreover, I will underscore the importance of investigating audience activities as culturally situated consumption practices.

3. Digital everyday life and practices

In the previous chapter, I engaged with audience and cultural studies to develop my analytical approach. I outlined the relevance of this approach of cultural audience research in how I see the fundamental operation of digital platforms like TikTok centred in the commodification of audience activities – for example, in tracking and shaping how people watch content on algorithmically personalised content feeds. Reflecting on the structural power of these systems, I oriented myself towards their empirical complexity. I outlined the importance of investigating how people respond to and navigate these structures of audience commodification, and the ways in which these manifest in their everyday lives. This chapter thus complements my earlier discussion by offering a theoretical framework.

To develop this framework, I will update the previously discussed approach of ethnographic audience studies. I start by outlining everyday life, consumption, and ontological security as theoretical key concepts as they have been developed in this tradition. Then, throughout the remainder of the chapter, I will extend that discussion by drawing on more recent work from the literatures of internet research, social media scholarship, and algorithm studies. More specifically, I will open two perspectives. Firstly, in theorising how people move through mobile and polymedia landscapes. Secondly, by discussing how people interact with algorithmic systems, and make sense of such, in their everyday lives. The final section of the chapter will, then, tie these together as a framework.

3.1 Everyday struggles over meaning

I want to begin by discussing what I mean when I speak about everyday life – namely, the contexts within which people use media like TikTok and are confronted with manifestations of their power dynamics. As outlined in the previous chapter, the tradition of ethnographic audience research is key to my analytical approach. Historically, the idea of everyday life played a vital role in this tradition (see Morley 1992 or Silverstone 1994). Its usage did herein stem from a desire to understand the contexts of media use, such as that of watching television, and move beyond the rather narrow analytical focus of the then dominant text-reader metaphor (see Radway 1988). In this thesis, my use of the concept follows a similar path. I use it to make reference to the contexts of my participants' TikTok consumption, and by doing so, make sense of everyday life as a set of culturally and historically situated practices. The aim of doing so is to broaden my perspective on TikTok in a way that audience activity can be talked about both within and beyond structures of audience commodification (Ang 1996).

From this angle, however, we cannot simply copy earlier approaches of doing audience research. For example, in the past, scholars often worked with broad definitions of the everyday, yet narrowed them down through related concepts, such as that of domesticity (see, for example, Morley 1986). The idea of the domestic is closely intertwined with that of everyday life. It is in the domestic contexts of the household, for example, that people spend much of their time, and in which much of their social life and identities are anchored. Earlier audience research, focussed on technologies such as the television, has been closely linked to that sphere of the domestic, often due to how engagement with that technology was materially bound to the physical space of the home (see Silverstone and Hirsch 1992, Morley 1991). And the same holds still true to later iterations of such discourses, for example around the ideas of a bedroom culture and multiplication of screens and personal media devices within the rooms of individual members of a household (Bovill and Livingstone 1999).

While my participants did spend a great deal of time-consuming TikTok at home, the mobile nature of it does extend beyond such contexts of the domestic household. TikTok exemplifies a contemporary media culture of abundance as Boczkowski (2021) theorises it, for example. As he writes, “until the 1980s, communication practices were relatively medium-specific”, whereas “nowadays, we watch movies on smartphones, make calls via computers, go online on television sets” (Boczkowski 2021: 16). Similarly, TikTok relates to the complexities of what scholars like Ytre-Arne (2023) refer to as a form of “digital everyday life”, in which technologies like the smartphone take centre place. Synthesising past research and literature, Ytre-Arne (2023: 15) the smartphone folds multiple social domains into a singular device that people navigate. And this becomes even more complex if we consider, as Madianou (2015: 1) underlines, that the various apps and platforms people access through these smartphones have “become so many things to different people”.

I will unpack these perspectives in more detail later in this chapter. In relation to ideas of everyday life, they do here, however, underline the empirical complexity that this concept carries, especially when studying the role that media play within it. I use the notion of everyday life thus as a reference marker that allows me to point towards the contexts of TikTok use so that their empirical complexity becomes perceptible. Doing so, using theory to let empirical complexity emerge, is crucial if we remember the cultural situatedness that theoretical concepts carry. Morley (2000: 133) discusses this with reference to the work of Silverstone (1994) and Martin-Barbero (1984). He argues that while both the genres of soap opera and *telenovela* studied by these scholars are similar in form, the everyday contexts in which they were consumed, the suburb and *periferias*, are quite different – the former lacking as sense of community, the latter anchoring one for people. In return, as Morley continues, both the forms of everyday life and that of watching melodramatic stories are different in that relationship.

Put simply, theories of everyday life are complicated by the historical moments they make reference to, and the cultural contexts they are situated in. That is why I agree with Morley's (1992) argument here. He argues that an approach to everyday life needs to be informed by an empirical sensibility for complexity, for "the forces and structures, the conflicts and contradictions, of quotidian reality", other than "an abstract theorizing" of such (Morley 1992: 236). Aligned with this argument, my understanding of everyday life in this thesis is composed of two components. Firstly, and as outlined above, I conceptually use the notion of the everyday to broadly point towards the context of my participants' TikTok consumption – be that in the domestic contexts of the household, the quotidian routines of commuting, working, or studying, the digital environments of smartphones or platforms, and so on.

Secondly, within this broad context, I seek to capture specific, critical elements. These critical elements include dynamics of power, and especially those that I outlined in the previous chapter through the theme of a tension between agentic capacities of self-determination and forms of algorithmic control and persuasion. I develop this orientation by drawing on the wider debates as they are exemplified in the works of Lefebvre (1961) and de Certeau (1984). The two are prominent theorists of everyday life and have been influential in shaping the discourses on media use, such as the work of Silverstone (1994) which plays a key role in my thesis. More specifically, I follow the position that Silverstone (1994: 161) has outlined in relation to these two voices, which he sees as exemplary of two broader traditions of theorising everyday life, one focussed on the everyday as a site of domination and alienation, the other as space of resistance and creative meaning-making.

Silverstone opposes an either/or dichotomy between these two positions. He argues that "in the everyday our lives become meaningful", or significant. To understand these dynamics of

becoming, we need to think of everyday life as “the site for, and the product of, the working out of significance”, and we need to make sense of it through “the forces both of domination and resistance” (Silverstone 1994: 164). As discussed in the previous chapter, corresponding themes of ambivalence and contradiction are of my interest empirically. I thus decided to draw on the approach towards everyday life put forward by Silverstone (1994) in how it resonates with this position. It proposes to use the concept of everyday life to outline the particular processes under which people make meaning, and such activities are shaped by powerful structural forces, at times in contradictory ways. We can briefly turn to the representative works of Lefebvre (1961) and de Certeau (1984) to understand how Silverstone arrives at this position.

At its core, Lefebvre (2002: 45) argues that everyday life “embodies the changes which take place somewhere else, in the higher realms”. To him, the everyday is thus an intermediate level. It is the domain where power manifests and has a concrete impact on people and social practices. For Lefebvre, the everyday is the domain “mediating between the individual and the social” (Lefebvre 2022: 62). One central way in which Lefebvre theorises this mediation, and thus power, is through his historical analysis of the technocratic organisation of life in industrial societies. His analysis is exemplary here for broader discourses that critically engage with the decline of traditional forms of life under conditions of capitalistic alienation. For example, Lefebvre discusses changes in the structuring of everyday lives, shifting from the cyclical timescales of seasons and traditional customs towards the linearity of rationalised time management and logics of productivity (Lefebvre 2002: 49).

Other than creating entirely new rhythms of modern everyday life, he argues that such shifts are marked by a series of new “small technical actions” – such as the use of vacuum cleaners, washing machine, radio, or television – which “intervene in the old rhythms rather like

fragmented labour in productivity in general" (Lefebvre 2002: 75). In short, Lefebvre theorises the everyday as the manifestation of capitalistic alienation disjoining people's relationship to the products of their labour, with one another, history, and the world around them. He argues that modern cultures of rationalisation and functionalism have turned the everyday, its traditional rhythms and routines, into a "mincemeat". This has created ever more margins and empty spaces in people's everyday life which are filled, for example, with what he describes as "passive entertainments" like watching television or reading magazines (Lefebvre 2002: 76). Within these developments, Lefebvre (2002: 78) argues that "everyday life has lost a dimension: depth. Only triviality remains."

It is from this angle that his work is representative of such broader cultural diagnoses which see the everyday life as a product of powerful capitalistic forces. As might be obvious, I have some reservations about such analyses, especially in how they render people as passive subjects positioned by structural forces, or make grand claims about the loss of depth and other cultural qualities. Nonetheless, Lefebvre's work is relevant for two reasons here. Firstly, in how it outlines the everyday as analytically significant for the manifestation of such structural forces, and especially in how these forces shape the organisation of everyday life, for example in rhythms and routines. Secondly, in that his perspective, in contrast to others (for example, that of Horkheimer and Adorno 1947), remains committed to the theme of contradiction. Lefebvre argues that "in its margins, the unformed and the spontaneous live on", through which the everyday "rebels" against attempts of total control (Lefebvre 2002: 64).

The work of de Certeau (1984) is representative of another strand of theorising the everyday. Namely, he represents a prominent voice that opened a perspective on the everyday life that puts centre stage such rebellious actions and resistance that take place within these margins of

everyday life. In de Certeau's (1984: 34) view, everyday life is "concerned with battles or games between the strong and the weak, and with the actions which remain possible for the latter". One key element in his theory, respectively one prominently picked up in later debates, is the idea of tactics. He uses the metaphor of tactics to discuss these possibilities of creative action from the bottom up. He understands as tactics how ordinary people "make do". Tactics are not concerned with questions of long-term change or resistance. That is the domain of strategy. Tactics, in contrast to strategies, represent a "clever utilization of time, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power" (de Certeau 1984: 38). That is why he sees everyday life as a kind of battleground or playing field.

In his work, de Certeau (1984) offers many such metaphors. I engage with his work here primarily for these metaphors, and that of tactics specifically. On that level, of the metaphor, they are productive to concentrate our analytical attention around particular, critical elements of everyday practice – as well as being able to observe a potential absence of such creative tactics. To move towards a larger theory of the everyday from de Certeau's work, however, would have shortcomings. As Silverstone (1994: 163) underlines, de Certeau's (1984) work is at times inconsistent in the metaphors it uses. Thus, it does not offer a necessarily coherent description of the dynamics of everyday life and its politics. Silverstone points out, for instance, how de Certeau in one moment speaks of everyday life as "guerrilla warfare" and in another positions people as "eternal renters" who will never make property their own.

Therefore, Silverstone (1994) voices some concern with a theoretical perspective that is overly centred on these metaphors. On tactics, he argues that "brilliant those activities may be ... from time to time, but they will not always be so" (Silverstone 1994: 163). Making this point, Silverstone is speaking towards discourses on everyday life and popular culture that emerged

around the work of de Certeau (1984) and other scholars (such as Fiske 1989). Within these discourses, scholars often ended up falsely characterising everyday practices as inherently resistant and thus critical (see discussion of Budd et al. 1990). In this context, Silverstone argues that binarism, theorising control vs the controlled, for example, is a flawed approach to make sense of the everyday. Against this binarism, Silverstone proposed “an approach based both in cultural critique and empirical research ... a more provisional form of thinking” about everyday life and its politics (Silverstone 1994: 161).

In this thesis, I follow this approach of ethnographic audience research that Silverstone (1994) has paradigmatically shaped. I study everyday life critically, with a concern for questions of power and resistance, yet also with a particular empirical interest in describing and outlining its dynamics. I understand, in other words, everyday life as a “continuous achievement ... more or less taken for granted, more or less fragile” (Silverstone 1994: 165). I seek to outline these dynamic and fragile processes, the achievement of everyday life, through a form of provisional thinking in which theory helps open perspectives on empirical complexity.

Put differently, in the domain of the everyday, it is neither people nor apps like TikTok that are fully in control, or controlled, by the other. Rather, when the two meet in the everyday, a “play on contradictions” unfolds, to borrow terminology from Hall (1981) discussed in the previous chapter. People approach TikTok in an attempt to re-contextualise the app, and content hosted on it, as part of their everyday meaning-making practices. TikTok does in the same moment try to modulate people’s engagement and commodify their activity as audiences. In this interaction, a tension emerges between agentic capacities of self-determination and algorithmic control. This tension emerges in people’s everyday life as type of continuous process, as Hall (1981: 233) writes, where there are no “once-for-all victories”, but only “strategic positions to be won and

lost”. And it unfolds as a process on uneven grounds, in which powerful structural limits exist that shape social practices.

My use of everyday life as a concept centres thus around this position. It is driven by an interest less in theorising the everyday as such than it is by understanding everyday struggles over meaning in relation to apps like TikTok. Within my theoretical framework, the idea of everyday life is thus key in how it allows us to make references to these contexts and dynamics, the playing out of contradictions. It does so in opening a perspective from which we can grasp the state of constant flux that marks people’s lives as they are lived from one day to the other. In the next section, I will continue this discussion on dynamics and everyday life around the ideas of consumption and ontological security. I draw on these two concepts to further sharpen my view on these dynamic and tense meaning-making processes.

3.2 Media use and ontological security

In the previous section, I defined my use of the concept of everyday life as a reference marker. Firstly, I discussed the concept of the everyday as a means to describe the contexts of my participants’ TikTok use. Secondly, I outlined a perspective on everyday life that sees it as a dynamic context in which structural forces manifest and are negotiated. In this section, I continue this discussion. More specifically, I will define my use of consumption and ontological security as theoretical concepts that help unpack these dynamics. Put differently, there are many forms of activity that people practice in their everyday lives, and in relation to TikTok. Similarly, there are many ways in which the dynamics of the everyday play out. That is, there are many different strategic positions that people seek to gain, as well as corresponding tactics

they deploy, in their everyday meaning-making. To add analytical focus to an analysis of everyday life, I thus use these two concepts.

I use the notion of consumption to refer to a particular, yet still broad, set of everyday activities, that is, acts of media consumption. As such, I understand the use of cultural artefacts, like TikTok video clips, in the management of self-identities, social relationships, and wellbeing. As discussed in the previous chapter, algorithmic systems, like personalised content feeds, are powerful structures that shape and limit how people can engage with the worlds they represent on people's screens. Herein, these algorithmic systems impact people's agentic capacities of self-determination. To capture how this impact plays out, I use the concept of ontological security. I focus on media consumption activities and how they influence people's wellbeing, broadly defined as a feeling of ontological security, of being able to feel meaningfully situated in one's lifeworld. In the remainder of this chapter, I will develop this position in further detail.

As Silverstone (1994: 109) writes, consumption is "one of the main processes by and through which individuals are incorporated into the structures of contemporary society". As such, consumption is a key theoretical concept to make sense of both how people make do, yet also how social practices are shaped by powerful structural forces. Giving consumption this centrality, Silverstone does, however, oppose a view on it as it has been advanced, for example, in critiques of mass culture. There, consumption is seen as a passive process that fosters cultural homogenisation (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947). Silverstone (1994: 112) criticises that these critical approaches fail to acknowledge "that culture is plural" and the product of "individual and collective actions". What Silverstone favours, instead, are more anthropological understandings of consumption, conceiving it as a social practice structuring everyday life from the bottom up.

My use of the concept of consumption follows this trajectory that Silverstone (1984), but also others in the tradition of ethnographic audience research (such as Morley 1992), have charted. The work of Miller (1987) is key within this approach. He conceptualises consumption as a form of work, as a process of re-contextualizing the objects of consumption in social life. It is through this re-contextualisation that objects of consumption are given meaning, and thus provide people with the material resources and creative opportunity to express themselves through them (see also Silverstone 1994: 119). From this anthropological understanding, we thus can see consumption as something that is inherently creative and active, and therefore culturally situated. It involves tactics, in de Certeau's (1985) sense, through which people give meaning to their life, identities, and social relationships. This includes, as scholars such as Martin-Barbero (1987), discussed in the last chapter, have demonstrated, the consumption of media, and the clever utilisation of such as resources in meaning-making and the formation of identities.

At the same time, Silverstone (1994: 131) is right to point out that we need to see consumption as being marked by a dynamic tension between "dependence and freedom, integration and isolation". In this thesis, I theorise these tensions through the idea of ontological security. As a concept, it offers a useful angle on how these tensions arise in everyday practices of media consumption. It does so, namely, by allowing us to grasp how media are constitutively intertwined with how people construct and position themselves as meaningful social subjects in their lifeworlds. If media become integrated parts of these processes through their consumption, then they are in a position to influence identities and social practices, meaning they can exercise some form of control (Silverstone 1994).

Scholars like Bausinger (1984) have prominently discussed the constitutive place that media occupy in everyday life contexts. Taking the newspaper as an example, Bausinger writes that

when newspapers don't get delivered, a lot of people are rightly upset about it. However, Bausinger raises the question of what they are upset about, missing out on the news content, or the paper itself. Bausinger (1984: 344) points out that both is the case. As he writes, "because the newspaper is part of it, reading it proves that the breakfast-time world is still in order". Without the newspaper present, Bausinger continues, the morning ritual of the breakfast would feel incomplete and out of order (see also earlier work like Berelson 1948 making observations). In audience studies, the idea of ontological security (Giddens 1994) has often been used to discuss this integral role media play in the structuring of everyday social life (Silverstone 1994).

According to Giddens (1991: 47), "to be ontologically secure is to possess ... answers to fundamental existential questions". When Giddens speaks about answers, he means something practical. Giddens (1991: 40) writes about people creating a "protective cocoon" comprised of a set of taken-for-granted routines. It is within such routines, Giddens argues, that people experience life following an order that makes the world appear normal. This experience of normalcy, according to Giddens, frees people from anxieties and existential questions. Giddens (1991: 36) outlines practical consciousness as the "cognitive and emotive anchor of the feelings of ontological security". What Giddens (1984: 375) means by practical consciousness is a tacit understanding of how to go on in life which cannot be put into words. It is practical in the sense that people just know how to do certain things – like eating breakfast – which allows them to go on with life in a natural attitude.

Furthermore, Giddens links this idea of ontological security to questions of self-identity. Giddens (1991: 52) defines the identity of the self as "something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual". These reflexive processes, Giddens continues, find a discursive anchor in linguistic differentiations such as those of I/me/you. When

Giddens speaks about self-identity, he hence refers to people's capacity to maintain a biography, an account of who 'I' was yesterday, is today, and should be tomorrow. An ontologically insecure individual, Giddens (1991: 54) states, will lack such a "feeling of biographical continuity". Therefore, Giddens continues, people create a protective cocoon meant to stabilise biographical continuity on both a reflexive and practical level. Through their everyday routines, people seek to create an environment in which their experience and reflection on their self-identity can continue to make sense.

In short, I understand ontological security as the feeling of life following an order in which 'I' makes sense. Moreover, I see feelings of ontological security relying on both social practices (routines that give structure to everyday life) and reflection (discursive anchoring of the self in the lifeworld). Through the concept of ontological security, I seek to grasp the dynamic processes in which people negotiate their sense of self and wellbeing in everyday life contexts, and specifically through media consumption activities. My use of the concept, derived from Giddens' (1991) work, follows here a similar approach like that of Silverstone (1994). That is, I pick ontological security as a concept out of Giddens' larger body of work. One of the reasons why Silverstone does so, and subsequently extends it through his own work, is that Giddens pays only limited attention to media within this context, which Silverstone (1994: 7) rightly points out as a significant shortcoming.

As Silverstone (1994: 19) notes, "ontological security is sustained through the familiar and the predictable". Media like the television, Silverstone continues, have a constitutive relationship to ontological security, therefore. For example, Silverstone (1994: 20) writes that "broadcast schedules reproduce (or define) the structure of the household day". As such, television allows structuring everyday life in predictable ways, for instance through daily rituals of evening news

consumption. At the same time, Silverstone (1994: 22) states, media also bring an element of the familiar, for example through the reoccurring symbols and narratives used in television news programmes.

Following Silverstone (1994), I thus theorise media as impacting ontological security in how they are consumed both as content and technology. As a technology, media can help people structure their day by establishing routines. As a sphere of content, media provide people with resources that enable reflexive self-identity formation, writing the biography of an 'I' that fits into the world. Henceforth, we can argue that media play an anthropologically meaningful role in everyday life. Even though people might not describe their uses of certain media as necessarily meaningful, they nonetheless are meaningful in organising the domain of the everyday and therein people's experience of the self.

However, the relationship between media and ontological security is by no means to be seen as unproblematic. On the opposite, Silverstone (1994: 7) positions the idea of ontological security in relation to the "routines that exist to protect individuals and collectivities from unmanageable anxieties, anxieties that accompany, indeed that define, situations of crisis". My engagement with the notion of ontological security, aligned with the work of Silverstone, stems from this productive angle that it opens. It opens a perspective on dynamic tensions that characterise how people manage and make do, try and fail to do so, and the ways that power manifests and is negotiated in the course of everyday activity.

There exist many examples in past audience research that have engaged with media consumption practices in these ways empirically to outline their contingent outcomes, or limited benefits, so to speak To name some prominent ones: in his work on family television

viewing, Morley (1986: 141) has highlighted how gendered family roles become reified in the question of who gets to decide what will be watched on the living room television set. Ang's (1985) work on soap opera audiences argued that although people can be creative in their readings, media still often portray certain groups, such as women, in problematic ways. Or, as Radway (1984: 218) underlined in her work, while escapist pleasures can help deal with feelings of dissatisfaction, real change requires for action in "the arena of actual social relations rather than ... in the imagination". Similar patterns can be found in more recent research as well, for example in the works of Lupinacci (2022), discussed earlier, and Jovicic (2021), both who engage with practices of scrolling and their consequences.

Lupinacci's (2022) work is focussed on understanding the temporal dynamics and feelings of "aliveness" that social media consumption practices of scrolling mediate. Lupinacci (2020: 276) observed how the design of social media platforms created a condition in which her participants felt "that something remarkable might happen any time, all the time, and that thus you need to be able to follow it as it unfolds in real time". Put differently, Lupinacci showed how her participants actively engaged in consumption practices like scrolling to feel connected and part of the world – as social media afforded them such feelings of seemingly "immediate" connection to what is happening "right now". At the same time, such desires for connection were ever so often not met, as Lupinacci continues, leaving people feeling bored, frustrated, or anxious – that is, ontologically insecure.

Jovicic's (2021) study, too, engages with the theme of temporality and scrolling, yet from a different angle. Her work draws on fieldwork with marginalised, urban youths. Faced with frequent boredom, for instance due to unemployment, and exclusion from public spaces, such as the city centres, Jovicic critically reflects on her participants' social media consumption. She

underlines that social media content feeds are highly commercialised spaces. She outlines how scrolling through these turns youths into targets of advertisers and integrates them into a consumer culture where their identity formation is grounded in the consumption of goods such as fashion. At the same time, Jovicic demonstrates that for her participants, being in these problematic online spaces was simply one of the few options available to cope with boredom and waiting they had to deal with in their everyday lives. They created, as she argues, in that condition life-affirming opportunities to carry on and feel connected – that is, they created some form of ontological security.

Put simply, what the above exemplary studies show is that how media will impact people's lives, their ontological security, depends. It depends on the kind of medium, how it is used, by whom, and in what kind of context. Media can help people deal with structural conditions that negatively affect their life and wellbeing, for instance in the form of boredom. Yet media can also be the sources of such boredom and other feelings, like frustration or anxiety. More so, media do not impact people's lives in singular or linear ways. They can stabilise the normal order in some moments, destabilise it in others, yet also ease the frictions and tensions that emerge from elsewhere – like moments of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic constituted one. The impact that media have on everyday life experiences hence cannot be properly captured by binaries of positive and negative effects, and it can only be properly made sense of empirically.

From this angle, however, my thesis then moves in a slightly different direction than Lupinacci (2022) and Jovicic (2021) when it engages with scrolling as a consumption practice. At the heart of Jovicic's analysis sits the traditional ethnographic description of a group of people (marginalised, urban youths) and their overall experience as such group. For Lupinacci, working in the critical phenomenological tradition, the overall objective is of theoretical nature.

Lupinacci develops an understanding for the conditions of contemporary experience as they are shaped by algorithmic media environments. As a consequence, in both analyses the empirical nuances of specific media contents and technologies that people engage with, in some moments more purposefully than others, tend to drift out of focus (see also Lupinacci 2022: 226). In my thesis, such nuances are of vital analytical significance, however. As discussed in the last chapter, my central concern is to understand how people navigate digital platforms like TikTok and their structures of audience commodification. That is why an engagement with media consumption practices in the concrete is vital.

To conceive of media use as a form of consumption in this sense, as culturally situated and particular activity, means to understand it as a way of responding to the conditions that one is situated in – be that a particular platform like TikTok or a particular historical moment of crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic. By doing so, we open a perspective from which we can analyse everyday life as a creative and reflexive process. We can make tangible the means that people have available to make do and go on, one step after the other. We can make sense of how exactly people try to live meaningfully, fail and struggle to do so, as well as attempt to secure the continuous success of such attempts by establishing routines which give a sense of order to their lives and identities. In the next two sections, I will continue this discussion by theorising how exactly people grasp and navigate media like TikTok as such resources for everyday living.

3.3 Navigating digital media environments

In the past two sections, I developed my theoretical understanding of everyday life as a creative and dynamic process in which people use media technologies and contents as resources to live in meaningful ways. In this and the next section, my concern will be to develop a theoretical

understanding of such everyday media consumption practices in a context of mobile and algorithmic media. This is necessary precisely in that most of the research I have drawn on thus far addressed everyday media consumption as it centred around devices such as the television. The context within which my study of TikTok is situated does thus require an update.

I want to structure this update of audience research along three key differences. Firstly, differences in the structure of media landscapes that people navigate today. Secondly, differences in the materiality of the media technologies people engage in their daily lives. Thirdly, differences in the organisation and distribution of the media contents people consume, for instance on algorithmically personalised content feeds (as already discussed in the previous chapter). The focus of this discussion will be less so on outlining these differences in historical detail than on describing how scholars have responded to these shifts in their development of theoretical concepts.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the traditions of audience research I draw on have mostly developed in contexts where media consumption was situated in the household context. There, media like the television had relatively static positions which, in return, structured engagement dynamics with them, for example along gendered family roles (Morley 1986). To make sense of cases like TikTok today, we are faced with a different kind of media landscape they are part of. Scholars such as Boczkowski (2021) theorise this contemporary media landscape through the notion of abundance. They underline that over the last few decades, the presence of media technologies and contents has become ubiquitous in everyday life. More specifically, Boczkowski (2021: 16) argues that this shift has been one away from a medium-specific condition towards one in which multiple media can and are being used for a whole variety of communicative purposes.

In parallel to these shifts, there has been growing interest by a variety of scholars to make sense of how people navigate these increasingly complex media landscapes (see, for example, Couldry 2016, Gershon 2010, Hasebrink and Popp 2006, Livingstone 2009). In this thesis, I draw on the theory of polymedia to make sense of this complexity. Polymedia theory can be seen as a key work within this theoretical trajectory. Madianou and Miller (2012) understand polymedia environments as the integrated structures of communicative affordances that people rely on in their conduct of everyday life. Within this integrated structure, Madianou and Miller (2012: 170) write, the meaning and social function of each medium is defined in relation to all other media. As they continue, the specific choice for and against a medium is today meaningful in itself. Boczkowski et al. (2018) mention in this context that people can, for example, post pictures on many platforms. Yet, where in the end they will post is going to be shaped “by their understandings of what is an acceptable and desirable” use of the given platform (Boczkowski et al. 2018: 255).

I draw on the theory of polymedia for two reasons. On the one side because it emphasises the creative activity of weaving together media technologies as an integrated structure. From this angle, polymedia theory resonates with the ideas of consumption outlined earlier, that is, an understanding of consumption as culturally situated re-contextualisation of artefacts in and for everyday life. The concept of polymedia is thus not merely descriptive of the media that people use. Much more so, it underlines that this environment is the product of everyday social activity. Herein, and secondly, I draw on the theory of polymedia how it allows us to capture within this construction a dynamic tensions of self-determination. By understanding how TikTok is situated in people’s polymedia environments, we can better understand the role that the app is supposed to play, and we can map with precision the tensions that arise in the fulfilment of this desired purpose, or failure of such.

However, when I speak about people integrating media technologies, I mean something different than the integration of the television into the household context, for example. TikTok is not a physical object that needs to be placed somewhere in a room and integrated into the routines of living within that space. Instead, TikTok exists on the internet and inside peoples smartphones, so to speak. TikTok is part of what we might call the “digital everyday life”, following Ytre-Arne (2023). She writes that “we increasingly conduct our routinized navigation across social domains through the smartphone, the centrepiece of our digital everyday life” (Ytre-Arne 2023: 15). What sets digital everyday life apart, as she continues, is how today people need to navigate across these multiple social domains collapsed and aggregated within a single devices like the smartphone. Moreover, the mobile nature of these devices makes them accessible potentially anywhere and anytime, moving them and their analysis beyond the domains of sitting rooms (Morley 1991) or a bedroom culture (Bovill and Livingstone 1999).

In other words, to understand how TikTok integrates into polymedia environments, and thus routines of everyday life, we need to make sense of how people navigate mobile devices like the smartphone – which Madianou (2015) describes as a material manifestation of polymedia environments. This is important in terms of the habitual nature in which smartphones are used, often appearing as taken-for-granted and overlooked elements in the conduct of everyday life (see Ling 2012). In particular, scholars have approached this taken-for-grantedness of mobile media by turning their attention to the embodied dimension of media use. For example, as Jovicic (2021) argues in her study on scrolling, engaging with scholars like Pink et al. (2016b), the seemingly simple contact of finger and phone screen has significant experiential consequences. It is such seemingly simple, embodied interactions, that between finger and screen, of which we need to be attentive to as forms of significant audience activity today (Silverstone 1994).

In the field of mobile media studies, there has emerged a rich literature on these embodied interactions. One key historical shift, as Hjorth and Richardson (2020) underline, was the emergence of touchscreens as dominant computing interfaces. Put simply, when using a desktop computer, people move a cursor around a screen to click on icons or to select items from menus. In contrast, on mobile devices, people engage in a different kind of navigational movement that is generative of the experience mediated through the screen. That is, people do so through their hands and fingers, requiring, as Hjorth and Richardson (2020: 27) argue, an understanding of naïve-physics of spatial movement in the virtual space. Due to this, as they continue, there is a “haptic intimacy or closeness to bodily experience” which renders “the touch screen a device of tactile and kinaesthetic familiarity”.

Fingers and hands have, resultingly, been a key focus area in mobile media scholarship. And it is through this theme that I integrate this scholarship in my theoretical framework here. More specifically, I integrate this scholarship by following the more concrete perspectives that scholars such as Hjorth and Richardson (2020), Moores (2014), and Pink and Leder Mackley (2013) provide for the study of everyday life and mobile media. That is, I turn to these scholars in order to foreground the significance that embodied ways of knowing one's way around mobile media has. As Pink et al. (2016b: 248) reflect on observing people use their smartphones, “it is the hands ... that take people into the experiential worlds of human relationships and playful and emotional forms of experience”. It is exactly this entry point, the generative nature of movement through polymedia environments, material manifest on people's smartphones (Madianou 2015), that is of my interest.

As mentioned above, Hjorth and Richardson (2017) emphasise the specific kind of haptic intimacy that results from this embodied interaction with mobile media. Empirically, their work

is grounded in research on mobile gaming. They frame engagements with such mobile media as a form of “digital wayfaring” – linked to Ingold’s (2010) understanding of movement as a way of knowing and acquiring an embodied familiarity for the environments that one is situated in. Hjorth and Richardson argue that people’s way of going about daily life, and acquiring this sense of familiarity, includes today a continuous, ambient presence of digital media. As they write, “touch screens are woven into our experience of place and being with others and work to reconfigure” these domains of the everyday (Hjorth and Richardson 2020: 30).

By focussing on this haptic intimacy, Hjorth and Richardson (2020) provide an effective solution to the problem of understanding how digital media like TikTok become present in everyday life. They argue that it is through people’s embodied interaction with devices like the smartphone that the binary between online and offline fades. More specifically, they argue that it is by feeling the world through mediated touch, that we can make sense of the significance that mundane media consumption practices have. As they write, practices like mobile gaming are “more than just a casual distraction”. They are pervasive cultural practices “embedded in our contemporary ways of being, knowing, and communicating” (Hjorth and Richardson 2020: 21). The work of Moores (2014) opens a similar perspective on the habitual and embodied interactions with media that shape people’s everyday lives.

Similar to others in this literature, Moores (2014) draws on the work of Ingold. Specifically, Moores draws on his understanding of everyday orientations, that is, knowing one’s “whereabouts” (Ingold 2000). Moores draws on Ingold’s work here to underline that people’s ability to know their whereabouts and orient themselves in daily lives is not a form of rational navigation, but a way of knowing, on the go, how to go on. Moores takes this cue from Ingold and applies it to the case of media, developing similarly a notion of wayfaring like Hjorth and

Richardson (2020). More specifically, Moores discusses the processual orderedness of coordinated hand, finger, and eye movements in this context. He brings up the example of checking emails, and the different steps it takes from opening a laptop towards navigating one's email inbox. Here, Moores underlines the generative and habitual nature of these coordinated movements, yet also their creativeness. He writes that some experiences, like checking emails, are part of a “thoroughly familiar space of movements” while in other cases people might draw on their extensive experience to adapt these movements to achieve other outcomes (Moores 2014: 204).

Pink and Leder Mackley (2013) offer a similar perspective on this integration of digital media into the everyday. The focus of their study was to understand how the home is constructed as an experiential environment in which people interact with and through a variety of technologies. Drawing on the notion of movement – as well linked to the work of Ingold (2010) and his ideas of embodied knowing – they underline how people develop “creative, diverse and innovative ways” to make their daily lives “feel right” (Pink and Leder Mackley 2013: 689). That is to say, they showcase how people habitually and physically interact with technologies in certain ways to evoke particular feelings, such as comfort or connectedness. As such, put differently, they demonstrate how embodied interactions with media technologies evoke a sense of ontological security (Giddens 1991).

Pink and Leder Mackley (2013) do not make a direct reference to Giddens here, yet in later work Pink et al. (2017: 8) briefly clarify that their notion of “feeling right” is similar to Giddens’ ontological security. Moreover, I would argue that this overlap does not just stem from the idea of “feeling right” itself, yet also their position that such feelings are sustained in practical knowledge as it is expressed in everyday routines, similar to Giddens (1991). It is then, in the

end, this particular edge through which I integrate this scholarship into the framework of everyday life, consumption, and ontological security outlined previously. I draw on this scholarship as one part of the whole that is my framework, using it to update the traditional approach of audience research discussed.

Polymedia environments constitute, we could say, the familiar terrain of communicative affordances through which people move to feel ontologically secure in their daily lives (Madianou and Miller 2012). They move through that terrain in embodied and haptic ways, that is, by being in touch with and through it. These ways of navigation are not rationally planned acts, but habitually coordinated movements that link towards the idea of practical consciousness (Giddens 1984) discussed earlier, enabling people to carry on and make do (de Certeau 1984). By attending to how people navigate between different apps on their smartphones, and find their way around on digital platforms like TikTok, we can understand what kind of experiential qualities such add to the texture of everyday life.

As Moores (2014: 204) emphasises, with reference to Morley (2007) and earlier audience studies work, it is the particularities of media consumption and their contexts that need to be brought to the foreground. At the same time, the question of analytical scope and perspective needs to be raised – as does my thesis look in a slightly different direction, creating a reason for the only partial integration of that scholarship here. Simply put, the ambitions of scholars like Pink and Leder Mackley (2013) are broad and more non-media-centric in nature than mine. They seek to understand in focus the domain of everyday life. In that course, some aspects of media, such as the particular media content people consume, drift out of analytical focus.

Yet, as discussed, I maintain that content remains of analytical importance for this project. Not so in the old, restrictive paradigm of the text-reader metaphor, in which it becomes the centrepiece of analysis. Yet, it remains relevant as a dynamically curated quality that shapes people's interaction with content-centric platforms like TikTok – for instance, in how people use media contents as resources to reflexively develop their identities and thus ontological security (Giddens 1991). As I have discussed by engaging with the reflections of Das (2012) in the previous chapter, in some contexts of engagement with digital media, for instance that of content feed, metaphors like that of reading still offer a productive analytical angle. They do so when focussed on a case like TikTok, yet might not when studying mobile games, for example.

Overall, then, my thesis retains an element of media-centricity in that it is empirically concerned with the particularities of a singular app, TikTok, and its content. My engagement with the literatures discussed in this section is therefore an aid to work the other way around, so to speak. I draw on this scholarship in untangling the complexity of TikTok as a particular mobile app. To understand TikTok, in other words, requires that we locate it in people's polymedia environments (Madianou and Miller 2012). It requires that we attend to how people move through these environments in routinised ways (Moore 2014) and investigate the senses of haptic intimacy these movements afford in terms of being in touch with the world (Hjorth and Richardson 2020) and feeling right in it (Pink and Leder Mackley 2013).

3.4 Imaginaries and situated actions

In the last section, I discussed how scholars have responded to shifts in the complexity of the contemporary media landscape. Where the focus revolved around the proliferation of mobile media there, in this section I turn towards the dynamism that has been added to this landscape

through the integration of algorithmic systems such as recommender systems. As discussed in the previous chapter, recommender systems dynamically adjust people's online experiences based on computational models of their and other people's consumption behaviour. Over the last years, there has emerged a growing body of scholarship that has sought to understand how people make sense of and navigate these dynamic media environments, for instance in the form of the content feeds like TikTok's "For You" page.

Notions of algorithm awareness (Gran et al. 2020), mental models (Ngo et al. 2020), and folk theories (Eslami et al. 2016) form a dominant strand in this scholarship, for example. At its core, this scholarship is concerned with understanding and mapping what people think about algorithms, on how such shapes a form of algorithmic literacy (Oeldorf-Hirsch and Neubaum 2023a). In this thesis, I draw on a different strand, one that is more closely aligned with the notions of practical knowing that I have discussed in the previous sections. Within this strand, scholars argue that people's way of knowing about algorithms stems less from a rational modelling of their technical qualities, than through acquiring an embodied understanding of what algorithms are and what they do. The work of Bucher (2017) on the algorithmic imaginary is a key here.

Bucher (2017: 40) defines the algorithmic imaginary as the "way of thinking about what algorithms are, what they should be, how they function and what these imaginations in turn make possible". Further, Bucher (2017: 41) uses the term imaginaries to refer to something more than "mental models" or theories. She understands imaginaries of algorithms as productive of the terms by which algorithms and people meet. Bucher underlines that people might not be able to understand how algorithms work on a technical level. They might not have the necessary knowledge to understand algorithms or simply lack access to the underlying

technical systems. Yet, Bucher (2017: 35) writes, people nonetheless experience “events in which the intimate power of algorithms reveals itself in strange sensations”.

What Bucher is referring to here are moments in which people sense and notice how algorithms work, and also fail to work. This can be, for example, a moment when algorithms struggle to identify and target a person’s interests in recommended content. It is upon this felt presence of algorithms that an algorithmic imaginary develops. It is this imaginary, Bucher (2017: 42) underscores, which shapes the modality of future interactions and experiences people have. In this sense, the idea of the algorithmic imaginary differs from folk theories in that it emphasises people’s affective encounters with algorithms. Furthermore, Bucher’s (2017) idea of the algorithmic imaginary is embedded within an understanding of algorithms that is aligned with the ideas of media power that I opened in the previous chapter.

In other words, and following scholars like Gillespie (2014), we can argue that algorithms are not fixed entities. As Gillespie (2014: 167) highlights, in technical terms an algorithm would be understood as a set of encoded procedures that produces from a defined input a defined output. TikTok’s recommender system, for example, uses people’s past consumption behaviour as an input to output a content feed of videos that will likely make a person spend an optimum amount of time on the app (Smith 2021). On this level, however, Gillespie (2014) argues that algorithms can also be understood as “institutional knowledge logics”, meaning ways of ordering the world in particular ways. Yet, as such, Gillespie (2014: 186) crucially underscores that, although tech companies own and operate algorithmic systems, they “are also what we make of them day in and day out” – which in the previous chapter I discussed along Cohn’s (2019) historical analysis and argument of algorithmic recommendations being suggestions and not orders to follow.

Gillespie (2014: 186) advances his argument on this dynamism by drawing on the work of Silverstone (1994), which I have discussed throughout this and the past chapter. Following Silverstone, what Gillespie means is that people put algorithms, that is, institutionalised knowledge logics, to use for different and at times unintended purposes in their everyday life contexts. Resultingly, how people imagine certain algorithms shapes to what ends they put them to use. It informs the creative work of re-contextualisation that is consumption (Miller 1987). For example, working with Bucher's (2017) notion of the algorithmic imaginary, Siles et al. (2020) show how people with different imaginaries of the Spotify algorithm used it for different purposes.

Siles et al. (2020) identified two main imaginaries that people developed and which shaped their experience of the Spotify algorithm. The first group imagined the Spotify algorithm as a "surveillant buddy". In this view, as Siles et al. (2020: 6) argue, people enacted their engagement with the Spotify algorithms through the lens of friendship dynamics in which "the algorithm" can be both annoying yet also help deal with feelings. The other group imagined the Spotify algorithm in more technical terms as a "feedback control system". As Siles et al. (2020: 7) argue, these people interacted with the Spotify algorithm by seeing it as something that can be trained through conscious efforts. What this study illustrates is how the experiential quality and dynamic of people's relationship with an algorithm can vary drastically depending on the imaginary used to enact it. It can be marked by more social qualities and values, be very technical and task-oriented, or be configured in another form.

Cotter (2022) emphasises that such imaginaries are often at work in the form of practical knowledge and consciousness. According to Cotter, it is not important whether people can put into words how an algorithm works. What matters is that people know how to accomplish what

they want to accomplish when they (have to) engage with it. Swart (2021) underlines in this context the importance of paying attention to moments of friction and conflict. According to Swart (2021: 8), when algorithms behave in unexpected ways, people not always manage to learn more about their logics, but instead can also feel discouraged in their ability to accomplish what they want to accomplish. The work of Suchman (2006), I argue, provides an effective way to attend to this dimension of practical knowledge and the dynamics of interaction between people and algorithms.

Suchman's (2006) work opposes the idea of thinking about either algorithms or humans as fixed entities. Suchman (2006: 286) defines as a central analytical task that of identifying "the materialization of subjects, objects, and the relations between them as an effect, more or less durable and contestable, of ongoing sociomaterial practice". More specifically, she works with the idea of situated actions to achieve this task. The idea of situated actions was initially designed by Suchman (1987) in opposition to dominant theories in the field of human-computer interaction. These dominant theories argued that people's uses of computers follows a kind of rational plan. Suchman (2006: 27), in contrast, argued that "the essential nature of action, however planned or unplanned, is situated". Resultingly, what Suchman got interested in was understanding the different situated actions by means of which people engaged with machines and, in return, differentiate themselves from them as agential entity.

Algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher 2017), I argue, can be seen as the resource people draw on to engage in such situated actions (Suchman 2006) and agential differentiation. These inform the necessary coupling for these situated configurations of human and machine to emerge – drawing here also on the work of Dourish (2004) on the embodied nature of human-computer interaction. It is by sensing and realising the presence of an algorithm that people gain an

opportunity to differentiate themselves from it and, thus, acquire situational agency. An attentiveness to the points of contact between people and algorithms is thus vital. However, it is so through the lens of Suchman's (2006) theoretical assumption that the positions of object and subject are not givens.

Thus, we are to ask how do people acquire agency when they use apps like TikTok, and to what end do they put that agency. Bucher's (2017) idea of the algorithmic imaginary allows us to effectively frame these process of people acquiring agency. It is within the imaginaries of algorithms that people negotiate both theirs and the algorithm's capacity to act in a given situation – they do so by negotiating the place of an algorithm in consumption. Furthermore, as Siles et al. (2020) underscore, people do therein also negotiate dynamics of power. Some people might be more open to algorithms and consider them in humanised terms as a “buddy”. Others, however, might see them as mere technical systems that can be manipulated.

Furthermore, as Siles (2023) showcases, these enactments do neither have to be singular, nor fixed. Rather, people continuously shift and adjust their entanglements with algorithms as they navigate digital platforms. Capturing this dynamic nature, opposed to fixed states of awareness, literacy, or agency, is thus crucial – and it is the central analytical approach I will take to unpack my participants' relationship with algorithms in this thesis. My engagement with this literature is thus of similar nature as that of mobile media scholarship discussed previously. I use concepts like that of the algorithmic imaginary (Bucher 2017) or situated action (Suchman 2006) to update my broader approach of algorithmic studies. The crucial difference is that the interaction with TikTok's algorithmic systems is only part of the broader picture I seek to gain.

In other words, I utilise this scholarship as a means to understand TikTok consumption practices of which making sense of and interacting with algorithms is a part of the work that people perform. And as I will demonstrate later, in Chapter 7, doing so will open a slightly different angle on the affective relationships that people have with algorithms, including how they negotiate senses of trust with them as interaction partners. In particular, I will address a gap in this literature, which concerns the socially mediated nature of these interactions. I will demonstrate that people's imaginaries are not just shaped by their affective relationship with algorithms, yet to a significant extent by the wider cultural and social context – materialising, for example, in stories that others share on and off the app about their experiences.

3.5 Summary of theoretical framework

In this chapter, I have introduced a number of theoretical concepts to develop a framework corresponding to my analytical approach. To reiterate, in the previous chapter I outlined this analytical approach as standing in the tradition of ethnographic audience research (Hirsch and Silverstone 1992, Morley 1992, Seiter et al. 1989). From this angle, my concern lies in understanding structures of audience commodification (Ang 1991) and forms of significant audience activity within such (Silverstone 1994). I am concerned, in other words, with making sense of how people navigate platforms like TikTok and their algorithmic systems, especially in terms of the opportunities for self-determined meaning making apps like TikTok afford, yet also the control they seek to exercise over people as objectified targets of their commercial intentions, such as selling more ads on their platform.

To this end, I opened this chapter by introducing three key concepts from the tradition of ethnographic audience research that I identified as vital to this project: everyday life,

consumption, and ontological security. Then, I spent the second part of this chapter engaging with more recent scholarship on mobile and algorithmic media to update this traditional approach. In this final section, I would now like to briefly summarise and tie these literatures together as a more concrete framework for audience research.

(1) At the heart of my framework lies the notion of everyday life, and a theoretical position foregrounding people as actively involved in shaping their everyday experiences – for example, through consumption practices (Miller 1987). I understand the everyday as a highly dynamic level of social reality, one marked by randomness and particularity that rebels against attempts of top-down control (Lefebvre 2002). As such, in my framework, I see everyday life as a playing field on which ordinary people develop tactics to creatively “make do” and resist control (de Certeau 1984). In particular, I am concerned with understanding how people try to feel ontologically secure, that is, experiencing life following a normal order (Giddens 1991).

I use the notion of practical consciousness to conceptualise the internalised social knowledges and practices that people utilise to go on with their life in such an ordered fashion that feels meaningful to them (Giddens 1984). Within this context, I see consumption as a creative process in which people use various artefacts to make meaning in social and everyday life (Miller 1987) Further, I see media as playing a constitutive role in shaping these feelings of ontological security and processes of consumption, both on a practical and reflexive level. I see media consumption as a process that enables people to structure their everyday lives and support reflexive self-identity formation through media. At the same time, I underline how in this integration of media into everyday life, people make themselves dependent on and vulnerable to their influence (Silverstone 1994).

(2) My theoretical framework acknowledges and takes seriously the active role that people play in shaping their everyday experiences. In a similar vein, it recognises the complexity of digital everyday life and how everyday technologies like the smartphone fold multiple social domains into a singular space (Ytre-Arne 2023). In this light, I follow the view that people manage the complexity of today's media landscape by creating polymedia environments, that is, integrated structures of communicative affordances which they use in their conduct of everyday social life (Madianou and Miller 2012). Moreover, I draw on the insight from mobile media scholarship which underlines the experientially generative role that embodied interactions with media play. As such, of my concern are the habitual and taken-for-granted aspects of media consumption practices, like coordinated movements of hands, fingers, and eyes across screens (Moore 2014) that produce haptic intimacies of being in touch with the world (Hjorth and Richardson 2020) and feeling right in it (Pink and Leder Mackley 2013).

(3) In a similar vein, I follow the view that relationships with algorithmic systems are situationally enacted and negotiated (Siles 2023). Depending on how algorithms are engaged, like when scrolling through content feeds, people's experience of the online environments will be shaped by situationally distinct modalities (Siles et al. 2020). I draw on the idea of the algorithmic imaginary to make sense of how people acquire this awareness for algorithms and adjust their behaviour towards them (Bucher 2017). I work with these concepts as they underline that people's interactions with algorithms are driven by habits and lived experiences (Dourish 2004) and shaped by situationally negotiated agentic capacities (Suchman 2006). By doing so, I develop a thread throughout each layer of the framework, tracing forms of practical consciousness that enable people to "go on" (Giddens 1984) with their life in an ordered fashion that provides senses of ontological security (Giddens 1991).

Across these different layers, the framework provides a toolkit which allows outlining the role that TikTok, its content, and the consumption of such play in people's lives. It allows us to locate the precise role of TikTok in people's everyday lives, how it acquired such, and what consequences emerged from its integration into meaning-making practices. For the purpose of answering my research questions, the framework is thus effective in that it opens an analytical space within we can study TikTok as something contradictory. That means, the framework opens a conceptual space in which we can empirically lay out how exactly TikTok functions as a resource that enables everyday social activity whilst also ending up as a potential source of trouble in the ordered process of the everyday. In the next chapter, I will carry out the final step in the preparation of this empirical analysis, namely, by outlining my methodology.

4. Digital ethnography and fieldwork

4.1 Methodological framework

In the previous chapters, I outlined the theoretical framework informing this thesis. This framework can be positioned in the broader tradition of methodological situationalism which, to reiterate, holds that individuals and behaviour can only be understood by looking at the contexts in which they appear (Knorr-Cetina 1988). Grounded in this tradition, situations of TikTok content consumption constitute the central unit of my analysis. It is around such situations that I tell the stories of my participants in the empirical chapters. As I have argued, in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, within situations of media consumption, the meanings and the wider politics of media are negotiated. Or, as Back (2015: 834) writes, within situations of daily life we gain an “opportunity to link the smallest story to the largest social transformation”.

Establishing such a link was a key intention behind this thesis, and thus shaped my research design. In Chapter 2, I outlined the transformations I am concerned with, namely those surrounding the increasing use of tracking and personalisation systems to commodify people’s online activities as audiences. Based on the existing literature, I theorised that a tension between agentic capacities of self-determination and mechanisms of control can be seen at the centre of this transformation. Accordingly, I designed my methodology in a way that allowed me to produce evidence on these transformations and tensions by “taking a step back” from the “bird’s eye perspective” so that I could see how “macro structures” materialise in “micro episodes” (Knorr-Cetina 1988: 39).

Resultingly, individual participants' episodes or stories of content consumption appeared a fruitful choice for my analytical unit. Within and around them, tensions between self-determination and control crystallize. To capture these stories, I developed a methodological framework in the tradition of digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2016a). I assembled a variety of methods including interviews, participant observations, media mapping techniques, and digital fieldwork. Over a period of one and half years, I used these methods to collect data on situations of TikTok consumption and their socio-cultural contexts. This data was then reflexively analysed to write an ethnographically situated account (Geertz 1988) linking small stories of TikTok consumption to larger social transformations (Back 2015).

Following Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), ethnography usually involves researchers participating in the lives of their research participants over an extended period of time. During this time, data is collected by "watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions ... collecting documents and artefacts ... in fact, gathering whatever data are available" (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 3). Willis and Trondman (2000: 5) thus argue it is best to understand ethnography as a "family of methods". These methods, they continue, are deployed to foster direct and sustained contact with people to produce richly written accounts of these encounters. In a similar vein, O'Reilly (2012) defines ethnography as an inductive approach of qualitative research that theoretically acknowledges the complexity of the social world and seeks to represent it in ethnographic writing.

Pink et al. (2016a) develop their definition of digital ethnography in dialogue with these debates around ethnographic research practice. They understand digital ethnography as a research practice that "is always unique to the research question and challenges to which it is responding" (Pink et al. 2016a: 8). The argument they make is thus broad in scope. They write

that what makes the approach digital is not just the incorporation of digital methods. Beyond that, they argue that it also must take “as its starting point the idea that digital media and technologies are part of the everyday” (Pink et al. 2016a: 7). As they continue, digital ethnography is therefore interested in understanding how digital technologies become part of the everyday whilst engaging with people in and through these very technologically saturated lifeworlds.

The reason why I worked with the broad definition of Pink et al. (2016a) was that it appeared most suited to address my specific research questions. Furthermore, digital ethnography presented itself as an approach which aligned with the goals that ethnographic audience research has traditionally set itself. In the broadest sense, these goals revolved around studying “the way in which media are integrated and implicated within” everyday life (Radway 1988: 366). Digital ethnography allowed me to work towards these goals in a context of social and polymedia media environments (Miller and Madianou 2012). Additionally, the “holistic concern with forms of being and experience” that informs ethnographic research practice (Dourish 2014: 2) gave me a crucial analytical flexibility. This flexibility allowed me to situate TikTok in my participants polymedia environments, and it helped me acquire a rich understanding for the place of situations of TikTok consumption in routines of digital everyday life (Ytre-Arne 2023).

In other words, I follow Pink et al. (2016a) in their approach of digital ethnography in how it puts centre stage the question of understanding and describing people’s experiences with and through digital technologies. As they argue, depending on the research question, this can include different digital and non-digital methods that need to be deployed in order to understand these relationships. At its core, however, they underline the importance for researchers to “seek to experience the same environments and activities as others as a route

through which to emphatically connect” with people’s experiences of digital media (Pink et al. 2016a: 39).

The guiding principle with which I therefore designed my methodology was that of being able to emphatically connect to participants’ experience of TikTok as content and technology. As Pink et al. (2016a: 58) highlight in this context, practices of digital media use are at once obvious yet also often taken-for-granted parts of everyday routines. In other words, the specific choice of methods I made – for digital fieldwork, interviews, media mappings, participant observations – revolved around opening an angle to (a) emphatically connect with and understand participants’ experiences of TikTok, yet also (b) reflexively uncover TikTok use as an integrated element in more general routines and relationships of everyday life. It is here exactly, then, that the approach of Pink et al. (2016a: 99) significantly overlaps with that of ethnographic audience research (Morley 1992), precisely in how it is concerned with understanding media expressed in particular everyday practices, routines, and relationships.

In the remainder of this chapter, I further elaborate on the digital nature of my methodology and the individual methods used within this framework. In the next section, I start by discussing my choice of methods and the reasoning behind each. Then, I share an overview of the entire fieldwork process and how I gained a contextual understanding of TikTok consumption using these methods. Thereafter, I discuss research ethics and the implications of doing online research. These reflections are followed by a justification of my sample and description of my participants, before I address the implications of doing research with young adults and across different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, I close the chapter by speaking on how I analysed and made sense of the data gathered during fieldwork.

4.2 Ethnographic methods

In this section, I discuss the different methods that were used as part of my digital ethnography approach. The central body of data was collected through interviews. Additionally, I used media mapping techniques, participant observations, and digital fieldwork. Below, I discuss the reasoning behind each of these in more detail.

As Morley (1992: 173) writes, interviews are a vital means to access “the linguistic terms and categories (the logical scaffolding in Wittgenstein’s terms) through which respondents construct their worlds and their own understanding of their activities”. Similarly, Ang (1985: 11) notes that when people express themselves about their media uses, “they will have to call on socially available ideologies and images” through which certain media attain their meanings. As discussed in previous chapters, I understand that such images and imaginaries people hold over media play a constitutive role in how they enact their relationships with them (see Bucher 2017, Nagy and Neff 2015, Siles et al. 2019). Therefore, speaking to people, as in to interview them, was critical to answer my research questions.

In terms of interview formats, I decided to use semi-structured interviews. These were positioned as a means to produce accounts of narrated emotional reactions, following Kennedy and Hill (2018). They have used qualitative methods such interviews to generate these kinds of accounts to elicit everyday understandings about datafication. Ruckenstein and Granroth (2020) have used the same approach and semi-structured interviews in the context of studying experiences of targeted advertising. The reason for asking people to recount emotional reactions about interactions with digital media rested in the fact that being there in the actual moments where formative emotional experiences occur is quite hard, generally speaking – and

it was impossible in the context of this study due to pandemic-related safety and legal restrictions.

In short, semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method to uncover how people think about TikTok, yet also to get a sense of their practices and experiences of using the app. To enrich the quality of this data, I took a long-term approach. Follow-up interviews were utilised to qualify observations. Moreover, interviews were spread out across the fieldwork period to allow me to develop closer relationships with participants. Finally, the benefit of this long-term approach was seen in giving participants themselves more time to think about their TikTok use, which otherwise remained a habitual element of daily routines. The number of interviews, length of conversations, and frequency of follow-ups are discussed in the next section. Overall, taking a long-term approach to interviewing allowed me to produce an in-depth and comparative account of TikTok consumption practices over time and changing everyday life contexts.

In addition to the semi-structured interview format, I further engaged with participants through a media mapping technique and participant observation. The mapping technique consisted of participants explicating the media they use in their daily life through a digital tool. The concrete details and processes will be discussed in the next section. The desired benefit of using this mapping technique was the following. As Pink et al. (2016a: 49) argue, practice-based methods like this “can help both researchers and participants become reflexively aware of hidden habitual and embodied digital practices and meanings”. Similarly, Miller et al. (2021: 80) argue that conducting what they similarly call “app interviews” is a fruitful mechanism to get people talking about their smartphone app usage in more concrete ways and to uncover routines and practices that participants might not be consciously aware about otherwise. In this line, I used

this technique not as a method to produce accurate mappings of all the media my participants use. Rather, the desired outcome was to create a resource which could help both me and participants uncover the relative significance of TikTok in their daily routines and polymedia environments (Madianou and Miller 2012).

Participant observations took place in the form of me observing participants scroll through TikTok during interview sessions. Participants were furthermore asked to narrate their experience of doing so. This was a means to collect observational data on consumption practices. However, it was also to add another practice-based dimension for participants to reflect on their habitual navigations through the TikTok “For You” page. This element of participant observation was broadly tied to the logic of the walkthrough method that Light et al. (2018) have developed. They developed the method as a systematic approach to uncover the vision and intended uses of an app, and to get a “sense of how individuals resist these intentions” (Light et al. 2018 897). By walking through their “For You” page with them, I was able to get a sense for how they orient and navigate the TikTok platform and interface. This process was paired with my own digital fieldwork and walking through the app.

During the initial stages of the project, I conducted extensive digital fieldwork on TikTok myself. This involved observational and some autoethnographic elements. The approach was here less structured than the walkthrough method, which demands following a set procedure from account setup over everyday usage to account deletion (Light et al. 2018). In contrast, my primary objective was exploration and construction of TikTok as a digital field site within which I could reflexively locate the stories of my participants (Burrell 2009). Thus, my digital fieldwork involved using the app myself, interacting with its affordances, attending to its surveillance and

datafication mechanisms, and exploring as big a variety of TikTok content as possible by strategically scrolling through my “For You” page.

In the next section, I outline in more detailed how these individual methods were used to complement each other as a form of ethnographic research practice and fieldwork. After that, I will discuss and further reflect on fieldwork, data quality, and data analysis.

4.3 Fieldwork process

Fieldwork took place in three stages. These were spread across a period of one and a half years, starting in early 2020. The first stage was explorative in nature and aimed at getting a general understanding of TikTok. In this first stage, through digital fieldwork, I immersed myself into different sides of TikTok to get a sense for its communicative dynamics. In the second stage, data was collected through semi-structured interviews, media mapping techniques, and participant observations. Here I gathered the central body of my data from interactions with 30 UK-based young adults. In the final stage, data was collected over a period of one year in the form of 20 formal follow-up interviews and additional email conversations with research participants. Throughout fieldwork, I closely followed public debates and English-language news coverage about TikTok to get a sense for the app’s status as a cultural phenomenon.



Figure 2 Timeline of fieldwork stages in the period 2020 to 2021.

The first stage started in early 2020 and lasted for roughly six months. During this time I used the app myself with a particular focus on exploring the TikTok “For You” page. As noted previously, the “For You” page is the algorithmically curated content feed at the heart of TikTok. When people speak about scrolling through TikTok, they usually mean scrolling through the “For You” page. I would scroll through the “For You” page for at least 30 to 60 minutes at least every other day for six months on my personal TikTok account. In the foreground stood the exploration of the app, opposed to a detailed diary-style documentation of my experience as a scroller. Field notes were thus taken primarily in the form of observations on the app and “For You” page. For example, and as I will also discuss later, through my explorative use of the app I was able to uncover insights on how TikTok uses SIM card geo information to adjust the content mix on the “For You” page. It was in these ways that my digital fieldwork overlapped with approaches like the walkthrough method trying to uncover hidden and non-obvious “mobile software components” (Light et al. 2018: 897).

Exploring the app in this way over six months helped me to get a deeper understanding of how it works and how content is recommended on it. Furthermore, during that period, I also kept track of significant TikTok trends and memes that I encountered whilst on the app. These trends were noted down in an Excel spreadsheet field diary. I reflexively engaged with this spreadsheet diary to guide my engagement with the “For You” page. Doing so allowed me to recognise and break feedback loops. For example, upon noticing in the spreadsheet that I had seen a lot of different sketch comedy trends in the last days, I would actively seek out different comedy content appearing on my “For You” page. Similarly, once I noted a saturation of different comedy genres, I tried to engage with different types of content, such as daily vlogs, instead.

This explorative approach was based on using TikTok's recommender system as a content discovery tool. In a first step, I would 'unlike' all the videos I had 'liked' in the past days. Then, I would engage with the content of a new genre by liking videos, re-watching them multiple times, or following their creators. Doing so for an hour or two usually reset my "For You" page and enabled me to explore a variety of genres, aesthetic styles, and sides of TikTok. This reflexive engagement with the "For You" page allowed me to get a contextual understanding for the communicative dynamics of the app and its content recommendation system. Through this digital fieldwork, I acquired an understanding for what it means to train TikTok's recommender algorithms, how to navigate through the array of short-video clips on the "For You" page, and above else got acquainted with all kinds of trends and styles of TikTok content. I drew on these experiences not so much in a strictly autoethnographic manner, meaning as an object of analysis. Rather, I utilised autoethnographic experiences and observations from the field as a resource aiding further data collection and analysis.

The second stage of fieldwork took place during the summer of 2020. There, I first interacted with my research participants, which were a group of 30 UK-based young adults. Participants were recruited using a promoted tweet on Twitter (now called X), meaning a targeted advertisement, in which I asked for people to talk about their experience of using TikTok (see Appendix I for screenshots of the recruitment materials). A first call for participants was posted on July 9, 2020, and a first round of interviews with 14 participants was completed towards the end of July 2020. Screening the data collected up to this point, I determined that there was not yet a level of saturation reached. Therefore, I shared another call for participants on July 25 and conducted 16 further interviews in August 2020. A more detailed description of this sample is provided in section 4.6.

Data collection in this stage consisted of interviews, media mappings, and participant observations. Before the interview, participants completed a pre-interview mapping task. Using the MeSort tool developed at the University of Bremen (<https://mesoftware.org/>), they were asked to sort different media based on personal relevance in their daily life. In addition to the pre-defined tokens available for sorting on MeSort, participants were able to add their own tokens. The MeSort interface as it was used in the study is shown below in Figure 3. An exemplary mapping of this task is shared in Figure 4.

Participants completed this task on their own after having received instructions on how to sort the items via email a couple of days prior to the interview. 26 out of the 30 participants completed this pre-interview task. Participants reported that this pre-interview task was helpful in that it provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their taken-for-granted habits before the interview. The final media mappings were used to guide conversations with participants during the interview and later stages of fieldwork.

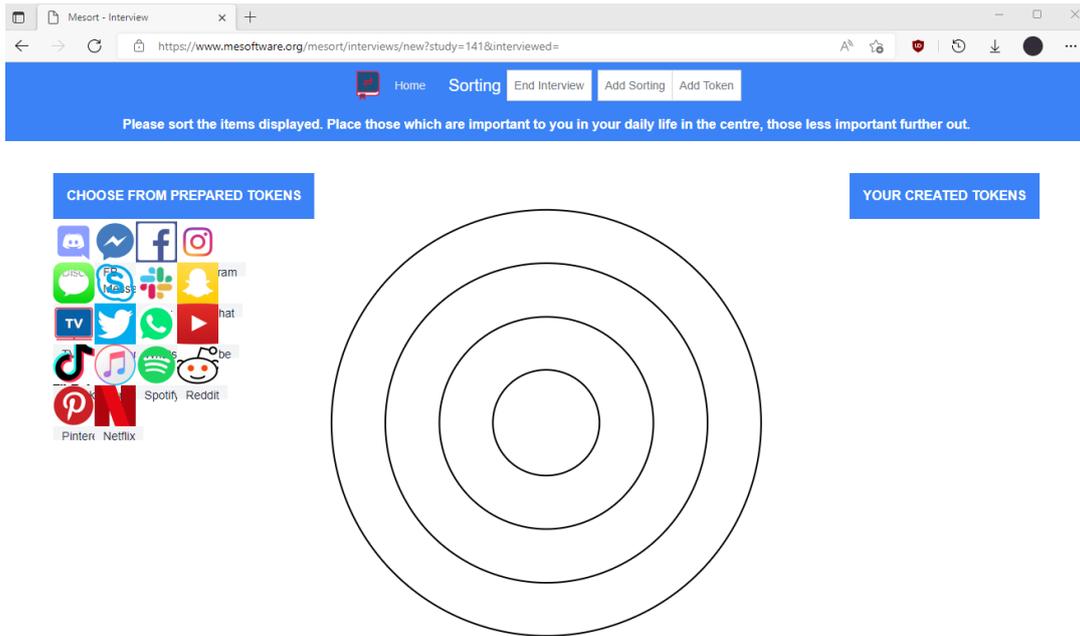


Figure 3 MeSort interface of the media mapping task completed by participants.



Figure 4 Example MeSort media mapping from a participant.

Semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes with the average interview being around 42 minutes long. Conducting the interviews, my aim was to create a comfortable atmosphere for participants. Furthermore, my interviewing approach was informed by Hermes' (1995) argument on the "fallacy of meaningfulness". Hermes (1995: 16) writes that "the fallacy of meaningfulness leads popular culture researchers to privilege knowledgeable viewers and to use only their most expressive utterances". Hermes continues that we should not assume for media to always be something profoundly meaningful to people, or that they will speak about media in profound ways.

In other words, I went into interview sessions with the aim to collect any description, observation, comment, or story that allowed me to better understand the ordinariness of TikTok and content consumption practices. Length and depth of expressions were not directly correlated in this case, causing some interviews to be shorter than others. For example, even very short descriptions of TikTok consumption settings – such as scrolling whilst brushing one's teeth – carried significant analytical value for me. Moreover, and as outlined in the interview guide in Appendix III, I probed the use of a variety of TikTok's affordances in conversations. The purpose of asking these broader question at this initial stage of the research was to probe and remain receptive for the complexity of everyday TikTok use practices. Yet, many of such practices, like commenting or content creation, were not performed by most my participants. Here, again, shorter answers on disinterest in these affordances were meaningful insights to me in terms of understanding TikTok as an everyday technology, and understanding people's engagement with it from the position of content consuming audiences.

In terms of the interview guide, questions were tested by conducting two pilot interviews in my social circle. The guide was also re-evaluated after the first formal interviews. The structure of

the interview was as follows. General introductions were led into questions on media use based on participants' media mappings. Further, participants were asked if their media use had changed during the times of the COVID-19 pandemic during which fieldwork was conducted. After that, the focus of interviews shifted towards TikTok. A first set of questions were aimed at understanding the reasons why people use TikTok and the contexts and ways in which they engage with the app in their daily life. Conversations also focussed on perceptions of TikTok as a cultural phenomenon. In addition, questions were asked to understand the role of TikTok in participants' wider social networks. The aim here was not just to see if other people, like their friends, also use TikTok, yet also how TikTok mediates and is mediated by social relationships.

Another focus of interviews was the topic of TikTok's recommender system. Participants were asked if they know that TikTok uses algorithms to decide what content it shows to them on their "For You" page. Given that all participants had at least some form of algorithm awareness, conversations usually revolved around how the 'TikTok algorithm' was experienced in day-to-day uses of the app. The goal was to understand practices of interacting with it yet also getting a sense for feelings in relation to these interactions. To do so, participants were asked to speak about memorable experiences they had interacting with TikTok and its recommender algorithms.

Finally, participants were asked to open the TikTok app on their phone to walk through the app with me – borrowing here on elements of the walkthrough method mentioned earlier (Light et al. 2018). Participants either showed their phone's screen when they were using a laptop for the video call, or described to me the content they would see when they were on their mobile phone. All participants, however, were asked to talk about the videos shown to them. Furthermore, they were asked to talk about whether they would have watched them outside the interview

setting, and if they would have interacted with it in any way, for example if they would have tagged it with a 'Like', 'Not interested', left or read the comments, and so on.

Data collection during this stage was completed after 30 interviews had been conducted. This decision was based on reaching a level of saturation in the answers received from participants. The third and final stage of fieldwork lasted until the summer of 2021. Following initial interviews, participants were reached out to at roughly three-month intervals. In this follow-up stage, further formal interviews were conducted, and participants were asked follow-up questions via email. These questions were more open-ended and specific to each participants' life circumstances and TikTok use. Over the fieldwork period participants had moved to different places, started new jobs, commenced studies at university, tried new things on TikTok, and in a couple of cases also quit using the app. Follow-up conversations were centred around such changes.

Out of the 30 initial interviewees, 14 were available for a second formal interview around the time of December 2020 and January 2021. Another 6 participants were available for a third and final interview in July 2021. 50 formal interviews were conducted during the entire fieldwork period. On top of that, more participants answered questions via email while no longer being available for formal interviews. For instance, 2 participants replied to my final follow-up interview requests by telling me that they had given up using TikTok and lost interest in the app. Another 4 participants declined by telling me that they still use TikTok, but much less now, and that their focus had shifted to other activities again, such as doing sports or going to the pub with friends.

The drop-off in participation is thus also to be seen as a data point in itself. It speaks on the shifting status of TikTok. What I mean is that TikTok seemed less new and exciting to my participants as fieldwork progressed. A common motivation participants initially mentioned for participating in my study was that they themselves were thinking about the app quite a lot. This was because they felt TikTok was very different from other social media, and thus they were interested to explore why that is. As TikTok became more normal, for some, there appeared just less interest to keep actively thinking and talking about it.

This follow-up stage, after the Summer of 2020, thus provided me with a valuable long-term view on TikTok as a phenomenon of popular culture and everyday life. Furthermore, the follow-up interviews allowed me to collect data on people's TikTok experience in different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from moments of strict lockdown to times when restrictions were eased and life slowly returned to normal for many people. This enabled me to draw conclusions of more general nature, speaking on TikTok use beyond a lockdown context and more normal settings of everyday social life. I will provide a more detailed breakdown of these pandemic stages and their intersection with fieldwork periods later in this chapter.

4.4 Research ethics

The project received ethical clearance by the Media, Communications and Cultural Studies Department Ethics Committee on July 8, 2020. The submitted Ethical Approval Form is available in Appendix IV and outlines the steps that I have undertaken in relation to data collection that involved individuals in the form of interviews, media mappings, and participant observations. Digital fieldwork on TikTok was of explorative nature and occurred in the months before this main data collection. During this first explorative stage, I did not significantly

interact with any individuals on TikTok. For example, I did not interact with people on TikTok in comment sections or through direct messaging. However, I 'liked' content and followed accounts as part of my exploration of the platform. Moreover, I engaged with the app on my personal mobile phone and navigated through the "For You" page, logged into my personal account.

This experimentation with the TikTok app occurred within the Terms of Service, meaning that, for instance, no third-party tools were used to inspect the app and no data was scraped from the platform. Furthermore, I conceived the "For You" page as a public space and videos shared under the assumption that they will be publicly accessible. However, screenshots of TikTok content were taken only if deemed necessary for publication, as illustrative examples like shown in Chapter 1 for instance. A focus was set on choosing, where possible, videos from creators that showed an intention to be perceived publicly (for example, by them posting regularly and/or actively promoting themselves as content creators).

In my field diary, I only stored hyperlinks to exemplary videos of specific trends or genres I had encountered. While being a public space, creators can change their mind and decide to remove content for various reasons. Because this was only a supportive method, I decided there was no need to extensively document the content I discovered during digital fieldwork through means like taking screenshots or downloading videos. Considering these circumstances, I deemed linking the more appropriate approach, as it would leave final control over content with the respective content creators.

In relation to interacting with participants, I only worked with people above the age of 18. To ensure this, recruitment materials were targeted via the Twitter advertising platform towards

people in the 18 to 24 age bracket. Furthermore, in the interview form participants had to enter their age and only forms of people above 18 were stored and processed. The form is available in Appendix I as part of the recruitment material documentation. Once people had expressed their interest via this form, they were contacted through their provided email address. After a time for an interview had been arranged, a consent form was shared via email and signed by participants. The consent form is copied in Appendix II.

In the consent form, participants were informed about the aims of the study and that their participation is voluntary. It was underlined that they can stop the interview at any point. They were also told that they can withdraw from the study altogether until one month after the initial interview has been conducted. Moreover, participants were made aware that the interview will be recorded, transcribed, and securely stored. The recordings and anonymised transcript were stored on an encrypted and password-protected drive, with access to both being limited only to the research investigator. The data retention period was set as five years.

A metadata record is kept inside a password-protected spreadsheet document. This metadata record contains participants contact information and the alias they were given for data processing and anonymisation. This metadata record is kept to ensure people's right to withdraw and data deletion. Data was anonymised not only to ensure participants' privacy but also mitigate potential harms with interview content falling back negatively on participants in the future. Finally, research participants were made aware that anonymised parts of the interview can be published in different formats such as this thesis but also papers and conference presentations, for example.

Data anonymisation consisted of the following steps. Firstly, participants were given an alias in the form of a randomly chosen name. If interviewees referred to other people by name in interviews, these were transcribed in generic form, as brother, mother, best friend, roommate, and so on. Secondly, locations were transcribed in broad geographic terms, especially when participants lived or talked about locations outside of London. For example, “I’m a student at the University of Edinburgh” would have been transcribed as “I’m a student at [University in Scotland]”. Similarly, care was taken to not name universities participants studied at, or their places of work. Lastly, when describing people and their occupation, care was taken to speak in broader terms to limit risk of identification.

At the start of interview sessions, participants were asked if they have any questions about the information on the consent form. Further, they were reminded that they can stop the interview at any time. During interviews, care was taken to create a comfortable atmosphere. All formal follow-up interviews were opened by checking with participants if they still feel comfortable taking part in the study, or if any questions had come up since the last meeting. In relation to email conversations, a reply from participants was interpreted as willingness to be further contacted. If an email received no reply, one more email was sent. When no reply to that second email was received, the given participant was not further contacted for interview requests or questions.

4.5 Online research

Given that fieldwork took place entirely during the COVID-19 pandemic, data was only gathered at a distance using digital means. This included the digital fieldwork on the TikTok app discussed earlier, but also interacting with participants via video call or email. This was to ensure

the safety of the research participants and research investigator. Yet, it was also to comply with legal obligations of social distancing measures that were in effect during many stages of fieldwork. While limited in some degrees, I still was able to get an understanding and feeling for the settings of my participants' TikTok use.

By conducting interviews online, participants would often speak to me whilst, for instance, sitting in bed where they would also normally scroll. Reflecting on fieldwork, I would not describe this mediation of 'being there' as a key element across all interviews. Nonetheless, it was helpful in some instances to get a better sense for the contexts in which participants would consume TikTok content. For example, on numerous occasions I was able to witness, through video call, how boundaries were negotiated and violated. Examples include parents knocking on doors during the call, siblings bursting into rooms, or participants switching locations to find a quiet space to talk to me, or having a more stable internet connection.

It were observations like these which allowed me to get a contextual understanding and feeling for the settings in which my participants scrolled, even though I was not able to physically be there. Furthermore, Howlett (2022) has recently reflected on her fieldwork during and before the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that interviewees were more comfortable and open in online settings. While I can't make such comparisons myself, the fact that the interviews took place in an ultimately private space appeared helpful. Especially during initial interviews, participants mentioned feeling slightly embarrassed about using TikTok and often still hadn't told their friends that they did. Hence, the privacy afforded by a video call taking place at home was beneficial in creating an environment to discuss TikTok as a 'guilty pleasure'.

Nonetheless, there are limitations in regard to conducting online research compared to the depth at which participant observations could take place in a setting of physical co-presence can go. There were a number of pragmatic challenges as well. For instance, on a couple of occasions there were issues with internet connection which had effects on conversation flow. In one instance, this resulted in me not being able to see the interviewee as their camera remained frozen. Similarly, three participants did not turn their camera on at all during interviews. On the one side, this created for a more comfortable interview setting for these participants. At the same time, it took away from the already limited opportunity to observe non-verbal cues during the online interview.

Similar limitations applied to the element of participant observation. As mentioned earlier, during the interviews I asked people to show me and scroll through their “For You” page. This worked well overall. However, especially if people were in the call using their mobile device, the situation was more difficult. Likewise, this mediated observation was still limited compared to having physically sat next to participants. My knowledge from digital fieldwork ended up helping out a lot here. For instance, multiple times a video started playing, and before participants had even commented, I already recognised the sound that was used in the video. Having acquired this deeper understanding of the platform and its different trends beforehand helped to effectively make sense of the limit cues that could be observed at a distance.

A challenge remained, however, in relation to making observations beyond the interview setting. As Madianou (2009: 331) has argued in a different context, “people will claim in an interview that they watch the news because it is their duty to be informed, but their actual practices may reveal myriad other uses”. What Madianou here notes in the context of her research on news audiences holds true, I argue, more generally for research on media

consumption practices. Ethnography is usually a method to go beyond these limitations by actually being there and looking beyond what people say. As noted, in this study this was simply impossible and also challenging given the private settings in which TikTok is normally used. However, I negotiated this limitation through the long-term approach of my study.

Firstly, I was able to observe a wide range of practices of TikTok use that participants experimented with throughout the year I worked with them. Secondly, I was able to get a sense for what practices persist over time, yet also those that are dropped again for being not meaningful. While I was not able to be in the physical settings of TikTok use, my approach of digital ethnography allowed me to engage and validate stories over an extended period of time. Finally, as I will discuss in more detail in section 4.7, many of the young adults I worked with saw their participation as an opportunity to open up about their TikTok use in ways they felt unable to with their peers.

The relative anonymity granted in the digital ethnography was beneficial in creating a private space for people to speak on their 'guilty pleasure' that was TikTok. Moreover, my long-term commitment to their stories allowed me to establish relationships of trust with participants. No significant concerns thus emerged during fieldwork in relation to not being able to observe the full breadth of my participants' TikTok use. While there were challenges of conducting research online, the ethnographic nature of my engagement with TikTok and participants was able to negotiate these challenges and their potential negative effects on data quality.

4.6 Research participants

A short description of each participant can be found in Appendix V. In this section, I provide an overview on the sampling process through which this group was assembled. Moreover, I describe and reflect on the identity markers of the young adults I worked with. Except for four participants, all were randomly recruited using the promoted tweet mentioned earlier. Out of the four, three were recruited in my social network in London and one was referred by another participant. Using Twitter's advertising platform, I targeted people aged between 18 to 24, living in the Greater London area, and having an interest in TikTok. These targeting parameters were set not as strict eligibility criteria but rough guidelines. The primary aim was to work with young adults in the Greater London area.

The age range of 18 to 24 was set as offering a good breadth of different stages of young adulthood and matching the key group of people on TikTok in the United Kingdom. During fieldwork, TikTok was mostly perceived as an app for kids. Many participants, in fact, shared this view. However, in late 2019 and early 2020, the time when most of my participants picked up using the app, young adults in their early 20s already formed the largest group on TikTok (see Loose et al. 2020, Omnicore 2022).

I thus decided to work with young adults, as their experiences of the app seemed overlooked in debates back then. The focus on Greater London was initially set for two reasons. Firstly, to have a common denominator in the sample, beyond that of young adulthood, which shapes everyday life contexts of participants. Secondly, a focus was set on the Greater London area for the possibility that if pandemic conditions allowed, fieldwork could have been switched to a more traditional ethnographic approach – which ended up not being the case.

Due to the design of the Twitter platform, people were able to retweet, as in re-circulate, my call for participants in their own networks. The first call for participants in particular was seen and re-tweeted by a popular content creator called Grace Beverly. Two participants explicitly told me that they had signed up for the study due to her having re-tweeted my call for participants. Further, at least five participants told me that they themselves had not seen the tweet but were forwarded it by a friend.

Most participants were between 18 and 24 years of age, with four having been slightly older by being in their late 20s. In terms of employment status, out of the 30 participants, 12 were full-time employed during fieldwork with the rest saying that they were students of which some had part-time employments. Of those full-time employed, the vast majority (9 participants) were recent university graduates. My sample can thus be seen as a group of largely well-educated and mostly middle class individuals.

In relation to ethnicity, 19 participants mentioned they come from a White British and 2 from a White American background. The remaining participants indicated they have Black British (4), Middle Eastern (2), British Indian (1), Indian (1), and South East Asian (1) backgrounds. Furthermore, 5 participants noted that they were born outside the United Kingdom and moved to London during different stages of their lives. From this angle, my sample represents London as a global city in which people with diverse cultural background live.

More than half of my participants, 16 to be exact, exclusively lived, worked, and/or studied in the Greater London area. Due to recruiting participants via social media, however, I also ended up with participants who lived in other regions of the United Kingdom, primarily in England (4 in South England, 3 in English Midlands, 2 in North England). Additionally, five participants were

originally from London, living back in the area during the pandemic with their family, whilst studying and/or working in different parts of the United Kingdom.

During the registration stage, 22 participants identified as Female, 7 as Male, and 1 as Other. TikTok itself does not report on the gender distribution of its platform. Reliable data is thus hard to obtain. However, a slightly female leaning userbase of TikTok has been noted around the time of my fieldwork (Omnicores 2022). Similarly, a higher share of female participants appears in line with the samples of related qualitative studies on TikTok use during the same fieldwork period. For example, Jang (2021: 14), Kang and Lou (2022: 5), Lee et al. (2022: 4), or Siles and Meléndez-Moran (2021: 6) all state working with majority female samples – without any of these authors giving an explanation as to why.

In sum, my thesis represents the stories of young, primarily well-educated, and middle-class adults living in urban and metropolitan areas. While my sample was not fully balanced in all identity categories, such as gender, ethnicity, class, or ability, it offered a sufficiently diverse perspective for the purposes of this thesis. As such, my data does not allow making generalised statements on young adults or TikTok as a whole. And it will necessarily paint a different picture of TikTok than that of studies focussing on marginalised groups who are more likely to experience harms when engaging with the app (see, for example, DeVito 2022, Rauchberg 2020, or Simpson and Semaan 2020).

This is not to say that TikTok did not cause any problems and challenges to my participants, as I will discuss in more detail in the empirical chapters. However, there is a difference on how I was able to observe such negative experiences, namely on the level of individual stories, opposed to the shared experience of a group. Conducting research with such groups is vital.

Following Miller (2023: 5), I agree that it is important “to observe and report on deprivation, struggle, and suffering”. Yet, I also share his view that anthropological work needs “to write about lives outside of these conditions”. By focussing only on the former, he continues, our scholarship becomes prone to see the world only through pathologies.

As I have discussed in Chapter 1, it was of my particular interest in this project to look at the contradictory nature of TikTok, the fact that people somehow enjoy using it despite it being problematic in many different ways. To this end, I decided to work with a group of young adults coming from a variety of cultural backgrounds to explore diverse experiences that stem from TikTok consumption in everyday life contexts. In the following sections, I continue these reflections on my data and limitations. Next, I discuss implications of doing research with young adults. After that, I do the same for the context of the COVID-19 pandemic within which data was collected. Doing so, the next sections reflect on the transferability of my findings by developing the position within which my ethnographic account is situated.

4.7 Working with young adults

There are three core implications of working with young adults that need to be discussed. Firstly, participants saw me as someone who gets TikTok and as someone who was to some degree a young adult like them. Due to my digital fieldwork on TikTok, I already knew about almost all the trends and memes that participants referenced in conversations. Similarly, having just turned 25 in the summer of 2020, I was only slightly older than many of my participants. This is why it was common for them to talk about “people like us” or “people our age” during interviews. My appearance as a young adult that gets TikTok thus had an impact on the way in which participants spoke about their experience of using TikTok.

On different occasions participants, in fact, mentioned that being part of the project had a kind of therapeutic element to it. These participants never or rarely have spoken about TikTok with their friends because, back then, the app was often still perceived to be childish, cringe, or dumb. To be able to speak to someone their age who gets what they are talking about was thus accompanied in some instances by feelings of relief. Similarly, a common motivation for participation was a general curiosity to learn more about TikTok. For my participants there was something exciting and new about TikTok they weren't fully able to understand and thus eager to explore through participation in the study.

My appearance as someone that gets TikTok helped in that regard, as participants didn't seem pressured to justify their use of the app to me. Often I was told that they still believe TikTok is a bit dumb or mindless. Further, instead of seeking profound answers on the meanings of TikTok, I invited participants to reflect and unpack the taken-for-granted aspects of their TikTok use in interviews. Such seemed to have worked, as occasionally participants responded to my questions by saying "I have never thought about that before".

Secondly, doing research with young adults meant doing research with people who already had lots of experience using social media. In the United Kingdom, during the time of fieldwork, almost every young adult had access to the internet and used multiple social media apps (see Ofcom 2021). Growing up with social media, moreover, played an integral part in the life of my participants. They not only connected with their friends on platforms like Facebook but also consumed various types of online entertainment on sites like YouTube. Similarly, more than half of my participants had engaged with the popular short-video app Vine at least in some form before it was shut down in 2016. These and other platforms were a significant part not only of how my participants connected with their social circles growing up. They were also an integral

part of how they passed time and relaxed in their leisure time. In short, my participants engaged with TikTok as the newest addition to an already matured polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller 2012).

This backdrop of past social media experience is important to consider. It is so precisely because other demographics, such as kids and teenagers, experience TikTok against a quite different backdrop. For example, as De Leyn et al. (2021) show, younger people like tweens use TikTok with a much stronger element of social networking in mind. Whereas, for my participants, meaning young adults, TikTok was primarily an entertainment platform. For kids, my participants observed through their younger siblings, TikTok more so was the first social media app they had really used. Older people in friend groups of my participants, on the other end, were described as not understanding TikTok and the appeal of short-video entertainment more broadly, even though two participants towards the end of fieldwork mentioned that their parents were starting to use the app. My data thus speaks on a particular group of people. It reflects the TikTok experience of people who already had up to a decade of experience engaging with social media for various purposes, from social connection to entertainment.

Thirdly, as young adults, my participants experienced TikTok during a particular moment of their life course. Young adults are usually understood as people roughly in their 20s up to early 30s who “live relatively independent lives, but have not yet married or had children and as a consequence, are still experimenting with their relationships and lifestyles”. (Giddens 2009: 300). Further, some scholars describe the period between 18 and 25 years of age as emerging adulthood, that means as a distinct part of the life course in which change and identity exploration are the norm (see the work of Arnett 2004). Additionally, in countries like the United Kingdom, and specifically middle class contexts, this early stage of young adulthood is

often marked by rituals of leaving home and setting up new social networks elsewhere, for instance at university (Heath and Cleaver 2003).

My participants' life circumstances fit within these broader discussions on young and emerging adulthood in the United Kingdom. 25 of the young adults I worked with either thought about, were currently, or had just finished studying at university. For that purpose people had usually left their family home and moved to new cities, in four cases even left the countries they grew up in to come to the United Kingdom. Around one fifth of my participants had just started their first full-time jobs and felt they were slowly finding their place in the world. Similarly, some participants, four to be precise, seemed to have found a long-term partner, and we're in the process of setting up their first shared household with them. Other participants, however, seemed dissatisfied or overwhelmed by their experience of entering the job market, or struggled with finding a partner or social connection more generally. As scholars like Hunt (2017) have underlined more recently, uncertainty and unpredictability are increasingly constitutive elements of the life course and young adulthood in particular in contexts like the United Kingdom.

The TikTok use of my participants has to be seen in relation to this life course stage they were in. It needs to be understood as practised in relation to the particular circumstances of identity exploration, social networking, and uncertainty characteristic of young adulthood. The more long-term view of my study was therefore helpful to assess TikTok in relation to such a period marked by change and unpredictability. The same was the case of my sample, having provided good coverage across the early 20s age range.

Due to these circumstances of change, at the end of my project not all participants still used TikTok. Four out of 30 people told me that they quit using TikTok entirely throughout fieldwork, for different reason that will be discussed in Chapter 6. At least six more participants told me that they were using TikTok significantly less than before. In this sense, most participants kept using the app, and for many, TikTok had turned into an integrated part of their daily routines. It had become a tool they used to navigate the uncertainties of young adulthood or to explore their identities and relationships. The COVID-19 pandemic formed another important condition shaping my participants' TikTok use. I will discuss the implications of this pandemic context in the next section.

4.8 Pandemic context

In the previous section, I have reflected on the implications of doing research with young adults. Another major contextual factor that needs to be discussed is the COVID-19 pandemic. I want to briefly outline for future readers what exactly the COVID-19 pandemic was. When I speak about the COVID-19 pandemic, I am referring to the global health crisis that emerged from the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its variants. First discovered in 2019, the virus quickly spread throughout many countries, with the World Health Organization (WHO) announcing a global pandemic situation in March 2020. Due to the airborne transmission of the virus, lockdown and social distancing measures were put in place to slow down its spread. The below graphic provides a general overview of the different lockdown measures that were put into place in the United Kingdom over the course of the fieldwork period.

Stage 1 Fieldwork on TikTok app							Stage 2 Interviews		Stage 3 Follow-up interviews			
2020	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
No lockdown measures in effect yet		National lockdown marked by strict stay-at-home orders					Period of eased restrictions with local lockdowns in some parts of the country			National lockdown		

Stage 3 Follow-up interviews								
2021	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug
National lockdown				Continous easing of resestrictions with most limits on social contact removed by July				

Figure 5 Overview of lockdown measures during the fieldwork period.

As noted previously, the main body of my data was collected during Stage 2 of fieldwork, a time in which restrictions started to ease in the United Kingdom. My participants seemed very relieved about this. They had just come out of a period in which they had to live under strict stay-at-home orders for months. During this period, people were only allowed to go outside for essential purposes such as buying groceries or medical reasons, and only whilst wearing a face covering. Travelling any further than the nearest supermarket or an essential place of work, like a hospital, was not just virtually impossible for people during these months but simply illegal. Any contact with people living in another household was restricted. That is why the government ordered those businesses it deemed non-essential to shut, leading to many people losing their jobs and income for months.

Where possible, work was supposed to continue at home by means of digital technologies. Similarly, education, too, moved into a setting of remote learning. This created dynamics of what has been described as a second-order disaster. Such refers to the rapid reorganisation of everyday life around digital technologies, which often amplified social inequalities that had already been accentuated by the pandemic situation itself (see Madianou 2020). In particular,

voice and video calling tools like Zoom had grown in significance during the pandemic as they were associated with higher feelings of social connectedness than more text-based social media (Nguyen et al. 2021). For example, people tried to recreate some of their pre-lockdown social rituals, like the pub quiz on Zoom. Using these tools in such ways, however, requires a certain level of digital media literacy that left some people excluded from the mediated sociality of lockdown life.

The participants of my study were largely in favourable positions during the lockdowns. Many were able to continue their work from home and have an income. Furthermore, all seemed already skilled at navigating digital environments as part of their social and leisure life. This is not to say that their experience of the pandemic, and especially the first lockdown, was unproblematic. Stress, anxiety, loneliness, or boredom were common themes along which my participants, and especially students, described their lockdown experience. During these times of lockdown, the use of television and streaming platforms in particular had become vital coping mechanisms for many in the United Kingdom (Johnson and Dempsey 2021). My participants too mentioned an increase in their television and streaming platform use. TikTok emerged as the central medium, however, through which they dealt with their experience of lockdown life.

Out of the 30 people who participated in my project, 12 had already been using the TikTok app before the pandemic started. The remaining 18 people only started using the app in early 2020, around the time of the first national lockdown. For all participants, however, a condition of lockdown life seemed to have played a significant role in how their TikTok use habits formed. This is not to say that my data only speaks on such a condition of lockdown life. As illustrated in Figure 3, especially follow-up data collection (Stage 3) covered different periods of both further national lockdowns yet also periods in which restrictions were eased and at times lifted

completely. The COVID-19 pandemic was in the end a dynamic event to which people and societies more broadly adapted over time. Because of that, as I mentioned before, during the later stage of my fieldwork at least four participants quit using TikTok as they slowly returned to their pre-pandemic ways of life. However, most had come out of the various lockdowns with a new appreciation for apps like TikTok. That is because they had developed a new appreciation for how little things such a scrolling through content feeds can help them relax and unwind, for instance.

In this sense, I understand the pandemic as a significant yet still historically situated event. That is to say that I see changes in pandemic media use as having accentuated and foregrounded, rather than completely re-organised, how media function as constitutive elements of everyday social life. The same is the case, I argue, for the digital capitalist business models of turning human behaviour into data and profit. The pandemic has heightened awareness for growing dependencies on digital technologies in social life. However, it has not necessarily led to fundamental shifts in the way that companies like TikTok create data from human behaviour and process it for purposes of economic value creation.

Put differently, in my fieldwork I followed people's stories over an extended period of their lives and the COVID-19 pandemic. I do not tell just stories about how TikTok was used by young adults isolated in a lockdown setting. These kinds of stories are only on part of the bigger picture that I sketch. Much rather, I tell stories on TikTok use across a variety of stages of the pandemic, and stages of young adulthood. In this long-term view, I followed participants as they moved from a setting of lockdown back to living on campus with their friends and fellow students. It allowed me to be there when people moved into shared flats with their partner or friends, or when they transitioned from being a student to being a full-time employed worker, for example.

Across these and other settings, I ethnographically situate TikTok consumption. While my observations are thus necessarily particular to a specific historical period, they nonetheless speak to settings and dynamics that are of more general nature. The orientation of my observations and writing was, in short, not on the pandemic itself but these more general social settings as they occurred in my participants' lives. I write, among other things, on how people deal with stress and tiredness, negotiate boundaries in shared living space, struggle to focus and concentrate, or reflect on their self-identity and interpersonal biographies as part of their daily routines.

The pandemic and its disruption of the normal order of daily life has revealed exactly the importance of technologies like TikTok to deal with these kinds of challenges. It has created a context in which routines, artefacts, and technologies creating feelings of ontological security (Giddens 1991) had moved to the foreground of people's attention. It is this relationship between media and matters of ontological security, how people use media technologies to regulate the quality of their everyday life, that my project offers evidence on. This relationship is not particular to the pandemic, whilst having been accentuated within it. Touching on these patterns of everyday media use and entanglements with technology, my data thus speaks to broader debates and future times in which media continue to play an integral role in people's lives.

4.9 Data analysis process

Data analysis was carried out in the form of an iterative and reflexive process. The central body of data analysed in this process were interview transcripts. The analytical approach to transcripts was thematic in nature and aimed at identifying patterns of shared meanings,

experiences, and practices in participants TikTok use. All other data were used to support this thematic analysis process reflexively. These other data include notes taken during interviews, notes from digital fieldwork and the field diary spreadsheet of TikTok trends, the media mappings generated before initial interviews, and any notes and screenshots that were taken of TikTok-related news articles or tweets.

The analysis of this data unfolded in the form of an sustained engagement with the collected materials using descriptive and thematic coding, supporting the final process of reflexive ethnographic writing. At the end of Stage 2 of fieldwork, the first interview notes and transcripts were screened and a round of descriptive analysis was performed. During interview sessions, notes were taken in relation to each of the main topics covered. These notes were then compiled into an Excel spreadsheet. In this spreadsheet, each topic received its own row, while the notes were placed in separate columns for each participant. This summary sheet was used to gain a first overview of data. In a next step, interviews were transcribed and coded descriptively. An overview of these descriptive code groups can be found in the below table.

This descriptive coding stage had the purpose of pre-processing the fieldwork data for further thematic analysis by getting a general overview for interview contents. The process of this coding involved an initial screening of the data an outlining key descriptive categories in the data, listed in the table below. Then, for each of these groups descriptive codes were added by going through the individual interview transcripts. The aim of this initial coding was thus to get a more in-depth overview of, for example, the specific features of the TikTok app used by participants or the different affective states participants mentioned in relation to their experience of TikTok. As noted, these code groups were developed inductively through iterative engagement with interview notes and transcripts.

Table 2 Overview of descriptive code groups from interview data analysis

<i>Name</i>	<i>Description</i>
Actors	Codes of the different actors mentioned in relation to TikTok. For example, friends, partners, siblings, parents, or co-workers.
Social media	Codes for different apps mentioned in relation to TikTok, such as YouTube, Vine, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and so on.
Contexts	Codes for the contexts that participants mentioned they use TikTok in, like in the morning, before falling asleep, after work, during lockdown, at a party, and so on.
Practices	Codes of the different practices and ways in which participants engaged with TikTok. This included general codes for practices like watching videos, creating content, sharing videos. However, also more specific practices, for example in relation to breaking the loop, training algorithms, and so forth.
Perceptions	Codes for the various perceptions and understandings participants mentioned, for example TikTok being a kids app, a Vine successor, a Chinese app, an app not understood by older people.
Affects	Codes for the different affective and emotional states that were noted in participants speaking about their use of TikTok yet also other apps. For example, happiness, excitement, joy, boredom, stress, tiredness, and so on.
Justifications	Codes for the different arguments participants brought up in regard to explaining their use of the app, and the struggle to do so. For example, TikTok use as unproductive, guilty pleasure, mindless fun, and so on.

Coding was performed in a spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel. Interviews were transcribed into

a Word document and then compiled into one long spreadsheet using R (a programming language for statistical computing and data processing). In this spreadsheet, each question and response were treated as one row of the sheet. Codes were then added in columns next to the respective text field. Furthermore, interview transcripts were also engaged with in the form of a searchable text database using R Studio (a software to process and visualize data using the R programming language). Doing so enabled me to quickly perform keyword searches to compare different text passages in which participants mentioned similar feelings, such as laughter, or other platforms, like WhatsApp.

Once this analytical infrastructure was established, I move onto the thematic analysis of this coded data. In this process, I understood a theme broadly as a shared pattern of meaning, experience, or practice. The development of these themes was inductive in nature. It was guided by the idea that ethnographic data is to be generalized through “juxtaposition – contradistinction, comparison, sequentially, referentiality, resonance, and other ways of patterning across multiple observations” (Dourish 2014: 11). I started by engaging with the coded interviews to identify patterns like ‘using TikTok to create distance’, ‘TikTok recommender algorithms having a scary and appealing accuracy’, or ‘TikTok content functioning as social resource’. This initial development of themes was performed in a way of probing and exploring potential nuances through juxtaposition of the descriptively coded data. For example, I explored potential differences in the use of TikTok as a resource for social interaction in context of different actors (friends, parents, siblings, partners, etc) that participants discussed in interviews.

After a set of initial themes had been developed, I moved to the stage of ethnographic writing, that is, turning themes into an intelligible description of TikTok consumption amongst my

participants. This writing process, the putting together of themes in an ethnographic narrative, intersected with the data analysis in a reflexive manner. Doing so, I iteratively refined these themes during the writing phase. This allowed me to add a reflexive element to data analysis process and keep my analysis on the dimension of the concrete rather than the abstract. The four core themes that were identified through this reflexive process correspond with the empirical chapters, each of which describes a shared pattern of TikTok engagement uncovered from my participants stories: TikTok as a 'me space'; an everyday technology; a space of surveillance; a socio-cultural resource.

Over the course of writing, I reflected on the themes I had developed as discursive objects that bring "a kind of order and coherence onto the otherwise chaotic outlook of the empirical". (Ang 1996: 65). Herein, I understood the overall process of writing up the fieldwork material as describing and explaining what is going on in a particular cultural context (Geertz 1988). Data was thus analysed in a way that served as a means to that end of giving an intelligible account of my participants' everyday practices of TikTok use. Moreover, I treated the accounts produced through my analysis and writing as partial and positioned truths (Abu-Lughod 1991). In other words, I do not claim to provide an account that is able to explain TikTok in its entirety. I write on TikTok from a particular position and towards a particular direction. To reiterate, in this thesis I take TikTok as an emblematic case to understand contemporary structures of audience commodification as they impact everyday lives in situations of content consumption.

As noted, the next four chapters are the product of this reflexive data analysis and writing process. Chapter 5 starts by providing a more general discussion of TikTok through the eyes of my participants, in dialogue with my own fieldwork on the app, yet also perspectives on TikTok from the literature. In particular, here my discussion focuses on the notion of personalisation

and participants' experience of TikTok as a 'me space'. After that, in Chapter 6, I turn my attention to the everyday contexts and uses of TikTok. Chapter 7 then continues by zooming in on what happens when my participants are on the app and interact with it as a surveillant online environment marked by tracking and datafication mechanisms. There, my discussion is framed around the theme of TikTok's recommender algorithms being experienced as having an appealing yet also scary accuracy. Chapter 8 closes the discussion of empirical material by zooming out again. I focus on the themes of TikTok and its content specifically being a kind of social resource that used to mediate various social relationships.

5. TikTok as an online space

5.1 A space of disconnection

In this chapter, I discuss how TikTok was imagined and engaged as an online space by my participants. The chapter has an introductory function to the overall empirical analysis. In this sense, it is written in hybrid form, combining discussion of empirical material with perspectives from other studies of TikTok. In this combination, I position TikTok as an online space and discuss my participants' perception of it. Doing this as a first step is crucial. An app like TikTok is not a singular thing experienced the same way by every person. It will mean different things to different people in different contexts. This chapter answers this question of what TikTok was to my participants, and it will outline how their experience of it stands in relation to the TikTok experience of others.

For example, some research points towards TikTok as a vital site of community formation (Boffone 2021). My participants, however, primarily perceived the app through notions of disconnection. More specifically, many explicitly described TikTok as a 'me space'. They used TikTok as such a 'me space' almost every day, often even multiple times per day. On some occasions, they would scroll through the app for hours. Yet, despite this frequent use, none considered the app to be particularly meaningful to them. They described it as something nice to have. If TikTok were to be gone tomorrow, life would just go on, they said. As Rosa explained: "I think I would miss it, because I use it often, so obviously it would be different. But I don't think I would be upset about it. I'd find something else to do [laughs]".

Part of the reason why participants felt that TikTok was just nice to have was because their use of it was primarily for personal entertainment. They didn't feel a strong, emotional connection to the app and the space it provided them. Stronger feelings of attachment, dependency even, were associated with apps like WhatsApp or Snapchat. These were platforms on which important conversations took place with friends and family. Less close social ties were maintained through Facebook, echoing Miller's (2016) observation on Facebook as a tool to keep the right distance. Twitter (now called X) was used to stay in the loop of news and current affairs cycles. Instagram played a vital role in staying on top of friends lives yet also pop culture related affairs. Put simply, on these and other platforms, participants would manage their social networks and engage what is going on in the world more broadly.

A loss of apps like WhatsApp, Twitter, or Instagram would have limited the ability to fully participate in their social life. A loss of TikTok, in contrast, would merely mean having less convenient access to entertainment, according to my participants. Moreover, TikTok, as a company executive has revealed in an interview, primarily sees itself as an entertainment platform, and not a social networking site. According to them, TikTok brings out "these cultural trends and this unique experience" (Sherman 2022: para 15). This resonates with what I was able to observe during my fieldwork and in the stories of my participants. Simultaneously, this is not to say that there is no social networking happening on TikTok, or through TikTok, which I will discuss in Chapter 8. But, for my participants, TikTok primarily was about entertainment, disconnection, and 'me space'.

To understand what is unique about the experience of consuming content on TikTok, we can have a look at how my participants contrasted it from an app like Instagram. In late 2020, Instagram integrated a TikTok-like feature to its platform called Reels. This was and continues

to be Instagram's attempt of making content on its platform more engaging for people to consume. However, for my participants, Instagram had a problem that stopped it from becoming an entertainment hub and 'me space' like TikTok. Will described this by saying: "TikTok is just such more low effort. I don't need to think about oh my friend is on holiday or uh that's a nice picture of my friend. It's just random people who I don't care about, and I don't need to tell them anything either".

Participants perceived and enacted TikTok as an online space disconnected from their ordinary life. Consuming content on Instagram always felt attached to a certain social quality and, by extension, normativity about how content should be consumed. On TikTok, this was not the case. As Will says, he enjoyed about TikTok that people on there were just strangers that he does not have to care about and also does not have to interact with. Because of that, he can just enjoy watching videos, or keep scrolling past them if he doesn't like them. Will obviously could just watch videos on platforms like YouTube, which, too, offer access to video content that can be consumed outside the social atmosphere of Instagram.

However, YouTube is a platform that is comparatively old, especially in the relative terms of my participants' biographies. Some, like Adna, had been using YouTube for almost a decade. Because of that, Adna felt that sometimes she's being recommended content by the YouTube algorithm from creators she followed when she was 14 or 17. Yet, she has lost all interest in these creators since, although never unsubscribed from their channels. While she didn't describe YouTube as inherently boring, she found it less exciting compared to TikTok. Since TikTok became a thing, many participants mentioned using YouTube less and less.

One thing that made TikTok exciting was that my participants perceived the content shared on the platform to be very relatable. Judith talked about this. She described scrolling through TikTok as “seeing what your friends are up to if your friends were all kind of cool, and you didn’t have any obligation to them”. This stands in relation to the findings of Omar and Dequan’s (2020) study, which shows that many people using TikTok have a strong peeking motivation. They enjoy about the app how it allows them to peek into the life of other ordinary strangers. This was also the case for the young adults I worked with. They found TikTok attractive as an online space hosting a very particular kind of relatable entertainment content.

In what follows, I discuss this particular entertainment quality alongside the form of the TikTok app and its short-video content. I start by talking about the form of TikTok short-videos and their consumption on an algorithmically curated content feed. This feed, the “For You” page, will be understood as a mosaic in which small fragments of lived experience materialise as a window through which people peek into their lifeworld. As noted earlier, in Chapter 2, I see this structure of content feeds in relation to the idea of media flows discussed by Williams (1974). From this angle, what will be of my concern in this discussion is twofold. Firstly, to understand how individual TikTok videos are amalgamated into the unit of the flow, the “For You” page. Secondly, and in the last two sections of the chapter, my concern lies making sense of this mosaic structure of videos from the perspective of TikTok as a company, that is as a means of audience commodification. I will explain how the entertainment quality people associate with scrolling through the “For You” page needs to be seen as a part of TikTok its broader design principles which aim to keep people engaged as an audience of scrollers. TikTok does not just open a window for people to peek into the world. When people consume content on the app, they also open a window through which they are observed by TikTok.

5.2 Fragments of lived experience

Initially, videos uploaded to TikTok could only be 15 seconds in length. By 2022, TikTok allowed up to 10 minutes long videos on the platform. While continuously lifting the upper limit, TikTok videos mostly remained short during fieldwork. When I speak about TikTok videos, I am thus referring to video clips that are a few seconds in length and significantly shorter than videos posted on other platforms like YouTube. A defining quality of this short form is ephemerality. We can understand this by, for a moment, looking at short-videos on other platforms. Instagram and Snapchat are good examples. Both of have historically been prominent sites where people share and consume short-video content, so-called Snaps and Instagram Stories respectively (not to be confused with Instagram Reels mentioned earlier).

On Snapchat, videos are by default available only to be watched once. Likewise, short-video content of Instagram Stories is only available to be watched for a 24-hour period. What Snapchat and Instagram do, in limiting the availability of short-video content, is accentuating ephemerality as communicative affordances. What I mean by that is the following. It is not impossible to create a short-video clip that can persist, for example, as a work of art from which deeper meanings are constructed in continuous consumption over time. The vast majority of social media short videos, however, function by aiming for the opposite. On a meta-communicative level, the form of Snaps and Stories suggests that there is not much more to be expected beyond their immediate impression. They are a form of speaking, to draw on and extend Jurgenson's (2019) argument on the social photo. As such, we can understand short-video content as having a practical form. In this form, they only have to do for the moment. They facilitate meaningful communication in being ephemeral artefacts.

For instance, Ekman (2015: 100) argues that the complexity of Snapchat short-video content lies on the dimension of context-awareness networking. A study by Beyer et al. (2016) illustrates with empirical material what Ekman means. What Beyer et al. show is how people primarily use Snapchat to share small moments out of their daily life with friends. Looked at in isolation, these small moments will appear random. The opposite will be the case when understood as fragments of an interpersonal biography or ongoing conversation. Madianou (2016) makes a similar argument discussing the media use of transnational families. She illustrates how all the small pieces of information and content shared on social media create an ambient presence of distant others. Engaging with this assemblage of bits and pieces of content helps family members negotiate senses of belonging at a distance.

The situation becomes more difficult when turning to TikTok, however. For the most part, TikTok content is not created to mediate interpersonal relationships. Neither do TikToks, as content on the site is called, primarily function as mediators between content creators and their followers, as they might in the context of Instagram Stories. Abidin (2020) argues that on TikTok flows of attention are organised not around specific creator personalities but rather the “For You” page as algorithmically mediated space (see also Kaye et al. 2022). Within this space, potentially anyone can go viral and have their fifteen seconds of fame, which Stokel-Walker (2021) highlights as a characteristic quality of TikTok. Looked at individually, TikTok videos thus might appear random or merely produced with an attention seeking attitude. Yet, when looked at contextually, we are presented with a different image. To get a sense for this, we can briefly consider the following two TikTok videos that I encountered during my fieldwork on the app.

During fieldwork, as discussed earlier, I spent six months exploring the app and its content every day. Similarly, for the year after this fieldwork on TikTok, I got an insight into the content that my participants consumed, both through their accounts, and by observing their “For You” page. A type of content that recurringly emerged across this fieldwork period was that of comedy. To better understand the form of TikTok short-video content, we can therefore exemplarily discuss two examples of this broader genre of TikTok comedy content. This discussion is not meant to capture the phenomenon of TikTok short-video culture in its totality – which itself is an impossible endeavour. Yet, I do so to highlight this popular genre of content, which allows us to get a glimpse into the formal workings of short-video communications on the platform.

One short comedy sketches that I encountered during my fieldwork was from @lonnieivv. In the video screenshot shown below, Lonnie performs a skit in which God and Gabriel speak about how God created the oceans. Lonnie plays both roles by wearing different clothes and indicating who he is acting as through a text annotation (see Wang 2021 for a more in-depth analysis of the variety of modes used in TikTok communication). The skit, which takes 21 seconds, essentially revolves around God deciding to create the oceans and Gabriel commenting how this is a good idea as humans will have easy access to drinking water everywhere. The video then cuts to Lonnie performing as God, saying “make it undrinkable”, referring to the fact that ocean water is undrinkable for humans.

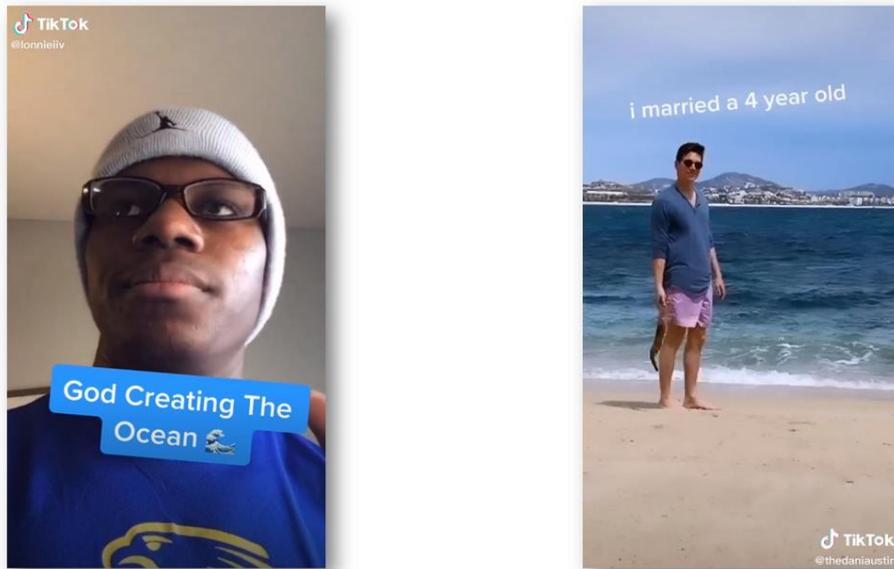


Figure 6 Screenshots of exemplary TikTok videos by @lonnieiv (2020) and @thedaniaustin (2020).

What is interesting and characteristic about this TikTok video is the fact that, even though Lonnie is a professional content creator, there is nothing necessarily personal about it. The style and form of the video are very typical for the TikTok comedy genre. During my fieldwork I saw countless skits utilising the same performative means. These videos work even if one does not follow their creators or knows who they are. They do not rely on prior knowledge other than a general understanding for the given topic, like narratives of Abrahamic religions. We can see something similar in the video of @thedaniaustin titled “till death do us part”. The video, 14 seconds in length, consists of the creator Dani filming her husband Jordan on the beach. Jordan has picked up a stick and Dani can be heard yelling “Jordan, don’t throw it” whilst Jordan does in fact throw it into the ocean. At the top of the video is a text annotation that reads “i married a 4 year old”.

One does not need to know either Dani or Jordan personally to get the video documenting the ‘childish’ behaviour of Jordan. Moreover, even though it gives some insights about the two as a couple, its address is of more general nature. The video is tagged with “#honeymoon #marriage #honeymoontrip #honeymoondiaries #marriagegoals”. It speaks not so much about Dani and Jordan as a couple specifically than it does on the experience of marriage and romantic relationships more broadly. As such, the context-awareness networking (Ekman 2015) it facilitates is not between the position of creator and audience, but audience and content. During my fieldwork, I found that this is very common for TikTok videos. They comment in relatively general terms on social reality, as Lonnie does in his skit, or document life in its various facets, as Dani does with the clip from her honeymoon.

In short, in this section I have discussed the first key characteristic element of the TikTok platform, its short-form content. To reiterate, individual TikTok clips are relatively de-contextualised fragments of lived experience and social practice. Looked at in isolation, these short-video clips might appear random and lacking depth. However, this changes when we make sense of TikTok clips in their re-contextualised form on the app. On TikTok, short-videos like that of Lonnie or Dani exist as small pieces of a broader mosaic structure taking shape by scrolling on and on, from one fleeting moment to the next. TikTok creates this mosaic of short-videos not randomly. It does so for each individual person on their “For You” page. This personalised content feed is the second characteristic element of the platform and my participants’ experience of it. Taken together, they form what in Chapter 2 I have described as the configuration of content consumption. Content and content feed are, in simpler terms, what fills people’s screens as they use the app. When I speak about TikTok consumption, I thus mean how people navigate and engage with short-video content on the “For You” page.

5.3 Meanings of the ‘for you’

The TikTok “For You” page is the content feed sitting at the heart of the app. It can be described as what sometimes is called a ‘discover feed’. That means, it shows content from people that ‘you’ do not necessarily follow. On the “For You” page, people discover videos from ordinary strangers they have never met and very likely will never meet. What exact content people will be shown is determined through a logic of personalisation. The “For You” page is an algorithmically curated feed that lets ‘you’ discover content from strangers like ‘you’ or videos that ‘you’ might like based on similarities that have been computed to other people and content on the platform (see also Chapter 2).

However, by now essentially every major social media platform provides people with a personalised content offering. Similarly, TikTok is by no means the only space on the internet where people can randomly peek into the lives of other ordinary strangers. For example, one of my participants, Gretta, used Reddit for similar purposes, meaning to peek into the life of strangers through the stories they share on the platform. Nonetheless, there is something particular about TikTok and the “For You” page. We can see this in how TikTok differs from other content feeds, that is, the media flows of other platforms on which people engage with a continuous stream sounds and/or images (Willaims 1974).

Another prominent site offering an endless stream of short-form content to scroll through is Twitter. Many of the young adults I worked with frequently used Twitter. They described the difference between the two platforms to me like in the below quote from Hannes.

“The difference is whereas on TikTok you might be exposed to a video, you know, which has 2 ‘Likes’, and it’s probably from a relatively new creator there are very few situations on Twitter where I’ll come across a tweet from someone that I don’t follow, that hasn’t tweeted very much, tweeting about something random. It is a lot less random on Twitter”. (Hannes)

Both Twitter and TikTok use algorithms to curate what content they show people on their feeds. Twitter uses, for the most part and time, as source material for that curation all the content from people that a person has followed, and what content these people retweet or like (see Burgess and Baym 2020 for an extensive biography of the Twitter platform). TikTok, in contrast, does not limit the input of its personalisation system to a person’s social network – even though it offers such content on a dedicated separate “Following” feed. This is why participants like Hannes feel that the TikTok “For You” page is more random than the content feeds of other social media platforms. This randomness is nothing necessarily bad or disliked, something which people in fact desire and enjoy. My Participants described the “For You” page as exciting. Isobel, for example, compared her Twitter and Instagram feeds to TikTok in the following way.

“My Twitter is much more like one topic. I’m very much in one group on Twitter. And then on Instagram pretty much the only people who I follow are people who I know from real life. Like, people from my high school, family, people who I know. And so it’s kind of boring because they are not doing anything interesting, yeah, like TikTok it’s much more spread out, more interesting and like, yeah, the different videos you’d usually see”. (Isobel)

What we can see in comments like that of Isobel is how TikTok occupies a very particular place in her polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller 2012). For young adults like her, TikTok was something that enables exploration of interests and serendipitous encounter with ordinary strangers like ‘you’. Twitter and Instagram, in contrast, were social media in a different sense. As Isobel mentioned, on these other platforms she is more so concerned with maintaining ties in existing social networks. Yet, such can be quite boring at times. Twitter, moreover, was often associated with news related debates. Some of my participants, such as Jade, thus differentiated Twitter and TikTok in the following way.

“Twitter is just sad, like all the time, which can be really overwhelming ... TikTok is like ... my personal feed would be just, like, half current affairs but mostly light-hearted stuff, yeah, it’s definitely different in the way that it’s not meant to be taken too deep into heart”. (Jade)

When Jade says Twitter is more sad she is referring to her encounter with news about the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, and other coverage of various injustices, crises, and conflicts unfolding all around the world. What is interesting is how Jade uses the metaphor of TikTok being lighter in comparison to Twitter, which speaks to the embodied nature of social media use and navigation (Dourish 2004). We can understand this in terms of the emotional weight and atmosphere of TikTok. Jade experienced it as a lighter space than Twitter because for her TikTok had a more positive, fun, or light-hearted atmosphere. Because of that, she felt less emotional weight on her shoulders when being on TikTok. Judith made a similar remark in relation to her experience of Twitter.

“There is a lot more pressure to kind of interact. For some reason, I feel a lot more pressure to post on Twitter. I think possibly because it’s just a lot easier to tweet something compared to making a whole video. With Twitter, I kind of wanna constantly share whatever I’m thinking. On TikTok, it’s actually nice to not take part and just watch and not feel the stress of having to get back to people and interact”. (Judith)

For Judith, Twitter was a space defined by social interaction and participation. This is not surprising if we consider, as Papacharissi (2015) illustrates, that online spaces like Twitter are sites of affective mobilisation. Surrounded by a stream of tweets, people like Judith feel a kind of pressure to join in on what Papacharissi (2015: 54) describes as “refrain-like rhythms” which accentuate intensity and movement towards a particular direction. Judith joins in on that movement by tweeting herself, sharing her thoughts as part of a broader discursive movement taking place on the app. Similarly, Judith experiences this stream of tweets as a form of pressure and, ultimately, stress when she finds herself in that space.

TikTok, of course, can also be a space of affective mobilisation. As discussed earlier, Zulli and Zulli (2020) theorise the platform as an imitation public where mimesis and content remix are the defining features of social interaction. Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin (2022) do, for example, succinctly show how people turn the “For You” page into a “For Us” network by enabling creative and playful communion around TikTok dance and music challenges. However, the young adults I worked with did neither experience nor enact TikTok as such a playful community space. In fact, their attitude towards the app opposed the experience of TikTok as a site of communal gatherings.

In short, the young adults I worked with embraced the ephemerality of TikTok content and randomness of its discovery on the “For You” page. When encounters are ephemeral and random by default, it is easy for those who seek space for themselves to also receive it. For my participants, TikTok was thus ‘for you’ in a literal sense. They engaged with it as an online space in which the ‘you’ can dwell outside the obligations, worries, and pressures of the networked ‘us’. I will continue discussing this ‘for you’ quality and experience of TikTok in Chapter 6. For now, I want to continue by talking about two things. Firstly, how the ‘for you’ stands in relation to the idea of the personal. Secondly, how TikTok, as a company, creates these personalised flows of content for purposes of commercial value extraction.

5.4 Algorithmic world-making

In the previous section, I have discussed the randomness of encountering content from ordinary strangers on TikTok. However, this is a tricky term that needs to be qualified. No encounter with content on TikTok is really random. TikTok videos are always put in place by an algorithm following a specific logic, that of personalisation, along which it determines what content is to be displayed next in the flow of the “For You” page. Thus, when my participants spoke about TikTok being random, they did not mean seeing literally any kind of content all the time. Rather, they meant a randomness within the boundaries of their personalised and localized version of TikTok. They meant a randomness within their personalised stream of TikTok content.

Before any personalisation happens, TikTok will already limit the pool of content it considers showing to people. This is by no means an uncommon procedure and in recommender systems discourses referred to as the ‘cold start problem’ – meaning, the problem of providing accurate recommendations to a person about whom no or only limited information is available (see Ricci

et al. 2015 for a broader contextualisation). Companies like TikTok approach this issue by relying on interests that expressed in the account setup stage (Zhao 2021), but also language preferences and location data stored in people's phones. I was able to evidence this through my digital fieldwork on the platform, for instance.

During my time on the app I was mostly shown English-language TikTok videos from people based in the United Kingdom, United States, or Canada. Due to using a German SIM card, I was, however, also shown a lot of German TikTok videos, even while physically being in London. Switching to an Austrian SIM card, the German content on my "For You" page was 'magically' exchanged with videos from TikTok creators in Austria. When this kind of localization did not occur, my participants often experienced TikTok as random in a negative sense. Consider the following story Velta told me.

"One thing that was really weird, I think it kept showing me ... it might have been Russian? ... I've gotten about four or five of them. Like, Russian TikToks. And I don't understand the language, but it is something that, you know, sounds familiar that I could tell it was Russian TikTok. It was really random. I was so clueless for why it was even on my feed". (Velta)

Like other participants, Velta, too, enjoyed the element of random content discovery on TikTok. However, she only did so when it took place within the boundaries of her personal "For You" page. As her above statement illustrates, even though these videos were random, they still felt out of place. The type of videos Velta was shown for the most part mapped across her interests and fandoms, like that of the band One Direction and its former member Harry Styles. To randomly discover videos from other Harry Styles fans she has never met was something that

Velta liked about TikTok. Most participants used TikTok like Velta. They stayed within the bounds of their personal “For You” page. Herein, the young adults I worked with usually described the “For You” page as the combination of three to five major types of content.

The below table provides, for illustrative purposes, some concrete descriptions that participants gave me of their “For You” page. The selection presented here can be seen as indicative for the wider group of people I worked with. That is to say, it is indicative for how my participants perceived their “For You” page as an online environment they interact with in their everyday life, while the concrete content elements were different for each participant.

Table 3 Illustrative description of participants “For You” pages.

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Description</i>
Bea, a 25-year-old international student and freelance writer	Bea described her “For You” page as an “interesting mix” from the “places where I’m engaged in a local culture”. She mentioned it featuring content specifically from her home town in Canada, “a lot of British stuff, that I don’t understand”, “a normal amount of American stuff”, and “random Dutch TikToks”.
Antonio, a 25-year-old Marketing Manger	Antonio’s TikTok feed was a mix of interior design videos, funny things “that have the same kind of energy of what Vine used to have”, and “the dancing and singing”. Further, he noted “I don’t actually see, surprisingly, any of the verified content creators that actually have a following”.
Catherine, a 27-year-old Nurse	Catherine described TikTok showing her content that is “quite broad actually”. Her “For You” page was comprised of lots of

comedy content but also fitness and dieting videos, “and people doing like point of views and stuff that is kind of more serious”.

Fatima, a 22-year-old
working as a Paralegal

Fatima started, like others, in telling me that her “For You” page is a mix of content. She noted seeing “a mix of political things and information”, videos “based on the Indian/Asian community”, but also the “humour part of it” and “the more aesthetically pleasing side of it”.

Lisa, a 22-year-old
Master’s student

Lisa noted not only how her “For You” page is a mix of content yet also “changes all the time”. Though, she described generally seeing a lot of music-related content, comedy videos, and videos from “specific kinds of queer identities you wouldn’t really see anywhere else”.

Hannes, a 24-year-old
working in journalism

Hannes described the “For You” page as “broad and surprisingly niche”. He mentioned being shown a broad variety of comedy and music content. Yet, depending on what he interacts with, he also saw niches like “lots of heart-warming videos of people with their grandparents”.

In short, my participants perceived their “For You” pages as a dynamic mix of content relating to their interests and personality. Making a similar observation, Bhandari and Bimo (2022) believe that we should understand the “For You” page as a kind of algorithmic mirror through which people inspect their “algorithmized self”. As such, they define a new form of self in the social media context, contrasting it from earlier conceptions such as the networked self (Papacharissi 2010). Lee et al. (2022) make a similar argument by theorising the “For You” page as an “algorithmic crystal” presenting a partial and fragmented view onto the self. Yet, they also

stress how the “For You” page can be a space in which people position themselves as part of broader communities or sides of TikTok.

I argue, however, that we need to go one step further back by thinking about the “For You” page more broadly as an algorithmic environment and its world-making capacities. In particular, I maintain that we need to make sense of these capacities through the perspective that Siles (2023) opens when he speaks about algorithms being enacted in everyday lives. As discussed in Chapter 2, Siles acknowledges the structural powerfulness that algorithms have in terms of what they represent on people’s screens. At the same time, he argues that we can only make sense of the effect that such algorithmic representations when they are enacted by people in the context of their everyday lives and local cultures.

Like a window, the “For You” page frames a perspective on the world out there. Like when sitting down in a café, and watching outside the window, the “For You” page opens a situated view on life as it is lived, moment after moment, one more interesting than others. In contrast to a café window, however, the views opened up on TikTok are personalised. They are so in a twofold sense. TikTok’s recommender system does not only curate a flow of videos that is relatively unique to each person using the app. People also engage with this window through their personal screens of their mobile phones. It is on this dimension of the personal, then, however, that the complexity of this algorithmic world-making rests.

The way in which my participants described their “For You” pages showed a reflexive awareness. My participants spoke on their “For You” page as “normal”, “random”, “surprising”, “changing”, as illustrated in the table above. These terms indicate a reflexive awareness for how TikTok shapes their view of others, themselves, and the world more broadly through the “For

You” page. Like I have discussed earlier, in this context scholars such as Moores (2014) or Hjorth and Richardson (2020) underline the experientially generative nature of such forms of “digital wayfaring”. Leaning on the larger body of work of Ingold (2010), such wayfaring is not merely a form of moving or navigating through space. Rather, it foregrounds that the particular way in which people move through space is generative of their very being in that space, and thus experience of it.

For the case of scrolling, Lupinacci (2022) underlines in this context the importance of habitual and embodied engagement. She argues that in order for people to access these worlds that algorithms generate, they need to attune themselves to their rhythms and timescales. In other words, and to return to my earlier discussion of Lupinacci’s work in Chapter 2, the flow of content on TikTok is reliant on people to continuously keep moving, scrolling in order for the content to flow. More so, it is reliant on people to recurrently engage with the site again and again in order for it to pick up and become personalised, that is, reflecting certain patterns of individual preferences and interests.

It is thus in this sense, of the habitual attunements of the personal and the algorithmic, that we can locate how TikTok controls and shapes individual experiences. That is, when its algorithms are enacted in people’s lives (Siles 2023). To put it differently, TikTok creates a personalised view that guides, although never fully controls, people’s attention. TikTok is more or less obviously not the only medium through which people relate to the world around them. Furthermore, people’s engagement with the app is not passive and mindless. People play an active role in enacting the personalised flow of videos they move through as they scroll. At the same time, TikTok determines the parameters of content form, as discussed earlier, as well as the form of such distribution, as a personalised flow curated by its algorithms.

It is in the interplay of these forces that the tension between self-determination and algorithmic control I theorised in Chapter 2 materialises. I will further unpack these dynamics in Chapter 7. In particular, I will highlight how people attune themselves to the app's logics of personalisation and become bound as audiences to the platform in such sense. Looking at these processes in situ, however, I will evidence that we should think about personalisation not as a set environmental property of platforms, but an experiential quality performatively enacted through a specific way of reading content feeds – which opens new ways to think about the consequences of algorithmic systems.

Here, I want to continue by turning to Beer (2017: 4) who reminds us that algorithms are “modelled on visions of the social world, and with outcomes in mind, outcomes influenced by commercial or other interests and agendas”. It is against these visions and intended outcomes that people navigate through the “For You” page. In the next section, I reflect on these conditions alongside a number of cases from the literature that demonstrate how TikTok's content recommendation system turns the app into an exclusionary online space. Thereafter, and closing the chapter, I discuss the extractivist and commercial logics through which TikTok operates their platform as an infrastructure for audience commodification.

5.5 Exclusionary knowledge logics

From the point of view of my participants, TikTok was first and foremost an online space that is ‘for you’. The young adults I worked with experienced TikTok as a space that is fun, entertaining, interesting, and sometimes a bit random. However, TikTok is also something more than that. Like other social media apps, TikTok also is a space that is optimised for the extraction of data and exercise of control over attention flows. For example, TikTok has been

criticised many times over the last years for its content moderation practices. One early instance was in 2019. There it had been revealed that TikTok instructed its moderators to tag the content of people with disabilities so that the reach of their videos on the platform can be curbed. TikTok explained this back then by stating the intention to protect vulnerable people from potential abuse on its platform (Köver and Reuter 2019).

A few years on, studies still found traces of these ways in which TikTok, through its algorithms, shapes content and attention flows with exclusion and discrimination as an outcome. For example, in a study on transfeminine TikTok creators, DeVito (2022) outlines what she describes as a narrative of algorithmic paternalism. Within such, she captures the stories of her participants feeling perceived “as a distinct class of people that is likely to attract harassment – and is therefore best kept safe by keeping them separate from the rest of TikTok”. (DeVito 2022: 18). As she continues, even when such is done with an intention to protect people from potential harm, it quite simply undermines their agency and ability of self-determination on the platform in fundamental ways. It is in such ways that TikTok makes political decisions on the visibility of identities in the worlds it curates on people’s screens.

Simpson and Semaan (2020) also stress the importance of this in their study on the TikTok experience of LGBTQ people on TikTok. What they found in their research is how their participants experienced TikTok as creating exclusionary identity spaces. Their participants reported on content being removed for, apparently, violating community guidelines. However, Simpson and Semaan (2020: 21) also report on how their participants felt that TikTok “was seeing only selective parts of them”. In response to these forms of algorithmic silencing, as Simpson et al. (2022) highlight in more detail, people tried to “tame” the app’s recommender system in the hopes of being shown a more diverse range of content on their “For You” page.

Rauchberg (2020) speaks on this in the context of TikTok shadowbanning disabled people, meaning limiting the visibility of their content whilst not removing it, as noted earlier in this section. She underlines how within this context we need to see TikTok as a site of struggle. She points towards the fact that while disabled voices are institutionally suppressed on the platform, the app also functions as a vital site to educate and build communities. Peterson-Salahuddin (2022) makes similar observations on the experience of Black people and creators on the app. Looking at TikTok's moderation practices, Peterson-Salahuddin (2022: 6) sees TikTok as "a white technological space, in which anti-racism, as opposed to white supremacy, is categorized as offensive or hate speech". In this light, she attends to how people navigate TikTok as a site of racialized surveillance. She outlines, for example, how Black TikTok creators inserted anti-racist messages into popular TikTok trends and challenges to subvert the algorithmic oppression of their visibility.

From this angle, and following Gillespie (2014), we can understand TikTok's recommender algorithms as an "institutionalised knowledge logic" (see Chapter 3). TikTok constructs content feeds following a specific logic which, intended or not, has material consequences like that of discriminating against marginalised groups and identities. These consequences, as the studies discussed above show, do not go by without resistance. However, we should not underestimate the power that TikTok holds. There lies, as Ang (1996: 117) has prominently pointed out, and I mentioned earlier already, a crucial difference between people actively appropriating media and them having the capacity to actively induce structural change. More so, it appears that the institutional knowledge logics of algorithms exercise a form of media power, as I have theorised it alongside the work of Williams (1974) in Chapter 2. That is, and to reiterate, a form of power in which behaviour is not directly determined but profoundly shaped through setting structural limits on what is possible.

Klug et al. (2023) discuss, for instance, the phenomenon of “algspeak” in relation to TikTok. The concept refers to how people alter their ways of expression in order to avoid being detected by content moderation systems. As they note, “algspeak might help the creators who use it evade consequences, but it simultaneously limits their ability to create content authentically on TikTok” (Klug et al. 2023: 237). In other words, although people can creatively circumvent institutional limits imposed onto them, such comes at the cost of lowered self-making capacities. As such, we can see TikTok as a highly entertaining, creative, and at times even subversive online space. Yet, at the end of the day, we also need to acknowledge that TikTok is a platform designed and optimised for specific commercial purposes, aligning what is possible on its site with its objectives as a business.

As discussed in Chapter 2, key to the business of platforms like TikTok is the extraction of data (see also Bogost 2020). During the time of my fieldwork it was revealed, for example, that TikTok is actively snooping the text that people have copied to their iPhone clipboards (Goodin 2020). Most of my participants were not surprised by these kinds of revelations. As I will discuss in Chapter 7, all the young adults I worked with had at least a general awareness for the fact that data is collected about them when they are online and using services like TikTok. In this sense, for them, whether or not TikTok is grabbing more data than other apps was not really a concern. That is in contrast to public discourses where such had often been debated in relation to geopolitical concerns around its ties to China (see Stokel-Walker 2021). What matters thus in the context of this thesis is that TikTok, as an online space, embodies an extractivist design that is typical in today’s digital media landscape. I will discuss this extractivist design in the next and final section of this chapter.

5.6 Extractivist platform design

Fowler (2023), writing for the Washington Post, opens an article on debates surrounding TikTok and online surveillance by saying the following: “For the average user, TikTok appears no more risky than Facebook. That’s not entirely a compliment” (Fowler 2023: para 2). What he is referring to here is that, based on his research, which aligns with that of other journalists (for example Stokel-Walker 2023), how TikTok collects, stores, and sends data around the globe is not much different from other social media platforms like Facebook. Which, of course, does not make it good either. As Wodinsky (2020) rightly points out, data from people around the world has for many years made, and continues to frequently make, its way to China and other places through a complex digital advertising network (see also Ryan and Christl 2023). Likewise, controversies such as the Snowden leaks have prominently revealed the extent to which governments, such as that of the United States, are using communication infrastructures as surveillance mechanisms (see MacAskill and Dance 2013).

What sets TikTok apart, if we are to follow commentators like Wei (2020), is the quality of data generated on the app, and the effective use TikTok makes thereof. TikTok has a very algorithm-friendly design, Wei (2020: para 27) argues. He writes that “TikTok fascinates me because it is an example of a modern app whose design ... is optimized to feed its algorithm as much useful signal as possible”. The entire app and interface of TikTok, Wei (2020: para 70) outlines, is set up in a way that the “algorithm can see what it needs to see to do its job so effectively”. For instance, Wei points towards the fact that when opening the app, people are immediately placed on the “For You” page. There, a video filling the entire screen automatically starts playing. In return, every action that a person takes after opening the app can be used as a signal in relation to the recommended content at hand, Wei argues.

If we want to understand content consumption experiences of TikTok, we need to keep these facts in mind that Wei (2020) points out. This design of the TikTok app is meant to enable TikTok, the company, to operate a commercially viable business. As I have noted earlier already, leaked documents have revealed that TikTok's recommender system is designed to show videos on people's content feeds that, according to models of consumption behaviour, will likely make them keep watching for an optimum amount of time (Smith 2021). Whether TikTok can in the end directly control how long people will use the app is not necessarily important here. What matters is the knowledge logic (Gillespie 2014) these leaked documents reveal. They reveal a system that is designed to gather and use behavioural data to optimize content consumption behaviour (see also Seaver 2022 for broader discussion).

In some sense, then, we could say that keeping people entertained in the most efficient way possible is what TikTok as business is concerned about. Yet such is only part of the picture. As Smythe (1981) has prominently argued, the economic function of mass media is to deliver audiences to advertisers. TikTok, used by one billion people all around the globe, operates in a way not radically different to that of earlier mass media institutions, as I have discussed in Chapter 2. Key to TikTok's business operations is selling access to its platform, and the attention of people on the platform, to commercial partners.

On the "TikTok for Business" website, for example, potential partners are offered to integrate their content directly into the 'for you' feeds of people of the platform. By doing so, TikTok (2022b) claims, "ads are embraced like native content", brands will "stay top of mind", and attention can be turned into action. Like other mass media institutions before, TikTok makes these claims by relying on third-party research agencies such as Kantar or Nielsen to verify them. What is new about the social media context, Wu and Taneja (2020) argue, is that data

generated online is used in a twofold way, namely for audience measurement and administrative purposes.

Data generated on apps like TikTok is used to turn people into a tradeable audience attention commodity. On the other side, the same data is used internally by social media companies to continuously optimise this operation they rely on to be commercially viable. To reiterate, TikTok relies on keeping people engaged to have a sufficiently large inventory of targetable screens that it can market for profit. For this purpose, TikTok makes administrative use of data to create personalised content feeds that it hopes will increase an individual person's time spent on the app. It is within this continuous optimisation of individual experiences that TikTok differentiates itself from the earlier mass media business that programmed more or less static schedules and advertising blocks within them.

This difference, however, appears to be less hard than often suggested in popular and industry discourses. We can take discussions about the TikTok "heating" feature as an example to understand this. In early 2023, it was revealed that some TikTok employees have access to heating, "a manual feature that ensures specific videos achieve a certain number of video views" (Baker-White 2023). In and by itself, this feature is anything but new. It is functionally equivalent to a tv broadcast director sitting in a control room and pushing a button to share content directly to the screens of tuned-in viewers. However, two things are revealing about this feature. Firstly, the mere existence of it indicates that there prevails at least some desire for mass opposed to targeted reach. Secondly, the existence of a manual scheduling feature on the platform speaks to potential issues in relation to the effectiveness of TikTok's targeted advertising operations.

As Hwang (2020) argues, the digital advertising market is characterized by a widespread optimism for its own effectiveness that not always materialises in reality. Yet, whether TikTok is actually capable of effectively serving ads on its platform is beyond the point of this thesis. That is precisely because it doesn't matter if TikTok is capable to achieve what it claims to be capable of. What matters is that it actively tries and in that course has to extensively collect, process, and store data on people and their behaviour. In fact, like major platforms such as Facebook or Google, TikTok is increasingly gathering data all across the internet. To do so, TikTok uses tracking technologies such as pixels. These small pieces of software, installed on websites and apps, track what people do even beyond TikTok's boundaries, such as shopping online, and send that data back to TikTok (see Germain 2022).

5.7 Positions won and lost

For ordinary people there seems little that can be done to resist today's ubiquitous networks of surveillance technologies, of which TikTok is a part. One might, of course, decide to stop using TikTok, or the internet, all together, that is to disconnect (Chia et al. 2021). Similarly, people could resist to some extent by using privacy-enhancing technologies. These can limit the degree to which one can be tracked and identified while navigating the web. Yet, being on a platform like TikTok means to inadvertently be a productive part within its extractivist endeavours.

As I will discuss in Chapter 7, my participants experienced the ubiquity of surveillance as just a 'normal' facet of today's internet. For them, it was an expect element to be monitored by tracking technologies all time, so to speak. This is not to say, however, that we should see TikTok as something wholly corrupt, or that my participants did not enjoy being on TikTok. As Hall (1981: 233) reminds us, media "are deeply contradictory; they play on contradictions,

especially when they function in the domain of the popular”. If there would be nothing for people to get out of using TikTok, they would not be on the app in the first place, never mind keep using it on a day-to-day basis. It is this fact that we need to take seriously when dealing with a phenomenon like TikTok. And it is, to reiterate, this very “play on contradictions” that I seek to explore in empirically concrete terms here.

We can grasp this contradictory nature within the very design of TikTok as an online space I have outlined in this chapter. To do so, we might briefly return to the metaphor of the window I have used earlier. For my participants, TikTok curated an entertaining flow of random moments on the “For You” page and their mobile phone screens. At the same time, this window that TikTok opened in situations of consumption is also one through which TikTok looks back at the person engaging with content on the app. In many instances, my participants found engaging with TikTok relatively unproblematic, simply enjoying the view the “For You” page generates for them. This was not because they didn’t care, but because of the “culture of resignation” (Draper and Turow 2019) within which they used TikTok.

To is to say, there were moments in which my participants felt that TikTok was intrusive, its algorithm frustrating, or the views it creates on the world to be exclusionary (see Chapter 7). However, they felt that these were also problems inherent to the social media landscape more generally, and ones that they as individuals cannot change. As such, they tried to “make do” (de Certeau 1984) with TikTok in their relative powerlessness as ordinary people. It is these dynamics that inform the everyday reality of TikTok as a commercial online space. And it is this reality that I try to explore in more detail across the next three chapters through the stories of my participants.

The overall argument I make across these chapters revolves around the tension between self-determination and control I have outlined in Chapter 2. As I noted there, I argue that such a tension sits at the heart of digital platforms like TikTok and how they operate their commercial business of audience creation. Moreover, there I followed Hall (1981) in so far that I theorised this tension as a dynamic process of social struggle in which strategic positions are continuously won and lost. Or, as boyd (2010: 54) has said it in early debates on social media: “people are learning to work within the constraints and possibilities of mediated architecture, just as people have always learned to navigate structures as part of their daily lives”.

In short, in the next three chapters, I tell a story of how my participants gained and lost strategic positions as they learned to work within TikTok as an online space. In that regard, each of the chapters will speak on the dialectical nature (Silverstone 1994) of TikTok consumption, looking at how the app materialises in situations of its use. By doing so, I advance three storylines from which we can gain a deeper understanding of these learning processes and struggles that characterise how people live their lives. In this way, these stories will not provide us with solutions to the structural issues at hand. However, they will help us understand how, through what practices and mechanisms, people manage to derive pleasure from the window that TikTok opens.

Next up, in Chapter 6, I write on the routines of which scrolling through TikTok was a part. I illustrate TikTok as a tool enabling the modulation of daily rhythms in meaningful ways, whilst ending up as a disturbing force to such rhythms in some cases. Similarly, in Chapter 7, I discuss how people navigated TikTok as a surveillant environment, as a window through which they are observed. There, I paint a picture of how people creatively coped with attempts of being controlled whilst feeling a sense of powerlessness in relation to overarching surveillance

mechanisms. Finally, in Chapter 8, I talk about the growing significance of TikTok beyond the platform boundaries. I show how sharing TikTok content vitalized social relationships but, in that course, shaped ways of expression and exercised a form of pressure to join the app.

Taken together, these three storylines – of TikTok as an everyday technology, space of surveillance, and socio-cultural resource – will demonstrate the complex position that the app occupied in the lives of my participants. They will showcase the creative ways in which people learned to navigate TikTok to aid meaning-making. Yet they will also demonstrate the structural limits (Williams 1974) TikTok imposes in its form of an online space, and how they shaped and undermined agentic capacities of self-determination. Focussing on the skilled ways in which my participants “make do” (de Certeau 1984) on and with TikTok, I challenge grand claims of algorithmic control. At the same time, in each storyline I highlight how the structure of TikTok, and of the wider social media landscape it represents, emanates a background noise and latent sense of unease against which daily lives unfold.

6. TikTok as everyday technology

6.1 A normal day

In the previous chapter, I have described TikTok as a space of disconnection. I talked about how my participants see TikTok as an app ‘for me’, respectively, how TikTok brands its platform as ‘for you’. In this chapter, I outline how participants engaged TikTok as this ‘for you’ space, when they did so, for what reasons, and with what consequences. Moreover, I will tease out the contradictions and tensions that emerged, such as the app becoming an increasingly distractive element in the daily routines of some participants. Before doing so, however, I want to briefly provide some context on the role that social media and devices like the smartphone played in the everyday life of my participants.

The young adults who shared their stories with me are people who often use their smartphone as one of the first things in the morning. Gretta, an accountant in her early twenties, is one of them. She told me: “I almost always use Twitter in the morning, along with news apps ... and then I go through Facebook and Instagram, just when I’m having my morning coffee”. For Gretta, checking various social media was a fixed part of her morning ritual. It were movements of her hands and fingers that occurred almost naturally (Moore 2014). Even while not fully awake, young adults like Gretta would be navigating between different apps on their smartphone. They would connect to their various social networks by checking messages and status updates, or they would bring themselves up to speed on the latest news.

Throughout a normal day, social media use was an element that punctuated daily rhythms. For my participants, it was very normal to check their phones repeatedly as their day progressed,

and they were at work or studying. Similarly, some apps were used almost constantly. This was the case for Will, a student in his early twenties. He told me that “no matter what I’m doing, like I could be really busy working, I could be studying, I could be just running, or whatever I do, I have to have music on in the background”. What is crucial about his statement is how he speaks about this constant media use as a need. He says that he has to “have music on in the background”. Without music playing in the background, something would feel missing and out of place. For this reason, Will is accompanied by his smartphone all the time.

TikTok is another app that, although not used constantly, contributed to the technologically mediated background against which my participants lived their daily life. Gretta, for example, told me that she would use TikTok as a time killer on different occasions, such as in the morning or during her lunch break, just to “have like something to do”. Participants who were not working full-time jobs and/or had no set plans for their day mentioned something similar. Manu, a caseworker in her mid-twenties, said the following to me: “Normally if I’m not doing anything in the morning I just like lie in bed for a bit, replying to messages that I saw when I woke up, and then I scroll on various social media for a bit, and that includes TikTok obviously”. Sunder, a student and supermarket worker, also talked about this. He described it by saying that when he is bored and has nothing else to do, he will just be going through various social media apps “almost waiting for the right thing to appear to entertain you”.

In other words, for my participants, their smartphone and apps like TikTok were something ordinary. They used TikTok mostly in the various in-between spaces of their daily schedules. There was nothing necessarily exciting that made my participants use TikTok. None of them had set aside a dedicated ‘TikTok time’ in their daily routines. Neither were they planning their use of TikTok like some might do when wanting to watch a specific movie. It was spontaneous

and responsive. TikTok can be seen as functionally similar to, for example, artefacts like the Greek *komboloi*. A *komboloi* is a string of beads that people, especially in previous decades, have played around with to pass time and relax. At the same time, there are considerable differences.

TikTok has different affordances than worry beads, or similar artefacts, that people across various cultures use to ease their experience of the everyday. As described in the previous chapter, TikTok constitutes a mosaic of fragments of lived experience. Scrolling through this structure not only helps pass time in moments of boredom, or to relax when one is stressed or tired. Rather, TikTok has a dynamic and interactive nature that renders it as a fruitful means of escape and potential source of inspiration or pleasure. Further, as a mobile phone app, TikTok is more problematic than other material artefacts like the *komboloi*. The *komboloi* does, more or less obviously, not keep track of how often one has fidgeted it. It's just a string of beads. TikTok, in contrast, is a complex socio-technical system actively monitoring how it is engaged with, as I have discussed previously.

In what follows, I explain these dynamics of TikTok as an artefact of everyday life that is at once mundane and complex. In the first half of the chapter, I discuss how scrolling through TikTok was generative of pleasure, relaxation, and inspiration in different everyday situations. Here, I highlight how TikTok functioned as a tool enabling my participants to control their experience of everyday life in self-determined ways. The second half, then, focusses on problems that arise in engaging with the app. I touch on unintentional uses of the app or experiences of getting carried away whilst scrolling. Doing so, I show how TikTok's design exercises a form of pressure that at times was undermining my participants' meaning-making capacities and structure of everyday life.

I frame these discussions through the idea of ontological security (Giddens 1991, Silverstone 1994) that I have introduced in Chapter 2. Alongside the idea of ontological security, I will argue that TikTok consumption can safeguard the normal order of daily life whilst also posing a threat to it. TikTok, as an everyday artefact, enabled my participants in their everyday life. Yet, as that very artefact, it also exercised a form of control over how the everyday can be approached and enacted. It is along this tension that I close the chapter by discussing the limited benefits of consumption practices. In short, this chapter advances the overall argument of this thesis by providing a concrete account of how young people “make do” (de Certeau 1984) within the kind of commercial online spaces TikTok represents.

6.2 Light escapisms

When I first started speaking to my participants, it became evident that escapism is a dominant modality of how they engage with TikTok. Conversations were driven by their perception of TikTok as ‘for me’ and enabling disconnection. When going on TikTok, they could actively avoid interacting with other people and thus also escape associated social obligations and responsibilities. This is not to say that TikTok does not afford social interaction. However, as I have argued in Chapter 5, my participants enacted TikTok as a space of disconnection through a refusal to interact with others. Understanding these escapist enactments of TikTok is crucial to understand their wider experience of the app. They set the context in which, for example, my participants negotiated TikTok as a space of surveillance, as I will discuss in Chapter 7. As such, it is important that we start by taking some time to outline how and why my participants enacted TikTok through escapist practices.

Looking at other studies on TikTok, we can see that escapist uses of the app appear quite common amongst young adults. For example, in the study of Siles and Meléndez-Moran (2021: 3), a young adult from Costa Rica described TikTok as “my oasis ... a place of smiles in the midst of our disastrous and busy life”. Similarly, a young adult from Singapore, who Kang and Lou (2022: 5) worked with, spoke about TikTok as a private little space that “allows her to experience personal and private moments”. In line with such descriptions, my participants, based in the United Kingdom, often talked about TikTok as a “true escape”. For them, TikTok appeared as an attractive space to withdraw in the hopes of escaping, even if just for a moment, the stress and worries of their normal everyday lives.

That media are used as escapist means is nothing new, or necessarily particular, about TikTok, though. Scholars like Wajcman (2015: 154) underline that mobile media more generally allow people “to be present but also absent or withdrawn”. The simple fact that TikTok is an app on people’s phones thus can already be seen as adding to its attractiveness as an escapist medium – as an ‘oasis’ or ‘private space’ carried around in one’s pocket wherever one goes. TikTok, as a smartphone app, is part of the ambience that shapes how people are in touch with the world (Hjorth and Richardson 2020). Looking at TikTok as a particular app within this ambience, we can turn to Radway (1984). She reminds us that it needs two things for an escapist desire to be fulfilled by a medium. Not only need people be able to withdraw from life in the here and now. They must, moreover, also be transported into a more pleasurable experiential space (Radway 1984: 90). In other words, then, we need to ask how the use of TikTok afforded my participants escapist opportunities that they did not receive elsewhere in their everyday life, and particularly, in their polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller 2012).

My participants clearly seem to find something pleasurable about escaping into the world of the “For You” page. As noted previously, they especially liked how content on the app could be consumed purely for entertainment purposes – disconnected from social obligations or feelings of missing out, mediated through the content of peers. Bea, a freelance writer in her mid-twenties, explained this by saying that when she goes on TikTok, she “can just watch videos of cute dogs and stuff ... It’s just a nice way to avoid life. On TikTok, time is kind of paused. It’s like a true 30-minute escape”. What is interesting about Bea’s comment is how she describes TikTok as a “true escape”. She implies that there are other means of avoiding life that are, quite simply, less effective.

As such, for some participants, TikTok appeared attractive in terms of substituting other forms of escape. One of the most direct forms of escapist practice is, for example, that of going on holiday. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, heavy movement restrictions had been imposed during the period of my fieldwork. Especially when I first spoke to my participants in the summer of 2020, they just came out of a strict lockdown situation that lasted for multiple months. During this time, many found that TikTok enabled them to substitute their escapist desires of travelling. This was the case for Belna, who was in her early twenties and worked in a London garden centre.

Belna described herself to me as a person generally outdoorsy and connected to nature. Lockdown thus created a troubling situation for her. During the early months of the pandemic, Belna found herself mostly alone and trapped inside a small city flat. This is why she gave TikTok a try. The content which Belna liked most was of people uploading plain, point-of-view videos of them going for a walk in the countryside. The trend of Cottagecore, a specific aesthetic style that had found cultural re-vitalisation on TikTok, resonated with her most strongly.

Cottagecore is all about portraying the atmosphere of rural life, landscapes, and traditional crafts (see Brand 2021). The below figure provides some screenshots of content from this genre of TikTok content for illustrative purposes.

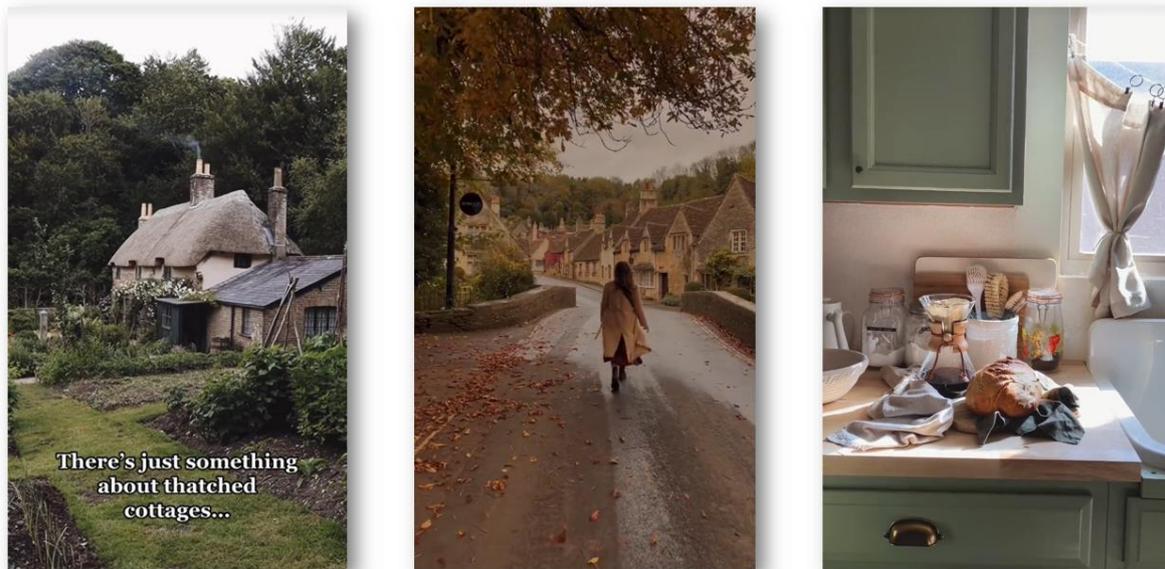


Figure 7 Screenshots of Cottagecore TikTok videos by @_beanandbear_ (2021), @kelseyinlondon (2021), and @cozyteatok (2021).

Consuming this kind of content and aesthetic transformed TikTok into a tool that enabled Belna to escape to the countryside on a continued basis. It allowed her to maintain the identity of an outdoorsy person whilst being trapped at home in the city, be that due to lockdown, or other conditions that keep people trapped, such as their job or care responsibilities. Another example can be found in the story of Manu. In one of our early conversations, Manu mentioned how she would currently see a lot of travel content on her “For You” page. In the summer of 2020, when I first spoke to Manu, lockdown conditions had eased, yet leisure-related travel was still complicated and largely impractical. This is why Manu really enjoyed the vicarious pleasures of

consuming travel content. She explained this to me by saying that “it’s like, you know, most of my time is spent either in my house or going to the shops”.

In such a condition, scrolling through aesthetically appealing content on TikTok appeared as an effective substitute to other means of escaping. However, this qualitative dimension, that of TikTok content, only explains the attractiveness of the app partially. The other has to do with the convenience of TikTok as an app. Convenience is, as Shove (2003: 171) writes, “about timing, that is, the ability to shift and juggle obligations and to construct and determine personal schedules”. TikTok’s convenience is expressed in two facets of its design. Firstly, as an app, TikTok can be used anywhere and anytime. Secondly, TikTok is designed so that people are immediately placed on the “For You” page once they open the app. Thus, the escapist pleasure of going on holiday will not match the vicarious enjoyments derived from consuming content on TikTok. At the same time, scrolling through TikTok is much more convenient and less time and resource intensive. A situation of escapist TikTok consumption can be enacted anywhere and anytime, so to speak.

Seen from this angle, we can understand my participants’ TikTok use as a form of light escapism. They are not withdrawing from their normal conditions of everyday life completely. They stay physically present within them whilst modulating their experience into something more pleasurable. A typical situation in which Belna would use TikTok was right when coming home from work. This appeared a fairly common setting in which other people I spoke to also would end up scrolling through the app. In this situation, as Belna told me, she often feels “too tired to do anything kind of like active in terms of hobbies”. That is why TikTok is attractive to her in these settings because “it’s just easy to open it up and keep myself entertained”. After a long day of work, what Belna values is the convenience of TikTok. She finds the app attractive

as an escapist medium because it is a technology that is ready-to-hand (Dourish 2004). There is no conscious effort involved in using it.

This sentiment of Belna resonated in the stories of other participants. One of them is Iris, a recent university graduate in her early twenties. Iris told me that she uses TikTok as a coping device to deal with anxious thoughts. That is because she finds that TikTok “is just easy to use, you don’t have to think about stuff ... I think that’s probably why I enjoy it now. It’s kind of a relief for me”. Manu reflected on the appeal of TikTok as a form of relief similarly. As she told me: “It’s just like an easy entertainment thing and also something sort of to take your mind off from what it is going on”. This theme of TikTok being good at taking one’s mind off things carried through almost all conversations I had with participants. Bea, for instance, talked about it by saying that she is “just hooked and sucked in and like ... I’m never thinking, ‘oh man, I need to finish this paper or go make dinner’”.

In short, for participants, TikTok appeared as an effective and convenient escapist tool. It helped them cope with pandemic related escapist desires, however, mattered in a much broader sense to them. As the stories above show, the young adults I worked with turned to the app in mundane settings. As Belna said, she uses it during times when she just feels too tired to do anything more physically active. Thus, I found that the appeal of TikTok had less to do with the pandemic and lockdown life as such, but rather a desire for convenience and escape that was accentuated in it. As an escapist tool, TikTok can be utilised to cope with experiences of stress and tiredness in daily schedules. Scrolling through the “For You” page allowed my participants, in other words, to effectively distract their thoughts from the here and now and jump into a more pleasurable experiential space. This escapist practice is one within which the human body

remains in place, so to speak. However, the experience of that place is modulated to a different tonality through the engagement with TikTok.

In the next sections, I will explore how such modulations of everyday experience stand in relation to matters of ontological security (Giddens 1991, Silverstone 1994). As I have touched on earlier, TikTok is used within the polymedia environment of the smartphone (Madianou 2014). It is neither the first nor only app that my participants turned to throughout their day to seek escape. TikTok integrates, more so, within established routines of escapist practice and meaning-making. These routines could be called, I suggest, 'polymedia rhythms'. That is, rhythmic movements through the polymedia environment directed towards achieving certain objectives, like 'true escape' or 'pausing time'.

I continue by discussing how TikTok was used as a tool to both slowdown and pick up the pace of daily rhythms. After that, I turn my attention to how participants bounced back from their escape into TikTok by finding inspiration and motivation on the app to go on with their daily lives. Finally, at the end of the chapter, I critically evaluate how TikTok also functions as a convenience trap that becomes a threat to the productive flow of everyday life.

6.3 Regulating the pace

A typical way in which participants used TikTok was to slow down. They turned to the app when they felt exhausted and overwhelmed by the pace and intensity of life in a given moment. There were many different reasons causing my participants to feel tired. Work or university related stress were common themes in discussions. Some participants further reported struggling with anxious thoughts, for instance due to entering the job market in times of high

uncertainty. More generally, the pandemic had heightened what already was a very overwhelming experience for some people, namely that of early adulthood, growing self-responsibility, and the need to make big life decisions. The meaning of TikTok as a technology of, for example, slowdown needs to be situated within these broader life course stages – and a general acceleration of the pace of life in countries like the United Kingdom (see Wajcman 2015 or Kitchin and Fraser 2020).

One of the stories that resonated with the theme of slowdown was that of Gretta. She saw TikTok mostly as a time killer that's nice to have, not something profoundly meaningful. Nonetheless, she would use it almost every day. Working from home due to the pandemic, Gretta would usually spend her breaks like the rest of her work day, that is alone in her flat. During her breaks she would spend time on social media, and often TikTok, to avoid just sitting there doing nothing. Gretta explained her preference for using TikTok in these situations by sometimes feeling “exhausted with other more serious social media”. In contrast to these more serious social media, on TikTok Gretta would see mostly comedy related content or people documenting funny things happening in their daily life.

Stories like that of Gretta mentioned above speak on this. What made TikTok appealing to her during lunch breaks was the specific kind of content shared on the app and how it was different from that of more serious social media, such as Twitter. In consequence, over time, TikTok had become almost synonymous with the notion of the break for Gretta. As she told me: “I almost start to time my lunch break like ‘oh, I got 5 minutes, that is 5 TikToks’”. Fatima, a recent university graduate working as a paralegal, told me something similar: “I do use it quite regularly, just mindless scrolling on it, just to like watching something and zone out in the day”. To use TikTok as a tool that helps to ‘zone out’ in the day was a common theme in conversation.

Beyond the kind of content available on TikTok, however, the convenience of the app and its design also played a crucial role. That is to say, not only did my participants find TikTok content enjoyable to watch, but also the app making the process of doing so very convenient – creating, therefore, a relaxing experience overall. Another interesting example illustrating this can be found in the story of Mona, who was working as a freelancer in the advertising industry.

“The last time I used it was last night. I was like chilling on the sofa and had just finished a long day of work. I feel that is usually what happens. I’m kind of done with work and wanna relax, chill, and just have a laugh to spend something like 40 minutes on it before I maybe make dinner”. (Mona)

As the above quote showcases, scrolling through TikTok enabled Mona to actively manage the speed at which she would take on her daily responsibilities. Through her TikTok use, she would be modulating the rhythm and flow of the everyday in a way that feels more comfortable. That people use media to regulate the pace at which their everyday life unfolds is nothing new. Silverstone (1994), for the case of television, has prominently theorised how media are used to structure the flows and rhythms of everyday life. The case of Mona nicely illustrates this. We can also see this in a situational setting that is, so to speak, a diametrically opposed to that of the cases discussed thus far. Namely, we can see it in relation to boredom understood as a break that is not taken by an individual but rather imposed onto it.

Following scholars like Goodstein (2005), we can understand boredom as the experience of being trapped in a situation that is experientially grey, that constitutes an “experience without qualities”. The use of TikTok in moments of boredom was very common amongst participants. By engaging with the app, they sought to add experiential colour to otherwise grey situations.

Moreover, they engaged with the app as a means to make empty time pass quicker. A typical boredom-related TikTok use can be found in a story Hajna told me. When I first met Hajna, she was 19 years old and about to finish her first year of university. Like many students, Hajna was working a part-time job alongside studying. More specifically, she was working in a local supermarket. During our initial conversation, I asked her if she could describe the last time that she used TikTok.

“I’ve used it today, but I don’t really remember when [laughs]. But yesterday I had a 45-minute break at work, and they get quite boring sometimes if no one else is sat in there with me. So, I was just scrolling through TikTok. That was pretty much it, really. I finished eating my lunch and just scrolled [laughs]”. (Hajna)

Benjamin, a recent university graduate, had told me a similar story of when and how he had last scrolled through TikTok.

“It was literally an hour ago. I was getting a haircut with my partner. He was getting his hair cut, and I had to wait outside because of social distancing. Like, they weren’t allowing more than three people in. So, I was just sitting on the bench outside the hairdressers, and I was just on it. I won’t actively be like ‘oh my god, I really wanna go on it’. I’ll probably just do it when I’m bored and when I’m passing the time”. (Benjamin)

In both the case of Hajna and Benjamin, we can see how a form of boredom emerges. Hajna is waiting for her break to be over in a room all by herself. Benjamin is waiting outside for his boyfriend to be done and their day to carry on. In response to this feeling of being held in an otherwise experientially empty situation, both of them turned to TikTok. This is not surprising. Turning to their phones, Benjamin and Tanja are able to regain partial control over the situation

of boredom they found themselves in. They remain present, keep waiting, whilst at the same time escaping into an experientially more stimulating space by scrolling through TikTok. What we see here, in other words, is how their smartphones, and apps like TikTok, enabled Benjamin and Tanja in their self-determination. TikTok provided them with a resource that gave them control over how they experienced that situation.

We can turn here to the work of Hjorth and Richardson (2020) for a second. In their study of mobile gaming practices, they also touched on the notion of boredom, including situations of waiting and ways in which people negotiate their experience of time in everyday life. There, they crucially underscore how people engage with different types of mobile games, and their underlying experiential affordances, based on how such harmonize with the given situation that one is in (Hjorth and Richardson 2020: 76). From this angle, we are to ask about the specific form and affordances of TikTok that made it appear as the appropriate choice to participants like Benjamin and Hajna when they had to wait.

If we reflect on these two cases further, we can see how TikTok shares qualities with other media forms, like the magazine. As Hermes (1995) argues, a core quality of magazines is that they are easy to pick up and put down again. “Magazines will not capture us totally or carry us off, they are quite safe to read”, which, as Hermes continues, “makes them eminently suited to fight the dangers of boredom” (1995: 32). The attractiveness of TikTok as an escapist medium can be framed similarly. What participants required from TikTok was not much more than for it to be putdownable. Using TikTok to fill time whilst waiting is safe to use for the simple reason that one can almost immediately stop without having any hard feelings about it.

We can see this reflected in the overall tone that Hajna and Benjamin speak about using TikTok. The app offered them a solution to the problem of waiting, was useful and potentially meaningful in that sense. At the same time, Hajna talks about how she barely remembers using the app. Benjamin, likewise, underlines that he does not go on the app for its own purpose. But rather, he only turns to it as a reaction to the situation he finds himself in. As such, we can see the use of the app as being habitual, as part of an embodied way of navigating everyday spaces in order to “feel right” in them (Pink and Leder Mackley 2013).

TikTok appears appropriate as such a medium, because there are no narratives that develop and unfold as they would do in a film, for example. The enjoyment of scrolling through TikTok is generated one video after the other, not slowly built up as one gets invested into a story told in a film. Like a magazine, TikTok assembles pieces of content that can be enjoyed at one’s own pace. On TikTok, one can enter and leave the “For You” page at any time. There is no fixed start and end point, no set narrative that has to be followed. TikTok merely is a set of mostly seconds long clips placed one after the other. This fragmented nature renders it perfectly suited for purposes such as filling time, yet also that of slowing down and taking breaks.

The ephemeral nature of TikTok’s design enables the app to conveniently fit and fill all kinds of in-between spaces in daily schedules. As such, it is an appealing resource for people like Benjamin and Tanja to draw on to cope with situations like that of boredom and waiting. Within these situational settings, there was a defined space that TikTok can fill, and, so to speak, and external impulse to stop scrolling. Participants found scrolling through TikTok more problematic when being bored more generally, especially during the pandemic, being trapped at home not knowing what to do. In such situations, TikTok become a source of boredom itself, and I will discuss such in more detail later in this chapter.

For now, we can more broadly say that my participants mostly found TikTok to be a convenient tool to manage their experience of everyday schedules. TikTok enabled them to take breaks and slow down the pace at which their day unfolds, and they take on their various tasks. On the other side, TikTok enabled them to fill and pass time to pick up the pace in moments of their daily routine where there was nothing meaningful to be experienced for them. In doing so, TikTok use contributed to ontological security. The app functioned as a device through which my participants eased and stabilised the normal order of everyday life. They turned to TikTok in moments where the experiential continuity of everyday life was under threat - for instance, through exhaustion or boredom.

The stories discussed in this section for the most part showcase how TikTok enabled a self-determined conduct of everyday life. Yet, at the same time, they also hint towards how the app exercises a form of control over ordinary behaviour. We can see this, for instance, by returning to the case of Gretta, who started to time her breaks in the temporal unit of TikToks. In the next section, I will turn to stories that further speak on these dialectical dynamics (Silverstone 1994) in which TikTok is both enabling self-determination whilst exercising subtle forms of control.

6.4 In search of stimulation

For many participants, scrolling through TikTok had a stimulating effect. The case of Lisa illustrates this nicely. When I first spoke to Lisa, in the summer of 2020, she was still living with her mother due to the pandemic and lockdowns. However, a couple of months later, she had found a new place to live in London with her friends. Reflecting on how her use of TikTok has changed in this new setting, Lisa said the following to me.

“I’m still using it, but definitely less than I was, and I do think this is partly due to my change in situation. Just because there is more stimulation in my daily life than there was before. There is less of a need to get that stimulation from TikTok now, I’d suppose. The structure of my day is similar, but it feels very different. Now it feels like more is going on”. (Lisa)

For Lisa, it became noticeable that scrolling through TikTok had enabled her to address a lack of stimulation she experienced due to being in lockdown and trapped at home alone with her mother. This is not to say that Lisa disliked spending time with her mother. But there lies a kind of vitality in being surrounded by, whilst not necessarily engaging with, others to the degree one would with close social ties like one’s mother. Having an awareness, even if just peripheral, of the fact that life still goes in a somewhat ordered fashion provides a sense of ontological security (Giddens 1991). My findings resonate here with the broader argument that Madianou (2016) has developed around the notion of ambient co-presence. In her fieldwork with transnational families, she found that the ambient presence of distant others, mediated through ephemeral social media content, can provide people with a reassuring feeling that life is still in order.

Beyond this more general stimulation experienced whilst scrolling, participants mentioned how TikTok was also a source of concrete inspiration and motivation. Participants would at times see videos that actually did not hook them, but rather inspired them to put down their phone and do something else. In this context, Benjamin shared the following story. Not originally from the United Kingdom, he had travelled home during the pandemic to be closer to his family. To pass the time whilst self-isolating, he spent a lot of time scrolling through TikTok. One day, he saw a video of people embroidering their own clothes. Benjamin told me: “I was like, ’oh, that

looks cool and fun'. So, I bought an embroidery kit just to pass the time". What started as a TikTok-inspired lockdown activity slowly turned into a hobby that Benjamin kept practising beyond his self-isolation period.

Adna, a recent university graduate working in the education sector, told me a similar story. She, too, had seen embroidery videos during lockdown and picked it up as a hobby. However, checking back with her a few months later, Adna told me that she no longer embroiders. In an almost confessional manner, she then revealed to me that the reason behind this is her having merely picked up a new craft, namely that of making candles, which she had also seen TikTok videos about. Benjamin and Adna more so stumbled across these crafts in their scrolling and were inspired by them. Other participants also engaged with TikTok in ways of more actively trying to find inspiration for various aspects of their everyday life.

Some participants would turn to TikTok in the hope of getting new ideas for what to cook or to find recipes that catered to their dietary preferences and needs. Others engaged with TikTok to feel inspired in areas like that of style and fashion. Yet others would scroll through TikTok trying to find inspiration in relation to redecorating their house and making it more homely, especially during lockdown. Living in London, my participants would normally spend most of their leisure time out in the city. Lockdown had created a shift in that people's flats and living rooms now had become the centre stage of their everyday lives. From this angle, scrolling through TikTok is not just a mindless pastime. It is an active search for inspiration in relation to the conduct of everyday life.

What I mean by such a search for inspiration is not, though, that participants were literally searching – meaning using the app's search function – to find specific videos or tutorials. Such

videos do of course exist on TikTok. Learning-related and educational content was actively promoted by TikTok during my fieldwork period. TikTok's aim with these campaigns was to use the app's "heritage of entertainment to make the platform more useful to the lives of our users" (TikTok June 2020). However, it weren't these kinds of videos that motivated and inspired my participants. In fact, during my own fieldwork on the platform, I found a lot of the tutorial content, such as cooking videos, weren't particularly unique to TikTok. Rather, they were produced for and posted across different social media, such as Instagram or Twitter. What my participants found inspiring about TikTok wasn't necessarily the content itself. They could and often already did consume this kind of content elsewhere. The moment of discovery on TikTok, of just seeing other people do things, was what produced a feeling of being inspired.

Tanja, who had already been on TikTok since late 2019, mentioned how she used the app much less compared to when she initially started. This was not because of her becoming bored of using TikTok. Over time, TikTok had simply received a more defined role in her polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller 2012). For Tanja, TikTok had become a concrete source of inspiration and motivation through seeing what other people are up to, and working out specifically. What Tanja needed was not more information about how to work out. Tanja needed awareness for the fact that other people manage to do it. That is, people like her, ordinary strangers, and not some content creator, influencer, or celebrity. Judith similarly described this process of integrating the use of TikTok into her daily life as follows.

"I suppose it sort of both stayed the same and changed. Part of the reason why I like it and keep using it is just ... the content on it is a lot more inspiring and optimistic than say on Twitter or Instagram. On TikTok, it's like 'oh look at this cool meal I made' or 'here's how to do this and that' ... it makes me feel a lot more positive after using TikTok

than other forms of social media. So, yeah, I think it started off that I just was bored, and now I go to it when I need inspiring or cheering up or entertainment". (Judith)

These stories about how my participants found scrolling inspiring resonate with the findings of Herzog's (1941) study on the listeners of radio soap operas. Herzog outlines (1941: 70) how radio soap operas were consumed in a way that provided their listeners with emotional release and allowed them to imagine the mundanities of their everyday life as meaningful. However, beyond that, Herzog (1941: 82) also showed how people read the soap's characters and stories as "recipes for adjustment". Listening to the stories of fictional characters, people found guidance and inspiration in them to live their own life in different ways. They read the soap opera's text along the rationale that "if the radio people can manage their troubles I might be able to also", as one of Herzog's participants said (quoted in 1941: 88). It is in these ways, as Tanja's story illustrates, that my participants found consuming TikTok content inspiring. If the ordinary strangers of TikTok manage to work out, cook healthy meals, pick up new hobbies, or have fun during lockdown, then 'I' might be able to do so as well.

In short, TikTok not only contributes to ontological security by helping establish routines and regulate the temporal structure of the everyday. Rather, it also supports ontological security on the discursive level of constructing and writing a biography of the 'I' (Giddens 1991: 52). As a source of stimulation, inspiration, and motivation, TikTok enabled my participants to reflect on who they want to be and how they want to live their life. They turn to TikTok in moments where their everyday experience as 'I' feels lacking and search the "For You" page for inspiration on how to go on with the day and, by extension, one's personal biography.

As discussed earlier, in Chapter 5, TikTok is not the only place where they go. They would scroll through Twitter to feel part of larger events and discussions unfold. And they would scroll through Instagram to stay up to date with what is going on in their friends lives. What made TikTok stand out was a relative lack of negative outcomes, however – such as ending up doomscrolling on Twitter, experience a fear of missing out, or being bored by superficial influencer and celebrity content on Instagram.

Zooming out, we can locate within this significance as a discursive resource also the power that TikTok holds. As noted in Chapter 2, scholars such as Hallinan and Striphas (2014) argue that recommender systems have become “arbiters of culture”, making decisions of what is worthy of people’s attention. Likewise, McKelvey and Hunt (2019) underline that discovery is not a random coincidence but an algorithmically coordinated encounter between scroller and content. The stories discussed here speak on that. They do so in a way contrasting popular narratives of linear effects, in which algorithms directly determine what people pay attention to. As stories like that of Tanja, Benjamin, Adna, and others show, my participants actively select and choose from the streams of content on their “For You” page.

The power of TikTok in this context is thus not linear but manifest in a more indirect way as Williams (1974) has theorised it. The “For You” page and its algorithm create a window (Chapter 5). They put into frame a variety of content, setting the bounds of what is in reach for people to engage with on the platform. McKelvey and Hunt (2019: 2) theorise this through the idea of vectors, “interactive pathways we take through data, guided by software”. In other words, people’s behaviour is not directly controlled but guided by algorithms who lay out the path in front of them.

The significance of this power to guide content consumption rests not only on a broader cultural level, meaning in relation to TikTok determining certain trends and modulating flows of public attention, as Webster (2014) highlights more broadly. Rather, the impact of the “For You” page setting the limits of what discursive material people have access to is also interwoven with individual experiences of ontological security – and especially feelings of ontological insecurity. According to Giddens (1991: 54), an ontologically insecure individual will lack a “feeling of biographical continuity”. TikTok can help ensure this continuity by providing the stuff along which people can consciously reflect and work on their self-identity.

Yet, as Kant (2020) highlights, personalisation systems can also have the opposite effect. They can spark what she calls “epistemic uncertainties” within which people struggle to see themselves in the content they are recommended online. Likewise, as I have discussed before, studies like that of Simpson and Semaan (2020), DeVito (2022), or Rauchberg (2020) demonstrate the feelings of ambivalence that people with marginalised identities experience on TikTok. For them, the “For You” page is a space where they can connect with others like them, yet also face silencing of parts of their identities at the same time with some content not being circulated on the platform.

My participants, for the most part, did not encounter such uncertainties on TikTok, however. Instead, as we were able to see in stories like that of Tanja, it was on other platforms where they struggled to locate their self within recommended content. Instagram, its influencer and celebrity-centred content streams, were a recurring point of reference here. A pattern of shared negative experiences cutting across stories revolved around the “For You” page and its perceived addictiveness. Here, my participants experienced TikTok as an obstacle to the continuity of the everyday. I will discuss these troubles and experiences in the next section.

6.5 Managing addictiveness

The young adults I worked with, for the most part, enjoyed being on TikTok. At the same time, TikTok can become an obstacle in taking control over one's experience of the everyday. My participants talked about this through the idea of TikTok being addictive. Like other young people, they used the idea of addiction as a sense making device to reflect on their everyday techno-dependencies (Tiidenberg et al. 2017).

When my participants were speaking about TikTok being addictive, they did not mean being an addict in a literal sense, and mostly meant habitual uses of the app (see Chun 2017). Interestingly, what my participants noted as addictive largely matched the two metrics TikTok seeks to optimise through its recommender system, that of "watch time" and "retention" (see Smith 2021). Watch time refers to the time a person spends scrolling and watching videos on the app. Retention refers to the rate that a person is returning to the app over a given period of time. Participants indirectly spoke these metrics, namely their struggles with breaking the flow of the "For You" page (watch time) and moments of unintentional TikTok use (retention).

To understand the first addictive experience, we can take Belna as an example. Belna described TikTok as "weirdly addictive in a way [laughs]". She would scroll through TikTok when lying in bed before falling asleep. As she said: "I kind of do have to consciously stop myself and be like 'ok, I need to try to go to bed now'". Belna's situation was not uncommon. Many mentioned how they have to stop themselves from scrolling, especially in settings like lying in bed. That is because, by design, there is no end on TikTok. Responsibility for the decision of when to stop consuming is placed, in a neoliberal manner, on individual scrollers.

This individual freedom gives TikTok the flexibility that many liked about the app. The “For You” page can be anything from a quick laugh to hours of entertainment. But this openness also rendered TikTok as something addictive. It did so in creating a lack of closure that more closed-off textual structures, like a film, have. Belna said to me: “I think it is that kind of feeling of ‘oh what else is there, what’s next ...’. That’s probably the main feeling that keeps it going and going and going ...”. Some said that they have no problems stopping this continuous flow. Yet, others struggled with it. Tanja told me that she feels a need to actively manage her consumption because she can’t risk getting carried away.

Like many people her age, Tanja was working various part-time jobs next to studying. She also had occasional care responsibilities in the form of looking after a younger sibling. Tanja told me, her life is very structured and planned. More specifically, she said: “I have to be productive because otherwise I’m gonna lose my day, and I’ll probably lose my job”. She experienced being organised as a need to not only keep on top of her work, but also have a day. Within her packed schedule, she thus would use the occasional “spare half an hour or fifteen minutes on social media, just like a breather”. To ensure that she will not get carried away beyond that limit, Tanja used a screen time tool. As she described to me: “I can just hit like 15 minutes reminder and then it shuts down. And then I know 15 minutes is gone, opposed to just scrolling for hours and losing track of time”.

A couple of other participants also used screen time management tools to regulate their engagement with the app. Their stories demonstrated the skilful way in which they were able to manage the addictiveness of TikTok’s design. At the same time, we need to acknowledge that my participants were very media literate. Others might thus have a harder time dealing with these challenges. Stories like that of Tanja thus ultimately reflect a neoliberal self-

responsibilisation that has become increasingly pervasive, and a central theme in debates on social media use and well-being (see Syvertsen and Enli 2020). Tanja's story also speaks on the fact, as Shove (2003) highlights, that everyday schedules in the United Kingdom have, over the last decades, become highly fragmented and packed with ever more granular tasks and responsibilities. This has given rise to convenience becoming a highly valued quality. As a technology, TikTok corresponds to such arrangements. Following Williams (1974), what we see here is how TikTok emerges from within society, expressing in technological form its values and desires, yet also reproducing patterns of inequality, like those emerging around neoliberal self-responsibilisation.

TikTok is a very convenient app to use, can easily be integrated into fragmented routines of the everyday – for example, as a 15-minute breather. More so, TikTok's nature as a mobile phone app integrates it within wider socio-economic arrangements of digital well-being and screen time as something that needs to be managed on the dimension of a self-responsible individual (see Jorge et al. 2022). For some individuals, like Tanja, using TikTok thus appears convenient and manageable. They are capable of using the app in a way that enhances their quality of everyday experience. Other people, however, will have more issues doing so, and rather struggle taking control over how the app impacts their everyday routines. We can see this expressed in how my participants talked about moments of unintentional uses of the app.

As I have mentioned earlier, one of the moments in which participants used TikTok is right after waking up. In these settings, TikTok was part of more or less fixed routines of morning rituals. What I mean by fixed is not that it is something necessarily consciously planned. Rather, it is fixed in the sense that it is ingrained and sinks into their bodies (Ehn and Löfgren 2010). It is an almost natural thing to do. It is part of people's practical consciousness (Giddens 1984). Without

being fully awake, they will be navigating their phones on autopilot, unfolding a particular polymedia rhythm. To reiterate, I theorise polymedia rhythms as routinised ways of navigating a polymedia environment like the smartphone to achieve certain objectives, such as waking up. In this rhythm, participants would be going through different apps in a structured manner, checking messages, status updates, news, and also scroll through TikTok. Similar rhythmic movements were activated, however, also in less structured situations than that of the morning ritual of waking up. One of my participants, Gil, told me that “something I noticed every day, it’s almost like a muscle memory, just pressing onto the app”.

The idea of the muscle memory is one which a couple of my participants used. It is interesting because it nicely illustrates how they see TikTok use as something that becomes ingrained into their body, routines in coordinates movements of fingers, hands and eyes (Moore 2014). They sometimes open the app unintentionally, in a way that feels like an automatic reaction of their body to a given situation or experience, such as that of boredom. Participants described this unintentional use as a form of addictiveness. And they experienced it as something negative, as disruption. As one of my participants said that “on TikTok, time is kind of paused” (Bea). While pausing time can be desired, unintentionally getting carried away on the app felt as if someone had paused their day.

Framing this experience as addiction speaks not necessarily on a complete loss of control. But it showcases the depths to which TikTok becomes part of daily routines and polymedia environments (Madianou and Miller 2012). For some participants, using the app had over time become an almost natural element of their conduct of daily life. Here, TikTok did not necessarily completely replace the use of other apps or habits. It had been added to the repertoire of media people drew on to deal with boredom. It was integrated into polymedia rhythms, such as a list

of apps that one goes through to find entertaining content when bored, like in the case of Sunder. As noted earlier, it is not that my participants stopped watching videos on YouTube or scrolling through content feeds on Instagram, for example. It is more so that over time, TikTok had become a dominant element within such rhythms and habits of navigating the polymedia environment.

In response to unintentional and habitual use of TikTok, some participants started to develop creative tactics in the sense of how de Certeau (1984) conceptualised them. One of these creative tactics I was able to observe during my fieldwork was through the case of Lisa. Once she had moved back to London with her friends, she felt getting stuck less and less on TikTok. The reason being that she had more impulses and stimulation around her than before, when she was living alone with her mother. This made it easier for her to stop scrolling and break the flow of the “For You” page. As a side note, in that discussion, Lisa mentioned something else, though. She talked about how at some point she noticed herself frequently opening TikTok unintentionally. That is, she noticed herself unlocking her phone and tapping on the app icon without knowing exactly why she did so.

To counter this muscle memory, Lisa re-organised her polymedia environment so that her habitualised movement through it would be disrupted. She removed the TikTok app’s icon from the home screen of her phone. This might seem as a quite simple and trivial thing to do. However, the consequence of performing this simple action was profound because it broke an existent polymedia rhythm. In moments where her habit still would kick in, her finger would now be pressing on an empty spot on her phone’s screen. If she wanted to actually use TikTok, she now had to scroll down the entire list of apps installed on her phone and find the TikTok

icon amongst it. Through this simple tactic, Lisa had turned the act of opening TikTok into a much more conscious and time-consuming effort.

In other words, Lisa had re-positioned TikTok in her polymedia environment to make using it minimally less convenient. By doing so, she countered the addictiveness of it as an app and felt more in control over her use of it. She did so in a way that underlines the argument of Moores (2014) that digital technology uses is often a matter of hand and finger movements. In particular, stories like that of Lisa underline the generative nature of these movements. Moores (2014: 204) underlines here the particular qualities of digital media in their adaptability, how they allow people to adjust settings and thus their “dealings with the machine” as it becomes continually into being in their daily lives (Moores 2014: 204). Lisa’s tactic to break her habit of TikTok exemplifies this. She adjusted the organisation of her polymedia environment to lead her unintentional finger movement into an empty space on her screen, disrupting the habit of unintentional TikTok use.

From this angle, we can follow Madianou (2014) in positioning the smartphone as a polymedia environment in material form. Within the smartphone environment, they tactically negotiate the consequences of addictive apps like TikTok. Tanja did so by using screen time tools to add breaking points in otherwise continuous flows. Lisa creatively utilised the possibility to arrange app icons as entry points. Not all my participants had established these kinds of tactics. Yet, as examples, they underscore that smartphones are a material device through which control is exercised yet also resisted and negotiated.

Similarly, the stories discussed here illustrate the close-knit relationship between technology and society. Cleverly utilising the resources at hand, Tanja and Lisa deal with conditions

addictive technology design (Williams 2017) and/or being pressed for time (Wajcman 2015). Their stories allow us to see neoliberal self-responsibilisation in practice, and they point towards the polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller 2012) as the material site where these struggles unfold.

6.6 Moving on from the app

Over the course of my fieldwork, a few participants had stopped using TikTok entirely. One of them was Josh. Originally from London, Josh was studying at a University in South England for a natural sciences degree, which he had completed towards the end of my fieldwork. When I first met Josh, he stood out as an interesting case because he seemed to use TikTok somewhat differently. He was among the only participants that would also consume content on the “Following” feed. Josh followed a couple of TikTok creators who uploaded new content every day, and he appeared quite invested in their stories and lives. Checking their new content in the morning was a fixed part of his daily routine during lockdown. In this way, he seemed to have a closer attachment to the app than other participants.

The importance of this morning ritual and moment of ‘me time’ became evident during our initial video call. Living back with his family during lockdown, Josh’s younger brother ran into his room numerous times during our conversation. Josh was visibly annoyed and apologised for it. It was clear that Josh desired boundaries and ‘me space’. Not because he disliked his brother or family but simply because it was too much for him at the time. With restrictions lifting sometime after, Josh was able to move back to his university accommodation to finish his final year. During this time, he slowly stopped using TikTok. There appeared less of a need to create

space for himself, and he felt the app was undermining his ability to properly focus and finish his degree.

The reason why Josh quit TikTok, however, was not that he didn't enjoy doing nothing. "I enjoy my me time sometimes. I can watch long movies and just be in bed. I'm fine with that", he told me. However, he said that he can only enjoy this me time and doing nothing if he doesn't have anything important to take care of. If there is something that needs to be done, he would "feel guilty for not doing anything". In the same conversation, which took place almost a year after we first met, Josh also spoke about how he feels only two social media can distract him to a point where he will feel that kind of guilt for not having done anything productive with his time. These two are YouTube and TikTok. On both he gets carried away often, and thus he either uses them only in combination with a screen time management tool – like Tanja mentioned in the previously – or not at all. TikTok in particular, Josh mentioned, he has not "figured out yet" and thus nowadays keeps away from.

Another reason why Josh used TikTok less was, quite simply, because pandemic restrictions had eased. There were again more things to do other than just scrolling on social media. Josh would increasingly be going on walks in the evening to clear his head but also spend more time with friends and family. He looked back on TikTok by saying: "It helped whilst I was using it. It helped a lot ... but now I'm moving on". A number of other participants told me something similar. One of them is Carla. From the start, she had less positive things to say about TikTok. Carla felt that TikTok was a good way of passing time in lockdown. But she never seemed too excited about using the app. When I checked back with her at the end of my fieldwork, in 2021, she told me in a brief email that her experience of TikTok "was mostly negative as I would

mindlessly watch these videos for hours”. Because of that, she had at one point deleted the app and moved on from it.

Dissatisfaction with TikTok mostly occurred on this temporal dimension. For participants like Josh, TikTok was simply too risky to use, as he was easily getting carried away and did not manage to figure out a way of regulating the time he spends on the app. Carla felt that TikTok was a waste of time, as she experienced scrolling as not being productive of anything. However, a couple of my participants also noted quitting TikTok for other reasons, one being that the app had negative effects on their well-being. Will’s case, who had an off and on relationship with TikTok, is exemplary for that.

During our initial meeting in 2020, Will, a student that moved back home to his family in London during the pandemic, introduced himself by saying that he’s “not someone who’s happily sitting inside and enjoying their own company”. He is actively practising various sports at his university and even playing on some of its official teams. As Will explained to me, he’s the kind of person “constantly needing to be around other people”. Not being able to practice his sports or meeting people due to lockdown was challenging. He would use, like many others, the available tools such as Zoom to virtually meet with friends but also turned to TikTok to fill the time at home or to take breaks from his work from home internship.

Interestingly, however, while Will had been using TikTok since late 2019, when we first met he said that he just quit the app and only re-installed it for our meeting. Will found it entertaining to scroll through TikTok, consuming mostly a mix of comedy and sports content, he also left the app with mixed feelings. As he explained to me, on TikTok one can “scroll for half an hour and all you see are people on holiday, people like really happy, living an amazing life ... it’s like

they're having that, and I don't". In the months that followed our initial meeting, Will had picked up using TikTok again, only to quit shortly after for a final time. His reasons for quitting TikTok stayed the same. Scrolling left Will unhappy about his own life.

Disconnecting from TikTok, Will left behind the "For You" page, but in some sense merely ended up scrolling through other personalised environments, such as the content feeds of YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels. In relation to Instagram specifically, Will mentioned how the platform's personalisation system caused similar problems. Dealing with "relationship stuff", as Will explained to me towards the end of my fieldwork, he noticed how the Instagram algorithm increasingly showed him content of happy couples. This evoked negative emotions for him. He was actively trying to get over something which the Instagram algorithm constantly reminded him of.

The mixed feelings that Will got from scrolling through personalised content feeds, not just on TikTok but also Instagram, relate to arguments discussed in discourses on the well-being effects of passive social media uses. There, psychologists hypothesise that 'passively' using social media – which they define as consuming content, opposed to 'active' uses such as chatting with people – can lead to negative well-being effects by, for example, causing envy in constantly comparing oneself with others (see Verduyn et al. 2015). However, scholarship on digital well-being effects is marked by many methodological issues, like a reliance on self-reported usage measures or cross-sectional data. Meta-studies and reviews find, if at all, small negative effects of social media use on well-being (see Orben 2019). More and more long-term studies in this field are emerging that find no significant link between social media use and well-being (Steinsbekk et al. 2023, for example), and scholars start to underscore the importance of taking seriously person-specific effects (see Valkenburg et al. 2022).

In this sense, the story of Will highlights such potential negative and person-specific effects. He was going through a rough time, and social media like TikTok or Instagram reinforced the causes of his negative feelings. At the same time, Will's story provides a concrete insight into the complex and contingent nature of these effects. Like the other examples I have discussed in this and the previous section, the case of Will illustrates how people grow aware of what is going on when they scroll. That is to say, scrolling and browsing is not a passive use of social media. People are actively negotiating the terms by which they engage apps like TikTok and get hooked (see also Siles and Meléndez-Moran 2021).

This is not to say, however, that social media have no power. Will's case clearly demonstrates the relative powerless people have in relation to shaping their social media experience on a structural level. Wherever Will went online, after leaving TikTok, such as to YouTube or Instagram, he was being tracked and shown content negatively affecting his well-being. With platforms adopting TikTok's design and logics, such as YouTube's Shorts or Instagram's Reels, Will in some sense struggled with fully leaving the app. Not all people will be affected to the same degree as Will was by personalisation systems. However, his story highlights the inadequacy of self-responsibility as a core mechanism to deal with the consequences of these systems.

The stories of Josh and Carla can be positioned similarly. They show that people cannot always "make do" (de Certeau 1984) within the kind of commercial online space that TikTok exemplifies. This is not due to a lack of creativity or effort, but rather recognizes the limits of such creativity that scholars like Silverstone (1994) underline. All of them, Josh, Carla, and Will, tried using TikTok and making the app work for them. All of them tried to develop "creative and innovative ways" of navigating their terrains of media-saturated everyday life (Pink and Leder

Mackley 2013). Yet, the structural imbalances that characterise TikTok rendered their creative attempts a challenge which they felt was not worth enduring and dealing with. Hence, they moved on from the app, in a spatial sense of avoiding and no longer entering that area of their polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller 2012).

A variety of factors will impact both people's vulnerability to these kinds of negative consequences, and their ability to deal with them. These factors include, for example, their class, educational, and cultural background, or their gender identity. Due to the ethnographic nature of my project, my perspective is limited to particular cases, and thus future research appears vital to further explore these factors. What my participants' stories of boredom and frustration underline, however, is that scrolling is something active, and that such activity deserve more attention – especially as it runs against popular portrayals of scrollers as being mind-controlled.

6.7 The politics of scrolling

In this chapter, I have discussed the relationship between TikTok use and ontological security (Giddens 1991, Silverstone 1994). I outlined how my participants used TikTok as a tool to regulate the structure and experience of their daily lives. At the same time, I presented how TikTok caused significant disturbances to the normal order of the everyday, for instance when the app was used unintentionally or participants got stuck scrolling. In the below figure, I summarise the different situations of TikTok consumption that were discussed.

Along a simplified, linear axis of the everyday, the figure shows the variety of ways in which TikTok was integrated into the schedules of my participants. Of course, no participants used TikTok at all these times. Yet, this illustrative summary allows us to see how, across the lives

of my participants, TikTok punctuated daily schedules at almost any stage of a normal day. Moreover, in closing this chapter, it allows us to reflect on the implications of what it means for TikTok to be so deeply integrated into the routines and rhythms of daily life.

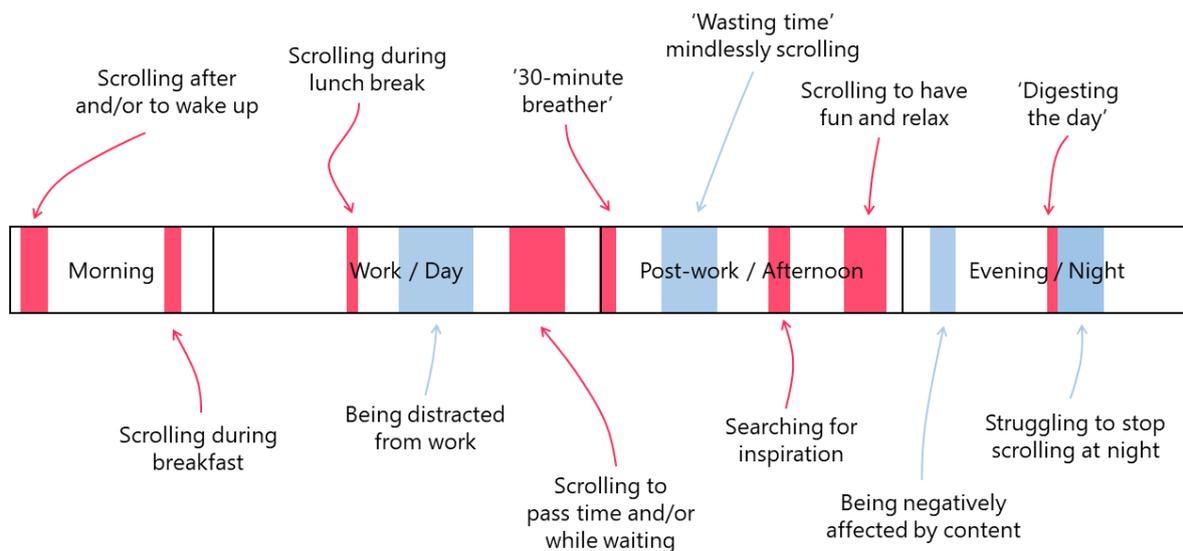


Figure 8 Illustration of different TikTok uses punctuating daily schedules.

The sections in red are uses of the app that in the accounts of my participants can be classified as relatively self-determined. Within such, people actively draw on the app as a tool to regulate their experience of daily life. The sections in blue, in contrast, illustrate some of the more unintentional and distractive uses that my participants told me about – and which I discussed in the previous two sections. I was not so much interested here with comparing the quantity of these different uses, to then come up with some net positive or negative effect. Rather, of my concern is how TikTok, as an everyday technology, becomes intertwined with the conduct of daily life, and sparks tensions within these schedules.

In this light, another point I underscored in this chapter was how these consequences of TikTok content consumption develop and shift over time – which echoes the results of Siles et al. (2022a) diary study with people who used TikTok for the first time. That the outcomes of media consumption are contingent has been frequently noted in prior audience research. As Radway (1984) emphasises in a different context, the second-hand pleasure produced in reading romances is always momentary. What comes out of consumption might only be more consumption. Vicarious pleasures can in some cases even “be satisfying enough to forestall the need for more substantial change” (1984: 118). By emphasising these limited benefits of escapist media consumption, Radway and other audience researchers do not seek to deny them their meaningfulness. Rather, it is to stress the fact the media like TikTok do not have linear effects but produce contingent outcomes in situated processes of consumption (Silverstone 1994).

In other words, TikTok won't help people fix the structural causes of their tiredness, boredom, or lack of inspiration. Nonetheless, it is a valuable resource in their conduct of everyday life. To follow Ang (1985: 135), phenomena like the soap, or TikTok today, “function by making life in the present pleasurable, or at least liveable”. However, this does not necessarily, as Ang continues, preclude people from engaging in more transformative and political activities. Audience research creates a sensibility for this dynamic. It shines a light on the indeterminate nature of the relationships between people and media at hand here. We need to simultaneously acknowledge the limited benefits of apps like TikTok, and their potential negative consequences, such as distraction, frustration, or unintentional use.

From this angle, it is crucial to stress, once again, that TikTok rightly appears more problematic than other time passing devices, such as the *komboloi* mentioned at the start of this chapter.

The politics of TikTok as a medium necessarily entail its position within the landscape of digital capitalism. TikTok is not just an object that keeps people's fingers and minds entertained, like the *komboloi*. TikTok is also a data extraction mechanism. Further, TikTok is also an algorithmic environment that dynamically adjusts its appearance as people move through it. The stories I have discussed in this chapter speak on this. They have pointed towards TikTok embodying a tension between capacities of self-determination and mechanisms of surveillance and control.

Based on my fieldwork, this tension seems to be one that forms throughout daily schedules, as illustrated in the above figure. TikTok is a resource that can be creatively used, in de Certeau's (1984) sense, to "make do" in everyday life. However, by allowing TikTok into their lives, people also make themselves vulnerable, to follow Silverstone (1994). People put themselves into the reach of TikTok's influence and its attempts to shape behaviour for commercial purposes. It is important, put differently, to not lose sight of the fact that TikTok is a commercial technology, an infrastructure that is designed to monitor, control, and commodify the processes of content consumption. TikTok is not just useful as a tool for ordinary people like my participants. It also is a service designed and operated in a way that benefits the commercial objectives of TikTok as a company, and its various commercial partners such as advertisers (also Gillespie 2010).

As I have noted in the previous chapter, TikTok opens a window through which people can see out into the world. The stories I discussed in this chapter – like those of Belna, Manu, Bea, and many others – directly resonated with such a metaphor. They spoke on how people use TikTok as a mechanism to escape into a different world. Yet, as noted, this window is also one through which people become observable and targetable subjects of control. Within this metaphor of a window opening up, we thus can grasp the politics of scrolling more broadly. These are politics

which revolve around time and temporality as a site of struggle, yet also a resource that, to again follow de Certeau (1984: 61), can be cleverly utilised.

Throughout the chapter, I have shown how my participants used TikTok in clever ways to manage and modulate the temporal structure of their daily schedules. They turned to TikTok to pick up the pace, or slow it down. They used the app as a source of inspiration and motivation that can help vitalise daily rhythms. Moreover, I demonstrated how my participants not just managed their daily schedules through TikTok, but also the time they spend scrolling through the app itself. This unfolded in a similar way that Harmon (2015) studied mundane rhythms of dis/connection in everyday life. My participants managed their TikTok use by giving it a very defined purpose, that of relaxation and disconnection, in their polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller 2012) and what we might call, by extension, polymedia rhythms.

To reiterate, what I mean by polymedia rhythms is the following. For my participants, such as Sunder, there exist set routines of going through apps, in a specific order, when dealing with being bored, “almost waiting for the right thing to appear to entertain you”. Such are rhythms in which people navigate through their polymedia environment, the integrated structure of communicative affordances, which is key in facilitating everyday social life (Madianou and Miller 2012). In this sense, my data shows not only how people manage TikTok by integrating it into this environment, but also into their rhythmic movements through it. As noted, for some participants, such as Gretta, this integration extended to a point where they would be structuring everyday activities, like taking a break, in the temporal intervals of TikToks.

What we can see within these polymedia rhythms then is how people effectively utilise TikTok as a resource to manage their daily routines in a self-determined way. Simultaneously, for some

participants this management of TikTok also constituted a serious struggle, that is, a struggle related to a wider reckoning with social media (Chia et al. 2021). Here, in the stories of participants who quit using the app – like Will or Josh – we saw a loss of strategic positions in the app, to borrow from Hall’s (1981) terminology. We saw people retreating and leaving areas of the digital media landscape. We saw people overwhelmed by the tensions TikTok sparks, giving up on their struggle with the app. For them, TikTok was no longer a supportive device, but a nuisance de-stabilising their daily schedules – undermining self-determination and creating a sense of ontological insecurity.

In sum, in this chapter, I have discussed how people manage and grapple with TikTok as an everyday technology. Its interference, positive and negative, within the structure and flow of daily schedules was key herein. However, temporality is only one dimension of the politics of scrolling. Another crucial dimension revolves around data extraction, surveillance, and behavioural modulation. It is this dimension that I engage in the next chapter. I will do by paying close attention to how my participants navigated TikTok as a space of surveillance when consuming content.

7. TikTok as space of surveillance

7.1 Taking a step back

In the previous chapter, I talked about the situations in which my participants scrolled through TikTok. Within these, scrolling was a relatively self-evident thing to them. They described it as something mindless, as they could just go with the flow of the “For You” page. However, scrolling is anything but a mindless activity. It merely appears so because people are skilled scrollers, capable of attuning themselves to the rhythms of the “For You” page in a way that is productive of pleasure, enjoyment, relaxation, and so on. In this chapter, I continue this discussion by looking at how participants interacted with the “For You” page.

My approach differs somewhat to that of related studies. The work of Bhandari and Bimo (2022) and Lee et al. (2022) are prominent examples. They conceive TikTok as an environment of algorithmic personalisation and treat this environmental property as the starting point of their inquiry. In doing so, they are primarily concerned with understanding the consequences of personalisation on self-identity formation. As Karakayali et al. (2017) theorise, recommender systems have become critical “technologies of the self”. Understanding how they influence people’s sense of self is thus important. Moreover, as argued in Chapter 2, scholars such as Couldry and Mejias (2019) underscore how the increasing reliance on such algorithmic systems signals a potential erosion of the integrity of self in contemporary societies. Empirical investigations like Kant’s (2020) confirm this to some degree by underlining that “epistemic uncertainties” can emerge when navigating personalised online environments.

Yet, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the consequence of such an erosion are hard to evidence. Rather, we saw that as an everyday technology, TikTok had varying consequences for how my participants managed their self. Within their stories, we saw how TikTok was enabling as a technology in most cases, whilst in some undermining agentic capacities of self-determination. Saying so, I do not deny that negative experiences do come from TikTok and similar apps. I touched on this along the work of Simpson and Semaan (2020) earlier, who showcase how TikTok's algorithms silence identities in not representing them on the "For You" page. None of my participants felt that TikTok was silencing their identities in such ways necessarily. However, some expressed an awareness for biases in the app's algorithmic recommendations. Iris, for example, told me about how during Black Lives Matter protests she made a "conscious effort" to not just see the perspective of white creators on the platform.

Generally, my participants perceived TikTok as ambivalent in the way that Rauchberg (2020) has outlined it, meaning as a platform that gives space to a diversity of views yet also hinders their expression simultaneously (Chapter 5). We rightly need to be concerned about these dynamics and how algorithms intersect with identity formation, both in regard to silencing but also amplification. That is why questions of autonomy over algorithms have become a central topic. They are vital, as Savolainen and Ruckenstein (2022: 14) write, to evaluate and understand the possibility to live well "with (the aid of) our algorithmic companions". In this light, studies like that of Kang and Lou (2022) have discussed how people exercise control over their searches for entertainment and connection to like-minded individuals on the "For You" page. Similarly, Siles and Meléndez-Moran (2021) have researched the addictiveness of TikTok's personalised content feed – with the aim of understanding how young people retain control whilst getting hooked.

In this chapter, I build on these debates yet also take a step back within them. I do so by taking personalisation not as the starting point from which to investigate certain consequences. Instead, my aim is to understand the process of becoming entangled in the algorithmic and surveillant environment of TikTok. Here, I align with Siles (2023) and his call to study the relationships between people and algorithm as enactments. No person that has just downloaded TikTok will be shown a highly personalised content feed. As Siles et al. (2022a) show, the first moments of being on TikTok are formative and marked by a continuous re-orientation on the platform and towards its algorithmic systems. Likewise, not every video that a person will be shown constitutes that kind of ‘hit’ getting people hooked.

Simply put, the relationship between scroller and algorithm needs to be continuously enacted. As such, the relationship is under constant threat. Negative feelings of being bored, annoyed, or scared by TikTok need to be managed. Asking how this enactment takes place, and under what circumstances, is thus crucial. It opens a wider perspective on the relations of power at play. By treating personalisation as a socio-technical achievement, we understand how TikTok moves into a position from which it can attempt to exercise influence over identities, behaviours, and worldviews. It is by unpacking this socio-technical achievement that we, furthermore, come to understand how content consumption is managed and exploited as a commercial resource.

Following my engagement with Hall (1981) in this thesis, it is within this achievement that we can grasp how contradictions unfold on TikTok. Both scroller and algorithm are actively engaged in constructing personalisation as an outcome. The former to receive content that feels personally meaningful and relevant. The latter to acquire accurate information about people’s interests, and to optimise their engagement with content. Across the chapter, I discuss

four mechanisms through which personalisation is enacted by people and, more crucially, this enactment made durable over time. These four are the mechanisms of ‘algorithm awareness’, ‘situated trust’, ‘stories about algorithms’, and ‘reading for personalisation’. The below table provides a brief summary of each.

Table 4 Key mechanisms of personalisation on the scroller side

<i>Mechanism</i>	<i>Description</i>
Algorithm awareness	Awareness for online surveillance mechanisms and algorithms that serves as the pre-condition to direct actions towards and negotiate one’s position in relation to them.
Situated trust	The way in which people make using the app practically manageable by negotiating its worthiness of being used, considering a variety of potential adverse effects.
Stories about algorithms	Artefacts such as memes in which ordinary people share their lived experience of algorithms, providing their listeners with emotional reassurance and guidance.
Reading for personalisation	Enacting personalisation as a felt environmental property by skipping past basic videos and navigating towards those which resonate with personal interests and ideas of self.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. In the next sections, I outline the above mechanisms. I outline participants’ levels of algorithm awareness and its role in negotiating senses of trust in the app. I position the relevance of stories in making sense of TikTok as a space of surveillance, and I outline how the “For You” page was read within this space. Tying

these mechanisms together, I show how the “For You” page is constructed by scrollers in active and reflexive ways. Doing so, the latter part of this chapter reflects on how these interactions become normalised and what implications arise herein. I will speak on how my participants learned to adjust their behaviour to be understood by TikTok’s recommender system, for example. Moreover, and closing the chapter, I reflect on the consequences of what my participants experienced as an ultimately normalised entanglement with this surveillant system. Here, I render my participants as neither overly helpless nor powerful. Rather, I paint the picture of a bond between scroller and algorithm that is highly fragile and tense.

In this way, this chapter contributes to the overall argument of the thesis in the following way. By conceiving personalisation as an outcome achieved in practice, we alter our view on what self-determination and control mean in the context of digital platforms like TikTok. I underline how self-determination is not a matter of binaries but, to once again borrow from Hall’s (1981) terminology, a continuous negotiation of strategic positions and resources. The fragile dynamics I observed in people’s relationships with TikTok during my fieldwork speaks towards this. My participants were not fully in control over TikTok, nor capable of resisting its processes of audience commodification. At the same time, they figured out how to defend their ways of meaning-making with TikTok. This chapter provides an answer, then, to the question of how, on a practical level, people manage to enjoy using TikTok despite it being problematic in many ways, tracking their behaviour and trying to shape their behaviour in particular ways.

7.2 Developing a sense of trust

All participants were aware that what they see on TikTok is algorithmically curated. Given that they were young adults and have grown up using social media, these high levels of awareness

appear relatively unsurprising (see Gran et al. 2020 and Oeldorf-Hirsch and Neubaum 2023b). Yet, although all people I met were aware, there existed differences in levels of awareness, and how such were reached. Educational background was a key mediator of these differences.

Some participants had an educational background in areas such as media studies or computer science. This provided them with more formal knowledge about algorithms. They mentioned that they feel naturally aware of them. Antonio explained this by saying that because of his background, he had been closely following the many “discourses on algorithms and all apps beyond TikTok that have been going around for years now”. But also among participants that did not have this formal educational background, many were very interested. They were interested in understanding how it manages to capture their attention. For example, Iris used TikTok every day, sometimes scrolling on the app for hours. When I asked her why she wants to participate in my study, she replied saying the following.

“I think I was just interested in doing this because I’m interested in understanding why it’s such an addictive app to use. So, when I saw that you were doing it, I really wanted to see what it was like and maybe get some kind of understanding and talk it out a bit”.

(Iris)

Participants like Iris experienced TikTok as a unique app. Joyce, a law graduate, told me that TikTok is “very unlike every other app I’ve used. I definitely can spend hours on it without even realising”. Bea, at the time completing a Master’s in media studies, described TikTok to me as an app whose algorithm “works exceptionally well ... really understands me and knows what to show me”. For most participants, algorithm awareness emerged from such lived experience. They noticed how they are being figured out and get carried away on the app. To be more

precise, their awareness was activated through lived experiences, given that they had prior experiences of recommender systems and the figure of ‘the algorithm’ as agentic entity curating their content feed. Awareness was activated both when participants got hooked, but also when encountering inaccurate recommendations.

Tanja, a business student, told me how when she first started using TikTok, she saw a video that gave tips on how to use Excel more efficiently. She wasn’t too interested, though somewhat fascinated. Out of curiosity, she watched a couple more of the creator’s videos. Shortly after, her “For You” page had turned into an array of Excel tips and tricks videos. For Tanja, this failure to recognise her engagement with these videos as a deviation and not confirmation of her interests made TikTok’s recommender algorithms visible to her. Tanja noticed the attempt for her “For You” page to be personalised, and she realised that the content “you interact with does come up more”. Her having this realisation is crucial. It allowed her to position the ‘TikTok algorithm’ as an entity she can interact with. Moreover, a failure of such realisation could have resulted in negative consequences in other cases, such as being guided down streams of misinformation or “epistemic uncertainties” – that is, being left struggling to identify oneself in recommended content (Kant 2020).

Many of my participants had similar experiences like that of Tanja. However, some also drew on prior experience with algorithms on other platforms. Gil, a 21-year-old natural science student, told me that he had been watching videos on YouTube since he was nine or ten years old. Based on his experience with YouTube, he immediately noticed that on TikTok, there are algorithms at work. Gil commented on this by saying that he “noticed it, but never really considered it a problem or anything”. For participants like Gil, algorithmic personalisation, something he had over a decade of experience with, appeared just normal. It is part of his

practical consciousness (Giddens 1984) through which he navigates online environments in his daily life. Benjamin, a psychology student, explained this normalised experience of personalisation in relation to the branding of app's like TikTok.

“I have enough awareness to know that if I'm going onto an app where it has a “For You” page that I'm going to expect that it tracks certain things ... but I wouldn't say that I felt threatened or vulnerable to it”. (Benjamin)

My participants' experience of TikTok as an algorithmic environment was distinct to the app and its lived experience. But it was also embedded in broader negotiations of corporate surveillance, online privacy, and personalisation. Benjamin approached TikTok, branded as ‘for you’, with an already negotiated position of personalisation and its privacy implications. He had come to terms with a condition of being surveilled and datafied by companies like TikTok when using their services. This, in consequence, allowed him to be comfortable about engaging with them.

As Kappeler et al. (2023) highlight, the opposite is also possible. They found that some people toned down their behaviour online due to concerns about surveillance. This resonates with Duffy and Chan (2019) showing that such “surveillance imaginaries”, the ways in which people perceive media to be surveillant, shape their online self-expressions. In my data, there was no strong evidence for such chilling effects of surveillance. This appeared primarily due to the fact that the aforementioned studies looked at self-expression, whereas I did at consumption. Within their consumption, participants generally perceived less surveillance and privacy-related risks. Moreover, in relation to large social media platforms, participants indicated having fairly negotiated positions on surveillance implications, like the case of Benjamin shows.

To understand how my participants reached such a position, we have to think back to the discussion in the previous chapter. The primary reason why participants used TikTok was to escape and feel relieved from the pressures, demands, and obligations of daily life. Therefore, in the first instance they imagined TikTok through the lens of escapist desires, rest, and comfort. Only in a second instance did they make sense of TikTok in a broader context. Tanja's comment illustrates what I heard in many conversations.

“I think the privacy thing is slightly worrying, and I don't fully understand it myself, but I probably should look into it. I think everyone just believes there is an app on the Apple store so it has to be legit, there is a reputation around it automatically ... it is something in the back of my mind”. (Tanja)

Participants rendered questions of privacy and corporate surveillance as topics that sit in the back of their mind. Tanja expresses this with a certain sense of guilt. She felt that being informed and mindful about these topics was socially expected from her. These feelings of guilt and an inability to fully understand what is going on underscore how current arrangements of consent, placing responsibility on informed individuals, appear impractical and inefficient to fulfil their purposes of consumer protection (see Solove 2012).

Likewise, some participants actively decided to ignore concerns about corporate surveillance because they were “having way too much fun on TikTok at the moment” (Joyce). One even stated that “the privacy thing I haven't experienced because I don't post anything” (Agatha). Comments like this showcase the different meanings of surveillance and privacy in the digital context (Hartzog 2021). Many were aware of TikTok's corporate surveillance, meaning the app monitoring their behaviour. Participants were also aware about, but did not share, the view of

some public commentators that TikTok opens a backdoor for surveillance by the Chinese government (Sanger and Barnes 2020).

When participants had concerns about privacy, they mostly revolved around notions of social surveillance, meaning other people, be they strangers or peers, monitoring what one does online. Most wouldn't create TikTok content themselves and hence, like Agatha, say that they have no real privacy concerns. Some did occasionally post content, and also had videos go viral. This experience was described as scary in the sense of not knowing any of the thousands of strangers that had seen their creation. Similarly, some said that they prefer not to post on TikTok because they fear going viral and potentially embarrassing themselves publicly.

What is crucial to observe is that there existed an awareness for processes of datafication and corporate surveillance upon which platforms like TikTok operate. Even though this awareness was limited and sitting in the back of people's minds. Participants were not indifferent to digital corporate surveillance. Yet, at the same time, their reflections on it mostly focussed on coming to terms with it to use the app. Tanja felt comfortable about using TikTok, not because she didn't care about the consequences of personalisation. She felt that being distributed through an official app store, TikTok is at least somewhat legit. This shift from being concerned not about digital corporate surveillance as such, but bad actors instead, is something that other studies also observed (see Lupton and Michael 2017).

Similarly, participants like Joyce, mentioned above, or Bea, negotiated these concerns by assessing not the risks of algorithmic personalisation in general but for specific apps. Bea explained this to me in the following way.

“Sometimes I’m like: ‘how much can they really learn about me?’ They know that I like dogs, they know where I live, they know I like cooking videos ... I don’t feel threatened by that, you know, in the grand scheme of things. I think that I’m more afraid of Google than of TikTok”. (Bea)

What examples like that of Bea and others mentioned in this section show is how having a negotiated position on TikTok’s surveillance practices in the back of one’s mind creates a sense of situated trust. This trust does not deny the problematic nature of TikTok but rather makes it practically manageable. It allows people to use the app for entertainment purposes without having to think about it all the time. And such a trust is likely also at work in other contexts, like that of marginalised groups deciding to use TikTok for its benefits despite the risks they face (Rauchberg 2020). In the experiences of my participants, we can summarise that such a sense of situated trust emerged in three different ways. Firstly, through a negotiation of digital corporate surveillance as such, as in the case of Benjamin or Gil. Secondly, through an app’s status and reputation, as in the case of Tanja. Or, thirdly, through the evaluation of risks in relation to specific apps, as in the case of Bea or Joyce. In the next section, I outline how this awareness and trust shapes imaginaries of the ‘TikTok algorithm’.

7.3 Stories about algorithms

In the previous section, I talked about how my participants developed a sense of trust into TikTok so that they can use it comfortably and without constant questioning. Here, I continue that discussion with a focus on lived experiences, and stories told about them. In particular, I turn to moments of friction that marked engagements with TikTok as space of surveillance. Mostly, as I was told, TikTok managed to create a very close to home content feed. However,

sometimes it also failed doing so. In other moments 'the algorithm' was perceived as crossing a line by showing scarily specific videos, breaking the flow of the scroll. Participants coped with these moments through a discursive repertoire that I theorise as 'stories about algorithms'. These stories gave many of my participants emotional reassurance and guidance as scrollers.

As Giddens (1991: 38) argues, ontological security is anchored in the dimension of everyday emotions and feelings. The implication of this is twofold. Firstly, the experience of TikTok has to be 'smooth' on an emotional level. Otherwise, TikTok would not be able to efficiently function as an everyday technology generative of stability and comfort. Secondly, and in relation to this, for ordinary people there is little practical value in being able to cognitively unpack how exactly recommender algorithms function. Rather, they need for such cognitive processes to spark a sense of trust. That trust, more so, also extends into other dimensions, in sum providing a smooth emotional experience of scrolling.

I found that participants' situated trust in the app is directly related to its efficiency in providing content that is perceived as worth to be watched. Managing one's feelings about the app and its data practices is thus a key challenge that scrollers needed to tackle. As noted above, my participants' experience of the 'TikTok algorithm' primarily revolved around three feelings. First, positive emotions of it picking up the right signals and providing accurate recommendations. Second, negative feelings of being annoyed when it took a wrong turn by misinterpreting signals. Third, feeling of being scared when it crossed a line. It is this latter form in particular that I will focus on in this section, given that it evoked the strongest emotional responses.

Judith talked about an example where she once saw a video from a person documenting their weight loss journey on TikTok. Seeing one of their videos, she clicked on their profile to see how they had progressed since. After having done so out of curiosity, Judith noticed that her “For You” page had been filled with fitness related content. Based on that experience, she thought about the ‘TikTok algorithm’ as being “trigger-happy”. This resonates with the findings of Siles and Meléndez-Moran’s (2021) study. The young adults they worked with talked about TikTok’s recommender system as being very “aggressive” in pushing content, compared to that of other platforms. My participants shared this sentiment.

Lisa was one of the participants that imagined the ‘TikTok algorithm’ as an aggressive but also interactable entity in this form. A recent social science graduate and musician, Lisa was very excited to randomly discover music theory content on TikTok. That is why she deliberately tagged these videos with a ‘Like’ in the hopes of seeing more of them. Having encountered more music theory content after, Lisa said: “I was like ‘ok good, it’s recognised that I’m liking this sort of thing” (Lisa). Most participants told stories like Lisa. They spoke about how TikTok’s recommender system is good at picking up signals of interest expressed in actions such as consciously liking videos. Some, of course, talked about failures of doing so, like Judith. Another example is Hannes. He told me how he sees a lot of content on his “For You” page that he doesn’t enjoy. That is why he frequently uses the ‘Not interested’ button, a kind of ‘Dislike’ feature. Asking if it works, Hannes responded by saying: “No, I don’t find it does work. The continuous effort probably shows that it doesn’t at all [laughs]”.

Such observations are interesting as they run contrary to popular narratives that TikTok’s recommender algorithms are “hyper-efficient” (Wei 2020). Rather, as recent research shows, algorithms and conversational agents powered by artificial intelligence, such as chatbots, are

often rather unintelligent and simplistic systems that fail to live up to the promises of their creators (see Madianou 2021). Overall, the experience of inaccurate recommendations seemed to only have a small effect on the experience of scrolling. Moreover, inaccurate recommendations did not tend to evoke strong emotional reactions. Adna, a recent university graduate working in the education sector, explained this by saying that she doesn't "really feel any particular hard feelings when they show me a video I don't care about. You can skip past it so quickly".

Stronger emotional reactions occurred in moments in which a line was crossed between appealing accuracy and scary accuracy in recommended content. In such instances, TikTok showed content that was perceived as too specific and personal. This is something that other scholars, such as Simpson and Semaan (2020) or Cotter et al. (2022), also observed in relation to TikTok. Carla, a 23-year-old working in the musical and theatre sector, described one of these scarily accurate content recommendations to me.

"I watched a TikTok about dropping out of college, or something, and the way that it was worded was like exactly the situation I had been in. And it was a bit spooky that the TikTok was so specifically linked to my own life, if that makes sense ... so, yeah ... I've seen a few of those where it's a bit eerie how close to your own life it is and you think the phones are listening to us [laughs]". (Carla)

Carla's comment is interesting for the following reason. To cope with this disturbing experience, she drew on a broader imaginary of digital corporate surveillance, that of "the phones are listening". Scholarship on algorithmic imaginaries has somewhat overlooked these discursive repertoires through which ordinary people collectively make sense of algorithms. These

collective sense-making processes unfold through what I call ‘stories about algorithms’. Drawing on the work of Benjamin (1977), I contrast the notion of stories from that of information. Information is concerned with the validity of a claim about reality at a given point in time. Stories speak from particular lived experiences, in contrast, Benjamin argues. They are lived experience passed from one person to the next. Stories provide, as Benjamin (1977: 390) writes, people with practical guidance and orientation in how to manage their individual lives and identities in a specific socio-historical moment.

The idea of ‘stories about algorithms’ extends that of the “algorithmic imaginary” (Bucher 2017). To reiterate, such imaginaries are defined as knowledge structures that emerge from, and shape, people’s experience of algorithmic systems. The idea of stories stresses that these imaginaries are shaped on a social level, meaning ordinary people sharing amongst each other their lived experiences. As such, the idea builds on earlier notions such as that of “algorithmic gossip” (Bishop 2019). In contrast to such, stories are not necessarily concerned with the mediation of actionable information or the construction of a socially valid account of how algorithms function, however. Instead, the concept of stories accentuates the element of emotional reassurance and guidance that listening to the lived experience of others provides – and thus has a closer connection to ontological security (Giddens 1991).

Even though my participants were disturbed by scarily accurate videos appearing on their “For You” page, overall they felt comfortable engaging with TikTok. In comparison, conducting a study on advertising algorithms, Ruckenstein and Granroth (2020) found that their participants often felt left alone and ill-equipped to make sense of the content they are served. Especially with recommendations that appeared disturbing to them. In the context of TikTok, I made the opposite observation, because the ‘TikTok algorithm’ itself had frequently been thematised in

stories shared between young adults on and off the app. For example, during my fieldwork on the app, I encountered a trend in which people explicitly addressed the ‘TikTok algorithm’ and the platform’s surveillance practices. Participants, like Velta, also spoke about it to me.

“There is this trend where people are like, the algorithm apparently shows you creators that have the same interests and same personality traits as you. And then these videos basically say, because of this you are also single, a university student, living in London, ... and it was all these traits, all of them applied to me ... and no hashtags or anything. So, I was just really curious how they knew all that”. (Velta)

Almost all of my participants had seen videos of this “if you see this ...” trend in which people tell a story about the ‘TikTok algorithm’, its surveillant nature, and its scary accuracy. What is interesting about these stories is that they do not provide people with concrete information. They do not help people understand why it shows them a specific piece of content. They exist as a sort of living proof that the ‘TikTok algorithm’ is able to target them, or at least is able to do so allegedly – which relates studies finding that some people attest the ‘TikTok algorithm’ spiritual or godlike powers (Cotter al. 2022).

Often the categories named in such “if you see this ... “ videos were quite broad, such as an age bracket or location. In this sense, stories about algorithms do not themselves mediate formal knowledge. They merely make visible what is otherwise only felt, TikTok surveilling and targeting people. Doing so, as the example of Velta shows, “if you see this ...” videos activate scrollers in their thought processes about TikTok as a space of surveillance. Furthermore, my participants found stories about algorithms comforting in that they provided a reassurance that their lived experience is shared by others.

Lisa discussed in this context comments that other people sometimes leave under TikTok videos. In these comments, people tell the story of how they ended up seeing the given video. In relation to these comments in which people share their lived experience of scrolling through TikTok, Lisa described the effect they have on her.

“If it connects like to the situation I’m watching the video in ... so, like, if the comment is ‘me watching this at 2 am’ and I’m up around that time as well, then I’m like ... it almost makes me feel a bit better [laughs] about being in that state, because it’s like obviously the experience that everyone is having. It’s kind of nice knowing that it has a common effect on people”. (Lisa)

By looking at how people imagine the ‘TikTok algorithm’ as an observable and interactable entity, we can see how they actively negotiate their position in relation to it. Even though my participants said that they are just mindlessly scrolling, that practice is an active form of engagement. Scrolling through the “For You” page is marked by encounters with inaccurate recommendations or ones that feel scarily specific. These encounter make people feel uncomfortable and the need to take action. Along these tensions and the stories told around them, we can see how my participants had a reflexive awareness for TikTok as a space of surveillance. They continuously observe, think about, and discuss with others their lived experience of being profiled and targeted on TikTok.

7.4 Reading for personalisation

In the previous section I discussed the “algorithmic imaginaries” (Bucher 2017) held amongst my participants. I noted how they imagine TikTok’s algorithms as having both an appealing but

also at times scary accuracy. Amongst the young adults I worked with, this imaginary was dominant. Whether appealing or scary, the ‘TikTok algorithm’ was imagined as being good at observing and reinforcing consumption habits. In comparison to other platforms, participants did not necessarily understand TikTok to be different in principle. They saw it as part of a broader trend of social media being personalised. Sunder, who had been using apps like Twitter, YouTube, or Instagram since the early 2010s, commented by saying “that’s kind of what social media has become”.

However, in contrast to the recommender systems of other platforms, TikTok appeared much more efficient in delivering on the promises of personalisation. Bea mentioned how on Instagram she would increasingly see content she didn’t really enjoy and hence grew “frustrated with the Instagram algorithm”. For participants, TikTok often appeared as an escape from these frustrating experiences with failed and inefficient algorithmic personalisation. For many of my participants’ friends that didn’t use TikTok, that same sense of frustration was often a reason behind their non-use of TikTok.

“When I do get my friends to join TikTok, they sometimes be like, ‘oh ... I don’t really like it. I’m not getting any good videos’. And I always say, ‘just like the ones that you like and press not interested on the ones you don’t because you will end up having the perfect For You page’”. (Joyce)

What we can observe in Joyce’s comment above is that, as Bucher argues (2017: 41), imaginaries are more than just mental representations of algorithms. They are productive of those relationships they represent and describe. To imagine the ‘TikTok algorithm’ as an efficient mechanism of personalisation creates trust. Not so much in the sense of privacy, but

more so that the engagement with it is worth its price, be that the price of being surveilled, or simply spending time on the app. Having this trust in the 'TikTok algorithm' enables people to keep scrolling. The comment of Joyce nicely illustrates this. Speaking from her own experience of using the app, she tells her friends to keep scrolling, even if the "For You" page might not feel personalised right now. She mediates a sense of trust that at one point 'the algorithm' will provide a content feed that not only is enjoyable to scroll through, but more importantly can be scrolled through without interruptions.

TikTok materialised thus as an environment affording continuous scrolling not just because of its efficiency. It did so also in how imaging the apps' algorithms set out the terms of engaging with it in the first place. This became evident when I asked participants if they are looking for a specific type of content or genre on the platform. In these discussions, the common response was that they are not really looking for anything specific. My participants just wanted to scroll and follow the flow created on the "For You" page. The below quote from Rhea, a television producer, nicely illustrate this.

"I'm not looking for one specific thing. I'm kind of constantly scrolling and seeing whatever pops up that I like. I think the platform has a way of reducing what you like into a very specific thing ... I don't really have a specific interested when it comes to TikTok. I just take in whatever I get". (Rhea)

Rhea imagined the 'TikTok algorithm' as an efficient personalisation mechanism. Yet, she also approached it with very vague expectations for her experience of scrolling. Moving through the app, Rhea is just checking out whatever pops up on her "For You" page and catches her interest. Discussing her experience of consuming content on TikTok, another participant, Rosa, said to

me that “the only thing I’ve ever looked into specifically is vegan recipes, but other than that it’s just like not really stuff that I seek out, it’s stuff that just kind of happens over time”. What my participants cared about was not so much the specifics of the content they would see on TikTok. As long as the “For You” page felt close to home, participants were satisfied. This shifts the focus away from the ‘TikTok algorithm’ as personaliser and, instead, towards the scroller as one that reads for personalisation. Agatha, an arts student, reflected on this reading for personalisation in the following way.

“The thing with TikTok is that a lot of the time it’s very performative. If you look at the comments, I sometimes like looking at the comment to see what people say, and a lot of people are like self-diagnosing and stuff like that ... everyone goes, ‘oh yeah, I think I’ve got that wrong with me too, I think that’s me as well’. I think maybe the things I thought ‘oh, that’s a bit too close to home’, it’s probably because it’s been too close to home for a lot of people, or at least they think it is”. (Agatha)

The performative nature of scrolling that Agatha describes showcases how an imaginary of personalisation is productive of the experience of personalisation itself (Bucher 2017). When reading the videos on the “For You” page under the assumption that they must be ‘for you’, that means personalised, one will eventually find cues along which to justify that assumption. Saying so, I do not deny that TikTok is personalised in the sense that its recommender system materially reinforces past consumption patterns. Nonetheless, personalisation should not be understood as something that simply happens. It is an actively produced outcome of people engaging with algorithms. Sunder reflected on his “For You” page by comparing it to that of his wife.

“I think my wife's TikTok is really like ... that is the kind of scary algorithm where it's far too specific. But then my one, I don't know where it's come from, some things are specific, but mine is so random and absurd. And I get loads of TikToks from people with hardly any views, like a handful of likes. I find them really entertaining because they are so ... they can be really niche, or really strange, or really kind of crudely made and kind of odd ... but then that might be the algorithm as well finding that that's the kind of thing that I like and share because it's absurd”. (Sunder)

Personalisation does not necessarily mean being shown a concrete mapping of one's interest and personality. Rather, as the outcome of an interaction, personalisation reinforces the kind of interests that have been expressed at a given point in time. For some participants that created a condition as Sunder outlined it, meaning the “For You” pages being very distinct to his affinity for crude, strange, and niche content. Rosa mentioned in this context that “it's hard to talk to friends about TikTok because everyone has different tastes, so everyone has really different ‘For You’ pages, not everyone sees the trends as you do, necessarily”. Simultaneously, a lot of participants also mentioned that “there is like viral things that everyone ... that come up on everyone's ‘For You’ page, and it becomes like ‘oh, did you see this thing on TikTok’” (Manu).

As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, scrolling through the “For You” page is not an isolating experience. It provides opportunities for social connection through sharing and talking about content with others that was encountered whilst scrolling alone. However, these sharing practices are more so to be seen as by-products of escapist engagements with TikTok. They are so partly because of TikTok being designed ‘for you’ but also because of people reading through the idea of personalisation. In the next section, I continue to outline how people's

imaginaries of the 'TikTok algorithm', and desires for personalisation from it, informed navigational practices of seeking out 'for you' content.

7.5 Co-constructing the 'for you'

In the previous sections I have established that personalisation is not a technological consequence, as often assumed in public debates, but rather that it is an outcome produced in situated human-machine interaction. In this section, I explore this dimension by looking beyond imaginaries of the 'TikTok algorithm' and at the situated actions (Suchman 2006) that they inform. It is in these situated actions that people assume the position of the scroller that can navigate the "For You" page, yet also is constrained by its design. I outline how these situated actions – the responsive manners in which people attune themselves to the "For You" page as an algorithmic environment – were generative of the app being experienced as a 'for you'.

On a technical level, TikTok's recommender system is concerned with observing and reinforcing past consumption preferences. From this angle, recommender systems follow a simple logic. They are technologically complex more so in terms of how content preferences are computed, by using what data inputs, and at what speed and scale. During my fieldwork on the app, I early on noticed this straightforward logic and utilised it as a tool to explore the platform. By merely watching and 'liking' videos of a specific type, and skipping past others, I was able to easily curate and completely change the appearance of my "For You" page within a couple of hours.

Rini mentioned to me how she had also approached the 'TikTok algorithm' strategically like this. When I first met Rini, she had just returned from a gap year and was doing an internship in London. Talking about the 'TikTok algorithm', Rini mentioned that she is very skilled at

interacting with it. This was because she had lost access to her TikTok account before. Unable to regain access, Rini set up a new profile. After that, she sat down and came up with a plan for how to recreate her original “For You” page. She tried to remember specific videos and people she liked on TikTok and wrote them down. After that, she proceeded as follows.

“I think it was kind of like going for what I can remember, searching for people’s accounts, from there I can see like who’s commented, and I also followed and enjoyed their content, follow them, go through their videos and kind of rely on those as like main skeleton of I’ve liked these people ... I think it only took me like three or four hours for the algorithm to look like how I wanted it to”. (Rini)

In this situation, Rini is quite clearly the dominant force driving the personalisation of her “For You” page. She had developed a plan, an action strategy, and stopped following this strategy only once she felt that the “For You” page looked the way she wanted it to. At the same time, Rini’s story outlines the importance of the concept of situated actions as Suchman (2006) has developed it. As Suchman (2006: 27) argues, “the essential nature of action, however planned or unplanned, is situated”. While Rini had a plan in place – to start by engaging with the videos and people she remembered – her execution of that plan emerged as a series of situated actions taken in response to the kind of content discovered and recommended to her in the process.

We can further see the importance of situated actions in constructing and maintaining personalisation when looking at everyday engagements with TikTok. Gretta mentioned to me that most of the time she can just scroll through her “For You” page without interruptions. However, there will also be moments in which she feels a need to become more active. She noticed how this usually happens when she had not used TikTok for a couple of days, as she

would only use it during the week but not on weekends. Gretta mentioned the following to me as to what would happen when returning to using TikTok at the start of the week.

“If I put TikTok down for a bit ... I don’t know how the algorithm works, but it seems to get a bit confused, and I’ll spend a bit more time kind of going ‘uch, this is weird’, and then it will start to settle into what I like again ... but usually it’s quite accurate”. (Gretta)

As mentioned earlier, my participants often did not have clear expectations in terms of types and genres of content they wanted to see. They were looking for whatever resonates with their interest and sparks curiosity. The situated action through which Gretta re-enacted the ‘for you’ quality was thus not a kind of purposefully planned strategy of re-training TikTok’s algorithms, like in the case of Rini. My participants instead responded to inaccuracies by, for example, skipping and scrolling past videos, providing in the non-consumption vital signals for TikTok’s recommender system. This navigation of the “For You” page did not just make TikTok personalised in signalling preferences. Rather, it also had a performative component that I noticed whilst scrolling through TikTok together with participants during interview sessions. We can take the case of Lisa as an example.

In our first meeting, Lisa walked me through a couple of videos on her “For You” page. After opening TikTok on her phone, the first video that she was shown was a sketch comparing partying in the UK with partying in holiday destinations typical for “lads holidays” or “girls holidays”. It made a lot of sense that she was shown that video. Lisa is from the UK, she is a young adult, and the interview took place in the summer, a time that normally, yet not back then due to the pandemic, many groups of young people would travel to these destinations with their friends. Lisa, however, responded to the video by saying that “it’s a bit too basic for like

my taste and humour [laughs] and I would probably just scroll past that one". The next video was another sketch, one that Lisa found a little bit more appealing. The third video was what she described as a "hit".

"It's just someone playing guitar and the caption says 'if you know this riff, then your wlv music taste exceeds the expectations of so-and-so' ... and wlv means women who like women ... so this is like an example of the niche specific sort of thing that would come up on my feed. I don't actually know that song, but I probably would 'like' that because that's an example of a very sort of specific part of my music taste". (Lisa)

In the above quote it is not the video itself that is interesting, but the fact that it was preceded by two TikTok clips that felt basic and somewhat unspecific to Lisa. Following the logic of TikTok's algorithms, all three videos could be considered personalised, that is, having been computed to likely be of Lisa's interest. However, it was only the third video that was generative of a 'for you' experience for Lisa. By actively reading for personalisation, Lisa navigated towards those 'hits' that allowed her to performatively enact a 'for you' quality on the app. Will talked about this similarly.

"Once you use it enough ... I can see when a video is it and when it's not ... when I know it's gonna be a bad video, I scroll straight past it. So the time I spend on bad videos, even though I might have 10 bad and 1 good, the two times will be exactly the same with how quickly I'm scrolling". (Will)

What we can see here is again, as Moores (2014) argues, that digital media consumption is characterised by precise movements of the fingers and eyes. Within seconds, participants decided if content is worth watching or not. As their eyes glance across the screen to make such

judgments, their fingers stand ready to act on any decision or feeling, be that to wait and watch, or to simply scroll on. It is within these movements of reading for personalisation that people at least partially determine their experience of the “For You” page as ‘for you’, enacting personalisation as a felt property of the online environment they are situated in. It is in these practices we can see how the consumption of ephemeral and fragmented content pieces can come to constitute something meaningful rather than mindless. Tim Markham (2020b) speaks similarly on the navigation of digital media environments. He argues that the ability to effortlessly move “towards whatever comes next” represents something “ingenious rather than somehow lacking” (T. Markham 2020b: 15).

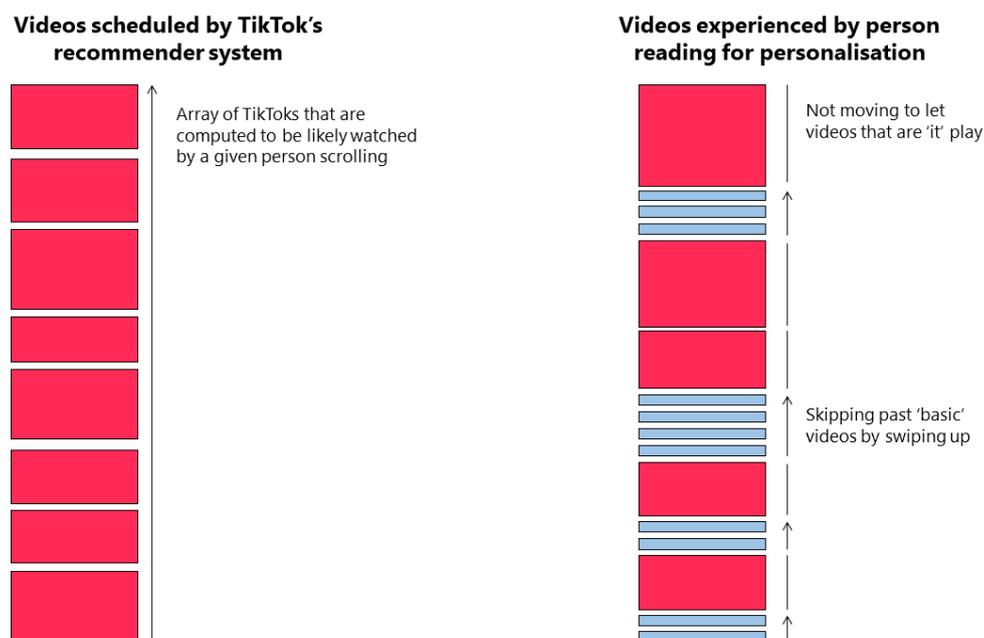


Figure 9 Illustration of content feed compression through reading for personalisation.

We can make sense of this orientation towards what comes next in what I call ‘content feed compression’. As illustrated in the figure above, TikTok’s recommender system only displays content it has computed to be likely watched and keep people engaged (Smith 2021). Scrollers

sort through this array of recommended videos, compressing ‘basic’ ones to a point where they are barely noticed, anticipating the next ‘hit’. In return, through reading and navigating the content feed in these ways, personalisation is produced as a felt quality of the TikTok platform and experience of the scroller.

Put differently, in order to experience personalisation, one must be able to scroll in a way that is productive of this kind of content feed compression. And it is as such that scrolling is anything but passive. It is a practical skill that has to be learned and practiced over time. As we have seen earlier, with examples of participants friends disliking TikTok, the inability to read for personalisation can be a barrier to enjoy scrolling. Likewise, the inability to adjust and nudge the flow of video can in other settings lead people down a spiral of misinformation or otherwise harmful content, for example. In this sense, it is important to underline the impact people can have in determining their experience on personalised social media. At the same time, we need to be cautious in our interpretations of this activity. Although not mind-controlled by the ‘TikTok algorithm’, people are still significantly limited in how much they can determine – namely, and for the most part, how they respond to the actions of powerful algorithms.

Therefore, and as Siles et al. (2023) underline, we have to think about agency as something fluid rather than static here. The question is not if one can exercise control over the other, such as algorithms over scrollers, or vice versa. As Kang and Lou (2022) highlight, people’s interaction with TikTok’s recommender system are active, but they are still guided by the app’s algorithmic design. Yet, they also underscore that many people actually enjoy this guidance, whilst acknowledging tensions that can arise. It is such interactive dynamics we need to attend to. For example, talking to Gil how he navigates the “For You” page, he described what I theorised as

content feed compression above. However, he also said to: “I mean, that’s about as much as I can do”.

To return to the commentary of Wei (2020), TikTok primarily is designed to help its algorithms see what they need to see. TikTok is set up in a way that it produces the best possible signals for its algorithms, and not that people can take the most effective control over their content feeds. As such, we have to acknowledge that being a skilled scroller inadvertently also feeds towards the logics of this extractivism. Participants like Rini, Lisa, Gretta, Will, or Gil are skilled in the way that de Certeau (1984) has outlined how ordinary people “make do” in everyday life. They are skilled in making TikTok work for them. In that their sorting of content becomes ever more proficient and habitual, they become of more value for TikTok’s business, at the same time. They help maintain a consumption profile that TikTok delivers to advertisers as a targetable audience. I will expand on both the habitualisation of this consumption behaviour, and its implications, in more detail in the next section.

7.6 Normalised entanglements

Over the course of my fieldwork, experiences of TikTok’s algorithms remained largely the same. Participants continued to imagine TikTok as having an appealing yet also at times scary accuracy. Encounters with this scary surveillant side of the app were a continuous element of how participants talked about the app to me. We can consider the following thing that Rhea said to me towards the end of my fieldwork in 2021.

“I try not to be too surprised but sometimes, yeah, it is like content seems very driven towards you or a situation you are going through. But yeah, I guess less so now because

I've used it more and, I mean, I've liked so many videos. Whoever is in control can see exactly what I'm into. It's less surprising ... but still weird. I'm still feeling there is a spy in my phone because videos can get very specific". (Rhea)

The conclusion of 'less surprising, but still weird' encapsulates a sentiment many shared. Over time, participants had become used to TikTok as an algorithmic environment. But this does not mean that they necessarily grew indifferent to it. Yet, most also did not become more critical. Getting used to TikTok rather meant coming to terms with the app's contradictory nature. Their experience of TikTok appeared smoother and their confidence in navigating the platform greater in that they knew what to expect. We can see this through the case of Adna. Talking to Adna a few months after our initial meeting, at a point when she had been using TikTok consistently for almost a year, Adna mentioned the following.

"I think I understand it a lot more ... I now kind of understand the power that 'liking' a video or following someone can actually have on your 'For You' page. So, I think carefully about who I 'like' and what videos I 'like' ... and I'm really happy to unfollow people too if they get annoying. I do that quite regularly because I'm working now. If I'm on TikTok, I don't want to see anything annoying or unfunny". (Adna)

What the case of Adna illustrates is something I noticed with a lot of participants. Adna did not necessarily learn something new about TikTok's algorithms the more she used the app. She speaks about a change in her understanding for 'the algorithm' as an interactive element of TikTok. This understanding is not of theoretical nature. It is something concrete and practical, a kind of embodied understanding for how TikTok's recommender system will respond to certain actions (Dourish 2004). Acquiring this embodied understanding, Adna and others

started to adjust their use of TikTok features such as the 'Like' or 'Follow' buttons. They started to heavily limit their use of these features to the sole purpose of sending clear signals about what content they want to see on their "For You" page.

As noted in the previous section, it is in these ways that the design of TikTok shapes how the app is used. People like Adna perceive other uses of the like button as risky. They see it as a potential threat to the integrity of their "For You" page, their escape site. As such, TikTok is capable of exercising control by directing people into the position of the 'good scroller' through its design. More so, it gets people invested into their algorithmically crafted 'you'. For none of my participants did this appear problematic. They turned to TikTok to have 'me time' after all. Adna approached TikTok as an escape site, which is articulated in her expression that when on TikTok, she doesn't want to see anything unfunny or annoying. Her primary goal is to relax, and not to socialise. To this end, the 'Like' and 'Follow' features are functional for her not as means of social interaction but communicating with the 'TikTok algorithm' as an imagined, interactable entity. The case of Joyce provides another interesting angle on this.

"It's quite obvious. If I 'like' a particular video, and it could be even quite niche, if I 'like' that, you will see more videos like that. I can really see TikTok reacting to stuff that I 'liked'. The algorithm is quite sensitive. I will literally just 'like' the stuff that I actually like ... and I'm quite conscious when I'm 'liking' or when I say 'not interested'". (Joyce)

What is interesting about the above quote is how Joyce speaks about the 'TikTok algorithm' as being sensitive. She speaks about being able to literally see the 'TikTok algorithm' react to how she moves through the platform and interacts with content. Sensing how TikTok's recommender system reacts to her as a scroller, Joyce started adjusting her engagement with

the app. Like Adna and others, Joyce started to become very conscious about when and when not to 'like' videos. Acquiring this embodied understanding, and imagining the app's recommender system as 'the algorithm', gave participants like Adna and Joyce confidence in navigating TikTok.

What we see here, in other words, is how a reflexive component – that of trust in algorithms to deliver, and confidence in one's ability to respond – mediate people's ability to move through the digital space of TikTok. It speaks towards notions of wayfaring discussed in relation to the work of Moores (2014) and Hjorth and Richardson (2020) in Chapter 2, leaning on the work of Ingold (2010), ultimately. Joyce and Adna did not figure out how TikTok works on an abstract, technical level. Over time, they attuned themselves to the rhythms of the platforms, its dynamic terrain of algorithmic content flows. Put simply, they figured out, on the scroll, how to scroll on, so to say.

But we also have to see it in terms of questions of power. As I discussed earlier, and in more detail in Chapters 2 and 5, TikTok's business model relies on getting accurate data about people's interests. Intended or not, a highly sensitive and noticeable recommender system pressures people to give accurate signals about their interests. It puts pressure on them to become good at 'reading for personalisation'. What people gain from doing so is, obviously, a tailored content feed. Yet, TikTok also gains something. It receives more accurate profiles of people's consumption preferences. TikTok's design thus can be seen as pushing people towards becoming productive for the app as they try to fulfil their individual desires for entertainment, relaxation, or escapism. The stories of Adna and Joyce are indicative of that.

The extended consequence of this is not just a process of audience commodification, in which content consumption behaviour is mined for data and modulated for commercial purposes. Beyond that, it also sets forth a commercialisation of online sociality more broadly. To put it simply, the design of platforms like TikTok foregrounds the interaction with its algorithmic system. It privileges the usage of features, such as the 'Like' button, as algorithmic signal over any other, like that of social interaction. Setting a boundary in this way, it indirectly pushes people towards learning to be a 'good scroller' in the eyes of TikTok's algorithms and business logic. That is to say, people can engage with content on the app, for instance to show support to strangers sharing their stories, even if they might not want to see more of this kind of content on their "For You" page. Yet, every interaction with content on TikTok will be interpreted as a signal for content recommendation by design. Because of this, when not behaving as 'good scroller', people ultimately put the accuracy of their "For You" page at risk.

In short, a person that is consciously 'liking' is not only receiving a content feed more closely resembling expressed interests. That person is also, inadvertently, productive for TikTok as a business in providing accurate information about themselves. I have thus, earlier, spoken about TikTok as a contradictory space (Hall 1981) in the sense that TikTok is neither fully emancipating, nor fully controlling. It is neither exclusively a site of commercial value extraction, nor purely a site of fun, entertainment, and joy. We can see this most clearly in the defensive mechanisms that my participants developed in response to becoming entangled in algorithmic environments like TikTok. At the start of this chapter, I spoke about how participants actively kept TikTok's corporate surveillance a topic sitting only in the back of their mind. In the same context, Jade told me this in relation to seeing a scarily accurate video on her "For You" page.

“I always cover my camera [laughs] when I’m watching these videos because it’s like ... sometimes I’m just like maybe the FBI really is like [laughs], you know, watching all over us. But usually it’s just a passing thought, and I’m sure it’s just ads and stuff you interacted with before, so, yeah ...”. (Jade)

Jade is not ignoring the fact that TikTok is monitoring her. At the same time, she’s also not reflecting further on it when encountering scarily accurate content recommendations. Rather, she deals with her feelings through humour, drawing on online surveillance discourses, here in a form of the “FBI agent watching you” meme (KnowYourMeme 2018). Jade acknowledges TikTok being a space of surveillance, yet also normalises it as part of people’s online experience. Because of that, these kinds of moments are marked only by passing thoughts on surveillance and targeted advertising practices. To let these thoughts pass, and not hold onto them, is a defensive mechanism. It is a reflexive strategy that people develop to protect the integrity of scrolling as a pleasurable experience. Put simply, for participants like Jade, there was more to gain – in a given moment of tiredness or boredom, for example – to just go with the flow of things than question it.

While participants felt that it is easy to go with TikTok’s flow, we nonetheless have to understand their entanglement with TikTok as fragile. That is because there is no natural configuration of human and machine. As Suchman (2006: 263) reminds us, interfaces, such as smartphone apps, are not to be seen as “self-evident boundary between bodies and machines but as a relation enacted in particular settings and one, moreover, that shifts over time”. That TikTok is a contradictory space means that people play an active role in enacting TikTok as a functional algorithmic environment. Without ‘algorithm awareness’, ‘situated trust’, ‘stories

about algorithms’, and ‘reading for personalisation’, there would not exist a flow of the “For You” page that they could just go along with.

The point of emphasising this is not to be romantic about consumption practices, as frequently criticised in wider debates (Graeber 2011). It is to stress that algorithmic entanglements are inherently fragile on a structural level. They form a complex web of relations that can and do frequently break down. To return to my discussion of Lefebvre (2002: 64) in Chapter 3, any idea of complete control is an illusion because “something always escapes”. Even as people’s position within such webs appears increasingly normal or natural to them, it remains a position that has to be assumed again and again. It is a position that has to be continuously defended against disturbances of this normalised order. These disturbances take the form of countless weird, scary, annoying, boring, or random situations occurring at the interface, each marking a potential breakdown of relations. And it is through the mechanisms that I have discussed in this chapter that scrollers actively manage these disruptions to make TikTok work as an everyday technology.

7.7 Putting trust to the test

In this chapter, I have outlined how personalisation is an outcome produced in practice. Personalisation, I have argued, is nothing that just happens as people scroll, in their words, mindlessly. Instead, personalisation is enacted by people reading content feeds with the very idea of personalisation in mind. This idea is that of being presented, by an algorithmic system, content that is aligned with one’s preferences and can be easily related to. Such ways of reading content feeds was an obvious thing to do for participants. It felt normal and almost automatic to nudge algorithms and navigate towards those bits of content which, amongst a plethora of

'basic' videos, evoke a 'for you' feeling. Scrolling was something normal, almost like walking, so to speak. There is not much thought that has to go into it, because it is activity relying on embodied knowledge.

However, this is not to be mistaken for this behaviour to be externally controlled, and thus undermining agentic capacities of self-determination. Following the metaphor of walking, we can say that for TikTok, personalisation means the construction of walking paths. People actively take these 'for you' paths, similar to the way in which one would select a specific trail when going for a hike. To a large extent, these paths and trails determine what people will experience along the way. To once again follow Williams (1974), TikTok is powerful in that it sets the boundaries and limits of this experience. It is not powerful, however, in determining exact itineraries and movements across these paths.

People still decide when to scroll, where to slow down, move at a faster pace, or when to stop and return home. The question here is thus not whether such movement and navigation is free, because people always are bounded in how they interact with the world around them. What is thus important, as Tim Markham (2020) underscores, is for us to recognize the generative role these navigational practices play in shaping people's experience of themselves, others, and technological systems. Here, the findings I have discussed in this chapter hence also align with the argument of Baym et al. (2020) that people today mostly have a "power to avoid" rather than a "power to transform" when they navigate digital landscapes.

TikTok creates these paths in a way that enables commercial value extraction along them. As I have demonstrated, participants were able to nudge TikTok's recommender system within this endeavour, yet such nudges did not amount to a form of subversion of these commercial

operations. Instead, participants rather learned how to adjust their behaviour to be understood by TikTok's algorithms. It is in these ways that TikTok shapes and modulates behaviour. And while my participants were skilled in this sense, we have to acknowledge that others, who do not have this literacy, can end up trapped on problematic paths, for instance of harmful or radicalising content. In either way, TikTok turns scrollers into a productive element of its business. As long as people keep scrolling and engaging with content, TikTok can create data and exploit screen-based attention.

Based on my fieldwork, there seems little that ordinary people can do to resist this commercial value extraction. People can avoid using TikTok in the first place, and do the same with similar services. Some of my participants, furthermore, talked about how they are quite efficient at quickly spotting ads on their "For You" page and skipping past them – undermining the efficiency of TikTok's commerciality in some form. Nonetheless, we see a significant tension at play. The theme of trust, I have argued, offers a fruitful angle on it. That is to say, it does not help us resolve this tension, but helps us better understand it.

To scroll through a content feed requires having a sense of trust in the app on which it is hosted. That is trust both for the app as a responsible surveillant agent yet also as a service provider that can deliver on its promises. People like my participants are not blind to what is happening in front of their eyes and on their mobile phone screens. They have a reflexive awareness for the dynamic environment they engage with and navigate it in ways that showcases degrees of relative autonomy.

Seen from this angle, the paths that TikTok's algorithms create are not just dynamic, but also fragile. Every inaccurate or too accurate content recommendation put participants' trust in

TikTok to the test. Such tests threaten the continuity of consumption. They threaten to upend both the possibility of pleasure for the scroller and the opportunity for TikTok's value extraction. Thinking about the integrity of content feeds through such trust tests provides, I argue, an effective perspective on the questions of how power is being exercised through them. That is, namely, in a way that renders TikTok not as a site of forceful capture but as a contradictory and ambivalent space.

For my participants, navigating these contradictions appeared not too complicated. They mostly had positive experiences scrolling through TikTok, and mostly felt in control over their usage of it. If they didn't, as I have discussed in Chapter 6, they simply stopped using the app. More so, my participants all were aware to at least some degree that TikTok collects data about them, and that it shows them targeted ads. But they were not overly worried about it. Mostly because they did not encounter any concrete adverse effects from TikTok doing so. That is why I have argued that my participants actively move awareness for these surveillance practices to the back of their mind. They do so because, for them as individuals seeking relaxation, there is no benefit of always being concerned, critical, and distrustful when scrolling.

To extend the argument of Baym et al. (2020), then, we could say that people have a "power to avoid" in a metaphorical sense. My data speaks on the ambivalent position within which my participants sat as scrollers on TikTok. They did not agree with the commercial politics of TikTok and its data extraction. At the same time, they decide to avoid this problematic nature in order to "make do" (de Certeau 1984) with TikTok as an imperfect resource. The implication is similar to the one I outlined at the end of the previous chapter. By drawing on Radway (1984), I argued that what comes out of consumption will often only be more consumption.

The practices and mechanisms of making do with TikTok – ‘algorithm awareness’, ‘situated trust’, ‘stories about algorithms’, ‘reading for personalisation’ – I have outlined in this chapter speak to this dynamic. They do not resolve the tensions inherent to TikTok as space of surveillance. But it is through them that my participants modulate their experience of it in a way that enables them to determine their experience from within. After all, they first and foremost engage with TikTok as ordinary people who try to “carry on” (Giddens 1984) with their daily lives. The implication of this is subtle but significant. Of course, TikTok is able to sustain its business operation through exploiting continuous content consumption on its site. At the same time, that continuous consumption is not wholly controlled by TikTok, creating at most a situation of impasse. In return, we do not see vulnerability but resilience, which itself is not a perfect outcome either, obviously.

Another way in which scholars have framed these dynamics of impasse is through the notion of chilling effects. Kappeler et al. (2023), drawn on earlier, have touched on this idea. To reiterate, in their study, they evidenced how an awareness of ubiquitous digital surveillance leads people to limit their online engagements. The accounts of my participants align with this idea of chilling effects in a different way, though. My participants didn’t necessarily limit their behaviour on TikTok in fear of being observed and tracked. Yet, underlying their stories was a latent sense of powerlessness and resignation. Not resignation towards their capacity of using TikTok in a meaningful way, but rather towards inducing structural change on and beyond the app.

As Draper and Turow (2019) highlight, such a digital resignation is cultivated by the ubiquitous surveillance practices of corporate social media. The findings of my study confirm this observation. My participants experienced both algorithmic personalisation and the

accompanying surveillance practices as taken-for-granted aspects of the online landscape. For them, as young adults that had grown up using these kinds of services, it felt like a natural part of the internet, and thus hard to imagine a different future of it. From this angle, we can make sense of my participants' behaviour by drawing a parallel to Simmel's (2006) famous analysis of the metropolitans of the late 19th and early 20th century Europe.

Outlining their *blasé* attitude towards one another, Simmel (2006) was not concerned about advising a social critique. Instead, he tried to explain how people managed to survive within the fast-paced social environment of the metropolises. His explanation was that people did so by developing *blaséness* as a protective mechanism. The behaviour I described in this chapter constitutes a similar kind of protective mechanism. By negotiating a conditional sense of trust in TikTok, my participants did not choose to completely ignore its problematic nature. They just decide against constant confrontation with these problems to make TikTok useful as an everyday technology. Like I have illustrated through a quote from Adna earlier, the moments when my participants went on TikTok were moments where they just wanted to relax and not be annoyed by anything for a short period of time.

That my participants only managed to experience enjoyment on TikTok through a complex negotiation of trust underlines the fragility of these relationships. And it contrasts popular narratives of scrollers as mind-controlled victims of powerful algorithms (see Smith 2021). In relation to the argument of the thesis, this means the following. The stories of my participants speak on how we should interpret ordinary people going about their daily lives in commercial and surveillant online spaces. They do so, as I have shown, in a way that shows some form of resilience towards blocking direct top-down control when engaging with TikTok. This resilience is not just personal, but also social and shared, for instance in the form of stories through which

scrollers provide each other with emotional reassurance and guidance. In the next and final empirical chapter, I will turn towards the idea of sharing in focus.

8. TikTok as socio-cultural resource

8.1 Looking beyond the self

In this chapter, I look at how TikTok content is consumed beyond the platform boundary. Doing so, I further elaborate my position opened in the previous chapter. I argued that recommender systems are predominantly seen as “technologies of the self” (Karakayali et al. 2017). Because of that, they are often evaluated in relation to questions of self-identity and the direction interactions that people have with them. I expand this perspectives by looking at recommender systems as social resources that people mine for opportunities to articulate interpersonal relationships.

Early during fieldwork, I noticed how sharing TikTok videos played a central role in my participants’ use of the app. Almost all of them shared TikTok videos with friends, roommates, siblings, parents, or other close social ties. Previous studies on TikTok have not paid too much attention to interpersonal content sharing practices. Scholars do not disregard their existence. For example, Simpson et al. (2022: 10) touch on sharing practices in explaining how people first became aware of the app and interested in using it. However, scholars mostly note rather than investigate. My ethnographic approach demanded such further investigation.

Within sharing practices we come to see another dimension where consequences, but also power, of TikTok materialises, the dimension of social network dynamics. As mentioned, my participants engaged with TikTok primarily by and for themselves (see Chapter 5). Similar to previous research on the app, I found that motivations for TikTok consumption were escapist in nature (see Jang 2021, Omar and Dequan 2020, Scherr and Wang 2021). However, explicitly

asking people about their motivation offers only limited understanding of its role in their lives, as scholars like Tim Markham (2023: 7) underline more broadly.

My participants did not go on TikTok because they wanted to find shareable videos. Yet, this is what they ended up doing. On their “For You” pages, they felt reminded of people they know and care about. Sharing this content provided opportunities to articulate relationships. My participants shared, as in sent, a couple of TikTok videos at least a every other day to friends or family members. Many shared content on a daily basis. I was told, furthermore, that TikTok content, memes, and trends were increasingly referenced in everyday conversations.

In this way, sharing practices are to be seen as a crucial element of TikTok consumption. Aligning with Siles (2023: 29), I see these sharing practices through the work of Silverstone (1994). He understands content as a “currency” or resource that people use to create different meanings in different contexts. Siles (2023) further highlights how sharing can fulfil different purposes herein. These purposes range from signalling good taste (2023: 119) over opening “a window onto the self” (2023: 126) to simply maintaining social relationships (2023: 135).

My focus is on this last form. Amongst my participants, this was the dominant purpose of content sharing. For them, sharing was about enhancing social interaction (Kenndey 2016). Similar to the findings of Scharlach and Hallinan (2023), my participants associated sharing practices with values of care and togetherness – and they experienced content sharing as a convenient form of social interaction. I hence see sharing practices as vital to how personalised content feeds become meaningful, namely as a resource that allows people to articulate relationships in creative ways. Furthermore, it is through the usage of TikTok as such a resource, that its power becomes further established.

I advance this argument in the following way. I start by discussing how participants encountered TikTok content beyond the platform. Then, I outline different forms of content sharing. These cover a range from sending video clips via messaging apps to posting them on other platforms to watching videos together with others. I show how TikTok content has come to function as a crucial cultural resource on which participants relied to facilitate meaningful social interaction. In this light, I show how sharing practices enable communion but also sparked tensions in relationships. Closing the chapter, I more broadly suggest thinking about consumption practices through the notion of dis/connection.

By doing the above, the chapter consolidates the argument of the thesis. TikTok exemplifies the ambivalent nature of online environments. It is at once a site of personalised consumption and social connection. TikTok is both a resource to withdraw from everyday social life by scrolling, and a resource that enables meaningful re-connection through content sharing. In both scrolling and sharing we see TikTok's meaningfulness materialise as an everyday technology, and we are once again confronted with the dialectical nature of media consumption (Silverstone 1994).

As much as sharing content is enabling social interaction, it is also enabling of TikTok as capitalist enterprise. That is in so far as people open the door for TikTok into their lives as they consume and share content through the app. Scrolling and sharing are dis/connective in a twofold manner, therefore. They allow negotiating self-other relationality in the domain of everyday life. Yet they also constitute the practical contexts in which technologies like TikTok realise surveillant capacities, be that in relation to surveilling and influencing scrollers, or their friends with whom content is shared.

8.2 Crossing the platform boundary

During my fieldwork, media and news discourses have shown a consistent interest in the app. This was because of TikTok's rapid growth, but also its origins outside the Silicon Valley, as discussed earlier. Aside from that discussion of TikTok as an app in media discourses, TikTok content had also been widely circulated around the web. It is beyond the platform boundary that we see a different modality of how meaning is derived from (shared) TikTok content, extending beyond that of the commercial category of "you" (Turow 2012) and the algorithmic context of the "For You" page.

Some of my participants, such as Sunder, at least at the start of my project, still preferred consuming TikTok content in this way. When I first spoke to him, he had told me that he disliked sorting through the "For You" page. He would often just "wait for things to kind of present themselves through something like Twitter or even Instagram". This desire for things to present themselves resonated with the observation of pop culture report Brittany Spanos (2019). She concluded a 7-day experiment of using TikTok by writing: "I like my content curated, thank you very much, and the relentless, churning chaos of TikTok is something I may never be able to keep up with at the source" (Spanos 2019: para 16).

As I have underscored previously, scrolling is not a passive or mindless activity, as sometimes suggested in popular discourses. It requires skill and commitment to practice scrolling in a way that is productive of desired experiences, such as feeling relaxed or inspired. The comments by Spanos and Sunder are thus not surprising. They underline that scrolling requires 'reading for personalisation' (Chapter 7). Hajna told me, similarly, how her boyfriend and sister also did not

use TikTok because of the effort it requires to find good content. Nonetheless, as Hajna explained, the two still end up consuming TikTok content.

“My sister and my boyfriend don’t want to have anything to with TikTok. And my boyfriend, when I show him a video, he is just like ‘oh, why again this stupid app?’ And she’s the same. But it’s funny, because TikTok videos come up on their Instagram feeds, and they both send me videos, funny videos, and show me them, and I’m like ‘that is a TikTok ... it’s just not on the app’ [laughs] I think it’s quite hard to avoid, because the videos are everywhere now. Same on Facebook, they are on Facebook as well”. (Hajna)

The way in which TikTok content presented itself to peoples on other platforms was often linked to its virality. Where Spanos (2019) labels TikTok as “the source”, other commentators speak of TikTok as a “meme breeding ground” (Martin 2019). Doing so, they are referring to the fact that seemingly every new trends or memes popular on social media would have its origins on TikTok (Walker 2022). As the quote of Hajna shows, it felt hard for people to fully avoid TikTok. Even on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter, they would continuously be confronted by content from the app. How TikTok content spreads and goes viral is not of my interest here, however. Much rather, it is the interpersonal dynamics that revolve around shared TikTok content that I’m interested in.

As the quote from Hajna shows, even amongst people of similar age, TikTok remained a difficult topic. While Hajna enjoyed using the app, her boyfriend and sister did not. The dynamic that TikTok mediated between Hajna, her sister, and her boyfriend was not uncommon. Many participants had a partner, sibling, or close friends who did not use TikTok and, moreover, did not think too highly of it. Nonetheless, they enjoyed TikTok content when it was shared, or

when they encountered it elsewhere. Similarly, parents of a lot of participants appeared to be frequent consumers of TikTok content, despite not being on the app. Antonio gave the following example.

“During March and April I went back to my parents’ place to spend time with them during lockdown, so I’m not lonely in London [laughs]. There was a coffee trend going on, on TikTok, at that time, and they were like, ‘oh, I saw this video, apparently it’s from TikTok’ ... they found it on Facebook, obviously, because that’s the platform they use ... um ... but apparently ‘it’s from TikTok, and we should try it’. And then we tried it and that was it ... They don’t have the app, but I do think they get the content from TikTok through Facebook”. (Antonio)

What we can see here is, so to speak, a completely different form of engaging with and consuming TikTok content. It is different to what was outlined in Chapter 6 where I described scrolling as a form of escapist consumption. Antonio’s parents did not encounter the video of a TikTok coffee making trend on the app itself. They saw it on Facebook. At least so Antonio assumes, given that is the only platform they really use. Finding this video there is not surprising, because the nature of this content is by no means unique to TikTok. Yet, the context in which it is consumed is different, lending it different meanings. It is de-contextualised from the mosaic structure of the “For You” page (Chapter 5) and shared in social networks. There, it serves the purpose of enabling social interaction. Antonio’s parents encountered this video on Facebook and saw within it an opportunity to do something together as a family.

During the pandemic, TikTok has been highlighted as a platform on which intergenerational solidarity was fostered (Nouwen and Duflos 2022). Discussions there, however, mostly revolved

around TikTok as an online space where people of all ages could participate in a “lockdown public” (Kendall 2021). TikTok facilitated communion in the form of an algorithmically mediated “For Us” network, for example (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin 2022). What we see in stories like that of Antonio is a more private form of this networking, and one impacted by algorithms and virality in different ways. For example, back in 2020, the presence of TikTok videos across the web had reached a point that some people didn’t even associate TikTok videos with TikTok anymore. As Mona told me:

“My mom doesn’t use TikTok, but she has sent me TikTok videos that she saves on her phone. She probably gets them from other people on WhatsApp. She doesn’t even know she is consuming TikTok content. She just thought the content was funny, so she was like, ‘alright, I’m gonna share this’”. (Mona)

For Mona’s mother, consuming TikTok content is less a form of personal entertainment than social connection. This was not just relevant during the pandemic and attempts of trying to make light of a frightening situation. We also need to consider that Mona lives in London, but her mother in South America. As Mona mentions, her mother does not perceive content shared with her on WhatsApp as TikTok content, but as a ‘funny videos’. More precisely, she sees it as a resource enabling phatic communication. As such I here understand communication for the purpose of communion and relationship maintenance (see Malinowski 1923). There is no concrete information or message in the content shared. Like in the case of Antonio and his parents, TikTok content is merely a means to come together and share a positive experience, an “atmosphere of sociability” created through communication (Malinowski 1923: 315). We can thus say that TikTok content sharing is socio-pragmatic in nature. The case of Hannes, a journalist, nicely allows us to contrast these interpersonal from more public sharing practices.

“I think when I share things on Twitter, I primarily share ... there’s a lot of social activism you see on TikTok nowadays. It’s been a lot when it comes to Trump rallies, which I’ve shared with my Twitter, because they’re quite interested in how I guess young people are organising using TikTok. When I’m sharing it with friends it’s normally a private joke we mentioned but in like a ‘hey look, this has come up’ kind of way”. (Hannes)

What we can see in the above quote is how both the meaning of sharing, and the content shared, differs depending on its context. When Hannes shares TikTok videos in his role as a journalist on Twitter, he does so with the intention to provide his followers with information. In the specific case mentioned, Hannes shared TikTok videos relating to a current affairs topic to show his Twitter followers how people on TikTok engaged with it. In contrast, when Hannes shares TikTok content with his friends, his aim is to perform a ritual, the in-joke, through which his friends are bound together as a group. In a different context, that of the TikTok use of Australian teenagers, McLean et al. (2023) make a similar observation. They found that content sharing is a form of care, and they argue that through this care work, relationships are articulated by opening a space in which people can see themselves as friends.

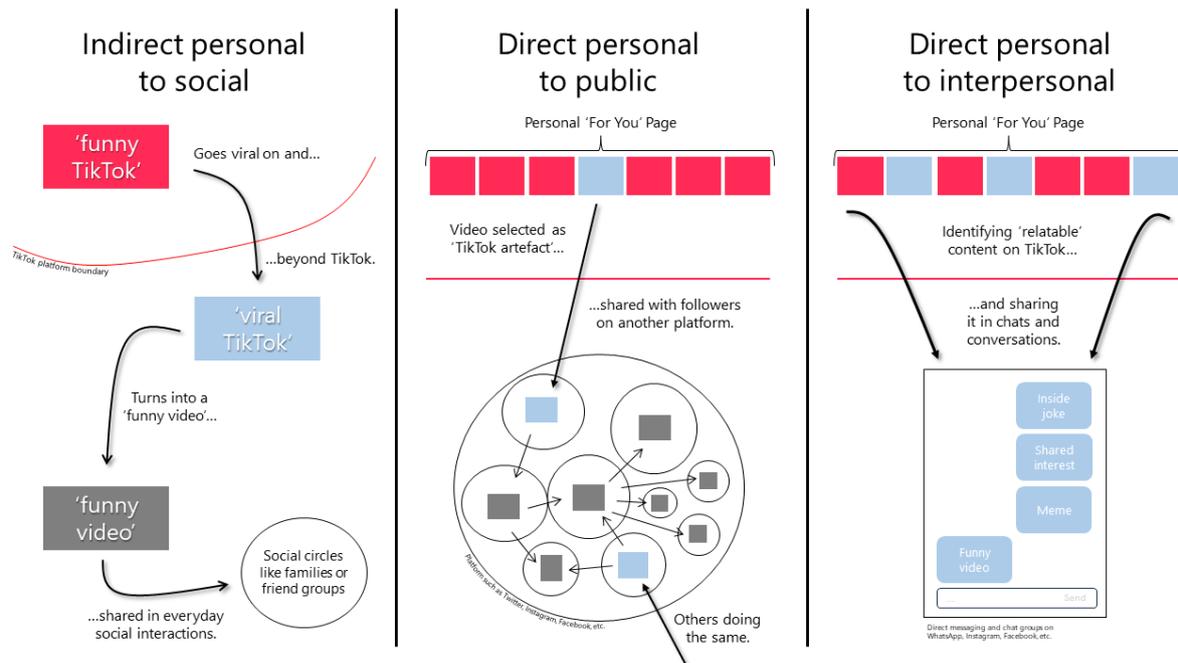


Figure 10 Illustration of TikTok content sharing dynamics.

The examples discussed in this section illustrate how content is being ‘socialised’, so to speak (in a way that Silverstone 1994: 130 speaks about “conversion”). The fact that TikTok videos, in and by themselves, often appear random to people adds towards this notion of them being a socio-cultural resource, that is something easily positioned and utilised for meaning-making across contexts. As Siles (2023: 136) writes for the case of personalised social media, the logic at work here is “to singularize videos that had been circulating for everybody” and to transform “algorithmic recommendations for many into singular suggestion for some”.

In the above figure, I summarise the three main applications of this logic that Siles (2023: 136) outlines and I have touched on in this section. The first relates to the cases of Hajna, Antonio, and Mona. It illustrates the flow of a video going viral and spreading through the internet until it becomes a ‘funny video’ shared in everyday interactions between family members or partners. The second outlines the re-contextualisation of a TikTok video from personal content feeds

into wider public discussions. The story of Hannes described this from his point of view as a journalist, selecting TikTok content as artefacts, he shares and discusses with his followers on Twitter.

Both of these are interesting. It is the third dynamic, however, which is of my main focus. It represents the primary way in which my participants shared content. Hannes spoke about it in the context of sharing videos relating to in-jokes. The next sections will focus on two elements of re-contextualising TikTok videos from a personal to an interpersonal environment. First, I discuss how TikTok affords sharing through its design and quality of content. Secondly, I discuss the relationship dynamics unfolding around shared TikTok content. Overall, I will show that sharing is both enabling of sociality and extensive of TikTok's surveillance and data extraction practices.

8.3 Eased and coerced participation

A decade ago, John (2012) surveyed how social media platforms present themselves. Back then, “sharing”, in its various meanings, appeared the “fundamental and constitutive activity” of social media (John 2012: 167). Today, however, as John finds, sharing more so seems to “be carrying out its cultural work in the background” (John 2022: 15). I’m interested in exactly this kind of background work of sharing, meaning sharing as a praxis (Kennedy 2016). As van Dijck (2013: 156) has argued, “whereas some platforms try to lock in apps and users by making their features and services incompatible with their competitors, others opt for ubiquitous presence of all features on all platforms”. TikTok, like most major online platforms, follows this latter strategy. A lot of participants perceived TikTok as Mona described in the below quote.

“TikTok is quite well integrated with other platforms, I found, in terms of that you can just send it. I tend to send it via Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp, that’s where like my main sort of chats happen. And it will normally be I’ll see something and be like oh that’s something this person does or that’s something this person would find funny.”

(Mona)

Generally, participants perceived the technical shareability of TikTok content as very easy and straightforward (resonating with the findings of Scharlach and Hallinan 2023: 6). Almost all major social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, or Twitter provide people with ample features that enable the sharing of content. That is to say, they offer features which enable people to re-distribute content to other platforms, like messaging services. TikTok embraced this normalisation of content sharing features to a point that it even allows people to download content through the app during my fieldwork period. Hajna talked about this in relation to sharing content with people who are not on TikTok.

“I usually send TikTok videos on Snapchat because it comes up as a purple video, and then you can, like, watch it. So I usually send them on that. But sometimes I do send them to my family as well, I would say that. Because there is quite a lot on there about families and stuff. I send them, and we have a group chat on WhatsApp. I just save the videos on my phone instead of sending them a link, because it’s just easier”. (Hajna)

What we can see in the above quotes from Hajna and Mona is how through sharing practices, TikTok becomes integrated into polymedia environments. Like Mona mentioned, her main chats and conversations would unfold on platforms other than TikTok. Apps like Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Snapchat, or Instagram were the primary tools my participants used for

social interaction with their friends or family. And, as I have shown in Chapter 6, my participants primarily engaged with TikTok to disconnect from the sociality afforded by such sites. Yet, simultaneously, the technical affordances of the TikTok platform enabled re-connection to these very sites, and thus a return from escapist pleasure to everyday sociality.

What is particularly interesting about Hanja's quote is how we can see the way in which different platforms and apps are given different communicative purposes (see Boczkowski et al. 2018 and Madianou and Miller 2012). When wanting to engage with close friends and peers, Hajna would use Snapchat. However, when trying to connect with her family, she would use their WhatsApp family group chat. Moreover, Hajna's case shows how it is not just the affordances of TikTok that enable this integration. Rather, the choice and use of the given affordances, too, matters. As Hajna said, she did not just share a link to a TikTok video with her parents and siblings on WhatsApp. Instead, Hajna would save, meaning download, the video and then upload it into the group chat. Hajna does so because she found this makes it easier for her parents, and other people that don't have the app, to consume shared content.

Although participants found sharing TikTok content to other platforms easy, I was often told, and noticed, how they found sharing videos within the app even more convenient. On the one side, participants told me how just having the app installed made watching the content easier instead of having to open a link in their web browser. On the other side, some increasingly preferred sharing TikTok videos through the app's built-in direct messaging function. The story of Agatha is an extreme case in this context.

Like many teenagers, Agatha's sister was using TikTok much earlier than she did. Moreover, for her sister and her friends, TikTok was one if not the primary social network site (De Leyn et al. 2021). In this context, Agatha explained:

“The reason why I got TikTok is because my sister, she's thirteen, and her and all of her friends use it, and she'll be like 'oh look at this really funny video'. And I'll be like 'send it to me', but I didn't have TikTok so 'ok, cool, I get TikTok'. It was kind of a way for me and my sister staying in contact via the TikTok app. We send each other funny videos. But that's basically all I really do on TikTok. I try and find funny videos that I can send to my sister [laughs]”. (Agatha)

Agatha was the only person in my study that said they primarily use the app to share content. Further, she only told me so at a later point in a conversation that mostly revolved around her personal content consumption. In other words, Agatha still would, like other participants, scroll through TikTok for personal pleasure and relaxation. However, for Agatha, TikTok had become especially meaningful as a tool to stay in touch with her younger sister. The stories that other participants who had younger siblings aligned with that of Agatha.

Those who had younger siblings mentioned how they felt TikTok afforded them a new way to relate to them on shared cultural grounds. Throughout my fieldwork, I was also told how friends and older siblings had picked up the TikTok app, with a similar dynamic emerging. Continuously being sent TikTok videos, and surrounded by them elsewhere on the internet, people made the decision to finally pick up the app as well (see also Siles 2023: 132). When I asked Lisa in mid-2021 how many of her friends are now using TikTok, she said:

“There was definitely kind of a domino effect of people downloading it. Mainly because it would just come up in conversations. And then it would be like ‘oh, have you not seen this TikTok? You should get it. It would be so much easier to send you these things if you had the app.’”. (Lisa)

What we can see in stories like that of Lisa, but also Agatha, is how TikTok’s affordances of shareability enable the app to exercise a form of “coerced digital participation”, which is here referring not to a forceful but subtle exertion of pressure shaping behaviours (Barassi 2019). The crux of the matter is the following. Popular media have always exercised a form of pressure through their advocates in social groups. In order to be on the in, one is coerced into consuming the popular. What renders TikTok different is that with such consumption today comes tracking, meaning coerced participation in a space of surveillance and data extraction.

As I have argued in Chapter 5, TikTok utilises more or less the same set of web tracking technologies to gather data about all around the web that services like Google use. This includes tracking people who interact with TikTok services, or websites that have TikTok tracking pixels installed. TikTok’s shareability affordances fit within this larger logic and strategy of expansive data collection. TikTok makes its content easily accessible across the web, from a technical point of view. This helps grow its popularity and has created a public image of TikTok as “the source” (Spanos 2019) from which content spreads throughout social networks. In this way, as the stories of Agatha and Lisa illustrate, shareability functions as a growth mechanism that helps TikTok to expand its reach to more people and devices.

We can understand this point by borrowing from Silverstone (1994: 50). TikTok sharing practices might be enabling of social interaction. However, they are also enabling of TikTok’s

extractivist and surveillant practices. The scroller is inadvertently productive as a data subject to TikTok's commercial goals (Chapter 7). The picture we are presented with here is similar. The sharer, too, inadvertently produces value for TikTok. Sharing helps build cultural capital around the app, and it is supportive of the platform's reach. Or, as Siles (2023: 134) writes, sharing "operates as an exchange of content with friends and a continuous enrolment through the platform".

Similar to the traditional gift exchange scenario (Mauss 1990), one could argue, sharing content creates a kind of obligation for the other to react and reciprocate. Thus, sharers exercise a form of subtle pressure to engage with TikTok to respond to shared content, often by sharing content as well. If people don't do so, as Siles (2023: 135) notes, they risk being perceived as a "bad friend". Moreover, Siles (2023: 138) continues by arguing how the reliability of TikTok as a resource strengthens the attachment of the scroller to the platform. This aligns with the observation I made in Chapter 7. To reiterate, a sense of trust into TikTok and its algorithmic system is developed based on its perceived reliability in delivering meaningful content. Shareworthy content is one type of meaningful content.

In the remainder of the chapter, I will further develop this position by answering two questions. Firstly, in the following section, I discuss the question of what makes TikTok content particularly shareworthy and thus a resource people 'mine' for meaning-making opportunities. Thereafter, I will locate the exact place that TikTok slowly starts to occupy within social networks more closely.

8.4 Keeping relationships alive

In the previous section, I outlined how TikTok's technical affordances ease the process of content sharing. If TikTok content would not be shareworthy, however, these technical affordances would have no such consequence. As mentioned, by now almost all platforms provide people with the technical affordances that give them the opportunity to share, as in re-distribute, content on other platforms and apps. TikTok is part of and embraces this development. Yet, both the format and personalised nature of TikTok content sets it apart from other services in its shareability.

TikTok content was widely shared within my participants' social circles. It was shared because video seemed highly shareable. The relatability of TikTok content played a central role in affording this shareability. This attractiveness leads to TikTok videos functioning as content that allows to meaningfully fill gaps in interpersonal relationships. My participants did, for the most part, not just share any funny video they saw. Rather, they would, so to speak, mine their content feeds for bits they could use to articulate relationships. In such ways, we can see the increasingly constitutive place that TikTok's recommender system occupies in relation to social practices and social formation, extending the focus beyond a personal domain of self-identity work (Karakayali et al. 2018).

The most common way in which my participants ended up sharing TikTok content with their friends and family was when they saw a video on their "For You" page that reminded them of someone else. Even though scrolling by and for themselves, they would be reminded of people they knew in the videos they encounter on their personalised content feed. As noted in Chapter 6, in this regard TikTok offers only a light form of escapism. Engaging with the app, one does not totally leave behind life as one knows it. Instead, on TikTok, one engages with content that

creates a representation of life that feels relatable and joyful because it is merely stripped from worries and social obligations.

As such, TikTok is not only well-equipped to help one escape from, but also return to, life in the here and now. Resultingly, sharing content was a common aspect of routines of TikTok scrolling amongst the young adults I worked with. For example, when I asked Manu for how long she would normally scroll, she replied by saying the following.

“I mean, it definitely has been an hour before [laughs] but it’s normally twenty minutes or something, I think ... it might be like twenty minutes to half an hour, and then I’ll send a few videos to my friends as well, like, you know ... I’ll see one and think ‘oh, that friend will find that funny’ or ‘this group of friends would find it funny’”. (Manu)

Descriptions like Manu gave it were common. My participants would approach TikTok for personal pleasure. Nonetheless, a sense of connection to and care for one’s social relations remained present within this desired experience of disconnection. Antonio, similarly, talked about the content he would share with his friends off his “For You” page.

“Most of the time I’ll be like ‘oh, that’s very me’ or ‘oh, that’s very you’. It will be like that. I send stuff that is relatable, that they could kind of or laugh along or get the joke, or I send it to them and a message that is like ‘haha this so you ...’”. (Antonio)

What exact content would be shared can thus be observed in relation to both the accuracy and inaccuracy of TikTok’s personalisation efforts. For example, the videos that Manu mentioned she would share would also sometimes be videos that popped up on her “For You” page, she herself didn’t find funny, but thought someone she knew likely will. Sharing was for some thus

a by-product of 'reading for personalisation' on the "For You" page (Chapter 7). However, sharing behaviour was also prompted in relation to the accuracy of the TikTok "For You" page. After all, people's interests and tastes will have at least some overlap with that of close social ties.

As Miller (2013) has prominently shown, consumption is often falsely rendered as an individualistic practice. Instead, as he argues, relations to others materialise, and are lived out, through practices of consumption. Such practices include not just purchasing goods while shopping, as Miller (2013) discusses, but also the consumption of content. In relation to scrolling on TikTok, we can thus see this in the following two stories.

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

"I have two friends who also use TikTok and our common interests are One Direction and Harry Styles, and that kind of music, and there's so many TikToks about them. Like, inside jokes in the fandom that would come up, and I'd find that hilarious and send that to them, and they'd send me some". (Velta)

Both Isobel and Velta engaged with TikTok for personal entertainment. Yet, the videos they would see on their "For You" page not only addressed their escapist desires. Isobel and Velta also used the content from this personalised content feed to relate to their friends on the grounds of shared interests, tastes, or cultural backgrounds. In consequence, Velta said that since using TikTok, "I've mostly grown a lot closer to my existing friends" (Velta).

Prior research has shown that sharing small bits out of one's everyday life plays a key role in how relationships are maintained at a distance (Bayer et al. 2016 and Madianou 2016). During the pandemic in particular, the role of such sharing practices was accentuated due to social distancing measures. TikTok is interesting because the type of content shared is only a reference of a given relationship or life situation. The TikTok videos my participants shared were not their own creations. They were videos that other people had uploaded to TikTok. One example Joyce gave me nicely illustrates how such content comes to enable the maintenance of interpersonal relations in being a reference of them.

“I share videos with my sister the most because she just enjoys them but doesn't really use TikTok. She's a bit older. I send her any TikTok that ... usually stuff related to our childhood, something that's funny, something that she mentioned or said yesterday and I will be like 'oh, this TikTok literally speaks on that' ... I usually send it to my sister. And then my friends also tag me stuff, that's how we communicate”. (Joyce)

What I found interesting about Joyce's quote was how she mentioned “that's how we communicate” in relation to the sharing practices within her friend group. TikTok content was shared to other platforms on which interpersonal relations and social life unfolds normally, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, or even SMS text messages. Gretta described this sharing in group chats, saying: “I share a lot of them with a group chat I have. You'd just scroll through it, and it will be just like TikToks that we've shared ... just, like, stupid stuff” (Gretta).

Gretta's description nicely illustrates something that I noticed with all my participants. It was unusual for deeper conversation to unfold based on sharing TikTok videos. Similarly, this also

did not seem like the desired outcome of sharing. Nonetheless, sharing was a meaningful practice. During lockdowns, when there was often not much going on for people personally, many felt that they had little personal news to share and discuss with friends. Participants like Tanja hence shared videos to keep communication channels active. Jakobson (1960) has theorised such phatic communication acts as means to establish and manage conversation flow – extending my earlier discussion of phatic communication with reference to Malinowski's (1923) work on communion. When Tanja shares videos, she does so with the intention of saying, indirectly, that “I am thinking about you”. Tanja explained that for her, TikTok is “personal but also interactive with how you can just ... without directly messaging someone, you can just let them know that you are thinking of them”.

These practices are not unique to TikTok, and they relate to the idea of ambient co-presence (Madianou 2016) mentioned earlier. By sharing fun and relatable TikTok videos, participants activate communication channels and establish presence in times when there are no new stories to be written in the respective interpersonal biographies. Similarly, we can make sense of them as part of the domain of haptic intimacy that Hjorth and Richardson (2020) have theorised around mobile media usage. As people are increasingly in touch with the world through their smartphone screens, content sharing is a vital mechanism people use to establish presence on their friend's phone screens, so to say. They generate, in other words, a surface area (the chat in which shared videos appear) that allows others not just to perceive the presence, but also react and tap into it – that is, it creates a virtual space to be in touch with each other.

Moreover, as the examples discussed in this section have shown, in their TikTok consumption, participants oscillated between a personal (scroller) and social position (sharer). They engaged

with the app for personal pleasure yet also mined it for opportunities to open space for mediated sociality. In these acts of phatic communication, we can thus see the active role that people play in re-contextualising and giving meaning to TikTok content. By sharing TikTok content with close social ties, people give meaning to a specific video, be it only seconds in length, as it allows mediating a given relationship. As a resource, TikTok content can here be observed in a variety of relationships. Participants like Joyce shared content with their sibling to reflect on a conversation they had, or their childhood. Participants like Isobel or Velta shared content with friends on the grounds of shared tastes or fandoms. However, for other participants, like Tanja, TikTok content appears useful as a resource to simply reach out to people and communication channels alive in the absence of other things to talk about.

Seen from this angle, there is thus an argument to be made that ideas of algorithmic content feeds as mirrors and sites of introspection (see Bhandari and Bimo 2022 or Lee et al. 2022) are too limited. The way in which TikTok integrates into people's lives appears to be through content sharing. In this way, the institutional knowledge logics (Gillespie 2014) that are expressed through its algorithm will influence not just people's sense of self but beyond that also how they interact with others in their social circle. We are thus able to observe the subtle ways in which digital media come to fill the in-between spaces of everyday social lives. TikTok does not just fill gaps in my participants' daily schedules (Chapter 6). Rather, TikTok content also bridges gaps in interpersonal biographies. I will continue to unpack and reflection on this argument in the following two sections.

8.5 Curating shared experiences

The most common way in which participants shared TikTok content was at a distance. This was not just the case during periods of lockdown and social distancing measures, meaning times where meeting others was impossible and illegal. Participants generally would scroll through TikTok when being alone. Finding content whilst scrolling in such situations, they would share it in the moment. As mentioned earlier, participants either shared videos directly on the TikTok app, through its built-in messaging feature, or to other apps and social network sites like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat. However, occasionally, participants would also share videos with people in a setting of physical co-presence.

In this section, I will discuss this form of TikTok sharing. More specifically, I reflect on how TikTok content sharing allows to mediate distance and closeness in social networks. Doing so, I will show how the distance people bridge is not just a physical one. By sharing content, people transform their personalised online spaces into social ones, creating a room for shared experiences, discussions, and reflections to unfold. A good example to start this discussion is the case of Antonio. Talking about sharing videos, he mentioned the following to me.

“I definitely just use it mainly just for me. I don’t really ... unless I find something really funny that one of my housemates will find funny, I’ll go to their room and show that TikTok. Other than that, I either just link or share them the video. Only because, yeah, I enjoy laughing on my own [laughs]”. (Antonio)

Antonio underscores how his primary use of TikTok is driven by a desire for personal pleasure. As he says, he just enjoys laughing on his own. Nonetheless, he still shared funny videos with his friends, momentarily transitioning from a personal to a social use of the app. What we can see here is how Antonio differentiates sharing at a distance and sharing in a setting of physical

co-presence based on the quality of content shared. If a video is just generally funny, Antonio prefers sharing it digitally. If a video is exceptionally funny, however, Antonio will get up, go to his housemate's room, and directly show them the video.

Most of my participants liked to share content yet also valued their personal use of the app. Only a few participants actually enjoyed scrolling through TikTok together with others. Rini explained this in the following way.

“Certain people wanna watch videos over and over ... it's kind of just, I don't know, sometimes it's just annoying to share those things when you have to be conscious of someone's cues of when they wanna re-watch a video or go back or something like that”.

(Rini)

For participants, it appeared that there is a considerable overlap between what content they see on their “For You” page and what their friends would enjoy, find funny, and could relate to. However, at the same time, scrolling through that content feed together with another person also appeared to take something away from, rather than add to, the experience. Instead of scrolling together, what Rini mentioned she would occasionally do is share specific videos in a setting of physical co-presence. The example that Rini remembered was when she and her mother were travelling on the train. In that situation, Rini told me, to pass the time, she opened TikTok on her phone and specifically looked for videos of cats, because she knew her mother would like them.

Some of my participants, however, would consume and scroll through TikTok together with another person. For example, Adna was friends with another participant, Manu. During the pandemic, they formed a ‘bubble’ between their two households, which allowed them to

physically meet. Asking Adna about how Manu and her share TikTok videos with each other, she mentioned that occasionally when she hangs out with Manu, they would scroll through TikTok together for a bit. As she described:

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

While for Adna and Manu it was rare to sit down together to scroll, some of my participants did it more regularly. Joyce, for example, talked about TikTok in the context of interacting with her sister.

“With my younger sister, who is not at our house at the moment, but when she was before going back to school, we would use TikTok all the time throughout the day and compare our ‘For You’ pages ... it’s basically just like watching tv together”. (Joyce)

Joyce and her sister would not necessarily scroll together on one phone but, instead, compare and share content from their individual “For You” pages. Interestingly, Joyce says that TikTok has a similar social function as rituals like watching television together have. The role of the television in doing family has prominently been theorised (Morley 1986 or Lull 1990). TikTok being homologous to the television as a social technology is not what is interesting here, however. Bovill and Livingstone (1999) have outlined how, in contexts that of the United Kingdom, the early settings of living room family television were followed by a more fragmented “bedroom culture” of individualised media consumption. TikTok can be seen within this larger trend of media consumption having turned increasingly private and individualised on a material level. Smartphones are, obviously, used in public spaces beyond the bedroom, and TikTok does

constitute a public space in its own right that one is part of when scrolling (Zulli and Zulli 2020). In both such spaces, however, individualised consumption has prominently been criticized. Technologies from the iPod (Bull 2007) over mobile phones (Turkle 2011) to personalisation logics (Chun 2017) are positioned in these contexts as shifting the focus of media environments towards the individual ‘you’ and away from the collective ‘us’.

My data challenges such critiques to some extent. Following Prior (2014), what we see in stories like that of my participants is a shift in how interaction and communion are facilitated. Prior outlined this through the iPod as means of social connection. Working with young adults in the United Kingdom, he showed how they would use iPods for personal music consumption whilst also sharing their tastes and interests through them – for example, by linking the iPod to a speaker system for collective listening. TikTok is not different here. It is part of a “bedroom culture” of privatised media consumption (Bovill and Livingstone 1999). As such, TikTok enables identity exploration and personal escape, creating distance to others. At the same time, it also opens and extends the bedroom as a social space, bridging distance and mediating senses of closeness.

At times, TikTok is even connective within the bedroom in a literal sense. One of my participants, Sunder, enjoyed scrolling on TikTok before falling asleep to clear his mind. His wife would do the same. Both would scroll on their individual phones, every now and then turning it around when they discovered a video the other might find interesting or funny. For Sunder and his wife, TikTok functions as a mediator of the shared bedroom space, allowing the two to be at once engaged with their individual consumption and experience as a couple. Further, the nature of TikTok as a content resource appears enabling of such interactions more than longer form media that are individually consumed, such as novels, for instance. In other words, the “For

You” page offers a higher density of opportunities to share content with a significant other than more contained narratives like that of novels.

Generally speaking, TikTok content sharing between partners was not uncommon. Among those of my participants that were in a romantic relationship, most mentioned that their partner wasn't using TikTok, Sunder being an exception here. Benjamin, who mostly would be served comedy and dance related videos on TikTok, added in that context the following:

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

Similarly, none of my participants mentioned that when they shared and watched TikTok videos together with their partner, that it was in the form that Benjamin rendered it unlikely, that of saying “hey, let's scroll through TikTok together”. Participants would share TikTok videos with their partners as they would with their friends. They would see something they think their partner might find funny and send it to them using an app like WhatsApp. Even though most partners wouldn't use TikTok themselves, they still would like and enjoy seeing these kinds of selected funny bits of TikTok content shared with them. Hajna explained it in the way that her boyfriend “sort of laughs at the videos but doesn't really care for it” (Hajna).

Often participants with partners mentioned to me that their partner liked the content, but not the process of how one has to discover it on TikTok, the process of scrolling and sorting through the “For You” page, a content feed that was perceived as mostly accurate yet also not all the

time. That is why some of my participants shared videos with their partners in a way, as Bea explained it to me:

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

Even though participants primarily enjoyed TikTok for personal pleasure, it also played a role in mediating their close relationships and settings of everyday life. TikTok materialises as a resource for that mediation yet also is a point of friction along which relationships play out and are developed. For example, Bea mentioned that she doesn’t just curate these montages of funny videos to be able to create a meaningful experience of co-presence for her and her boyfriend to enjoy. She also wants to communicate to him the message of: “hey, this app actually is great” (Bea). She tries to create more acceptance for the app that brings her pleasure, while many people, like her boyfriend, still talked about TikTok as being a sort of lesser form of entertainment.

Put differently, mobile phone apps like TikTok have enabled more personalised and individualised forms of media consumption. Yet this is not to be mistaken for that consumption to unfold in a social vacuum. Neither is it to be mistaken for people to desire purely individual experiences from an app like TikTok. TikTok was meaningful to my participants in enabling both. They enjoyed having an app that helped them create ‘me space’ in their daily routines (Chapter 5). Yet, they also enjoyed that fact that they could mine their “For You” page for opportunities to meaningfully interact with significant others. Similarly, as much as scrolling

can be disruptive of everyday routines (Chapter 6), sharing TikTok does not only have positive consequences either.

As stories like that of Bea illustrate, tensions within relationships are played out, and in some cases amplified, around sharing TikTok – similar to the ways in which relationship dynamics have been played out around other media technologies, like the television (Morley 1986). Using the app is part of the routinised movements through the home space through which people try to “feel right” (Pink and Leder Mackley 2013). Like examples of Bea thus show, when these movements are stopped, physically in that sense even, when they encounter friction in the form others that block the movement, the desired effect of feeling right, that is, ontologically secure (Giddens 1991), is hampered.

In this sense, thinking about how TikTok and its use are shared, we come to better understand not just its meaningfulness, but also the navigational procedures that enable said meaningfulness. Without being able to navigate the social space in which one uses the app, actualising the experiential qualities it affords can become a challenge and struggle for some. I will continue this argument in the next section by looking at how participants reported on TikTok being part of everyday conversational interactions in their social networks.

8.6 Forms of everyday talk

Aside from sharing TikTok videos, either at a distance or in settings of physical co-presence, the app and its content also was a frequent object of everyday conversations. Like other sharing practices, conversations about TikTok, too, helped strengthen ties but also sparked moments of tensions in interpersonal relationships. Conversations about TikTok with parents, and

especially fathers, were one setting which seemed prone to sparking such tensions. Velta, a student originally from India, gave me the following example during our initial conversation in the summer of 2020.

“It was somewhere in January or February when my dad sent me this video of like some government official talking about TikTok collecting data in the US. And he was like, you know, he’s always been wary of the internet and he was like ‘they’re collecting your data, it’s not good, you should not use it’ ... When they banned TikTok in India he was like ‘I told you’ and I was like ‘well, that’s completely different, it’s a political aspect.’” (Velta)

What has to be noted is that Velta had completed a media studies degree. Furthermore, she had written her thesis on the topic of big data. Resultingly, what we can see in the interaction between Velta and her father is not just a tension evolving around parental cautiousness. Instead, we see a tension that revolves around questions of authority within social formations like the family. Velta has studied and reflected on the risks associated with not just TikTok but datafication and digital surveillance more broadly. Such knowledge, and the acknowledgement of such, is mediated through TikTok as a phenomenon when discussed and shared in the family.

Not all of my participants parents behaved like Velta’s father. Nonetheless, knowledge discrepancies marked conversations, especially with parents. When I asked participants if they talk about TikTok with older people, like their parents, many even said they never do and don’t see the point. They explained this by saying that their parents simply would not understand what TikTok is. Given the wide news coverage on TikTok, however, the app came up as a topic in conversations. Sunder, for example, told me the following in relation to speaking about TikTok with his parents.

“As far as people who don’t use the app ... my parents and my wife’s parents, we’ll speak to them sometimes about TikTok, and it’s kind of ... it will come up, they would have heard about it on the radio or somewhere and will kind of have questions or will be kind of talking about TikTok as a phenomenon and ... yeah, on their part it’s usually not them understanding it and then us needing to kind of describe it or explain it and then perhaps showing examples”. (Sunder)

The dynamic in Sunder’s case and that of Velta are different. Velta’s father took a more authoritative stance and tried to regulate the technology use within his family by urging his daughter to stop using the app, regardless of her point of view. In contrast, the parents of Sunder and his wife took a more open stance towards TikTok. Where Velta’s father showed little interest in hearing Velta’s reflections, Sunder’s parents were actively trying to understand the app through the perspective of his and his wife’s experience.

Again, these dynamics are not new. As Lull (1990: 41) has theorised for the case of television, media technologies provide people with a variety of opportunities to fulfil certain social roles and ideals. Velta’s father assumed the position of the ‘family protector’ along TikTok. Sunder and his wife acted as ‘media literate young people’ that explain new technologies to their older parents. Moreover, I was told that exactly such conversations between people who use TikTok and those who didn’t played a crucial role in shaping perception of the app.

Rhea, for example, mentioned how her younger sibling had started using TikTok much earlier than she did. Visiting her family, Rhea remembered the following situation: “I think I showed my sister a video and my dad saw us, and he was confused and said oh ... I thought that was for kids”. Throughout the year in which my fieldwork took place, the public perceptions of TikTok

have changed quite a bit. In our final conversation, Tanja thus reflected on this by telling me the following.

“I said to my friend earlier that I've got another interview about TikTok later, and she was like: ‘It's crazy how you are doing this over a year ago and still doing it like now. It's changed so much’. And I just said: ‘it's the perfect year to do it. Just the slight turn that happened from it being ... well supposedly being a children's app to what it is now’”.

(Tanja)

Tanja's reference to what TikTok had become over time needs to be seen as something ambiguous. Different factors have played a role in changing both what TikTok is and how it (mis)perceived, such as people from a variety of age groups picking up the app and, in return, talking about it with their peers. Through such everyday social interactions, TikTok has lost its dominant kids app image and today appears a much more normal social media app, similar to the likes of Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube. At the same time, other stigmas around the app continued to shape everyday conversations and social interactions. Talking about the changing public perceptions of TikTok, Lisa told the following story.

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

For some participants, like Lisa, identifying as someone who uses TikTok was marked by mixed feelings. Like many others, she was turning to TikTok content, memes, and trends as a cultural

resource in conversations. Yet, as her story shows, some people that were not using TikTok perceived people displaying that TikTok knowledge as addicted to the app. What we see here is another dimension of sharing practices, relating to the display of cultural status as mentioned by Siles (2023: 119), yet in an inverse way. In short, in some social groups, the mere fact of sharing TikTok was already considered as having bad taste by some peers, so to speak.

In contrast, amongst people more open and engaged with TikTok, knowledge about TikTok trends appeared key. Many participants mentioned how TikTok videos had become a normal talking-point in everyday conversations. Manu gave me the following example in this context.

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

Amongst my younger participants, TikTok content has even been taken one step further than just being a talking-point. Especially amongst those that had just finished high school or were first year students, I noticed how they told me that referencing TikTok memes has become part of the way they speak. Like in the case of older participants such as Manu, a recent university graduate, the younger people I worked with also discussed certain TikTok trends and viral content. However, beyond that they would use phrases from TikTok memes and viral content as an ordinary way of self-expression.

The effect of doing so was different to the way in which Lisa experienced it, who also was a recent university graduate in her mid-twenties. Where Lisa was perceived as being a TikTok addict, amongst my younger participants, signalling one's TikTok knowledge opened ways to relate with others as mutuals. We can take the story of Rini as an example. As we saw earlier, when I first met Rini she had just returned from a gap year and was completing an internship at a company in London. Shortly after, Rini had moved to North England to commence her undergraduate studies at university. During this time, Rini told me, her knowledge and referencing of certain TikTok memes, phrases, and trends helped her make friends and meet people on campus:

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

Beyond the sharing of TikTok content, digitally and physically, what we can see here is the cultural significance that TikTok has reached within certain groups, such as young adults living in the United Kingdom, at the end of my fieldwork. As Silverstone (1994: 130) has noted for the case of television: “The appropriation of meanings derived from television, for example, is an indication of membership and competence in a public culture, to whose construction it actively contributes”.

On the one side, participants like Rini were able to foster communion through their display of TikTok knowledge. They can signal to their peers that they are on the in. On the other side, by

using TikTok as a resource in the facilitation of her social relationship, she furthers the significance of TikTok within popular culture. In a certain way, Rini makes herself dependent on TikTok to stay on the in, meaning being able to establish and maintain social ties amongst peers. While I disagree with labels of the TikTok addict, as Lisa have been given them, there is a point within them still. To speak of the addictiveness of TikTok suggests a certain loss of control. TikTok seemingly is able to control what is on Lisa's mind and how she expresses herself. This capacity to control will be limited, and by no means linear or direct, that it could cause a real addiction – constituting and being confused with a habit instead (Chun 2017). Yet still, labels of the TikTok addict show a certain resistance and opposition to the growing impact of TikTok and the consequences that habitual uses of it have on social interaction and self-expression.

In other words, there needs to be a critical engagement with TikTok and the role it plays in everyday social life, and forms of everyday talk. That critical engagement needs to extend beyond academic settings and into social interaction amongst ordinary people. However, I argue that labels of addiction are ineffective to do so. Lisa, as far as I can tell from knowing her, is not addicted to TikTok. In fact, throughout the time that I have worked with her, she has been using the app less and less and felt more and more able to control what she gets out of using it. Nonetheless, TikTok and the content she sees are on her mind. But, at the same time, so will be other topics presented to her on the news, for example. Taking the popular seriously, to follow Hall (1981), requires acknowledging that the resources ordinary people have available to facilitate their everyday life will likely always be imperfect. However, categorical dismissals as not good or addictive forestall such serious debate about TikTok and its growing socio-cultural significance.

8.7 Dis/connective practice

In this chapter, I discussed practices of TikTok content sharing. I started by stressing how TikTok adopts a strategy of shareability to achieve ubiquitous presence of its content across the web. I differentiated the virality of TikTok content with sharing practices that unfold on the level of interpersonal relationships. There, I showed that sharing can be understood as a form of phatic communication. By sharing TikTok content with close social ties, participants did not seek to communicate a specific message. Instead, sharing content had a socio-pragmatic nature. It constitutes a form of communication through social interaction is managed and communion facilitated (see Jakobson 1960 and Malinowski 1923).

I demonstrated how participants mined TikTok as a resource that allowed them to facilitate social interaction and communion. They shared funny videos to let others know that they are thinking of them. Yet, they also shared videos which related to highly specific aspects of a given interpersonal biography. Other platforms, too, provide the technical affordances to share content across the web. However, the form of TikTok content, meaning relatable short-videos, set the platform apart as a resource.

During my fieldwork, I was able to observe how for participants, young adults living in the United Kingdom, TikTok and its content become of increasing significance. TikTok content not only provided an endless resource of funny videos to share with people. It also emerged as frequent talking-points in everyday conversation or provided pieces to reflect on interpersonal biographies. Additionally, for some, popular TikTok memes and phrases had become part of the language they use to express themselves in normal, everyday conversations.

Throughout the chapter, I engaged with the work of Silverstone (1994) and his understanding of media consumption as a dialectical process. On the one side, people appropriate TikTok as a

resource and tool which enables them to engage in meaningful social interaction – and by extension their sense of ontological security (Giddens 1991; also Chapter 6). On the other side, people expand TikTok’s reach and status by sharing content continuously. Drawing on Barassi (2019) and Siles (2023), I argued that sharing practices exercise subtle pressure and coercion for others to engage and participate.

Closing this chapter, I want to reflect on this dialectical nature by returning to my critique with which I opened this chapter. Predominant models of personalisation systems focus on questions of self-identity formation and the role of algorithm therein. In contrast, I have shown another dimension of such systems, namely their role in interpersonal relationship dynamics. As such, we have to assess the power dynamics of TikTok’s algorithm not only in how it may impact the ways in which people perceive and construct a sense of self through the app (see Bhandari and Bimo 2022, Lee et al. 2022). Much rather, we also need to investigate the power of TikTok in how it shapes, although not determines, how self-other relationality is mediated by algorithms (Siles 2023) and shaped in habitual navigations of digital media environments (T. Markham 2020).

To think of TikTok consumption as a dis/connective process is helpful to do so, I argue. TikTok affords and is used as a tool to disconnect from ordinary social life to deal with experiences of stress, anxiety, tiredness, boredom, a lack of inspiration, and so on. In Chapter 6, I discussed how my participants liked about TikTok that they do not see news related content on their “For You” page, or have to engage with the content of their friends and family. For them, scrolling through TikTok was a way of disconnecting from the mediated sociality present on apps like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or WhatsApp.

TikTok was perceived as a 'for you', as something that enables having a moment of 'me time'. In this sense, TikTok is prone to the line of critique that scholars like Turkle (2011) have popularised, namely that tethered to devices the quality of social life declines. The stories of my participants counter such narratives. Even though the young adults I worked with use TikTok to disconnect, the app also provides them opportunities to meaningfully reconnect. Both practices are meaningful. The personal pleasure of occasional disconnection is one part of what makes TikTok meaningful. The opportunity to re-connect with everyday socialities, the other.

It is within this dis/connective dynamic, managing degrees of connectedness through TikTok, that the meanings and powers of TikTok need to be assessed. By sharing TikTok content, something that is personally meaningful is transformed into something that is socially meaningful. My participants re-contextualised videos from one domain of mediated interaction to another – performing the creative work of consumption (Miller 1987). By taking videos from the "For You" page and placing them elsewhere, like a group chat on WhatsApp, they turned personalised entertainment into an artefact enabling communion.

It is within these processes that we come to see most clearly the dialectical nature of TikTok as a technology of popular culture. TikTok enables people to negotiate self-other relationality by affording both disconnection and reconnection, integrating the app ever more deeply into the fabric of the everyday. Thus, in conclusion, I propose for future research to move the analytical focus of personalisation beyond points of contact between algorithms and people. Instead, it is vital to investigate the processes of social media consumption more fully.

As John (2022) argues, the notion of sharing seems to be carrying out its work in the background today. It is background activities, such as sharing TikTok beyond its platform

boundaries, upon which the app's growth and cultural status rest. Inquiring this background is therefore vital to actually understand the meanings and consequences that personalised social media like TikTok will have. As much as TikTok's recommender system might potentially addict people, or shape their sense of self, all such potential effects will never materialise in a social vacuum.

People discuss – meaning, they share – their experience of apps like TikTok with others, and get challenged for certain displayed behaviours, like a seeming TikTok addiction. Thinking about, theorising, and studying the consequences of TikTok as a socially situated phenomenon is thus crucial. It follows the call of Siles (2023) to understand people's relationships with algorithms as enacted – and it resonates with Suchman's (2006) earlier argument on not taking the human and machine for granted as entities. Scrolling and sharing are vital mechanisms of such dis/connection. It is by scrolling that people become entangled as a data subject in TikTok as a space of surveillance (Chapter 7). And it is through sharing, to extend the point of Siles (2023: 134), that sharers enrol the receivers of shared content into the same dialectical cycles of TikTok content consumption.

To assume the position of the scroller and sharer is thus always contradictory. These positions are neither wholly emancipatory nor wholly corrupt, as I have shown across the last three chapters. From within these positions, people are able to craft meaning in self-determined ways. Yet they also become subjects controlled by the limits and constraints of TikTok's design. Thinking about how people negotiate such positions as allows us to broaden our view on the power dynamics of digital platforms like TikTok and their underlying structured of audience commodification. In the next and final chapter of this thesis, I provide a more thorough review of this argument and further reflect on the conclusions that can be drawn from it.

9. Conclusion

9.1 Stories and transformations

I opened this thesis with the story of Tanja scrolling on TikTok to pass time while waiting. I chose her story because it illustrates a very typical form of TikTok use amongst the young adults I met during my fieldwork. Scrolling was just a normal part of their daily routines. It was something relatively unexciting they did to relax, have a laugh, make time pass, find inspiration, or to connect with their peers by finding funny and relatable video clips to share. Across the last chapters, I unpacked these stories to offer a concrete perspective on the meanings but also politics that surround scrolling on TikTok.

As noted in Chapter 4, in my overall analytical approach I intended, following Back (2015), to establish a link between small stories like Tanja's and larger transformations as TikTok embodies them – like the increasing personalisation of online environments (Kant 2020). Moreover, in the introduction, I outlined that my particular ambition was to establish such a link around practices of content consumption. I positioned such as central to the integrity of TikTok, aligning with earlier work on platforms like YouTube (Burgess and Green 2008). TikTok would not be relevant without people scrolling, watching videos, 'liking' them, leaving comments, or sharing them with others. It would neither be relevant as a phenomenon of popular culture nor as a platform offering and selling access to audiences.

From this position, I theorised the business of TikTok as the delivery of an audience, a set of targetable screens that are being attended to. As a company, TikTok is concerned with producing scrollers as controllable data subjects, and ones whose screen-based attention it can

market. Like other digital platforms, TikTok tries to control, and extract value from, the configuration of content consumption. I underlined how the design of the “For You” page, the site where people like Tanja scroll, favours a particular form of consumption. This is a form of consumption in which the commercial category of the ‘you’ (Chun 2017, Turow 2012) stands in the foreground. Moreover, I focussed my analysis on the algorithmic systems of personalisation through which TikTok tries to keep people scrolling and hooked (Smith 2021).

It is these algorithms that sit at the heart of the transformations that TikTok embodies – as noted above, transformations leading towards the creation of personalised and surveillant media environments. I argued that studying such conditions is crucial and that audience studies perspective are vital herein. Drawing on Ang (1991), I defined the task of audience research to understand how people consume media, and how platforms try to shape these processes of consumption. In this light, I set out to understand what goes on in moments of TikTok content consumption. When Tanja was sitting in front of that school building somewhere in the English Midlands, scrolling on her phone, she was not just passing time. She was also being captured as a data subject and globally marketed as a screen that is currently being attended to.

Establishing this link, I was trying to move beyond providing a mere description of the domain of everyday life as a site of capitalist exploitation and control. Rather, I followed Hall (1981) to conceptualise popular culture as contradictory. I theorised the consumption of people like Tanja through a tension between agentic capacities of self-determination and mechanisms of algorithmic control. Here, my objective was not to develop solutions that can help us resolve this tension. Rather, I approached it in the tradition of scholars like Martin-Barbero (1987) who were concerned with understanding how ordinary people “make do” (de Certeau 1984) with media not of their own making. And I positioned my approach alongside that of Siles et al.

(2022a) who advocate studying digital platforms and algorithms as popular culture in this very tradition.

Throughout my empirical analysis, I looked at how people navigated TikTok as a commercial and surveillant space. The ethnographic account I wrote opened a view on how tensions play out in this space, and what their consequences are for different people and in different contexts. My style of ethnographic writing was here one of “writing against” (Abu-Lughod 1991), in many moments contrasting popular images of the app and scrollers. I engaged with popular narratives of TikTok being some kind of “digital crack cocaine” (Koetsier 2020) or that using the app is a “waste of time” (Odell 2019). Further, I tried to evidence scholarly arguments about the transformations that TikTok embodies, for example in relation to a structural erosion of self-making capacities (Couldry and Mejias 2019).

Drawing on the stories of my participants, I showcased how they learned to “carry on” with their daily lives (Giddens 1984) against the constraints imposed by TikTok as a networked architecture and commercial space (boyd 2010). I did so, or at least tried, in a way that acknowledged the cleverness and resourcefulness my participants displayed in their consumption practices. However, I was at the same time mindful of the dialectical nature of media consumption (Silverstone 1994). The image that I was presented with during fieldwork was one of ambivalence and indeterminate positions. I found my participants to be neither completely helpless in the face of powerful algorithms, whilst simultaneously being unable to resist their doing on a fundamental and structural level.

When Tanja was scrolling to pass time, she was not doing so because she is an addict, neither was she wasting time and being distracted from more meaningful things in her life. She was just

waiting. Likewise, in this situation, TikTok did not undermine her capacity of self-determination. On the contrary, it functioned as a useful resource to negotiate her experience in that very moment. This is not to say that TikTok is not problematic, or that it cannot have negative consequences for people's lives, identities, and well-being. However, by opening the view on these small stories, I tried to shed light on the complexity of power at play.

Faced with ambivalence, I ended up posing broader questions throughout my writing and reflexive engagement with stories like that of Tanja. I followed Siles (2023) in underlining the importance of seeing entanglements with mechanisms of surveillance and control as enactments. Drawing on Suchman (2006), I asked more broadly what we can learn about TikTok, and social media in general, if we do not take the categories of human and machine for granted. Before algorithms can have any impact on people scrolling through the content feeds they curate, people need to first assume such a position of the scroller.

In this way, I moved away from qualifying effects and towards qualifying how people become entangled with apps like TikTok in the first place. In short, my thesis opened a view on TikTok's power in relation to producing a durable setting where people come to consume content. During my fieldwork, I encountered such relationships with TikTok that were durable, yet also tense and fragile at the same time. This view at once confirmed the problematic nature of TikTok as a capitalist enterprise whilst also contradicting images of the addict, wasted time, and a profound erosion of self-making abilities.

From this angle, the overall contribution of my thesis is twofold. Firstly, it deepens our understanding for how exactly personalised social media like TikTok come into a position from where they interact with and have an influence on people's lives. Secondly, it opens up new

questions in relation to how we conceptualise and study these wider power dynamics of digital capitalism, of which TikTok is emblematic (Su 2023). In the remainder of this chapter, I elaborate further on my findings and break down this twofold contribution.

In the next two sections, I continue by providing a review of my research process and summarising my findings along the research questions that guided this thesis. Thereafter, I reflect on these findings in five steps. Firstly, in relation to methodological limitations. Secondly, my findings' contribution to TikTok scholarship and, thirdly, research on social media more broadly. Fourthly, I discuss the contributions of my thesis around its audience studies perspective. Finally, I close the chapter by suggesting three future directions of research.

9.2 Theoretical framework

My approach towards TikTok originated from a desire to use a concrete case – TikTok – to gain a contextual understanding for the cultural dynamics of digital capitalism, and how they materialise in everyday life – for example, in content consumption practices. Drawing a parallel to Dallas, the soap opera studied by Ang (1985), I acknowledged that TikTok is problematic, for example, due to its addictive design, surveillance and data extraction, or geopolitical entanglements. However, I maintained that we also need to acknowledge that using TikTok is a highly popular activity, despite the app being problematic. Addressing this very contradiction lied at the heart of this thesis.

Leaning on scholars like Hall (1981), I started by understanding that it is typical for phenomena of popular culture to be of such a contradictory nature. According to him, they are never entirely corrupt or manipulative. They always offer something appealing that makes people engage with

them. This creates what Hall calls a “play on contradictions”. Around this play on contradictions, I framed TikTok as the of the thesis. How is it possible, in other words, that something problematic can also be meaningful? It is this question that, in the broadest sense, informed my interest in TikTok as a case.

In Chapter 2, I turned these initial thoughts into a more concrete analytical position, namely one of audience studies. There, I theorised that at the heart of platforms like TikTok lies a tension between the opportunities for meaning-making that they afford, and the structural forces of control they exercise. I looked here in particular at the control they exercise in an attempt to commodify activities like that of content consumption. Drawing on Williams (1974), I turned to his popular idea of media flows to reflect on the ways in which platforms like TikTok today try to control configurations of content consumption, keeping people engaged as audiences and screens that can be sold to advertisers.

In that course, I outlined the use of tracking technologies as well as algorithmic personalisation systems as key within this contemporary endeavour of commercial audience construction. Following Kant (2020), I understood this turn as a significant shift in that platforms utilise this data to address individual people and screens as their targets of control, transcending prior logics of constructing audiences along social strata. Within this dimension of algorithmic personalisation, I engaged with questions of power. More specifically, I discussed the perspectives of scholars who raise concerns about how such systems have standardised the processes of content distribution (Cohn 2019) and undermine self-making abilities (Couldry and Mejias 2019).

From my audience studies point of view, I took such concerns as a starting point for further analysis. I again engaged with Williams (1974) in how he theorised media power through the idea of limits and pressures that such exercise on social practices. I argued that from an audience studies point of view, what lies at the heart of analysis is the question of how people respond to such structural limits and pressures that are imposed onto their meaning-making abilities. Resultingly, I argued that grasping the tensions and complexities that arise when people navigate digital platforms today to consume content is of paramount empirical interest for audience research to help better understand media power today.

Closing Chapter 2, I aligned this position with recent work by scholars such as Siles (2023) and Siles et al. (2022a). Developing their popular theory of algorithms, I aligned with their position that pushes against the idea of generalized effects and instead argues that the consequences of algorithmic systems need to be studied in the ways such are enacted in the context of local cultures. I linked this position to the tradition of ethnographic audience research (Seiter et al. 1989) and specifically the work of Morley (1992) and Silverstone (1994). Turning to these scholars, I anchored my analytical approach towards TikTok in a perspective that sees it as a form of both content and technology that people engage with in dialectical processes of consumption.

In Chapter 3, I turned this analytical position into my core theoretical framework. On the one side, I introduced the three key concepts that I utilised from the tradition of ethnographic audience research: everyday life, consumption, and ontological security. On the other side, I updated this tradition with more recent scholarship from the fields of mobile media and algorithm studies. I theorised everyday life as a dynamic process in which structural forces manifest and people respond to these forces, at times in creative and subversive ways. I

positioned consumption as a key practice of such creativity, theorising it as the re-contextualisation of cultural artefacts, like TikTok content, for purposes of everyday meaning-making (Miller 1987).

Within this context, I introduced the idea of ontological security, which was defined as the reassuring feeling of life following a normal order. Around the metaphor of the “protective cocoon”, I understood everyday life as a site where people establish routines in an attempt to normalise their experience of daily life, and to reflexively position self-identities as meaningful parts within their lifeworld (Giddens 1991). Again drawing on Silverstone (1994), I highlighted the close relationship between media and ontological security. Routines like reading the newspaper (Bausinger 1984), for instance, can give structure to the everyday, and their content can inform how self-identities are constructed.

In this light, I next engaged with more recent work stressing the role of digital media in relation to how people make their everyday life “feel right” (Pink and Leder Mackley 2013). The notion of polymedia (Madianou and Miller 2012) was used in particular to underscore the integrated role that media technologies play in the structuring of everyday social activities. I discussed how being able to navigate increasingly dynamic media landscapes has become a key issue (Ytre-Arena 2023). Herein, I underlined how this navigation takes place on the embodied dimension of habitualised movements of the hands, fingers, and eyes which are generative of the worlds people experience online (Moore 2014). And I accentuated this argument by returning my focus to algorithms. Around the concepts of the algorithmic imaginary (Bucher 2017) and situated actions (Suchman 2006), I emphasised the importance of studying how ordinary people make sense of and interact with algorithmic systems in everyday situations.

I positioned this overall theoretical framework in the tradition of methodological situationalism (Knorr-Cetina 1988, Morley 1992). Situations of everyday media consumption are where larger cultural tensions, like those between self-determination and control, materialise. If we want to understand their consequences, how a “play on contradictions” (Hall 1981) unfolds, and with what outcomes, we need to focus our attention on such concrete situations. Audience research, I argued, is fruitful for doing so. It is so, especially when paired with recent concepts like polymedia (Madianou and Miller 2012) or the algorithmic imaginary (Bucher 2017), allowing us to situate consumption in dynamic media environments.

In Chapter 4, I operationalised this approach as digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2016a). I embraced ethnography as a methodology that values the long term over the short term view, operates with a commitment to context, is interested in the concrete over the abstract perspective, and produces evidence through reflexive writing (O’Reilly 2012). As part of this ethnographic approach, I assembled a mix of methods including interviews, media mapping techniques, participant observations, and digital fieldwork. Using them, I collected data over a period of one and half years. Primarily, I developed a body of 50 interviews conducted with 30 UK-based young adults. Additionally, I produced supportive data in the form of field notes, participants observations, and media mappings. Taken together, these data allowed me to write an ethnographically situated account of TikTok consumption and its role in the lives of my participants in the United Kingdom.

9.3 Three plus one questions

Across four empirical chapters, I unpacked the data collected during fieldwork. I demonstrated how scrolling is experientially rich, socially connective in ancillary practices of content sharing,

and a skill that needs to be learned. I showed how my participants were constantly subject to mechanisms of surveillance and control, like algorithms or addictive design patterns, whilst consuming content on TikTok. These mechanisms did not have a direct effect on behaviour. Yet, they created a tension evident in latent senses of unease and ambivalent feelings. This tension was never fully resolved, but either tactically negotiated, or wearing participants down to a point that they quit using TikTok. In what follows, I will elaborate on these findings and provide answers to my research questions.

(0) What exactly is TikTok to my participants?

I slowly began my empirical analysis in Chapter 5, answering the question of what exactly TikTok was to my participants. The app can be used in many different ways, and for many different purposes. To frame my further analysis, and to develop answers to my research questions, I used the space in Chapter 5 to sketch TikTok as an online space from the point of view of my participants, as well as by drawing on perspectives from other studies on TikTok.

I started by discussing the place of TikTok in my participants' polymedia environments (Madianou and Miller 2012). I here drew on conversations I had with them around the media mappings they created during fieldwork. Based on this data, I outlined how TikTok was defined by them as a site of disconnection and 'me space'. They approached TikTok with a clear intention to leave behind their normal life and the associated social obligations, responsibilities, and worries. My participants used TikTok in a way avoiding to directly interact with others on the platform, as they did already do so on other sites such as Instagram or Twitter, for example.

In line with studies on TikTok use motivations, I found that my participants primarily enjoyed about TikTok how it allowed them to peek into the lives of ordinary strangers (see Omar and

Dequan 2020). I explained that there are two key elements to the TikTok platform that afford this kind of disconnection, that of ephemerality and randomness. Drawing on material gathered during my digital fieldwork, I showed how TikTok videos are fragments of lived experience that in the first instance establish a connection between scroller and content, opposed to audience and creator – supporting descriptions of TikTok as a content-centric platform (see Kaye et al. 2022).

Similarly, along descriptions of their “For You” pages, I demonstrated how my participants experienced them as sites where they could watch content from ordinary strangers like them. This simultaneous distance and closeness afforded meaningful disconnection. TikTok appealed to them in moments when they wanted to take a break and for a short moment leave their daily life behind. On TikTok, they felt embedded in their lifeworld yet freed from the social demands and pressures they were trying to escape. In this light, I employed the metaphor of the window. I argued that the “For You” page turns people’s screens into a personal window through which they can peek into their lifeworld.

I highlighted two dynamics of TikTok’s power herein. Firstly, in relation to world making powers (Beer 2017) and how TikTok can create distorted and exclusionary views (see Simpson and Semaan 2020). Secondly, I pointed out how TikTok uses the window as a modality of data and attention capture. Highlighting these power dynamics is crucial not just to understand the stories of my participants, which revolved around dis/connection, ‘me space’, and surveillance. It is also crucial because it is these dynamics which map the broader space on which issues such as misinformation, polarisation, or the spread of hate speech fall on platforms like TikTok. Set against this backdrop, I set out to understand how people navigated the ‘worlds’ TikTok created on their phone screens, and how they negotiated associated power dynamics.

(1) What role do TikTok content consumption practices play in routines of everyday life?

I answered the above research question in Chapter 6 and Chapter 8. The first focussed on how my participants primarily used the app, namely for scrolling. There, I analysed TikTok as an everyday technology. The second turned to the most important ancillary content consumption practice, namely that of content sharing. Here, I looked at how TikTok functions as a social resource. Across the two chapters, I theorised the place of TikTok content consumption as enabling dis/connective practices in everyday life contexts. Scrolling through their “For You” page allowed my participants to effectively disconnect when feeling stressed, tired, or in need of inspiration. At the same time, it was through sharing content from the “For You” page that they opened paths of meaningful reconnection into their everyday social life.

My discussion was guided by the concept of ontological security (Giddens 1991, Silverstone 1994) that I had earlier defined as the reassuring feeling of live following a normal order. I showcased how TikTok was used to deal with disruptions to this normal order and to negotiate self-other relationality within it. For my participants, TikTok was functionally similar to how previous generations read magazines (Hermes 1995), romantic fictions (Radway 1981), or listened to radio soap operas (Herzog 1941). For the young adults I met, TikTok was a useful tool to deal with boredom, feelings of tiredness, or to search for inspiration and motivation in content from ordinary strangers like them.

Similarly, in Chapter 8, I touched on how the “For You” page constituted a resource of discursive material with which my participants engaged reflexively to manage interpersonal biographies. There, I talked about the various ways in which participants shared TikTok content in their social networks – be that through sending videos on messaging apps, watching them in a setting

of physical co-presence, discussing TikTok and TikTok trends, or using TikTok phrases in everyday forms of talk. Looking at how TikTok was made to transcend the boundaries of its own platform, I outlined the socially integrative nature of content consumption – yet also that of the polymedia environment, enriching TikTok’s affordances of personalization with those of social connection.

Across the chapters, I made sense of these practices by theorising the idea of polymedia rhythms. Such are understood as the habitualised navigations of polymedia environments (Madianou and Miller 2012) to achieve specific outcomes, like that of relaxation, stimulation, or social connection. Seeing TikTok as part of these broader rhythms, I tried to understand its particular appeal, yet also the problems it can cause from within.

Beyond the appeal of its content format and ‘for you’ discovery mechanism, I found convenience to be both the app’s blessing and curse, so to speak. The young adults I worked with highly valued TikTok’s ease of use, being able to offer effective escape and/or opportunities for social connection almost anywhere and anytime. However, this also turned the app into a ‘convenience trap’ for some, causing disruptions to the flow of daily life.

I stressed that in contrast to earlier media, there are considerable differences in the case of TikTok. For example, a magazine does not dynamically adjust the order of its contents based on how it is read. It does not supply an infinite amount of content to consume, either. Nor does it does keep track and collect data about the reader’s every interaction with it. As a dynamic media environment, TikTok is structurally different to these prior media. It enables new forms of winding down, passing time, finding inspiration, or connecting with significant others. These can be highly effective and convenient to people.

At the same time, TikTok amplifies the role of surveillance, control, and commercialisation in relation to ontological security. I shared stories of participants who struggled with getting carried away on the app due to its addictive design. Likewise, I touched on cases of unintentional uses and people struggling to get out of content loops negatively affecting their well-being. Around these stories, I moved into focus TikTok as a commercial space and how navigating it reinforced a neoliberal culture of self-responsibilisation (Syvertsen and Enli 2020).

I found that some participants were able to make use of their smartphones as devices to negotiate getting hooked or stuck on TikTok in self-responsible ways – for instance by using screen time management tools or removing the app from their home screen. Others, however, struggled with doing so. Often they decided to quit using the app as it formed an obstacle to carrying on (Giddens 1984) with their lives in an ordered fashion. Moreover, I touched on how by sharing content with others, people get “enrolled” (Siles 2023) into TikTok as a space of surveillance, extending the app’s reach to more people and devices. Similarly, I discussed how the presence of TikTok could also spark tensions in shared spaces, with others such as partners being annoyed by the app.

Overall, I thus used these two chapters to stress the dialectical nature of media consumption (Silverstone 1994). In this view, TikTok was enabling as a technology and resource to my participants’ meaning-making, on the one side. On the other, it was constraining as a distractive, addictive, surveillant, and problematic element in their daily routines.

(2) How do people make sense of and navigate TikTok as a space of online surveillance?

Popular media before TikTok, for instance soap operas such as *Dallas*, also have been considered to be problematic in many ways. However, they were so primarily in terms of the messages and

ideologies mediated through them (Ang 1985). Ideologies spread on digital platforms, and how TikTok shapes worldviews is a topic of ethical concern (Scalvini 2023). Herein, their problematic nature stems, however, not just from the content hosted on platforms, but also their mechanisms of surveillance, capture, and control. In Chapter 7, I confronted the question of how my participants dealt with this problematic side of TikTok. More specifically, I tried to find an answer to the broader question of how it was possible for them to enjoy being on TikTok despite it being a space of surveillance.

Aligned with Siles (2023), I asked how people become entangled with TikTok and its algorithm in the first place. Doing so, I outlined four mechanisms along which I found that my participants negotiated their experience and position as a scroller on the “For You” page. These were the mechanisms of ‘algorithm awareness’, ‘situated trust’, ‘stories about algorithms’, and ‘reading for personalisation’. These did not enable my participants to resist TikTok’s surveillance and datafication efforts. However, they allowed them to manage TikTok as technology and socio-cultural resource from which they could extract value in their everyday meaning-making.

I started by underlining that the ‘TikTok algorithm’ is not a singular thing that one can see. My participants primary ways of knowing and being aware about TikTok’s recommender system revolved around their lived experience of it and similar systems (see also Bucher 2017, Cotter 2022, Siles et al. 2019, Swart 2021). They ‘saw’ it through its actions and the content it put on their feeds and screens. Many had been using social media for up to a decade, and some were very interested in wider debates on social media algorithms. For them, algorithms were just a normal and even expected feature of social media, something they ‘naturally’ had an awareness for. Nonetheless, the everyday experience of interacting with TikTok’s algorithms was the central way in which my participants knew about them.

My participants described TikTok's recommender system as very noticeable. Some stated that they literally can see how it adjusts the appearance of their "For You" page. I highlighted that in doing something right yet also wrong, participants didn't just gain this awareness. They actively re-positioned themselves as scroller in these moments. They became active in terms of negotiating the terms on which they engage with the app and deem it worth their time. Especially moments in which recommended content appeared too personalised, participants felt scared by the 'TikTok algorithm' as a surveillant agent and re-evaluated their position as a scroller on the app.

The long-term approach of my fieldwork allowed me to validate these observations. Even after a year and more of using TikTok, some participants reported still feeling like there is a spy inside their phone. Such feelings were not only present on a level of personal experience. Rather, I discussed that there is lots of TikTok content in which people discuss their experience of the 'TikTok algorithm', its surveillant nature, or the addictiveness of scrolling. I theorised this content as 'stories about algorithms'.

Drawing on my own fieldwork on the app, I discussed cases of such stories, like the "if you see this, you are ..." trend where people create content predicting who it will be shown to. I defined stories like this as artefacts along which ordinary people share lived experiences of algorithmic systems. These stories do not necessarily help people better understand algorithms in technical terms. Drawing on participants' experience of these stories, I found that they rather had a socially and emotionally supportive function. They mediated not just awareness for TikTok as a space of surveillance, but also opened a context of shared experience amongst scrollers.

I argued that these stories, and engagement with them, underlines reflexive awareness of TikTok as a space of surveillance. Moreover, I critically engaged with the wider imaginaries around personalisation that participants developed, and how these were linked to interactions with the “For You” page (which, as Siles et al. 2020: 13 stress, is a link that is rarely established). To do so, I drew on the idea of situated actions (Suchman 2006) to develop the notion of ‘reading for personalisation’. With that notion, I described situated acts of reading content feeds with the aim to find cues for self-identification in recommended content.

I made this argument, drawing on data collected while observing people scrolling. There, I found that people would quickly skip past videos that they deemed ‘not it’, navigating instead towards those content pieces that evoked a ‘for you’ feeling. I theorised the effect of this navigation as a form of ‘content feed compression’. Through skilled navigation of the “For You” page with eyes and fingers (Moore 2014), people compressed ‘not it’ videos to a point that they were barely noticeable to them. This performatively enacted the ‘for you’ feeling in the experience of the scroller. The implication is that the scroller needs to be seen as a key force driving the construction of personalisation on platforms like TikTok.

In short, I showed that scrolling is not only a complex and dialectical process, but one which my participants were actively negotiating. I described this in the way that there was a latent sense of unease which marked their engagement with the app and digital media more generally. My participants tried, yet not always succeeded, to place this awareness of what is problematic about TikTok in the back of their mind to enjoy scrolling through the app. Thus, they were continuously re-evaluating their position as a scroller on the app, and the benefits they get out of it.

Similar to Ang (1985), I was able to showcase how a capacity to derive meaning from popular culture does not preclude the possibility to be critical of its wider politics. Echoing arguments like that of Marwick and boyd (2014), I found that just because my participants enjoyed using social media did not mean that they stopped caring about privacy. At the same time, my findings speak to a “culture of resignation” that Turow and Draper (2019) discuss. My participants had an awareness of TikTok being a space of surveillance. Yet, they felt powerless to resist these structural conditions as individuals. They were thus active not in resisting TikTok, but trying to make the app work as an element of their everyday life.

(3) How do people evaluate the meaningfulness of consuming content on TikTok?

Across all empirical chapters, I painted a picture that contrasted popular portrayals of people as victims of mind reading algorithms that are wasting their time (see Koetsier 2020, Odell 2019, Smith 2021). I portrayed a messy reality of in-between states in which trust was a key mediator. My participants were never fully in control, nor fully controlled, when they consumed content on TikTok. They put trust in the app to help them relax, unwind, pass time, find inspiration, or connect with significant others.

To this end, my participants agreed to at least partially play by TikTok’s rules. In this course, trust was, however, continuously put to the test, for instance in every encounter of too personalised or not interesting enough content. This leaves us with the image of a bond between person and app that is highly fragile – still marked by a power asymmetry, but not one-sided control. This was further supported through the fact that for many participants, using TikTok was perceived as just a mindless activity.

Hermes (1995) has touched on this by outlining the “fallacy of meaningfulness”, cautioning media researchers not to overstate the meaningfulness media have to people. Put differently, complexity does not equal meaningfulness. In fact, to again follow Ang (1985: 19), a lot of work is invested for entertainment media to appear as a “mere entertainment”, something which can be readily enjoyed without the need for further explanation or deeper questioning. If this would not be the case, entertainment would neither be effective as a means of escape or relaxation, nor would it be able to be popular, meaning engage a critical mass of people.

The TikTok use of my participants, and their own sense-making of it, resonate with these arguments of Hermes (1995) and Ang (1985). Generally, participants felt using TikTok was easily enjoyable, as one just needs to scroll. Because of that, they associated mostly positive emotions with it. This was also because, as I discussed in Chapter 5, they experienced consuming content on other sites, like Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter, with more negative feelings like stress, boredom, or a pressure to interact. This is not to say that participants did not have any negative experiences on TikTok, or that they did not use these other social media. Participants at times found TikTok addictive and distractive, scrolling a boring activity, or were scared by the ‘TikTok algorithm’, as mentioned earlier.

In the end, my participants thus had mixed things to say on the meaningfulness of the time they spent scrolling through TikTok. Many found TikTok helpful during times of lockdown where there was not much else to do. However, as restrictions eased, this group of participants shifted towards seeing TikTok more as a distraction from what mattered to them, like their relationships or career. At the same time, for many participants, TikTok had become a fixed, trusted, and valued part of their polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller 2012). These people continued to regularly use TikTok as an everyday technology to deal with stress,

tiredness, boredom, or lacking motivation. And they continued to draw on it as a discursive resource to find ways of meaningful re-connection with their social networks.

Especially in relation to the latter element, that of content sharing, I noticed clearer expressions of TikTok's meaningfulness. In Chapter 8, I discussed how some participants felt that since they started using TikTok, they had grown closer to their friends, or how it had allowed them to connect with their siblings in new ways, especially if those were younger. As I have highlighted there, what we see in sharing practices is the social meaningfulness TikTok and its "For You" page can acquire by being integrated into everyday routines and relationships. Here, I was left with the impression that participants were more hesitant to denote personal consumption as meaningful, while such hesitancy was not present in conversations around TikTok sharing practices.

9.4 Partiality of the account

Ethnographic writing is always partial. It represents the experience of a specific group of people, in a particular place, and particular point in time (Geertz 1988). This is not say, however, that my findings and arguments are necessarily limited overall. As Hall (1987: 45) writes, "to say anything at all in particular, you do have to stop talking". Having summarised my findings, I thus want to 'stop' here in reflecting on the limitations that shaped my investigation of TikTok consumption. Doing so is crucial. It forms the final step to qualify the findings of this thesis not as fact but, in a tradition of reflexive ethnography, as "positioned truths" (Abu-Lughod 1991). Qualified as such positioned truths, we can then, finally, discuss from where and how they contributions towards wider debates.

As noted earlier, I made a conscious decision to write around TikTok and content consumption because tensions of digital capitalism crystallize around the two. In a similar vein, my research took place during an exceptional time, the COVID-19 pandemic, which had created a fruitful context to study this case of TikTok consumption. At the time of writing this thesis, the global health emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic has been declared over by the World Health Organisation (2023). Yet, the Coronavirus continues to be a present part of everyday reality for many people, and maybe will never fully disappear. Looking back, most aspects of everyday life seem to have returned to their pre-pandemic patterns. People are, for example, again meeting friends or going on holiday, things which would have been impossible and illegal during the first stages of my fieldwork.

Up until the point of the pandemic, in early 2020, TikTok was predominantly seen as an app for kids in public discourses. Images of the app that circulated in debates revolved around teenagers and viral dance trends. Many participants themselves, upon first meeting them, expressed in an often confessional manner having held such views. Research on TikTok and its predecessor apps, such as musical.ly, have early on written against these perceptions of the app. As discussed previously, studies like that of Rettberg (2017), Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2019), or Boffone (2021) underline how TikTok and its predecessor apps constituted vital sites of discourse, cultural exchange, and community formation.

The pandemic has not only led to a growth in TikTok's popularity, yet also a shift in views on the app and its meaningfulness. My thesis did capture exactly this shift. The pandemic did here provide an almost quasi-experimental setting. The disruptions to normal life caused by pandemic measures such as lockdowns and social distancing had clarified, in this setting, the meaning of TikTok that others had already seen before. Amongst my participants, there were

initially two groups of people. Those who had been using the app before March 2020, and those who did not. The people in the first group did not use it any differently before the pandemic than during it. They turned to it as a fun and relatable online space where they could relax, unwind, and have a laugh. It is this very appeal, which I outlined in Chapter 6, that people in the second group slowly realised as they picked up the app out of boredom, or ironically because it was trendy to do back then.

Participants in the second group found themselves in a moment of disruption, of ontological insecurity, not knowing how to carry on and do the next step in their daily lives (Giddens 1991). Facing feelings of disorientation, stress, and at times profound boredom, they came to realise the meaning that something presumably so shallow and frivolous like TikTok has. As I have reviewed in the previous section, throughout the year I followed the stories of my participants, I came to see how they developed an appreciation for having access to a tool like TikTok – be that for passing time, winding down, finding inspiration, or connecting with significant others.

Many of the young adults I worked with have since first meeting them in the summer of 2020 started and finished their degrees, moved in with their partners or to new cities, commenced work in their first full-time jobs, and experienced many other significant life events. Not all of them still keep using the app due to these changes. Moreover, the TikTok that I have studied in this thesis has and continues to evolve. Video length limits on TikTok have continuously increased throughout the period of my fieldwork, from a few seconds to now minutes. More recently, TikTok has even added new features which enable people to specifically engage with the content of their friends on the app. However, despite many changes, the app seems to have remained somewhat unchanged at its core. TikTok continues to appeal as a ‘for you’ space on which to consume fun and relatable content.

As such, it is true that my findings speak about cultural dynamics as they materialised in a particular place and point in time, and how they were experienced by people in a particular stage of their life. Nonetheless, my findings do have value for broader debates and future research. That is because my writing was concerned, first and foremost, with a doing of people, and not so much understanding TikTok, the pandemic, or young adulthood in particular. Along the stories of my participants, I primarily outlined a set of practices along which people learned how to navigate mechanisms of surveillance and control.

For my participants, TikTok was a relatively new app and addition to their polymedia environments (Madianou and Miller 2012). The pandemic, in all its different stages, had created new challenges in relation to organising everyday lives and identities. And it had accentuated here a general fragmentation of daily schedules (Shove 2003) and acceleration of life's pace (Wajcman 2015) characteristic for cultural contexts like the United Kingdom. Being young adults, uncertainty and change were furthermore common to their lived experience (see Hunt 2017). Situated across these layers, my ethnographic inquiry was able to focus on dynamic orientations of lives in and around media that constitute the "digital everyday" (Ytre-Arne 2023).

Overall, in this thesis I was thus able to share an account of how my participants learned to navigate TikTok as a commercial online space. As mentioned earlier, the common thread throughout the stories of my participants was the appropriation of TikTok as a 'me space' herein. And this observation, of TikTok as 'for me' space, aligns with the experience of other young adults in Costa Rica (Siles and Meléndez-Moran 2021), Singapore (Kang and Lou 2022), the United States (Bhandari and Bimo 2022), or China (Omar and Dequan 2020), for example. In other words, the perspective I opened in this thesis was focussed on describing and explaining

how TikTok functioned as this ‘me space’, providing people with opportunities to dis/connect in their daily lives. The scope of my writing was thus partial also in this sense.

As much as this account, then, marks the full stop at the end of one sentence, it also is the start of new ones (Hall 1987: 45). Throughout the thesis, I underlined that the dynamics I observed might play out differently in different contexts. Similarly, I teased out some class, gender, and cultural differences. For example, in Chapter 6, I used the story of Josh to illustrate how the appeal of TikTok as a ‘me space’ was tied to him having to share living space with his brother – a condition mediated by socio-economic factors of class. Likewise, in Chapter 7, I underlined how educational background played an important role in shaping not just awareness of algorithms, but also how trust in them could be negotiated. In Chapter 8, I talked about how sharing TikTok in some instances sparked conflicts, like for Velta and her father, mediating questions of authority in the family. Similarly, I wrote about participants like Bea or Hajna who curated montages of TikTok clips they shared with their partners who did not themselves use TikTok – relating to gendered dynamics of care, taste, and consumption work.

These differences mostly emerged around the common thread that I outlined across the past chapters of TikTok being a ‘me space’ and dis/connective resource. My exploration of these differences was limited to the particular stories I had available from my fieldwork. For instance, Josh’s story on lacking ‘me space’ stands next to that of other participants, like Belna, who lived alone and still desired a personal escape site. Similarly, while Hajna would curate TikTok content for her boyfriend, she also did for her sister, similar to Joyce. On one occasion, Tanja also mentioned in passing that she isn’t surprised that my participants from London experienced TikTok as a “guilty pleasure”, whereas she and her friends further north in the country mostly cared about having a good time.

Further research, looking comparatively at particular groups of people in focus, is needed to more clearly outline such cultural differences as they materialise around TikTok being consumed and shared in everyday life. As such, I see the contribution of my thesis in having developed a common thread running through particular stories – outlining along this thread various mechanisms and dynamics of dis/connective experiences that allow us to further explore the meanings and politics of TikTok and other personalised social media.

9.5 Contributions to scholarship

The overarching contribution of my thesis is to debates concerned with the role of digital media consumption in everyday life. I contribute in particular through providing further evidence on the dialectical relationship between media and ontological security (Silverstone 1994). These debates are not new and have also been unfolding in relation to digital media, where scholars theorise the ambivalent feelings and experiences people have in digital contexts (consider the arguments of Lagerkvist 2017 or T. Markham 2023). For instance, Annette Markham (2021) has used the notion of ontological insecurity to make sense of the negative effects that can arise from disconnecting social media. Similarly, Lupinacci (2020) underlines the role of consumption practices like scrolling as a mediator of feelings of aliveness, and negative affective states when such feelings do not arise from consumption.

Paasonen (2021) argues in the same context that we need to conceive the dynamics of digital media use as an oscillation between feelings of dependency and possibility. Jovicic (2021) highlights in these debates that limited possibilities of pleasure, escape, and relaxation can often, and for marginalized groups specifically, be the only possibilities of such experiences. Work by scholars such as Barassi (2019) provides concrete evidence for these oscillating

dynamics, and the coercion through which people are bound to their devices as means of everyday living. Recent work by Ytre-Arne (2023) positions the smartphones as the centrepiece of digital everyday life, and it stresses the importance of associated skills necessary to grapple with its complexity as an everyday technology.

In line with other studies on everyday TikTok uses, such as those of De Leyn et al. (2021) or McLean et al. (2023), I analysed the role of TikTok within the “digital everyday” (Ytre-Arne 2023). Here, I drew on and extend the theory of polymedia developed by Madianou and Miller (2012). I theorised polymedia rhythms as routinised movements through polymedia environments to achieve certain outcomes, such as relaxation or social connection. Through the idea of rhythms, I accentuate the habitualised manners in which people move through these environments, for instance by checking social media apps in a specific order to feel socially connected and up to date. Similarly, in relation to Madianou’s (2014) conceptualisation of the smartphone as material manifestation of polymedia, I highlighted how smartphones constitute sites where struggles over self-determination unfold – for example, as discussed previously, by negotiating addictive design patterns through screen time management tools.

Furthermore, I contribute to debates on the increasing personalisation of media environments and consumption, continuing earlier discussions started around ideas of a bedroom culture (Bovill and Livingstone 1999, McRobbie and Graber 1975). More and more platforms are adopting the ‘for you’ design and semantics TikTok has popularised. Both YouTube and Instagram have become prominent sites on which short-video content is consumed today. Internal documents from Facebook, that have been leaked, reveal that the platform’s algorithm is actively being changed to be more like that of TikTok (Heath 2022). Scholars such as Chun (2017) have theorised this larger trend towards online environments being structured around

engagements with the 'you' as a largely commercial category and logic. For these reasons, academics have long voiced concerns about how digital technology can lower the quality of social bonds (Turkle 2011). They are concerned with how the design of social media increasingly seems to favour personalised consumption and ephemeral social engagement.

My work continues a line of argument in these debates opened by scholars like boyd (2008), Baym (2015), or Prior (2014) on the shifting modalities of social connection through commercial technologies and spaces. There is an obvious trend towards more personal media consumption, and growing appeal of engaging with 'for you' content that TikTok exemplifies. At the same time, my findings underline the continued relevance of sharing practices as a background work (John 2022) and mechanism of social integration (Kennedy 2016). Aligning with the recent work of Siles (2023), my thesis stresses the importance of looking at how personalised media come to be enacted as such, and for what purposes. My work demonstrates that people engage with TikTok for personal entertainment, but that from that experience emerge myriad opportunities of social re-connection around sharing content.

Focussing on TikTok sharing practices, my work has thus added to TikTok scholarship another angle on the app's sociality. As noted earlier, scholarly representations of TikTok primarily focus on analysing content, content creation, and community formation dynamics (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin 2022, Kaye et al. 2022, or Stahl and Literat 2022 are examples). My perspective thus provides further depth here. It outlines how exactly TikTok becomes integrated into everyday life and popular culture (see Boffone 2021), focussing on more private and less visible contexts of social interaction taking place around the app and its content. A key contribution of my thesis has thus been further developing our understanding of what personalisation means both on and beyond TikTok from this angle.

Research on TikTok's recommendation system often follows the view that such are "technologies of the self" (Karakayali et al. 2017), and personalisation has been theorised more generally as a mode of individuation (Lury and Day 2019). Hence, researchers often focus on studying the effects of recommender algorithms in relation to self-image (Bhandari and Bimo 2022, Lee et al. 2022) or potential harms that can be caused in the formation of the self (Simpson et al. 2022, DeVito 2022). My perspective moves away from such questions of effects towards the mechanisms that enact configurations of personalised consumption in the first place (Siles 2023). Here, I introduced two new concepts, that of 'reading for personalisation' and, relatedly, 'content feed compression'.

To reiterate, the former refers to the habitualised practices of reading content feeds by actively seeking out content that aligns with ideas of one's self and personal preferences. The latter theorises the effect of such reading practices on the perception of content feeds. People skip over unpersonal content in a way that it becomes compressed to a point that it no longer is actively noticed. Doing so, an online environment is experienced as personalised through performative enactments of it as such through the scroller. In short, my thesis foregrounds that personalisation is a quality actively produced on the scroller side (through reading), and that personalised consumption can foster meaningful social connection (through sharing).

My thesis hence further adds to debates on algorithms and their experience more broadly. In line with studies like that of Ruckenstein and Granroth (2021), my findings highlight the tensions and latent senses of unease that characterise people's engagement with the surveillant, algorithmic systems that help them personalise their experience of online spaces. Similar to Siles (2023), my work shows that people constantly adjust the degree to which they

intervene in the doings of such systems, creating dynamic modalities of following and pushing against the knowledge logics enforced through them (Gillespie 2014).

Showing the resulting fragility of people's entanglement with app's like TikTok is another central contribution of my thesis. I accentuated within this fragility the importance of social dynamics. Bishop (2019) has demonstrated the vital role that discussions amongst professional content creators play in producing socially valid accounts of algorithms and how they can be interacted with. I add to these debates through my concept of 'stories about algorithms' for the context of ordinary people understood as content consumers and audiences. To reiterate, I defined these stories as artefacts of lived experience, like memes. These create a feeling of shared experiences and struggle amongst scrollers, providing them with emotional guidance.

Across the practices of 'content sharing', 'reading for personalisation', and 'listening to stories about algorithms', my work highlights forms of significant audience activity (Silverstone 1994: 153) in the social media contexts. And it showcases how this activity informs tactics of meaning-making in media environments that are imperfect resources (Martin-Barbero 1987). I here add to the argument of Siles et al. (2022a) to study contemporary media environments and algorithms as popular culture, and that of Tim Markham (2020) on how people navigate these digital media environments in order to orient themselves to others and the world around them.

In this tradition, my findings do, on the one side, echo those of Baym et al. (2020) or Turow and Draper (2019) speaking on senses of powerlessness and resignation in the face of ubiquitous digital surveillance. On the other side, my ethnographic account resonates with Ang (1985: 134) who reminded us that "life must be experienced as worth the effort, not just because a prospect exists for a better future, but also because the present itself is a potential source of pleasure".

My thesis echoes this argument in relation to providing an empirical perspective on how TikTok was consumed by my participants to bring an element of joy and pleasure to their experience of digital everyday life – attempts which, as I have shown, were not always successful, however.

In sum, my thesis contributes to these wider debates on digital everyday life by unpacking the complexity of mundane consumption practices like scrolling across the four layers first outlined in the introduction: cultural, practical, social, and political. On the cultural dimension, my thesis underlines a medium-specificity that is not inherent in the design of apps, yet stems from the culturally particular ways that they are given communicative purpose in polymedia environments (Madianou and Miller 2012) and enacted in the contexts of people’s local cultures (Siles 2023). Demonstrating how my participants enacted TikTok as a ‘me space’ – both contrasted from other more explicitly social areas of their polymedia environment, and other routines of their everyday life – my thesis stresses the importance of studying such integrative practices in their productive and creative force shaping the experiential texture of the digital everyday life.

Connected to this, my thesis has foregrounded the practical knowledgeability that can be observed through seemingly simple consumption practices like scrolling. It provides here further empirical evidence to the argument of scholars like Pink et al. (2016b) that it is the hands which lead people into the experimental worlds of digital platforms. Within the context of scrolling as a form of moving through digital space, my thesis underlines in particular the importance of trust as a layered practical knowledgeability mediating such movement’s continuity. As I have discussed in Chapter 7, it was vital for participants to have a negotiated sense of trust in TikTok to be a trustworthy app and one that can deliver on its promises in order to keep scrolling towards those video that are actually deemed worthy to be watched.

Thirdly, my thesis contributes to scholarship by opening a perspective on the ways in which such mundane consumption practices are generative of an atmosphere of sociability (Malinowski 1923). As I have argued above around my findings of sharing practices, my research evidences the ways in which people, so to speak, ‘socialise’ the increasingly commercialised structures of internet in creative ways. More specifically, my findings underline the importance of understanding social media as content and technology here (Silverstone 1994). As much as social media constitute the space where people meet and connect, it is the particular content of what is shared that creates opportunity for meaningful, mediated social interaction – echoing the findings of Miller et al. (2016) as well.

Here in particular, as I have discussed in Chapter 8, the content that recommender systems display to people seems of increasing significance in discursively shaping how interpersonal biographies are articulated. On this dimension of power, then, my thesis demonstrates how mundane consumption practices like scrolling tie together the complex politics of digital media. In the next section, I want to reflect on this last dimension in further detail, more specifically around the notion of personalisation as a means of audience commodification, and the question of how we should make sense of such analytically moving forward.

9.6 Reflections on future research

Throughout this thesis, I have argued in favour of the constitutive role that content consumption plays in a social media context. I underscored the relevance of content consumption as a driver of the cultural and commercial viability of digital platforms. And I emphasised the analytical significance that consumption practices like scrolling carry, revealing the complex relationships that people have with themselves, others, and the world around them

through apps like TikTok. In Chapter 2, I reflected on this relevance, for example, by returning to the idea of media flows that Williams (1974) has prominently theorised.

As I argued there, of my interest in this thesis was not so much the kind of historical analysis that Williams (1974) provided in outlining media flows as a culturally significant shift in mediated social experience. Instead, I turned to the idea of flows as a way to reflect on how media institutions shape configurations of content consumption in particular ways to attract and retain audiences. I turned to the idea of flows, in other words, to think about how digital platforms design their services as structures of audience commodification.

My argument there, in Chapter 2, was that compared to previous ideas of televisual flows, there seem mostly subtle changes on a formal level, in so far that programme directors have been replaced with algorithmic recommender systems that offer a more dynamic and individualised approach of content scheduling. The goals of this programming, I have argued, remain similar, in that sense. That is, the algorithmic systems that recommend content to people on sites like TikTok are designed to keep people engaged for a maximum amount of time (Smith 2021) and balance the display of commercial content like ads within that period of engagement (Su 2023).

From this angle, and based on my empirical analysis, I remain somewhat hesitant to argue that TikTok exemplifies a shift of equal socio-historical significance as Williams (1974) has outlined it many decades ago by theorising television broadcasting through the notion of flow. Instead, as we were able to see, my participants' experience of consuming TikTok was one of engaging with the "For You" page as a flow, as a continuous stream of sounds and images that are woven together as a mosaic structure (Chapter 5). And such an observation seems to resonate with the perspective of other work on the TikTok "For You" page, like that of Lee et al. (2023) who

theorise it through the idea of creating a continuous, yet fragmented representation, of a scroller's interests and identity markers.

Similarly, as I have noted in the previous section, in my empirical analysis I came to challenge and push back against some of the concerns that have been raised about these 'personalised media flows' and the influence they are said to exercise. And there seems to prevail a paradox, even within the expressions of my participants, about the nature of such algorithmic personalisation. On the one side, my participants enjoyed and were at times amazed about how personalised the content they would see on their "For You" page is. On the other side, the videos they would see were 'liked' and seen by thousands if not millions of others. Similarly, they would share and discuss viral memes with their friends that 'everyone' sees.

The idea that people's experience of personalised media flows is isolating in such a sense is thus misleading, I would argue. Instead, and echoing the arguments of Lupinacci (2022) here, much rather do we see people connecting with otherness through the rhythms and flows that algorithmic personalisation systems shape. Furthermore, I support the argument that Lupinacci (2022: 214) opens by pointing towards the importance that rests in understanding how people attune themselves to these rhythms. As I have argued in Chapter 7, personalisation is in my understanding wrongly understood as a technically generated, environmental quality. Instead, we need to conceive it as a performative achievement of people reading social media content and content feeds in particular ways.

In that sense, on this dimension of practice, we can point towards at least some historical changes by returning to the argument of Turow (2012) briefly mentioned in Chapter 2. As I pointed to there, his argument is that earlier web personalisation, for example through targeted

advertising, marked a shift. He located this shift as one in direction. Where web personalisation did initially revolve around people customizing their personal internet browsing experience, such customisation had now become a quality imposed from the top down. Today, then, we could argue that within a context of algorithmic personalisation (Kant 2020), we can see a remediation of such bottom-up customisation practices. As I have shown, people play a significant role in enacting personalisation, such as in the form of the flows of content they experience when scrolling (Chapter 7).

Turning to the work of Lupinacci (2022), however, we also need to acknowledge the nested layering of different forms of such personalisation of online experiences, and the ways in which algorithms shape them. Lupinacci (2022: 226) locates such flow experiences not as bound to particular platforms, but instead as a rhythmic engagement across media. This argument echoes that of the literatures of mobile media I discussed earlier in this thesis, where scholars' interest is in understanding how people move through everyday spaces saturated by media technologies in order to be in touch with others (Hjorth and Richardson 2020) and feel ontologically secure (Pink and Leder Mackley 2013).

From an audience studies point of view, my perspective on these movements has been of a slightly different interest, however. As I have theorised through my notion of 'polymedia rhythms', I foreground the particularities of specific media content and technologies as targets within these movements. My participants were moving, so to speak, in an often directed manner towards specific platforms like TikTok because they knew, or at least hoped, that they could have a particular kind of experience on there, one that is different from that of other platforms. From my audience studies point of view, what stands in the foreground, then, is the

question of how these particular qualities are enacted and become a target of directed movements.

The notion of polymedia stood out to me therefore in that regard because it resonates with the argument of Silverstone (1994) on the working out of significance in everyday life. More so, it stands out in terms of what he poses as a crucial question for the study of everyday life, namely whether people have found or created the artefacts they engage with to live meaningfully (Silverstone 1994: 164). Other than outlining algorithmic personalisation as a historically significant shift, what was and remains of my interest then in the first place is the question of how personalisation is achieved as a felt quality of contemporary media experience – and how this quality is marketed and exploited commercially in the same course.

To reiterate the argument of Ang (1991: 19) I mentioned earlier in this thesis, one task of audience studies is to understand how media institutions structure configurations of content consumption so that they resonate with particular cultural desires that attract audiences. In this sense, then, I come to find that an audience studies approach asks us to operate with an analytical focus that extends beyond the question of media forms, and towards the processual configuration of such settings of media consumption. As I have discussed, for example, in Chapter 5, my participants actively assumed the position of content consumers on TikTok. In their use of TikTok, they actively refused to interact with others on there so that they could enact a desired experience of TikTok as a ‘me space’ – decentring the notion of ‘the social’ from TikTok as a ‘social media’ site, and instead enacting sociability across their polymedia environment as a whole.

From an audience studies point of view, my thesis thus problematises the notion of algorithmic personalisation. It does so in so far by posing the question of what does it mean to enact personalisation? Or, similarly, what is making content flow on content feeds? Only in the interplay of scroller and algorithm can the “For You” page materialise a content feed that is both personalised and flows, so to speak. From this angle, I agree with recent work of scholars like Lupinacci (2022) who underline that on the dimension of habit questions of power sit, and that thus our ethical reflections can productively revolve around these habitual movements, as Tim Markham (2020) argues. At the same time, I argue that the dimension of positionality is another productive angle here.

In this line, I find myself returning to Hall’s (1981) argument and the metaphor of strategic positions. By assuming the position of the scroller, that of a content consumer, on TikTok, my participants both were enabled in their meaning-making practices whilst, at the same time, becoming the target of algorithmic control systems. As much as my participants reflected on their habits of scrolling, through sense-making devices of “addiction” (Tiidenberg et al. 2017), they also reflected on their positionality as a scroller on the app. More so, and as I have discussed in Chapter 7, the design of TikTok pushes people to become ‘good scrollers’, ones that organise their movement through the app as an engagement with algorithms in the first place, and anybody else in the second.

Similarly, I have discussed in Chapter 7 the threats to the continuity of the flow experience that arise when encountering videos that go against the line of what is expected or accepted by the scroller. Here, my participants did negotiate power less through a reflection or adjustment of their habitual movement through that space. Rather, what these transgressions set forth were reflections on one’s positionality as a scroller, yet also that of the TikTok algorithm as a trusted

partner, in the joint endeavour of enacting personalisation. Resultingly, as I have argued, trust emerged as a key mediator of the relational positionality of scroller and algorithm without which a flow experience would not be possible to be enacted.

Following Suchman (2006), I thus believe that there lies great value in starting, so to speak, at zero, meaning from a position in which neither human nor machine are treated as given and stable entities. This seems especially important in the current moment where, as Suchman (2023) notes, both the creators and many critics of AI technologies often treat such as a taken-for-granted stable entities. Yet as studies, like that of Siles et al. (2019), crucially demonstrate, people's engagements with data, algorithms, and dynamic computing interfaces are always culturally situated and contingent. Current research seems mostly invested in trying to understand the outcomes of these situated interactions. In contrast, I propose a stronger focus on understanding how such situational configurations come together in the first place.

This might sound abstract at first. What I mean, however, is simply re-calibrating our focus towards describing the actual processes and settings of online content consumption, for example. By doing so, understanding how relationships, such as those between scroller and algorithms, are configured in settings of personalised content consumption will allow us to better understand how power is negotiated and exercised. It will enable us to better describe the limits and pressures that digital platforms exercise around logics like that of personalisation. Yet, it will also allow us to take that positionality as a reference marker from which to map the horizon of possibilities, of potential directions for movement, that they afford – for example in the direction of enabling people to share content and, by doing so, move towards more sociable online spaces. It is here, finally, in these practices of interoperability, that of bridging

movements between distinct communicative sites, that we can locate the social dimension of increasingly personalised social media, and the ways in which algorithms intersect with them.

Moreover, as Burgess (2023) underlines in recent commentary on debates around AI technologies, the perspective of ordinary people seems often overlooked as attention quickly centres on specific technologies in question, their creators, or the political economies in which they exist. Critical attention on these elements are crucial. Yet so is it for us to listen to the stories of ordinary people. By looking at the creative ways in which they “make do” (de Certeau 1984) and “carry on” (Giddens 1984) from the positions they occupy in conditions of digital capitalism, we are able to acknowledge an inherently human and social dimension to it. Brining this perspective to the table, to echo Livingstone (2018), is crucial for us to discuss in nuanced ways the meanings and politics of media today.

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Appendix I: Recruitment materials

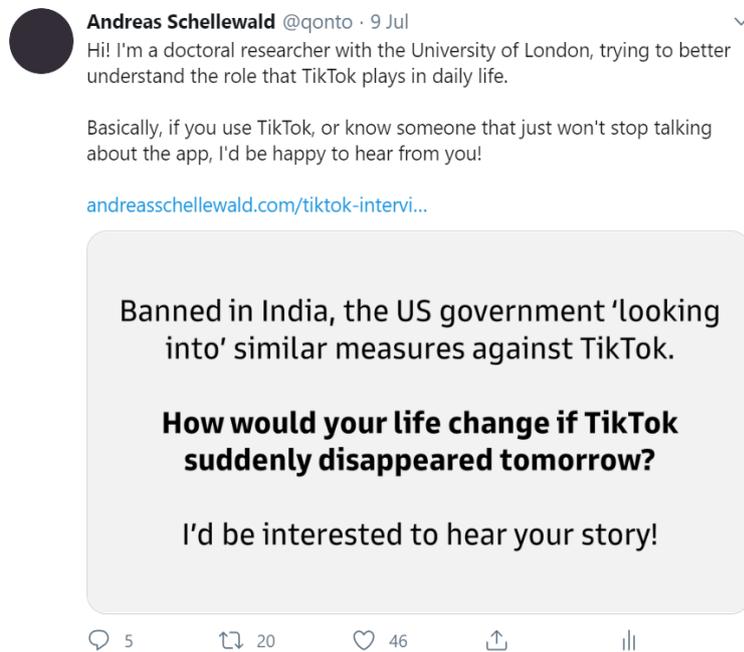


Figure 11 Promoted Twitter post from July 09, 2020.

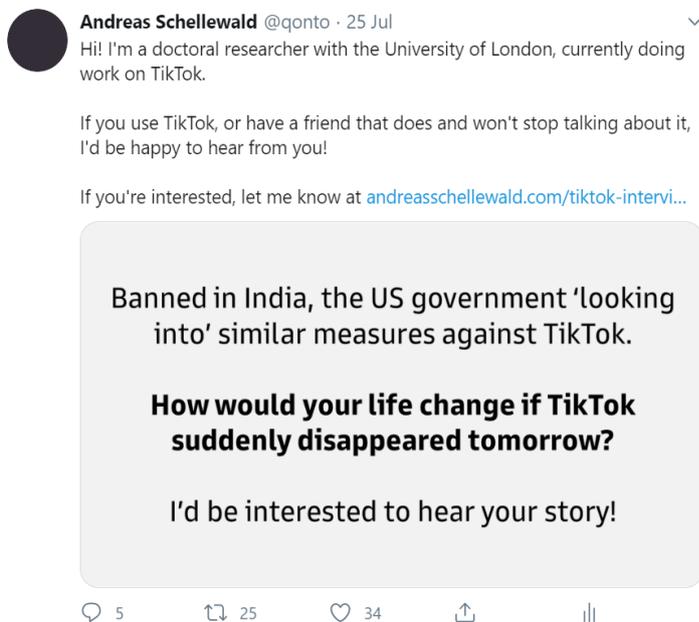


Figure 12 Promoted Twitter post from July 25, 2020.

Interview sign-up form linked in the Twitter posts

Hello there!

My name is Andreas Schellewald and I'm a doctoral researcher at Goldsmiths, University of London. Thanks for your interest in taking part in my research on TikTok.

It would be great if you could fill out this very short form. I will then be in contact with you shortly with more details on the interview process!

1. What's your email address?

[text field]

2. Do you live or have in the last six months lived in the Greater London area?

- Yes
- No

3. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Prefer not to say

4. How old are you?

- Younger than 18
- 18 to 24
- 25 to 30
- Older than 30

5. What is your primary employment status?

- Working full-time
- Working part-time
- Looking for work
- Student
- Other

6. What day(s) of the week would best fit your schedule for the interview?

- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Sunday

7. Do you have preferences in regards of time of day?

- No, I'm flexible
- Yes, in the morning would be best
- Yes, around noon
- Yes, in the afternoon
- Yes, in the evening

Appendix II: Interview Consent Form

Form that was sent to participants once an interview had been arranged.

Hello there!

My name is Andreas Schellewald and I'm a doctoral researcher at Goldsmiths, University of London. First things first: Thank you for contributing to my research!

As many people, I'm currently trying to better understand the meaning of TikTok in everyday life. Therefore, talking with people like you is an essential and vital aspect to that end.

In the interview itself I will ask you some basic questions on how you use TikTok and your past experiences. We will basically have an open conversation about how you get value out of the app and why it matters to you.

Now to the formal bit: If you consent to being interviewed and to any data gathered being processed as outlined below, please sign and date this form.

Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to stop the interview at any moment and withdraw from the research completely until one month after the interview.

If you have any questions, you can bring them up right during the interview or contact me afterwards.

- All data will be stored securely and in anonymised form.
- The interview will be recorded and transcribed by the research investigator and/or an independent transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement.
- You will be sent an electronic copy of the interview and the finished PhD thesis.
- Access to the interview transcript will be limited to the research investigator, also carrying out the analysis.

- All or parts of your interview may be used in academic papers, policy papers, news articles, blog posts, spoken presentations, or other publication formats.
- Any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through publication will be anonymised so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed.
- Any variation of the conditions above will only occur following your further explicit approval.

Further, during or after the interview I will ask if you would be willing to briefly show me your TikTok profile and content feed. This will be fully optional and will not be recorded but is just so I can get a sense for how the in-app experience looks on your side.

Printed Name

Participant Signature

Date

Research Investigator Signature

Date

Research Investigator: Andreas Schellewald (asche003@gold.ac.uk), Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW.

Appendix III: Interview questions

1. Could you give a brief summary of the main things you use your phone for during a typical day?
2. Would you say that this has changed during the last two months of lockdown?
3. In the media mapping task you completed prior to this interview you placed [app] very centrally. What role does [app] play in your everyday? Can you maybe give me an example of the last time you used it and what for?
4. How did you initially hear about TikTok?
5. How many of your friends used TikTok then and now?
6. What was like the main reason behind your decision to start using it? And is this still the reason why you use the app today?
7. Is there a specific type of content you are looking for on TikTok? Would you maybe be willing to briefly open TikTok on your phone so we can have a look at the videos you liked in the past?
8. How often do you normally use TikTok?
9. And for how long each time?
10. Can you give me an example of the last time you used TikTok? Like, where were you and what did you do?
11. Would you say that TikTok has like a clearly defined place in your daily routine? Or is it more spontaneous, like sometimes you just feel like using the app?

12. As you might have heard, in India TikTok got banned due to heightened political tensions with China. That's why I wanted to ask, if TikTok would disappear tomorrow, would you miss it? If so, what would you miss the most?

13. Has this importance of TikTok changed due to lockdown?

14. Do you sometimes share TikToks with friends, or other people more generally?

If yes: What was the last video that you shared with someone else, and on what platform did you do so?

If no: Is there a specific reason why, or has it just never crossed your mind?

15. Before lockdown, have you watched TikToks together with your friends? Or is something you normally do alone?

If yes: Could you just briefly describe the setting in which you guys watched TikToks together?

If yes: Do you use TikTok differently with different types of people, like friends and your boyfriend/girlfriend maybe?

16. Do you also create TikToks yourself?

If yes: Would you be willing to just show me one or two of them?

If yes: How does your creation process look like? Is it something you primarily do alone? Or is something that mainly happens when your around friends?

If no: Is there a reason why you don't create TikToks yourself?

17. Have you made friends via TikTok?

18. The TikTok algorithm obviously plays a central role in shaping what users see inside the app. Would you say that you understand how this algorithm works?

19. Could you give me an example of a moment in which you became aware of the algorithm? Maybe a moment in which it recommended something you didn't expect?

20. Would you be willing to briefly open TikTok on your phone and show me just like the first couple of videos in the 'for you' feed?

If yes: How do you feel about the videos the algorithm just recommended to us? Would you have watched or scrolled past them?

21. In general, are you satisfied with the content TikTok's algorithm recommends? Or do you spend a lot of time scrolling and searching for the right content yourself?

22. Thinking about the last time you spent an hour or so scrolling through TikTok, could you maybe give me a brief description of the setting and your mood were in?

23. What would you say kept you scrolling for such a long stretch of time?

24. How did you feel during this time?

25. And how did it end? Did the intensity slowly fade, and you decided to stop, or was it more abrupt?

26. How does scrolling through TikTok compare to using other apps, like Instagram, Facebook, or YouTube? Does it feel different?

27. Do you sometimes discuss TikTok with your friends?

If yes: What are you talking about? Can you give me an example?

If no: Is there a specific reason why?

28. Do you also talk about TikTok with people that don't use the app, like your parents maybe?

If yes: Could you give me example of such a conversation?

If no: Is there a specific reason why?

29. How do you in general feel about the way TikTok is discussed in public?

30. Have you noted any gender differences within your friend group when it comes to TikTok and using the app?

Appendix IV: Ethical Approval Form

Goldsmiths, University of London

Department of Media & Communications PhD Research Ethical Approval Form

CONFIDENTIAL

NAME OF APPLICANT Andreas Schellewald

Title of PhD thesis “Wasting Time? On the Poetics and Politics of Digital Culture”

This form should be completed in typescript and emailed to Des Freedman, chair of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee. All students should have read the BSA guidelines on ethics (or equivalent ones, such as the AAA or ASA) and the ESRC Research Ethics Framework document. Please make sure that you get the form signed and approved by your supervisor. If you do not hear anything for a fortnight after submitting the form, you can assume that no issues arising require addressing and you can proceed with your research.

1. Title of proposed project:

Fieldwork for PhD Thesis “Wasting Time?”

2. Brief outline of the project, including its purpose:

The project will investigate young people’s (18 to 24, based in Greater London area) uses, experiences, and perceptions of TikTok, especially its algorithmic environment. Herein it will be the primary source of data for the PhD thesis. Fieldwork will consist of three steps:

(1) Pre-interview: online form to gather basic demographic data. Further a diary/mapping task to gather data on their overall media use habits.

(2) Interviews asking people questions on TikTok in regards of its role in their everyday rhythms and practices of emotion management, practices and experience of navigating the app’s environment, and their perceptions of the app in comparison to popular connotations.

(3) Follow-up interviews with participants will be conducted, asking if since the interview uses and perceptions of the app have changed.

(4) Digital ethnography of interview participants TikTok profiles, such as video created and liked, with their explicit permission. Data will not be analysed but only used to get contextual awareness for their media use.

3. Description of methods of data collection:

Online form gathering basic demographic info on interview partners.

Digital diary/mapping of media use ecology by participants.

Semi-structured interviews conducted via video call.

Optional / with participants further consent, digital ethnography of their TikTok profiles.

If the research involves human participants (whether living or recently deceased) or animal subjects, please continue. If the research involves historical, textual or aesthetic data or secondary data already in the public realm and does not directly involve the observation or direct engagement with human or animal participants, then please jump to Question 19.

4. Specify the number of and type of participant(s) likely to be involved.

Goal is 40 participants for interviews.

Digital ethnography no goal, following willingness of interview participants, 5 – 10 expected.

5. State where the data collection will be undertaken.

Data will be collected online, in the form media use diary/mapping, video call with interview participants, and on TikTok as platform itself.

6. State the potential adverse consequences to the participant(s), or particular groups of people, if any, and what precautions are to be taken.

Expression of personal information and opinions will be treated as sensitive, therefore care will be taken to ensure that the interview transcripts will be anonymised so that no content of the interviews can fall back negatively on participants.

7. State any procedures which may cause discomfort, distress or harm to the participant(s), or particular groups of people, and the degree of discomfort or distress likely to be entailed.

Unlikely as participation is on voluntary basis. Participants will be informed about the study and its aims and their right to withdraw from interview and research during the interview and within a period of one month following. Further, interviews will be conducted in a way respecting people's privacy and not pushing them into answering.

8. State how the participant(s) will be recruited. (Please attach copies of any recruiting materials if used).

Via social media posts and email lists, and through snowball sampling / participants being referred by previously interviewed people.

9. State if the participant(s) will be paid, and if so, provide details and state reasons for payment.

Participation in interviews will be without financial incentive and on voluntary basis.

10. State the manner in which the participant(s) consent will be obtained (if written, please include a copy of the intended consent form).

10a. Will the participant(s) be fully informed about the nature of the project and of what they will be required to do?

Yes, participants will be informed about aims of the study and nature of the questions asked in the interview.

10b. Is there any deception involved?

No.

10c. Will the participant(s) be told they can withdraw from participation at any time, if they wish?

Yes.

10d. Will data be treated confidentially regarding personal information, and what will the participant(s) be told about this?

Yes, participants will be told that their data is treated as personal, that they have the right to withdraw from research and have their data deleted at any time, that the interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and anonymised, that the recording will be deleted after transcription, that access to transcriptions is restricted to the research investigator.

10e. If the participant(s) are young persons under the age of 18 years or vulnerable persons (for example with learning difficulties or with severe cognitive disability), how will consent be given (meaning from the participant themselves or from a third party such as a parent or guardian) and how will assent to the research be asked for?

Participants will be above the age of 18.

11. Will the data be confidential?

11a. Will the data be anonymous

Yes, data will be anonymised.

11b. How will the data remain confidential? Please explain any training you will be obtaining, or steps you will be taking to anonymise and/or embargo sensitive data, or coding data that you intend to share in terms of open access.

Interviews will be stored in an anonymised form, both personal information or any information that could identify a participant in the interview will be removed.

11c. How long will the data be stored? [It is recommended that it is retained for a minimum of 5 years and maximum of 10 years in order to defend your research

findings following publication by PhD thesis and further academic or media publication.] And how will it be eventually destroyed?

5 years

11d. How will you ensure that your data is stored ethically and safely’?

Data will be stored in an anonymised form on an encrypted and password protected drive, with access being reduced to the research investigator. Further explicit approval from participants will be required to change terms of access and use of data.

11e. Will you be storing your data with the College’s data repository system?

No.

11f. Explain the steps you will be taking to establish a meta data record is created disclosing what data is being generated, an indication as to where it is stored, and providing an oversight of all the research being done at Goldsmiths, and for reporting purposes to your funder(s) if relevant.

To ensure participant’s right to withdraw from research and have their data deleted, a meta data record will be created, comprised of identifier of anonymised interview and participants name and contact information. The meta data record will be stored separately in a password protected document.

12. Will the research involve the investigation of illegal conduct? If yes, give details and say how you yourself will be protected from harm or suspicion of illegal conduct?

No, won’t investigate illegal conduct.

13. Is it possible that the research might disclose information regarding child sexual abuse or neglect? If yes, indicate how such information will be passed to the relevant authorities (for example social workers, police), but also indicate how participants will be informed about the handling of such information were disclosure of this kind to occur. A warning to this effect must be included in the consent form if such disclosure is likely to occur.

No.

14. State what kind of feedback, if any, will be offered to participants.

Participants will be made available an electronic copy of their transcribed interview.

15. State your expertise for conducting the research proposed.

Research investigator received graduate level training in qualitative research and has professional audience and product research experience.

16. In cases of research with young persons under the age of 18 years or vulnerable persons (for example with learning difficulties or with severe cognitive disability), or with those in legal custody, will face-to-face interviews or observations or

experiments be overseen by a third party (such as a teacher, care worker or prison officer)?

N/A

- 17. If data is collected from an institutional location (such as a school, prison, hospital), has agreement been obtained by the relevant authority (for example Head Teacher, Local Education Authority, Home Office)?**

N/A

- 18. For those conducting research with young persons under the age of 18 years or vulnerable persons (for example with learning difficulties or with severe cognitive disability), do you have Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checking/clearance. DBS checks are now being done, via HR. Have you contacted the relevant person in the HR team to seek advice? (Ordinarily unsupervised research with minors would require such DBS checking. Please see <http://www.gold.ac.uk/fitness-to-train/>). Please provide evidence that DBS checking has been done.**

N/A

- 19. Will the research place you in situations of harm, injury or criminality?**

No.

- 20. Might the research cause harm to those represented in it? If so, how?**

No.

- 21. Will the research cause harm or damage to bystanders or the immediate environment?**

No.

- 22. Are there any conflicts of interest regarding the investigation and dissemination of the research (for example with regard to compromising independence or objectivity due to financial gain)?**

No.

- 23. Is the research likely to have any negative impact on the academic status or reputation of the College?**

No.

Appendix V: List of participants

Listed in alphabetical order. Names are pseudonyms and details have been anonymised.

Adna, in her early twenties, is a recent politics graduate living in London and working in the education sector. She has been on TikTok since 2019.

Agatha, 21 years old, studies for a degree in performance arts at a university in London and has been on TikTok since late 2019.

Antonio, 25 years old, works as a marketing manager at a business services company in London. He had a TikTok account since 2018 but only started actively using the app in early 2020.

Bea, 25 years old, studies for a Master's degree in London in addition to working as a freelance writer for different media outlets. She has been on TikTok since late 2019.

Belna, 23 years old, works in a garden centre in London. She has heard about TikTok years ago but only started using it in early 2020.

Benjamin, 21 years old, finished a degree in psychology at a university in the Midlands and picked up using TikTok in early 2020.

Carla, 23 years old, works in London's musical sector and also is self-employed in the e-commerce sector. She knew about TikTok years ago but only picked up using the app in 2020.

Catherine, 27 years old, works as a nurse in a London hospital. She has started using TikTok during lockdown in early 2020.

Fatima, 22 years old, is a law graduate working as a para legal in London and has been on TikTok since early 2020.

Gil, 21 years old, is a third year natural sciences student at a university in the South of England. He picked up TikTok during the first lockdown in 2020.

Gretta, 22 years old, is a Master's student and works as an accountant in the public sector. She started using TikTok during the initial lockdown in early 2020.

Hajna, 19 years old, is a first year student at a university in South England and works in a supermarket. She has been on TikTok since late 2019.

Hannes, 24 years old, is a journalist living in London. He has been on TikTok since late 2019 but only started to frequently use it during a period of lockdown in early 2020.

Iris, 23 years old, has graduated with a social policy degree from a university in the North of England. She has been using TikTok and its predecessor Musical.ly since 2018.

Isobel, 18 years old, has just finished her A-Levels in London and is thinking about where to study at university. She has been on TikTok since 2019.

Jade, 20 years old, is a final year politics student at a university in London and first used TikTok in early 2020.

Josh, in his early twenties, lives in London and studies for a natural sciences degree at a university in the South of England. He picked up the app during the first lockdown in 2020.

Joyce, 22 years old, is a recent law graduate working a civil services job in London. She first started using TikTok in early 2020.

Judith, 22 years old, works as a copywriter in a London marketing agency. She first started using TikTok in early 2020 during the first lockdown in the United Kingdom.

Lisa, 22 years old, works for a communication agency and studies for a Master's in London. She started using TikTok during the first lockdown in 2020.

Manu, 24 years old, is a recent politics graduate that works as a caseworker and has recently moved back to London. She has been using TikTok since 2019.

Mario, 22 years old, has recently graduate with a politics degree from a university in South England and now is looking to become a journalist. He has first used TikTok in early 2020.

Mona, in her late twenties, works in the advertising industry while completing a part-time Master's degree. She has been on TikTok since 2019.

Rhea, 23 years old, works in the film and television industry. During the fieldwork period she moved back to her home-town London and has picked up TikTok in early 2020.

Rini, 19 years old, completed an internship in London before commencing studies at a university in the North of England. She first downloaded TikTok in late 2019.

Rosa, 20 years old, is from London but studies at a university in the Midlands. She has been using TikTok since late 2019.

Sunder, 23 years old, works in a supermarket while completing a part-time degree at a university in South England. He has been using TikTok since early 2020.

Tanja, 20 years old, works various part-time jobs alongside studying business at a university in the Midlands. She first joined TikTok in late 2019.

Velta, 21 years old, graduated with a degree in advertising from a university in London before moving back home to India. She has been on TikTok since 2019.

Will, 20 years old, studies mathematics at a university in the Midlands but lived at home with his family in London during fieldwork. He first started using TikTok in late 2019.