

A Study of the Relationship Between the TikTok Algorithm and Content Creators:  
The Effects of the Digital Machine and Human Interactions

Elisa Mastantuono

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By: Elisa Mastantuono

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Signed by the final examining committee:

\_\_\_\_\_ Chair  
Dr. Kate de Medeiros

\_\_\_\_\_ Examiner  
Dr. Nayrouz Abu Hatoum

\_\_\_\_\_ Examiner  
Dr. Zhifan Luo

\_\_\_\_\_ Thesis Supervisor(s)  
Dr. Amy Swiffen

\_\_\_\_\_ Thesis Supervisor(s)

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Kate de Medeiros Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Pascale Sicotte

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean of Faculty of Arts and Science

## **Abstract**

### **A Study of the Relationship Between the TikTok Algorithm and Content Creators: The Effects of the Digital Machine and Human Interactions**

Elisa Mastantuono

This thesis explores the intricate dynamics between TikTok's algorithm and content creators by examining the interaction between digital materials and human agency. TikTok, a social media giant, is known for its personalized and engaging content. The platform transforms how digital content is created and consumed through its advanced machine-learning algorithm, AI. The study is inspired by the theoretical perspectives of New Materialism, Networked Individualism, and the Virtual Self, which provide a deep understanding of the interplay between technology and human behavior. With three methodological approaches, including digital autoethnography, digital ethnography, and semi-structured interviews, this research explores how TikTok's algorithm is influenced by content creators. While content creators try to manipulate the algorithm to boost their exposure and engagement, the algorithm, at the same time, changes their content and creative abilities. This suggests a complex mutual relationship. Moreover, this study adds to the wider discussion of algorithmic transparency, and the impact of AI on digital platforms. It highlights the need to further study the power structures embedded in digital technologies. Overall, we gain insights into digital interactions' evolving nature and algorithms' impact on cultural production and individual agency.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The complex world of social media has been growing and evolving for some time now. We have seen social media giants like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and many more, carving a unique path in the digital realm. However, the rise of TikTok has offered a new way of sharing, creating, and consuming content. TikTok captivates millions of users worldwide with its addictive short videos filled with an abundance of other creative tools. This digital innovation has become the inspiration for trends, challenges, and viral content, fostering a unique sense of community. Besides the obvious foundation of entertainment and creative experiences on TikTok, underneath lies an intricate algorithm that shapes the users' experiences on the platform. This algorithm uses AI (Artificial Intelligence) and is based on machine learning and user behavior analysis, which utilize personalized content feeds and provide a unique experience for all users. TikTok's algorithm has become a defining feature of the platform, catering to user preferences, promoting engagement, and overall contributing to application popularity and success.

What first struck my interest with TikTok was the complex For You Page (FYP). As a casual user, I spent the majority, if not all, of my time on the FYP. Caught in the TikTok loop, videos seamlessly passing me by with a slight swipe of the finger, making it feel like no time was passing. When I finally checked the time, it hit me – I had just blown two hours of my day without even noticing. This experience reoccurred numerous times, causing me to be a victim of the TikTok addiction. However, my time with TikTok did not end there. Whether I was with family, friends, or colleagues, we found ourselves scrolling on TikTok during awkward pauses in conversation and sending each other videos. Our conversations turned into, “Did you guys see

that video on TikTok where...?” which often ended in hysterical laughter. I came to realize that TikTok did not only consume my life but others around me. Captivating dance videos and trends seemed to flow through my entire social circle within hours. This sparked my interest in the TikTok algorithm. What makes TikTok so addicting? How does it know what I like and dislike? How is it that people around me end up watching similar videos as I do? Am I the one ‘telling’ the algorithm what I like, or is it telling me what I like and what I should watch?

As I kept asking myself these questions, the curiosity, as well as concern, about the algorithm grew. I began my research by attempting to determine how the algorithm worked, which ended in failure. After continuous time spent on the platform, I realized that the users who may have a better sense of the algorithm are content creators and influencers. Because it is not possible to directly observe the algorithm, my research is about how people experience it. That is, my goal is not to define and analyze the algorithm directly, but to observe the relationship between the TikTok algorithm and its users. The new materialist perspective inspired this thought, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the effects and relationship of the object [the algorithm] and the human [TikTok creators]. This topic has gained traction over the years due to the mystical element of algorithms. We are currently in an era where technology can influence and alter cultural norms, therefore, understanding this complex relationship between humans and technology becomes essential. Growing up at the start of the digital empire, I bring a unique perspective to this research, drawing on my experiences as both a consumer and contributor to many social media platforms, such as TikTok. I intend to explore the perceptions of users aged 18 to 30 regarding the influence exerted by TikTok’s algorithm on content creators and influencers, how they interact with it and how they perceive it affects their actions on the platform. This study examines user consumption patterns, content preferences, and assumptions,

while also examining the extent to which these users attempt to actively influence or control the algorithmic process.



# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## 1. TikTok

### 1.1 The Platform

TikTok is said to be one of the most popular social media applications today. This platform allows users to view, create, share, and “like” videos up to 10 minutes long (D’Souza, 2024; Feldkamp, 2021); Ceci, 2023). Users gravitate towards TikTok for its unique and personalized feeds, filled with user-generated content (UGC) that incorporates music, sound effects, filters, stickers, and more (Feldkamp, 2021, p. 75). The platform was created in 2016 by the Chinese technology company, Byte Dance, which refers to it as ‘Douyin’ (D’Souza, 2024, para. 7). However, TikTok only gained traction worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic (Li et al., 2021). During this period, TikTok was mainly used for communication with family and friends, as a source of information about the coronavirus infection and hygiene measures, and, overall, as a source of entertainment. In 2020, TikTok became the most downloaded non-gaming app, with more than 1 billion downloads (Feldkamp, 2021, p. 74; Cervi, 2021, p. 199).

### 1.2 Background Information

As of 2022, TikTok has about 1 billion global daily users, 41 percent of them aged 16-24 (Cervi, 2021, p. 199) There is almost an equal balance of female (49,2%) and male (50,8%) users. Moreover, TikTok is currently available in 154 countries and in 75 languages (Grandinetti, 2021, p. 8). Ingham demonstrates evidence from a leaked TikTok document which shows that “the platform’s 732 million global active monthly users engaged with the app an average of 89 minutes per day and opened the app an average of 19 times per day” (as cited in Grandinetti, 2021). This conveys the overwhelming presence TikTok has on the digital ecosystem.

### 1.3 Entertainment and Educative Content

While the app still maintains its entertaining and comedic format, it has been increasingly used for ‘infotainment.’ Influencers and content creators offer advice, tips, and basic information about everything and anything. Whether it is beauty, fashion, finance, health, cooking, there is a niche for all (D’Souza, 2024). On June 18, 2020, TikTok states “when TikTok was first launched, we set out to create a platform that would inspire creativity and bring joy, all in the palm of your hand... [Now] we want people to turn to TikTok not just for entertainment, but to learn something new, to acquire a new skill...” As such, they announced that they are investing 15 million dollars to launch #LearnOnTikTok and collaborate with educators, experts, creators, and nonprofits. This offers a personal learning experience for every user, only gaining more traction for the platform (TikTok Newsroom, 2020). Some would say that TikTok has become the new Google, the new search engine (Huang, 2022). Searching for information on TikTok is interactive and more engaging than scrolling through an endless amount of text on Google. You can search for new recipes, tips, and tricks for cleaning, clothing hauls, and even at-home remedies. The app delivers any information at your fingertips. Especially when TikTok has an advanced recommendation system in place, that directly caters to the user (ibid). This is what makes TikTok successful and unique compared to other social media platforms.

### 1.4 Challenges and Criticisms Faced by TikTok

While the evolving and innovative nature of TikTok produces a positive impact for the consumer and the company itself, the platform has faced some challenges and criticisms along the way. For instance, in 2020, then-President Donald Trump argued that the United States would ban TikTok due to its Chinese origins which threatens the national security, foreign policy, and economy (Chander, 2022, p. 1146). Legislators and authorities from the West are growing more concerned that TikTok might provide the Chinese government access to private

user information (Maheshwari and Holpuch, 2023, para. 5). The platform was banned in India in 2020, and the parliaments of several other nations, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and New Zealand, have also prohibited the use of the app on official devices. In fact, creators of TikTok consider talks about bans comedic and they criticize governments for attempting to censor their people (2023, para. 5-7).

Moreover, TikTok has been faced with serious privacy and security concerns for users. There is a fine line between private information and public content. As Trifiro (2022) puts it, content creators are compromising privacy for authenticity (p. 1019). The concerns around privacy and security are not solely about what information TikTok gathers and how they use it, but also about the risk of exposure to become 'famous'. In order to be authentic, users must share personal information online, thereby risking their privacy and safety. In response to such growing fear amongst users, TikTok specifically outlines some measures they take to ensure the security of user information online and what information they collect in the document "Privacy Policy." These efforts are intended to ensure the transparency of the platform and security for its users. However, many critics question whether these efforts are enough. Lastly, TikTok faces challenges of bullying, hate speech, and violence. Referring to "The Dark Side of TikTok," Weimann and Masri (2020) discover an overwhelming presence of far-right extremism (p. 4). They suggest a stricter Terms of Service "that does not allow postings that are deliberately designed to provoke or antagonize people, or are intended to harass, harm, hurt, scare, distress, embarrass, or upset people, or include threats of physical violence" (2020, p. 11). While creators on TikTok are restricted from posting such negative content, it does not prevent viewers from leaving abusive and offensive comments on their videos. This issue is discussed during the

interviews with TikTok content creators. Overall, these issues are present on all social media platforms, hence, research on such issues is essential today.

## 2 Content Creators and Influencers on TikTok

### 2.1 Content Creators vs. Influencers

While the architecture and technicalities of the TikTok app are important, those who create content are a vital aspect of the platform. Hödl and Myrach (2023) characterize content creators as users who generate and upload content on social media platforms (p. 497). In addition, content creators have the freedom to decide what user-generated content they want to display. Yet, there is a fine line between creating content you love and creating content that other users love. Going ‘viral’ and being authentic can sometimes be in conflict with each other. Content creators can also be considered “influencers.” Both groups produce content on social media platforms such as TikTok and have a follower base that they engage with (2023, p. 499). However, there are some differences between the two user groups. Content creators' purpose is to solely create content that engages their audience. Whereas influencers are “social media personalities who—again, it’s in their job title—influence their followers to do or buy something based on what they do or buy” (West, 2022, para. 2-5). The difference is behind the intention of their work. Influencers create content to receive monetary compensation for ‘influencing’ a product or brand, while content creators post engaging content that informs or entertains their audience (Geysler, 2017). Overall, these two groups reflect the entirety of the platform. Their creativity keeps the platform entertaining and captivating.

Furthermore, there are many tiers and statuses for influencers. It ranges from macro influencers with over 1,000,000 followers to nano and micro influencers that have between 1,000 and 10,000 followers (Macready, 2023; Geysler, 2020). With the rise of micro-influencers, the

number of followers has been disagreed upon. Some experts claim that a micro-influencer has a maximum of 5000 followers. For the sake of this study, I will follow Muuga (n.d.) definition (Vancottem, 2021). I am specifically interested in both content creators and influencers with 500 followers or more. As such, these tiers matter when discussing influencer marketing. This represents their status or their reach on platforms like TikTok, and how a company can benefit from them. Geysler (2022) highlights that “TikTok (utilized by 69% of brands using influencer marketing) is by far the most popular influencer marketing channel, now well ahead of Instagram (47%), YouTube (33%), and Facebook (28%)” (para. 7).

However, based on the engagement rate, follower count is not the only predictor of success. The formula for success considers the number of ‘likes,’ shares, and comments and divides it by the follower count. There are many other factors that determine high engagement status, like the number of views, profile clicks, affiliate reach, playthrough time, creation quality, and more (Grin, 2024; Smith, 2021). While engagement rates do not necessarily matter for content creators, it is interesting to analyze their status in conjunction with the algorithm.

## 2.2 The Market and “Influencing”

As mentioned before, the engagement status of an influencer is important when considering brand partnerships and other monetization opportunities. “Influencing” on TikTok refers to creators impacting opinions, behaviors, and decisions of their followers. In other words, they leverage their popularity to promote products, services, and ideas. TikTok’s ‘Creator Fund’ and brand partnerships provide monetary incentives to creators based on their video views and engagement rate. Creator Fund is a program created by TikTok to encourage content creators by offering financial support and rewards. Essentially, creators receive monetary compensation depending on the number of views and engagement they receive for a video. Which once was a

creative passion is now becoming a career for many creators on the platform (TikTok, 2020). In addition, creators can make a substantial amount of earnings by working with brands. By forming brand partnerships, TikTok creators must produce sponsored content. This includes incorporating brand products or services into their original video in exchange for revenue. This has become the modern advertising method for brands, which is seen as more effective and authentic (TikTok, 2022). I specifically interviewed creators and influencers who received monetary compensation for promoting a brand on their videos, and discussed how that affected their reach online. These techniques enable precise targeting due to machine learning and artificial intelligence, and the creative insights of content creators. Therefore, TikTok has introduced a unique approach for digital advertising.

### 2.3 The Impact of TikTok Creators

TikTok creators have a significant impact on society, culture, and the digital landscape. While entertainment has become central to a creator's persona, there are many other aspects which encompass their strengths. For instance, they are considered trendsetters. According to social media scholar Crystal Abidin (2021), social media platforms give rise to prolific users, who, in turn, become the platform's celebrities: "they are often the leaders of trends within subcultures and perhaps even the highest earners through brand collaborations and ad sales." (as cited in Boffone, 2022, p. 19). Prior to TikTok, those who set trends were well-known celebrities and millionaires. Now, TikTok has given power to simple users of TikTok, which leads to a rapid increase in content creation and engagement. Furthermore, such high engagement can foster a sense of community on TikTok. Influential TikTok creators are known to have a significant number of followers. This reciprocal engagement with their followers through likes, comments, live streams, and shares, not only builds a community on TikTok but also attracts

brands to work with those creators. Lastly, TikTok creators demonstrate a cultural impact. Studies show that the platform and TikTok community impacts culture and generates trends that transfer well beyond the platform (TikTok, 2021). They state that “from clearing shelves thanks to #TikTokMadeMeBuyIt, to driving luxury fashion trends, to hearing your friends say, "I saw this thing on TikTok" every day, 71% of users believe the biggest trends start on TikTok” (ibid). In addition, research shows that “7 in 10 users believe TikTok communities have the power to create change in culture. True to TikTok's mission, the collective creativity of the TikTok community to shape culture can't be understated” (ibid). Overall, TikTok creators have [or at least are perceived to have] a large influence on the digital world, society and culture. However, this would not be possible without the presence of the TikTok algorithm.

### 3 The TikTok Algorithm

#### 3.1 Machine Learning Algorithm

When discussing TikTok and its users, it is inevitable that the TikTok algorithm is mentioned. The platform offers numerous similar features when compared to other social media applications, such as “user profiles, followers, customizable usernames, user-generated content, and interaction between users (e.g., likes, comments, and features like duets that allow one to duplicate and interact with others content)” (Barta and Andalibi, 2021, p. 2). However, what makes TikTok so renowned is its highly personalized and addictive algorithm. TikTok employs algorithms known as the large artificial intelligence (AI) mode (Cervi, 2022, p. 200). Grandinetti (2021) explains that the nuances of AI are often simplified as “the algorithm”, since the specific mechanisms of machine learning, deep learning, and automated decision-making on social media platforms are often kept secret. According to a study by Klug et al. (2021) on user perceptions of the TikTok algorithm, they explain that algorithms are thought of as “invisible mechanisms

within socio-technical systems and digital infrastructures that can influence how we perceive the reality of every life only and offline, and how we interact with and in these realities and with each other” (p. 85). As such, when referring to AI on TikTok, we are talking about the subfield known as machine learning algorithms. Machine learning utilizes extensive datasets and layers of algorithms to learn to do tasks based on probability and pattern recognition (Grandinetti, 20210, p. 4). Similarly, Burrell (2016) mentions that the machine learning algorithm includes two parallel operations, a ‘classifier’ and a ‘learner’ (p. 5). Burrell (2016) notes that “classifiers take input (referred to as a set of ‘features’) and produce an output (a ‘category’): (p. 5). Moreover, machine learning algorithms called ‘learners’ “must first train on test data” (ibid). The outcome of this training will then be used by the classifier to determine the classification for new input data. Especially when talking about social media platforms, the machine learning process “identifies relations, detects and uncovers patterns, classifies information, recommends content, moderates and flags problematic material, auto-generates pages, and delivers targeted advertisements” (2020, p. 5). Moreover, Allen and Masters (2020) state that “machine learning processes can be used to achieve automated decision-making, in which algorithmic correlations allow for conclusions to be reached for simple and complex problems, often with minimal supervision” (as cited in Grandinetti, 2021, p. 4). In other words, this giant mechanism is specifically used to categorize and recommend content on TikTok. The platform employs algorithms to deliver personalized content to users based on their preferences and behaviors. Once AI has completed its tasks, it creates the famous For You Page for all users of TikTok.

### 3.2 For You Page

The uniquely crafted For You Page (FYP) on TikTok is thanks to the algorithm's performance. Jones (2023) defines the FYP as “the central feed through which TikTokers



interact, centered content from “a bubble of like-minded, similar people.” (p. 1193) This feed differs from other social media feeds because it delivers content to users based on their engagement and input, such as user likes, comments, followings, sharing, saving, playthrough time, profile clicks, and more (Mage, 2022). Also, the algorithm analyzes text, images, and videos to display targeted content to users (Byford, 2018, as cited in Seaver, 2017, p. 9) When you first open the app, all users are directed towards a scrolling content feed, like Facebook or Instagram feed. However, this content has been algorithmically selected based on a variety of factors. Overall, this curates the perfect FYP for each user.

First, TikTok's algorithm examines user preferences, interactions, and engagement with videos. Essentially, the algorithm takes note of the videos TikTok users ‘like,’ create, share to friends, repost, and comment on in the past and present. The duration of each viewing and the type of content the user views have a significant impact. In addition, the algorithm analyzes each video a user engages with and looks at hashtags, captions, sounds, and effects that are included in the video. It searches for patterns and resemblances between each video in order to determine the relevance and suitability of a user's preferences. As such, the level and type of engagement with particular content will determine what content the platform recommends (Klug et al., 2021, p. 85). This means that whether the video receives high or low engagement, it will ultimately determine who sees the content, if not at all. Also, if the engagement levels impact the creator's follower count, likes, comments, etc., it will play a role in the recommendation of content. The algorithm also considers the platform account settings and the device TikTok is used on. More specifically, it analyzes the language preference, the country or city, and the device type (cellphone, laptop, etc.). This allows for location-based content and recommendations (Klug et al. 2021, p. 85). Finally, TikTok AI evaluates popular trends and challenges to create a custom

feed. The algorithm identifies trending or "viral" videos, topics, and challenges by examining the large TikTok community collectively (ibid).

### 3.3 The Algorithms' Purpose

While understanding what the algorithms do and collect is equally important, understanding why the algorithm does what it does is essential. An article published by the New York Times "How TikTok Reads Your Mind" discloses a confidential document headed "TikTok Algo 101" from the TikTok company, which explicitly states how the algorithm functions and its purpose (Smith, 2021). TikTok's algorithm's four main goals are "user values, "long-term user value," creator value" and "platform value" (2021, para. 1). In other words, the algorithm is interested in what the user enjoys and finds engaging. It focuses on retaining user engagement for as long as possible. Smith notes that the algorithm is interested in how much time a user spends watching each video to steer them towards more videos, which results in them scrolling on the application longer (para. 6). In short, the company closely looks at two metrics "retention," which means whether a user will come back on the platform and "time spent", how long they have spent on the app (para. 8). The goal of TikTok is to keep users there as long as possible, which some may describe as addictive (ibid) Also, it supports creator content by recommending their videos to the right audience. Finally, the algorithm ensures the overall growth and prosperity of the platform. This highlights the power of the algorithm and sheds some light on the secrecy behind it all. My research will specifically address the powers of the algorithm and how it affects content creation from the perspective of content creators.

### 3.4 Algorithmic Bias

Across social media companies, there are signs of algorithmic bias. Although algorithms are instrumental in content recommendation and personalization, they do have some

disadvantages. Machine learning algorithms employ reliable labels from data experts to make accurate predictions. However, many studies have been questioning these ‘reliable’ labels and whether they insinuate biases and privacy concerns for the users. For instance, Grandinetti’s (2021) research shows that algorithmic design is not objective (p. 3). This can be due to the algorithms design or due to inherent biases in the input data or the interaction between the data and algorithms (Garcia, 2016 as cited in Sun et al., 2020, p. 6). Also, Ananny (2016) and Cheney-Lippold (2017) explain that algorithms predict outcomes without understanding intention and context. They act on "measurable types," assigning users' identities and categories that are mostly not representative but arranged for convenience (as cited in Bishop, 2021, p. 5). However, Sun et al. (2020) argues that “algorithmic bias evolves with human interaction in an iterative manner, which may have a long-term effect on algorithm performance and humans’ discovery and learning” (p. 7). In other words, the study tries to highlight the evolution of bias between algorithms and humans. Biased data from a human can lead to a biased algorithm, and biased algorithmic output can affect other humans and their behavior (ibid). While algorithms are often advertised with small margins of error when it comes to categorizations and prediction., it is important to acknowledge that these ‘small’ errors can be catastrophic (Bishop, 2021, p. 6). The article points out specific examples of algorithmic bias and the consequences it has. For example, in 2020, “Twitter systematically cropped out black faces in image preview, TikTok looped white creators (and excluded those of color) through its content-filtering algorithm” (2021, p. 6). Overall, this outlines the downfalls of machine learning algorithms and highlights the direct relationship between humans and algorithms. Furthermore, it demonstrates the role of AI as both an element of the algorithm and in the content put on the platform by the users. In response, TikTok Newsroom writes the article “New labels for disclosing AI-generated content”

which outlines a new feature where content creators can create their own labels for their videos to eliminate misleading information. Their goal is to keep people informed about AI-generated content. However, due to the evolving nature of AI, it is quite difficult to navigate.

### 3.5 Algorithm Impact on User Experience

A TikTok users' experience is almost entirely shaped by the algorithm. Everyone experiences the algorithm differently, especially when it comes to viewing and creating content on the platform. Two factors that must be investigated regarding this topic are user satisfaction and awareness. In a study named *I Can Spend Forever on It Without Getting Bored': Analyzing What College Students Like and Dislike About TikTok*, Martinez et al. (2023) concluded that the participants were most satisfied with TikTok when compared to Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. In addition, the participants explained that they like the variety of content on TikTok, the culture and community it inspires, and the applications algorithmic functions, layout and design (p. 11). On the other hand, what participants dislike about the platform is 'problems with content' like negative emotions and trending content, as well as negative experiences with other users and finally, privacy concerns. This highlights the profound impact of the TikTok algorithm on user experience and perceptions of the platform.

Moreover, a second theme in user experience is awareness. In the case of TikTok, algorithmic awareness is at the forefront. Specifically, Kang and Lou (2022) conducted a study based on AI agency and human agency. They focused on user engagement, human agency and how AI agency influences that. The results show that the participants are aware of the AI system and enjoy using AI-based affordances on TikTok because it provides a personalized FYP (p. 8). However, they realized the price to pay was their privacy and autonomy to enjoy a personalized social media experience. Additionally, participants expressed constant attempts to understand the

algorithm's ability to influence it strategically and be in control. Similarly, Issar (2023) investigates how TikTok users perceive the platform's algorithm. The results show that every user has a different perception of the algorithm. Issar (2023) demonstrates three levels of awareness: basic awareness, critical awareness, rhetorical awareness. First, “a user with a “basic” level of algorithm awareness is conscious of the fact that algorithms mediate cultural production and social interactions. They might rely on popular conceptualizations of human-algorithm interactions to inform themselves” (p. 8). Second, “a user with a “critical” level of algorithm awareness is likely to evaluate the ways in which algorithms shape cultural production and social interactions. Such users might reflect upon human-algorithm interactions that they have themselves experienced and might even experiment with generating different kinds of algorithmic experiences for themselves. They may (or may not) possess specialized knowledge about algorithms but are almost certainly aware of popular folk theories about algorithms on a platform”.

Finally, “A user with a “rhetorical” level of algorithm awareness has a more nuanced idea of human-algorithm interactions and human/algorithm agency in such entanglements than a “critically aware” user might have. They may (or may not) possess specialized knowledge about algorithms but are almost certainly aware of popular folk theories about algorithms on a platform. They actively attempt to contribute to the rhetoric concerning human-algorithm interactions and might directly or indirectly advise other users on how to navigate these entanglements. Such users may (or may not) also have a clear idea of the distinctions between understanding algorithms as technical objects and as cultural artifacts” (ibid). Overall, users believe that the algorithm has a direct impact on their experience on TikTok. As such, the participants believe it is important to be aware of the algorithm and how it works. This highlights

the lack of algorithmic awareness for TikTok users and the need for increased transparency. However, Grandinetti (2021) emphasizes that “technologies are no mere tools under the control of humans; instead, technologies and society are intertwined and influence one another” (p. 4). In other words, the user and the algorithm are in constant interaction.

Thus, the TikTok algorithm is a testament to the fusion of technology and human interaction in shaping digital experiences. Its ability to provide personalized content on the For You page is simply unmatched. Examining this relationship highlights the pivotal role of user satisfaction and algorithm awareness in shaping the TikTok experience. However, even though it is successful, there is the challenge of algorithmic bias. This highlights the ongoing need for research, scrutiny and adaptation to ensure a pleasant experience for all users.

## 4 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter examines past literature which dives into the dynamics of the TikTok platform, the role of content creators and influencers, and finally the functions of the TikTok algorithm. The platform's unique approach to content creation, based on its powerful algorithm, has revolutionized how digital content is shared and consumed. The algorithm is present through its personalized curation of the For You Page (FYP), ensuring constant user engagement that aligns with their preferences. This ultimately enhances user retention and interaction. Content creators and influencers on TikTok play a crucial role in this environment. They demonstrate a unique ability to produce creative and captivating content, which shapes cultural and social trends. They leverage the algorithm to maximize their reach and impact, demonstrating a reciprocal relationship between both parties. Furthermore, this chapter presents the role of TikTok's algorithm, and how it shapes the entire user experience. While it does include beneficial features, there are some downsides to the algorithm. These challenges require

greater algorithmic transparency and practices to maintain user safety and platform stability. These central points inform my research by providing a detailed overview of the factors that make TikTok a powerful platform. Moreover, it opens a discussion about the intricate relationship between humans and non-humans, in this case TikTok users and algorithms.

# Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I present the theoretical frameworks utilized to explore the intricate relationship between TikTok users and the algorithm. The theoretical approach in this research draws mainly from the approach of new materialism. Drawing from this perspective, this study will mobilize concepts of agency, networked individuals/networked creators, and the virtual self in the analysis. Through these theoretical lenses, the complex dynamics of user-algorithm interactions on TikTok can be better understood. By examining empirical data with theoretical insights, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how TikTok's algorithm shapes user perceptions, experiences, interactions, and perceptions within the digital realm. Also, if the user can shape the algorithmic experience, too. In what follows, I will define the concepts used to inspire my methodology and inform my analysis chapters.

## 1 New Materialism and Agency

### 1.1 Bollmer's Perspective

My research topic and goals are inspired by New Materialism theory by Grant Bollmer. This approach emerged as a critique of traditional sociology, which emphasizes culture and human agency over material aspects (Bollmer, 2019, p. 1). It derives from medium theory by McLuhan (p. 5). New Materialism theory deprioritizes human agency to consider interactions between human and non-human forces. Hence, he argues that 'matter' plays a constitutive role in the social world. In other words, this perspective aims to shift the focus from studies that are exclusively human centered to a broader examination of the agency and significance of non-human entities, including material objects, technologies, and environments, in shaping social phenomena. To situate Bollmer's (2019) theory, he addresses four different types of materialism.



First, performative materialism is defined as media being understood as what it does ‘materially’. Essentially, “media makes things happen” (p. 6). The second type is spatial temporal materialism, which means that media transforms the experience of space and time. Third, vital materialism explains that “‘life’ is the material, affective capacity of an object or body to act and be acted upon by others. The last type is neurocognitive materialism which expresses the relationship between the brain, the body and the world (ibid). Overall, Bollmer (2019) believes in a combination of old and new materialism, and he encourages the recognition of all forms to be understood (p. 1). In particular, his theory of new materialism is a combination of all four types of materialism (p. 6). These frameworks are inspired by classic theorists such as Marx, Foucault, Goffman, Innis, Ferraris and more. In short, what Bollmer grasps from all these experts is that “different forms of media, in their physical materiality, shape relations in space and time. The changes media bring about, in their shaping of space and time, have striking effects on social relationships, visual culture, and [...] the maintenance of institutional, governmental, corporate, and colonial power” (p. 99).

This approach is suitable for my research due to its understanding of humans and objects in relation to each other and the potential of objects to exert force in these relations. It is a useful framework for analyzing digital/social media. Moreover, this theory showcases how I examine and understand the dynamic between users and creators on TikTok and the algorithm. New Materialism allows me to capture the reciprocal relationship between objects and humans, like the algorithm and users of TikTok. The concepts below will show how I will rationalize this theory with my research.

### *1.1.1 The concept of objects in new materialism*

According to Bollmer (2019), the concept of objects is referred to as the active agency and relational qualities of objects in the shaping of human experience (2019, p. 146-147). Objects mediate human experiences by framing possibilities for action and interaction (p. 174). They are instrumental in structuring social practices, communication patterns, and everyday life. In other words, objects act as mediators between us and our experiences, shaping the possibilities of what we can do and how we can do it. Considering the context of media theories, Bollmers believes that objects are not passive or inert entities but are in fact tangled in complex relationships and interactions (p. 168-170). A consistent example of an object in Bollmer's book is media technologies. Media technologies mediate how individuals communicate, consume information, and engage with cultural content (p. 6). He asserts that these objects don't just passively exist but actively structure and shape the ways we engage with the world. He states, "objects are independent from humans, emphasizing their alterity and their Otherness" (p. 168). We can consider this concept when looking at my research. Social media platforms, such as TikTok provide us with various tools and features for communication and self-expression. They emphasize the possibility of action by offering options such as posting photos/videos, writing comments, sharing and more. At the same time, they shape our interactions by implementing constraints such as algorithms that prioritize certain content over others and alter our experience on the platform. Overall, such algorithms on TikTok play a significant role in shaping the user's experience. It determines which videos are displayed on users' FYP pages based on multiple factors, such as user interactions, video information, and device and account settings. It can be said that the TikTok algorithm demonstrates "action, agency, and, importantly, opposition and conflict" (p. 171). Hence, examining Bollmer's concept of object through a new materialist perspective is essential to my study.

### *1.1.2 Human-Object Relations*

Bollmer's pays close attention to the reciprocal relationship between humans and objects, which demonstrates greater social and cultural implications. As Grant Bollmer puts it, "materialism designates a set of perspectives united by the claim that physical materiality – be it of a technology, practice or body – matters in the shaping of reality" (p. 1). He asserts that even though we are unable to see the material infrastructure of something like 'algorithms,' it does not indicate that the material thing is insignificant (Bollmer, 2019, p. 2). He believes we have witnessed repeatedly that such locations, devices, and objects transform human interaction and experience, often beyond the human consciousness (2019, p. 3). Bollmer states "in their materiality, media define the limits of meaning and communication. They shape what human bodies are and do. They transform experiences of space and time. They influence how we relate to each other, intervening in human relations since we first began to speak to one another. And they point to how humans are and how they participate in the making of your reality" (p. 6). Overall, his book argues that our relationships and behaviors as humans are mediated, and this mediation is material and real. Objects like algorithms, embedded within digital systems, have transformative effects on human interactions and experiences, often operating beyond conscious awareness.

### *1.1.3 Algorithm as physical materiality*

Bollmer primarily focuses on physical materialities, including technologies such as algorithms and how they shape reality. Emphasis is made on the idea that algorithms are physical materialities. Algorithms do not only perform calculations and solve problems. Bollmer suggests that they are material entities that have a profound impact on humans and society (p. 68). Algorithms in this case have material embodiments in the form of statistical calculations,

hardware, and software components (Soni, 2023). One important aspect considered by Bollmer is 'storage'. He explains that "most media are designed to store something for a period of time, with recordings limited to the particular physical form that characterizes that medium" (p. 51). However, we are not specifically interested in the physical description and mechanics of the algorithm. Bollmer's theory allows me to consider how algorithms, as physical materialities, shape societal structures and human experiences. I am not investigating the algorithm itself, in attempts to define it. Rather, I am interested in the algorithm in relation to the TikTok user and how both parties affect one another. Moreover, Bollmer (2019) notes that past theorists believed that something fictional or not visible could not be physical. However, he argues that "fiction is material because of the materiality of a medium (p. 156). The same can be said about algorithms. While algorithms are not visible and hardly understood, it does not mean that they are not physical and do not have influence over society. In fact, they impact communication patterns, cultural practices, and information dissemination. In short, studying algorithms as physical materialities is essential to understanding their place within technological infrastructures and their broader impact on society and the environment.

#### *1.1.4 Understanding material agency*

Material agency refers to the capacity of entities to act and produce effects within their environments. Ultimately, objects and materials participate in shaping events and processes. Specifically, the work of Grant Bollmer (2019) explores material agency within his materialist media theory. He focuses on the reciprocal relationship between technological objects and humans. He believes that both parties possess agency and in turn, actively influence each other's performance, behavior, and experience. His book acknowledges the mutual relationship between humans and objects, where humans can alter the functioning of objects and viceversa. While

humans shape and configure technological artifacts like algorithms through design and use, these artifacts, in turn, shape human behaviors, perceptions, and social interactions. In addition, Bollmer argues that objects exert some type of autonomy. He notes that algorithms “are independent, they are different, and they are separate. Hence, I investigated the active role of objects like algorithms and how that shaped the whole ecosystem of TikTok. Also, my goal was to examine the relationship between users and algorithms, and how their agency exerts on each other.

## 1.2 Concepts

Here I will define the concepts I am drawing from Bollmer that will be applied in greater depth in the analysis chapters. He introduces specific concepts within his theory of new materialism such as sound, discourse, social and vital objects, and performance. These concepts are used to conceptualize media, its environment, and its influence.

### 1.2.1 *Storage*

First, he explains how digital media stores a wide range of things like photographs, recordings, sounds, texts, and more (2019, p. 51). Hence, he argues that the media’s physical capacity as a medium to store and record shapes the role a medium has in participating in and determining reality (ibid). In other words, the medium stores materials, which in turn affects the media and users. Considering that the social media platform, TikTok, has a large storage and distribution capacity for content, including texts, sounds, images, and videos. This enables increased creativity among content creators. Moreover, the content stored and circulated on TikTok shapes the platform's reality by influencing trends and behaviors. For example, viral challenges, memes, and trends that emerge on TikTok help shape popular culture and social norms. Hence, the content that is stored and shared on TikTok affects user experiences and

perceptions on the platform. The algorithm then analyzes user behaviors, interests, and engagement to deliver content on their FYP, which inevitably influences the content they view on the platform.

### *1.2.2 Discourse*

Second, he talks about discourse and how there is a link between the material and the discursive. In the sense of “seeing or experiencing something and from the linguistic or symbolic means for saying something about it that makes sense and can be interpreted and understood by others” (p. 63). Hence, it is important to acknowledge how the material object has a direct influence on the discourse at play and vice versa. In the context of TikTok, this concept is relevant as the platforms revolve around viewing, creating, and sharing videos, with the algorithm that mediates this discourse. One side considers how users on TikTok engage in discourse by creating and interacting with videos by liking, sharing, commenting, ultimately shaping the platform environment. On the other hand, TikTok's algorithm plays an essential role in mediating the interaction between content and discourse. By analyzing user preferences and behaviors, the algorithm curates content recommendations, thereby influencing the discourse of users. This highlights the reciprocal relationship between users and the algorithm. Also, it shows the impact of the algorithm as a material object in shaping user experience and discourse.

### *1.2.3 Social Objects*

In addition, Bollmer draws from Maurizio Ferraris' notion of social objects. Ferraris believes that ‘social objects’ are the product of inscription and documentality. Essentially, “social objects exist only insofar as at least two human beings are thinking about them (Ferraris, 2013, p. 43, as cited in Bollmer, 2019, p. 68). As such, social objects can be physical artifacts or intangible entities. My research suggests that the algorithm is a social object that is molded by

user interaction and engagement. The TikTok algorithm is a social object because users continuously process and interpret it in digital space. As they interact with TikTok's content, users collectively engage with and consider the algorithm, indicating their preferences, interests, and behaviors. Users give the algorithm meaning through their actions, such as likes, comments, shares, and watching preferences, which affects how the algorithm works and what content appears. In contrast, the algorithm, as a social object, exerts its influence over users by shaping their experiences and interactions on the platform. The algorithm mediates users' access to social objects within the TikTok ecosystem by curating personalized content recommendations based on user data and engagement metrics, thus shaping the discourse and cultural dynamics that unfold.

#### *1.2.4 Vital Materialism*

Moreover, vital materialism is introduced by theorist Jane Bennet, which refers to “the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own (2010, as cited in Bollmer, 2019, p. 146). In other words, it attempts to recognize the vast range of agencies beyond humans (p. 159). Through Bollmers perspective, he suggests that “media are vital objects, possessing their own agencies and abilities [...]” (p. 174). Bennet's notion highlights the agency and potential of non-human entities, including digital platforms like TikTok, to exert influence and shape human behavior. The TikTok platform and its algorithm can be viewed as vital objects with their own agencies and capabilities. The algorithm, which can act both independently and in response to user inputs based on its own trajectories and tendencies. In addition to being a tool for content curation, the algorithm actively influences the dynamics and user experiences of the platform. The goal of the object, the

algorithm, is to keep users on the platform by displaying personalized content, which modifies their attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, when considering the user-algorithm relationship, it is clear that both express aspects of control over the other. Although users can shape how they engage with TikTok's platform and content, the algorithm also has an impact by directing user interactions and determining how content appears on the platform. Users can assert control over the algorithm by manipulating their interactions or preferences, but they are also subject to the algorithm's decisions and biases in return.

### *1.2.5 Performativity*

Lastly, Bollmer addresses the concept of performativity. His overall work emphasizes the materiality of media technologies and their performance abilities. As he puts it, “media are performative. Media and technology act, and it is through their material agencies [such as the algorithm] that differential relations are produced and maintained. In acting, media permit some relations and bodies to materialize, while they also prevent others from doing so” (p. 173). His investigation of performativity in media technologies is highly relevant to the dynamics of TikTok's algorithm and content creators. It highlights how media technologies actively influence social interactions and cultural phenomena. This viewpoint emphasizes how TikTok's algorithm acts as an agent in facilitating the production, sharing, and consumption of content. When applied to TikTok, this perspective highlights the agency of the platform's algorithm in mediating the creation, dissemination, and reception of content. The algorithm decides which content is surfaced to users based on their interactions, preferences, and behaviors; this affects the visibility and prosperity of content creators on the platform. This means that certain relations and bodies, like well-known creators or viral content, are made possible by the algorithm's actions within the TikTok community. On the other hand, it is important to note that Bollmer does not



denounce the performativity of humans. He solely believes that both agents, objects and humans, have performative abilities. When looking at TikTok, content creators produce and share content, all while engaging with the algorithm. Their performance on TikTok is not only influenced by their personal interests, but also by their awareness of the algorithm's preferences and mechanisms. While some perform within the parameters set by the algorithm, others shape the algorithm's functioning through their interactions and strategies, influencing the recommendation system. This reciprocal relationship between content creators and the TikTok algorithm illustrates the performative nature of media technologies, wherein both human and non-human actors actively shape and co-constitute the socio-cultural dynamics within digital environments.

## 2 Networked Individualism

### 2.1 Definition

Another important concept for this research is networked individualism, which I draw from the work of Rainie and Wellman (2012). They view networked individualism as an "operating system" because it outlines the ways in which individuals connect, communicate, and exchange information. However, they are not focusing on traditional sociological insight of information exchange. While humans always engaged in symbolic communication and social interactions, networked individualism demonstrates a distinct sociological insight that links with new materialist perspective. Hence, the authors are interested in communication within contemporary social networks, particularly enabled by digital technologies. Networked individualism highlights the role of digital technologies such as social media platforms and much more. They highlight that societies such as digital systems have networked structures that provide opportunities, constraints, rules, and procedures (2012, p. 7). Considering Bollmers

work, there is materiality in digital platforms. The use of technology shapes how users perceive, experience, and participate in social networks like TikTok. Essentially, social media platforms mediate social interactions. Social media allows people to tell stories and create content, which is considered a social/networking activity (p. 14). The authors suggest that networked individuals participate in social networks but also take on specialized roles inside those groups. They state, “moving among relationships and milieus, networked individuals can fashion their own complex identities depending on their passions, beliefs, lifestyles, professional associations, work interests, hobbies, or any number of other personal characteristics” (p. 15). In other words, Rainie and Wellman (2012) suggest that networked individualism emphasizes the personalized nature of social networks. Unlike traditional social interactions that are based on predetermined social groups and communities, networked individuals create and manage their own networks based on their personal interests (p. 123-124). Moreover, social media offers further reach and accessibility. Online platforms let users connect with broader and diverse people, when compared to traditional interactions, suggesting global connectivity (p. 124). In addition, these networks offer emotional and social support to individuals. More specifically, they offer four things: “havens,” “bandages,” “safety nets,” and “social capital” (p. 19). Havens suggest a sense of belonging, bandages are defined as emotional aid and services; safety nets mean a reduction of stress and difficulties; and finally, social capital offers interpersonal capital (ibid). Additionally, digital spaces have drastically changed how individuals communicate and their actions and experiences, which alter social life. This allows for individuals to be increasingly embedded in social networks, rather than social groups and communities. They state that, “the shift puts people at the center of personal networks that can supply them with support, sociability,

information, and a sense of belonging (p. 124). These changes reflect broader changes in society's norms and practices.

Similarly, Bhandari and Bimo (2022) use the term “networked self”. This model examines how social media spaces invites self-presentation and identity management (Papacharissi, 2011, as cited in Bhandari and Bimo, 2022, p. 3). However, it assumes that social media spaces are merely neutral stages. This idea has been quickly challenged by the growing presence of algorithms, specifically, algorithmically directed feeds and social media experiences (2022, p. 3). Many scholars have been investigating the consequences of such advanced technology on users and self-making. Furthermore, an extension of this model is “algorithmized self” (2022, p. 9). The authors explain the concept; “TikTok users occupy the precarious position of dually engaging with an external and internal entity; they engage with versions of themselves, as mediated through the algorithm. [O]n TikTok the user interacts most heavily with the personalized algorithm which repeatedly confronts them with various aspects of their own personas.” Hence, experts believe that increased algorithmization has enabled fundamental changes in the operation of social media and has a significant impact on user experience (p. 10)

Both networked individualism and algorithmized self go hand in hand when considering this research. Rainie and Wellman’s conceptualization of network individualism suggests the impact of digital platforms on how individuals interact and build their identities online. Here, humans play an active role in managing and curating their social networks. However, despite human agency, technologies also play a mediating role in shaping online interactions. On the other hand, Bhandari and Bimo articulate the notion of algorithmized self which introduces the significant role of algorithms in shaping user experiences and presentations of the self on social media. While networked individualism demonstrates the intricate relationship between social

networks and humans, algorithmized self suggests the agency of algorithms. These two concepts complement each other, furthering the idea that both parties induce control of the other.

## 2.2 Networked Creators

More specifically, “networked creators” are defined by Rainie and Wellman (2012), as content creators who participate in ICT’s (information and communication technologies) and participate in different content creations, such as documenting memories, a form of communication, advertising themselves, and showing their skills (p. 199). Also, Pew Internet studies show that “15 percent of internet users combine material previously created by others to create original material—remixing or mashing it up” (as cited in Rainie and Wellman, 2012, p. 199). This practice reflects the culture of creativity and collaborative construction that is enabled by content creators. Social networks, like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and evidently TikTok, allow creators to display their creativity to a larger audience. Networked creators have also taken on the role of the news. They now cover political topics, catastrophes, emotional stories, healthcare situations and more, with different perspectives and tactics that leave the viewers more engaged and have a longer lasting impact. Consequently, viewers shy away from traditional media. Research suggests that this new material has a more powerful impact on viewers' sense of community and efficacy (p. 214). Moreover, networked creators participate in identity creation and reputation management (p. 216). Rainie and Wellman (2012) note that “they have to think in new ways about their identities, creations, and the degree to which their personal information is disclosed and archived. The result may be the erosion of the distinction between creating for a network of friends and broadcasting to the general public” (p. 217). While most of this seems harmless, it is important to note that even though not every networked creator becomes ‘famous’ or even noticed beyond friends and families. Yet, their creations contribute to

the expanding universe of networked information. Their work influences viewers, social networks, algorithms, and cyberspace.

### 2.3 In this study

Consequently, my research will focus on networked individuals, such as content creators and influencers, within the TikTok social network. I will examine how these users engage with the platform and how they believe their interactions may mutually shape each other (p. 6) Rainie and Wellman (2012) state that, “networked individuals are voluntarily creating content every day in tandem with other networked individuals within and outside of their own personal networks, and in ways that can expand and enrich collective knowledge and solve problems. Digital tools have helped networked individuals reconfigure the structure of their social networks by extending their reach and their potential for influence, blurring the lines between producers and consumers. With costs to creating and disseminating technology lowering, many more people are telling stories, giving personal testimonies, contributing their ideas, and interacting with others” (p. 201). Ultimately, I am interested in content creators’ actions on the platform and their perceptions of how this digital tool has contributed to their overall presence and identity on the platform. Furthermore, I am exploring their perceptions of the TikTok algorithm and how that affects their content creation. As Bhandari and Bimo (2022) put it, “through algorithms, affective capitalism succeeds in enacting particularly insidious and far-reaching forms of control: control over user identity” (p. 4). Conversely, I will investigate networked creators' agency and if they can exert power of the social network and the algorithm.

In addition, networked individuals and networked content creators can be interpreted through the lens of new materialism framework, highlighting the interconnections between human actors and technological objects. Specifically, this framework allows scholars to critically

engage with the complex interplay of online interactions and identity construction by acknowledging the intricate relationship between human behavior, technology, and the material conditions of digital culture. Here I am focusing on human and algorithm interactions. When listening to my participants' experiences in this study, these concepts will outline a connection between human agency and algorithmic influence.

## 3 Virtual Self

### 3.1 Definition

Furthermore, Ben Agger (2004) introduces the concept of the virtual self. By “virtual self” he refers to the “person connected to the world and to others through electronic means such as the Internet, television, and cell phones” (p. 1). Virtuality is the presence of being online and using electronic devices; it is a state of being, which refers to a specific way of experiencing and interacting with society (ibid). In his book, he explores the self and its experiences, in a world where people are directly linked to electronic means. Agger (2004) notes that “people are discouraged from theorizing their everyday lives, which are influenced by these powerful yet invisible structures, precisely because ideologies, which exist to protect this particular social order, portray society as governed by iron-clad necessities beyond the comprehension” (p. 24). He believes capitalist society removes larger institutions and structures from view to exert more control over people (2004, p. 34). Another term he presents is commodification. Marx insisted that human products and activities, especially labor, are bought and sold (p. 26). Hence, one can say that the acts and presence of the virtual self is being commodified on social media platforms. Moreover, he addresses the concept of discourse, which he defines as “all the ways we talk, write, and produce symbols. Overall, Agger (2004) is interested in the relationship between the

everyday lives of people and the social structure. Specifically, the author suggests that the internet helps demonstrate that we constitute social structures through discourse. Considering the concept of virtual self, individuals participate in discursive activities to construct and perform their virtual identities in digital spaces. The construction of the virtual self is inherently performative. Lastly, he introduces the term “cyberself” to describe the self-assembled, manipulated experiences of the world. Many theorists believe that capitalism was invented to control the self, and see individuals as subjects, vessels, servants and workers, and the powerless (p. 100). However, is it possible to create a different ‘self’ in the virtual world, when the self dominates the social structure and the electronic powers behind social media platforms?

### 3.2 In this study

The same can be said about the TikTok algorithm. The algorithm is invisible; however, we hear about it and are often affected by it. It is worth exploring whether users believe the algorithm was put in place for control or to be controlled by TikTok users. With the help of this theory, I will view users of TikTok as individuals producing their own virtual self on the platform. Moreover, I will explore how their virtual self is potentially affected by the algorithm or how their virtual self is constructed with the consciousness of the algorithm and ways to manipulate it. Furthermore, the sub-concepts mentioned above will be disseminated in the analysis chapter.

This chapter provides a strong theoretical framework that will serve as a lens to investigate how users between the ages of 18 and 30 perceive the impact that TikTok's algorithm has on influencers and content creators. Utilizing ideas from networked individualism, new materialism, and the virtual self, the study explores the complex interaction between users and the algorithm, emphasizing the ways in which both sides have power over one another. This

study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how young content creators navigate and interpret their experiences on TikTok through the investigation of users' interactions with the algorithm and their perceptions of its effects on content creation and platform engagement. The goal of the research is to shed light on the complexities of digital culture and social media interaction in modern society by revealing the complex dynamics between users and the algorithm. These ideas will explain the findings, which will be in the analysis chapters.



## Chapter 4: Methodology

The methodological approaches that I used in this research comprise of digital autoethnography, digital ethnography of TikTok creators, and finally, semi-structured interviews. These methods are designed to provide a comprehensive overview of user behaviors, preferences, interactions, and perceptions within the TikTok ecosystem. More specifically, I explored how users perceive the control that TikTok's algorithm exerts over content creators/influencers, considering the content they are being shown and other factors. Also, I investigated whether users perceive themselves as being able to control the algorithm as well. First, I used digital autoethnographic methods to dive into the researcher's personal experiences on TikTok regarding the algorithm. The second method, digital ethnography of content creators, provided perspectives on those producing content and who have an active relationship with the algorithm. Lastly, semi-structured interviews are employed to gather diverse viewpoints and narratives from TikTok creators aged 18 to 30.

### Acquiring Ethics Approval and Procedures

Before beginning this process, I had to obtain ethics approval from the Research Ethics Unit (Office of Research), by submitting a SPF form. This document included information about my study, its objectives, the methodology, participant recruitment process, data management procedures and ethical considerations. For digital autoethnography, the recruitment process was straight forward, as I would be the only participant for this step. Furthermore, it is important to address any ethical considerations specific to digital autoethnography. There is a potential impact of my role as the researcher and participant of this study. Hence, I address the reflexivity of my observations and any conflicts of interests that may arise in the sub-section below "My

Positionality Statement.” Also, participant protection is still applicable in this case as I managed any discomfort I had during this process, by describing my emotions and thoughts in my notes. Data management procedures were employed to ensure privacy and confidentiality. The data consists of screenshots, screen recordings, and handwritten notes on a note pad. These notes are a mix of journal, narrative, and self-reflection format. The notes were later transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. All data is stored on a USB key and on my iPad. I am the only one to have access to the USB and notes, as it will be stored in a locked drawer in my house. The rest of my work is on my laptop, which requires a password to enter. The data collected will be stored for 2 years. I will then destroy all the data. My iPad is not linked to my cellphone; therefore, no data is transferred through iCloud.

## 1 Digital Autoethnography

### 1.1 What is it?

When thinking of social media platforms, it is important to recognize the setting they live in. Some refer to this setting as ‘cyberspace.’ Cyberspace is defined as “an idea, culture, artifact, commodity, and imagined space” (Atay, 2020, p. 269). The setting of cyberspace is fairly new to research, which in turn has forced different qualitative methods to be introduced. As, Atay (2020) argues, “because of the increased digitalization of everyday life, our identities and realities are becoming increasingly mediated and digitalized. Hence, our identities are patched together and are a mixture of (cyber)experiences, (cyber)stories, and (cyber/mediated) representations. In order to study our lived experiences within a culture that is heavily digitalized, we need to develop a methodology that allows such experiences to be studied” (p. 272). Hence, the method of digital autoethnography was introduced. The purpose of this digital

approach is to study both the self and our digital experiences within our cyberculture, as well as this heavily digitalized media ecology (ibid). Atay describes three interrelated forms of digital autoethnographies. I combined two approaches of digital autoethnography in my project. The first is a classic, critical autoethnography that provides first person narratives of my experience on TikTok (ibid). The second form of this method is the most unconventional, focusing on my social media presence, which can be described as a form of cyber and digital autoethnography. This form delves deeper into the implications of the digital realm while still producing autoethnographic observations. Our presence and actions on the platform are a form of digital life writing. Such digital stories can be presented through images, screenshots, online postings, profile screenshots, and blogs/transcripts (p. 273). Overall, combining these methods of autoethnography allows me to reflect upon my personal experiences, emotions and thoughts in relation to TikTok to convey my understanding of the digital culture.

## 1.2 The Design

The digital autoethnography component of the study is specifically designed to grasp the researchers' experiences on the TikTok platform. I, as the researcher, observed and thought about my experiences with TikTok to generate rich qualitative data. More specifically, I focused on the content on my "For You" page and how it is presented, and changes based on my use of the platform. As I continued to use the platform and interact with the content, I was able to investigate the gradual changes to the content presented on this page. Importantly, through this process I focused on my positionality and how that affected the trajectory of the 'For You' page. It was also important to consider other factors such as time zones, national identity, and language used on TikTok. My observations of my newly created TikTok account allowed further understanding of the algorithm and how it informed itself based on my own user behaviors.

After receiving OOR approval, I began the first step of the research process. I created a new TikTok account, as I am already a current user of the platform. This new account was only observed on a new device (iPad). These efforts were designed to eliminate as many initial assumptions the algorithm may have about me as a user as possible. The creation of a new account allows for a fresh start for the algorithm and myself. While location, language and other factors still affect the algorithm, my main goal was to observe the evolution of the content presented to me by platform and how my presence on TikTok affects it over time. As such, I acknowledge the previous experiences I had on the platform and how it might affect my knowledge of TikTok and the algorithm. However, for this research I continued to be a casual user that offered little engagement, such as shares, likes, follows, and sometimes comments. I only began being more present on the platform in Week 2 and on. My interests and preferences drove my engagement on the platform. In other words, I only offered engagement to content that I enjoyed. I did not produce any content on TikTok in the form of posts or videos, as I left that domain to the content creators. However, my goal was to understand every aspect of the algorithm as reflected on my For You page in order to gain indirect insights into how it reads my behaviors and chooses certain content to show me, and how it can sometimes display completely different content than my interests.

Preparing the “researching self” was important when conducting any autoethnography (Marcus et al, p. 72). Where, when, and how I chose to conduct my observations of TikTok can greatly affect the results. My observations were conducted in Montreal, due to my current living arrangements. Moreover, choosing an environment to do observations was important to decrease fatigue. Therefore, choosing a room in my home with good lighting, reliable internet connections, and minimal distractions will suffice. I spent most of my time in my bedroom, at a

small desk next to the window. It was also important to switch rooms from time to time, and rather than sitting, therefore, I sometimes went for a walk while scrolling through the feed. Also, the times I logged in reflect different patterns of the platform, the algorithm, and the content creators. Therefore, I conducted my observations during two periods of the day: a morning period and an evening period, for approximately 1 hour a day. Data collection lasted 4 weeks. This provided me with a vast overview of the platform based on the separate times of the day, and a better understanding of the changes that go on based on my viewing patterns.

I used MAXQDA 24 software to analyze the data and find themes. This procedure was expanded in three steps. First, I uploaded a digital copy of my notes to the software. I then identified key points and recurring statements based on codes. Second, after generating a lengthy list of codes I began to group them into themes. Finally, the data analysis ended by running ‘selective coding’ where relevant themes were grouped into overarching themes (Nowell et al., 2017). Five major themes will be demonstrated in the analysis chapter.

Overall, this process allowed me to describe my first-hand experiences on the new TikTok account, to describe my observations about the algorithm based on changes to my For You page and understand my emotions and thoughts about the digital environment. Here I am demonstrating my experience and knowledge through autoethnography, but I will also examine and challenge assumptions and practices. Furthermore, I acknowledge that the algorithm cannot be seen directly, but rather understood indirectly through my presence on TikTok, observing the evolution of the For You page and examining the potential relationship between I (user) and the algorithm.

### 1.3 My Positionality Statement

Reflecting on my positionality is important for auto ethnographic methods and I chose this method to acknowledge my presence and the “self” in a digitalized environment, explore my perception of TikTok and the algorithm, and to analyze the possible relationship between the algorithm and myself. Digital autoethnography allowed for a critical reflection of my personal experience on the platform, as well as an examination of my relationship with the platform and TikTok algorithm. Therefore, as the researcher of this study, it is important to acknowledge my position. My background, experiences, and perspectives inevitably shaped the lens through which I interpreted and engaged with the subject matter. Given that the TikTok algorithm reacts to user interactions with the platform, it impacted how the algorithm shaped my For You page. Having been an active user of TikTok for the past two years, my familiarity with the platforms undoubtedly influenced my perspective. My firsthand experience as a user provided valuable insights that contributed to a basic understanding of how TikTok’s algorithm impacts user experience. Furthermore, my geographical location, ethnicity, gender, age, language, and other aspects of my identity inevitably played a role in shaping my interactions with the platform and how I interpreted the research data. Residing in Montreal, and identifying as a Canadian/Italian, whose primary languages are English and French, my research is influenced by my linguistic preferences, cultural contexts, and environment. Also, as a 24-year-old female, my relationship with TikTok is influenced by generational perspectives and gender-related considerations.

This acknowledgement emphasizes my positionality when discussing my research and how it may introduce certain biases into my study. I approached the study with awareness of my personal background and how it may shape my experience with the platform and my data. As such, I recognized the power I have as a researcher, my class, gender, socioeconomic status, educational background, age and how these factors might influence my observations and

interactions with the platform, as such the way the algorithm reacts to me. As a researcher, when you enter the field, you affect it and are never seeing it "objectively" or independent of your influence. In the case with TikTok, what I observed is necessarily influenced by my identity and my interactions with it. Thus, I acknowledged that the algorithm cannot be directly seen, but rather understood through my presence on TikTok. This process allowed me to share my beliefs about the algorithm and imagine its functions based on my personal experience.

## 1.4 Rationale

It is important to recognize two aspects of the platform. First, observing human action on the platform is a seemingly obvious aspect to consider during this phase. However, the researcher must also acknowledge the inanimate objects on TikTok, specifically the architecture and the algorithm. Inspired by experts such as Marcus et al. (2012), Kozinets (2010), Postill and Pink (2012), Seaver (2017) and Hine (2000), the platform architecture and the algorithm are seen as an artefact, a material object and agent. The method of digital autoethnography displays how both user agency and the agency of the platform and algorithm as material objects work together and influence each other (Kozinets, 2010). In other words, we must recognize not only the humans in the story but also the inanimate agents that produce change, in this case TikTok (Hine, 2000). As Bell (2001) puts it, "cyberspace is, therefore, a 'lived culture' composed of people, machines, and 'stories in everyday life'" (p. 2). As Marcus et al. (2012) put it, "follow the people, follow the metaphor, follow the artefact" (p. 59). It is important to study these three interconnected aspects to understand how people interact, how metaphors are used to describe or conceptualize it, and how artefacts like objects relate to it. In essence, the authors advocate for studying not only humans but also the conceptual frameworks and objects associated with it. Thus, I will learn the conventions of TikTok such as hashtags, trends, slang and more. Overall, I

am interested in the virtual world of TikTok, and the algorithm that controls it. Ethnography in this case allows researchers to view the algorithm ‘as’ culture not ‘in’ culture. This allows for the apprehension of the everyday practices that constitute the algorithm and keeps it working and evolving (Seaver, 2017, p. 6).

Bollmer’s material media theory informs my research process. The methodological approach—digital autoethnography—aligns with this theory, which emphasizes the presence of physical materialities and how they shape reality. In this case, the TikTok algorithm can be viewed as a material object that influences user experiences. On the other hand, users can also impact the platform and algorithmic performance through their presence and interactions. In other words, I am not only observing human behavior, but also the behaviour of the algorithm and their relationship to each other on TikTok. reflecting Bollmer's assertion that media technologies are vital objects with their own agencies. Considering his work, I explored the agency of both the platform and the user (myself), and how they influence each other. The only way to completely understand the TikTok algorithm is through personal experiences and interactions with it. Therefore, digital autoethnographies was the perfect fit in order to properly answer my research questions

More specifically, the concepts introduced by Bollmer inspired the use of digital autoethnography. Considering his concept of ‘mediums as material objects’, digital autoethnography allows for the analysis of the digital medium itself, in this case TikTok. I, the researcher/participant, actively participate in digital spaces, such as the TikTok environment, and will detail my firsthand experience on how the medium operates, stores, and shapes digital content and user experience. For example, I am immersing myself in TikTok and documenting my interactions with the For You Page, specifically digital artifacts like videos, text,



photographs, and sounds. I am reflecting on how these objects affect and shape my perception of the algorithm and how the medium influences my experiences. As discussed in the preceding chapter, another concept used by Bollmer is social objects. My use of ethnography allows me to explore the concept of social objects by studying how digital artifacts are created, shared, and circulated on TikTok. By acknowledging memes, hashtags, viral videos, and trends, researchers can investigate how these objects interact with social interactions and relationships. Lastly, the ethnographic method enables me to explore the performative aspect of TikTok by being actively present in the environment. Autoethnography in particular helps document participant interactions with digital platforms and content and explore how these technologies perform.

To summarize, digital autoethnography serves as a valuable methodological tool for incorporating Bollmer's concepts of new materialism into practice. Using first-hand experiences and reflections, researchers can provide valuable insights into the complexity of digital media and its impact on society.

## 2 Digital Ethnography

### 2.1 What is it?

The second methodological approach used for this project is digital ethnography. Marcus et al. (2012) book *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*, discusses the inner workings of ethnographic research. He explores participant observation in virtual worlds and describes ethnography as a practice where researchers actively participate and observe a certain culture or community. While the participation in the community was conducted in the autoethnography approach, observing the community which interact and are directly affected by the TikTok algorithm; content creators/influencers (p. 65-67) The authors state that

“ethnographic research is fundamentally a holistic project; we seek to understand shared practices, meanings, and social contexts, and the interrelations among them” (p. 67). In this case, I was attempting to understand the relationship between the users and the algorithm.

Furthermore, the goal was to understand the behaviors, norms and practices of content creators and influencers of TikTok. Ethnography explores interactions, relationships and identities constructed in digital spaces like TikTok, and how these actions suggest broader social and cultural standards. This method allows for an in-depth investigation of language use, tactics, power dynamics and the basic impact of technology on social interactions. Diving into the profile of content creators and influencers, who are chosen to be interviewed in a later method, offers rich data concerning the research questions and theoretical frameworks.

## 2.2 The Design

While digital autoethnography focuses on the researchers' experience on TikTok and its perceptions of the algorithm and the FYP, digital ethnography will focus on the accounts of TikTok creators. In similar circumstances, I will be immersed in the digital environment of TikTok. However, instead of exploring the nuances of my own FYP, the focus will be on individual user pages and their presence on the platform. This method was chosen to investigate the accounts of creators and how they might manipulate the platform for personal and economic gain. In this case, my presence is not known, because creators' profiles are public and thus are unaware of who views their profile. As Seaver (2017) points out, fieldwork is essential to discover what algorithms are, in practice (p. 2). Moreover, he states that “ethnography is also good for seeing algorithms as, rather than in culture—for apprehending the everyday practices that constitute them and keep them working and changing, not just for observing how they relate to a distinct and properly “cultural” domain. Ethnographic methods help us gain purchase on

topics that concern critical scholars: the interrelation of people and computers, the local production of abstract representations, and the human sensemaking that pervades algorithmic operations, locating these within sociocultural contexts that are diverse and changing.” (Seaver, 2017, p. 6). However, Seaver acknowledges that algorithmic systems have limited presence, partial information, and uncertain connections. Hence, this process is quite complex and understanding it through the lens of creators is beneficial (p. 7).

The content creators and influencers whose profiles I studied were either female or male and between the ages of 18 and 30 years old. They must have a following of 500 followers or more, who actively create content, i.e., videos, and that have a high engagement status such as ‘likes’, shares, saves and more. I viewed the accounts of users with 1000 views or more per video and a total of 1000 likes or more (Macready, 2023, para. 1) These accounts belonged to the individual whom I interviewed. Once the users agreed to participate in the interview, signed the consent form and scheduled a day and time to conduct the interview, I was able to complete this process. I observed their accounts on two occasions; before the interview and after. These two periods allowed me to understand their patterns for producing content on the platform. My ethnographic approach was passive for this phase, as I wanted to be a bystander who simply observed their interactions and relationships on TikTok. More specifically, I observed their actions on the platform, the types of videos they produce, their targeted audience, audience reactions to the participants’ content, the company’s they work with, the hashtags, symbols and captions they use, their engagement rate and much more. Moreover, I investigated the type of content they create and specific tactics they display to influence the algorithm in their favor. I was especially looking for indications of algorithm manipulation. For example, how users choose specific hashtags, background music, content, and other factors, to receive more views. Overall, I

was interested in how they create content, what kind of content they produce, when they post videos, where are these videos being published and lastly, if they are collaborating with other content creators. The ethnographic approach allowed me to comprehend their behaviors, identity, and actions on TikTok. All data was captured by taking detailed field notes, screen shots and screen recordings. Observations were done on my iPad in several types of locations such as my house, work, school, etc.

## 2.3 Rationale

This methodological approach is inspired by key theorists. Once again, Bollmers (2019) theory of new materialism inspired this process due to the fact that conducting ethnography allows for an in-depth exploration into the digital environment and the individual present in it. His theory addresses the reciprocal relationship between objects and humans, therefore suggesting that content creators have direct interactions with digital objects, such as algorithms. Here, I am interested in how human agency interacts and is influenced by technology. This involves the use of trending hashtags, editing tools, filters, trending sounds and any other algorithmic strategies that enhance engagement rates. Also, analyze material-discursive practices used by such creators, such as captions, comments, and collaborations, and how that affects their overall performance and presence on the platform.

In addition, my observational focus during digital ethnography was guided by the concept of networked individualism developed by Rainie and Wellman (2012) and the virtual self by Agger (2004). First, the digital ethnographic method allows specific observations into the behaviors, interactions, and identity management of creators on TikTok. Through the lens of Rainie and Wellman's concept of networked individualism, this method allowed me to observe and describe how individuals operate within the networked structure of TikTok, as well as how

they manage their connections, identities, and interactions in this digital environment.

Furthermore, Rainie and Wellman (2012) highlight the agency of networked individuals. My research primarily focuses on the agency of TikTok creators in navigating the platform's features, establishing their online persona, interacting with their audience, and—most importantly—managing the algorithm. Also, this theory emphasizes the networked structure even though the individual, also known as the creator, remains significant. Understanding how the structure of TikTok and the algorithm work is important when understanding the networked individual's presence on the platform. The ethnographic method allows for both the platform and the creator to be observed. Finally, this approach sheds light on the collaboration between the algorithm and the creator. Communication patterns, content creation tactics, and identity presentation can all be understood in tandem with their relationship with the algorithm.

Moreover, Agger's (2004) concept of the virtual self explores an individual's relationship with electronic means such as social media platforms. Digital ethnography allows the investigation of how TikTok content creators construct and perform virtual identities online. Through observations, the research will explore the ways in which creators curate their online presence, manage their identities, and interact with the digital space. His notion of powerful, invisible structures influencing everyday lives resonates with this research. Hence, I explored how the algorithm influenced users' virtual selves. Their individual profiles will show these influences. In addition, Agger's discussion of commodification can be applied to user content creation. Content creators and influencers create content that can potentially gain views, likes, and followers, which are all seen as forms of social capital within the TikTok community. To go even further, their content can be used to promote brands and products, therefore, their content creator can earn money. Finally, Agger introduces the concept of the "cyberself" to describe

manipulated experiences of the world in digital spaces. In a similar vein, I am curious to find out how users of TikTok utilize the algorithm to influence or control their virtual identities, as well as how they actively interact with it to influence their visibility and presence on the platform.

As a result, this theory guides my research method by understanding how people behave in digital networks, especially in relation to the creation of TikTok content.

### 3 Semi-Structured Interviews

#### 3.1 Design

I also utilize semi-structured interviews in this research project. A set of open-ended questions are predetermined based on themes and goals of the research. This process enhances both observations and sheds light on participants perspectives, experiences, and opinions (Jamshed, 2014). In order to meet my goals, I focused only on content creators and influencers. Potential participants were identified by their sex, age, and standing on the TikTok platform. They are categorized as ‘content creators’ and ‘influencers’ between the ages of 18 to 30 years old. They were required to have 500 followers or more, and actively create content and have a high engagement level such as frequent ‘likes’, shares, saves, and more. While there was no set standard for ‘high engagement,’ I interviewed TikTok content creators and influencers from December 2023 to March 2024, with 1000 views or more per video and a total of 1000 likes or more (Macready, 2023, para. 1) These participants were the same accounts that I observed for the digital ethnography phase. Surprisingly enough, I was able to gather participants who classify as nano- influencers, but also as micro-influencers and more. Catauta (2022) notes that, “although nano is the lowest tier based on the size of the audience, these influencers can still be mighty in impact (para. 12). Similarly, Geysler (2024) states that “[brands have] a strong

preference for working with small (nano - 44% and micro - 26%) influencers ahead of expensive macro-influencers (17%) and celebrities (13%)". Hence why I chose this specific requirement for my study. I conducted all interviews through Teams, however for those who lived in Montreal I gave them the option of doing in-person interviews. I was interested in their experiences and perceptions with the algorithm and how that affects their actions on the platform. I was also interested in if the participants believed that they could affect the algorithm.

After approval from the OOR, I used snowball sampling to recruit participants. First, I contacted participants directly on the TikTok platform to ensure identification. I sent a private message which included a description of my research, its purpose, my goals, participant involvement and value, and other vital information necessary to ensure transparency and ethical considerations. I specified that they would participate in a 1 to 2-hour interview through Teams or in person if they were a resident of Montreal. Due to the TikTok architecture, some of my messages were not visible to users whose accounts are in private mode or who were not following me. If participants did not view my message after a couple of days, I resorted to Instagram. I sent them the same invitation script through Instagram in hopes for a response. Once they agreed to participate, I provided a consent form through email, which needed to be read and signed. Before the interview process, I gave participants the option of receiving the interview questions beforehand, so they were aware of their involvement in the study and the type of questions I would be asking. Also, I verbally advised them that they can leave the study at any time with no repercussions and that all their information would be coded. This means that their identities would be protected'. Moreover, I allowed the participants to share any suggestions or concerns about the study before proceeding. After receiving validation from the participant to begin, I conducted (1) warm-up questions categorized as 'Individual Level', which included

personal and TikTok usage questions (e.g., personal interests outside of TikTok), and then (2) their experiences with the TikTok algorithm, categorized as ‘The Algorithm’, which posed questions such as their perceptions of algorithmic influence, how they feel about their FYP, their strategies and tactics to optimize their success with the algorithm, and probes, i.e., follow-up questions. Overall, the goal of the interviews was to understand participants experiences on the platform, as well as how they perceive the platform is shaping their behavior and the ways they think or try to exert agency/influence over the algorithm. Overall, this reciprocal relationship between humans and non-humans, in this case the TikTok user and the algorithm, was the target of the investigation.

Before ending the interview, I asked the participants if they knew anyone else who might be interested in participating in the research as well. They may have contacts on the platform and could facilitate finding participants. I gave the participants time to contact their contacts and see who may be willing to participate. I did not make initial contact until the participant first spoke to their contact and their contact agreed to receive a message from me. Unfortunately, none of their contacts were willing to participate so I resorted to my initial recruiting process. Once the interviews were completed, I gave the participants the opportunity to view the transcripts of the interviews if they desired, so that they could provide clarification or further information.

I used an inductive thematic analysis on our interview dataset by using MAXQDA 24 software. This procedure was expanded in three steps. First, I began to scan each interview transcript separately, identifying key points in their response that might answer the research questions. Second, after generating a lengthy list of codes I began to group them into themes. Finally, the data analysis ended by running ‘selective coding’ where relevant themes were grouped into overarching themes (Nowell et al., 2017).



## 3.2 Rationale

My choice to use semi-structured interviews as one of my methodological approaches can be justified through all three of the theoretical frameworks. First, Bollmer's New Materialism theory emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between humans and objects. As mentioned before, Bollmers suggests that media shapes human behavior and social interactions. He notes, "even in perspectives that position materiality as central to any understanding of media, the material nonetheless remains secondary to "narratives and the people who tell them"" (Brunton & Coleman, 2014, as cited in Bollmer, 2015, p. 96). Therefore, the use of semi-structured interviews allows for an exploration of how TikTok users perceive and interact with the algorithm, while unconsciously reflecting on the influence of material objects on human behavior. These interviews examine participants' experiences with the algorithm and their perceptions of its impact on their actions on TikTok. While ethnographic work is important in this process, hearing the participants' perceptions and their explanation of this topic enhances the research. The flexible nature of this method allows participants to explain in their own words. It also recognizes the agency of both humans and algorithms, as participants discuss how they navigate and potentially affect the algorithm's impact on their content and engagement.

To add, interviews encourage a personalized approach to understanding how networked individuals, such as content creators and influencers, navigate their interactions within the TikTok platform (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). This method allows participants to discuss their unique roles and experiences within their social networks on the platform, which provides a deeper understanding of networked individualism on TikTok. Identifying their content creation practices, interactions with followers, and perceptions of algorithmic influence, participants can share insights into how they curate and manage their online identities in their social networks.

Additionally, the use of semi-structured interviews allows examination of their connections with others on TikTok and their roles as networked creators. This method lets researchers uncover the dynamic interplay between individual agency and networked social structures within the platform.

Moreover, the use of semi-structured interviews reveals Ben Agger's concept of the virtual self. I was able to examine how TikTok users conceptualize and present their virtual selves on the platform, considering factors such as the algorithm's influence and the commodification of content creation. Through these interviews, I am exploring how users navigate the tension between presenting authentic identities and conforming to algorithmic preferences, as well as the discursive patterns shaping identity creation on TikTok.

In conclusion, all three theories are reflected in the semi-structured interviews due to the emphasis on interaction between humans, technologies, and digital environments. These interviews provide rich qualitative data for exploring participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors within the context of TikTok and its algorithmic influence.

# Chapter 5: Digital Autoethnography

## 1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the analysis of the data gathered through the digital autoethnographic method. The objective of this analysis is to understand and explore the intricate relationship between I, the user, and the TikTok algorithm. In other words, the goal is to understand how the algorithm affected my engagement and interaction with the platform. Also, demonstrating how the algorithm interacts with my presence on TikTok. By utilizing my personal experience of the For You Page (FYP), this method allows for an in-depth and systematic examination of my interactions, behaviors, and perceptions of the platform and its algorithm. The analysis will be contextualized by emphasizing the evolving dynamics between technology and human agency, informed by Bollmer's new materialism theory. Five overarching themes emerged through the analysis process: algorithmic personalization, content preferences and identity, location and contextual factors, user interactions and network effects, and lastly, limitations and future recommendations for research. These themes will be examined in light of current data from digital autoethnography observations, past literature, and the theoretical framework. Overall, the goal is to understand the foundations of the TikTok user experience and how it is affected by the algorithm, with a particular interest in the impact of user performance on the algorithm.

## 2 Data Organization and Preparation

This section will describe the procedures I took to guarantee the validity and dependability of my data analysis, along with how I went about organizing and coding the data.

I began my research by creating a brand new TikTok account. I recognized my preconceived notions and opinions about the platform because I had used it in the past, and I

concluded it would be best to start over (see 1.3 My Positionality Statement). Moreover, if I did not create a new account and instead used the account I originally had, my prior engagement with the platform would already be impacting the algorithm. By starting a new account, I am able to better observe the foundations of the TikTok user experience. An iPad was the only device on which this new account was observed. These efforts are to eliminate any previous assumptions the algorithm may have about me. Hence, creating a new account and using a new device that I have never used before, allows for a fresh start for the algorithm and myself. While location, language, time zone, and other factors still affect the algorithm, efforts are made to understand the platform's evolution and how my initial presence on TikTok affected the content of my FYP. As I continued to use the platform and interact with the content, I investigated the gradual changes. Most importantly, through this process, I focused on my positionality and how that affected the trajectory of the FYP. My observations of my newly created TikTok account allow further understanding of the algorithm and how it informs itself based on user behaviors.

My original plan was to make a totally different TikTok identity, which would not align with my real-life identity. This is due to not wanting the algorithm to figure out my identity just yet and letting the algorithm form a picture of me through my actions on the platform. On October 24, 2023, the digital autoethnography journey began, and the new TikTok account was created. I decided to hide my email from TikTok and chose the suggested name, 'centuagmbvl.' I then chose the nickname 'AG' and the username '@ag79673'. I chose "Do not Allow" when prompted to share my location and did not enter my phone number into the account. TikTok asked for my birthday and provided them with a fake birthday: October 24, 2004.

The first day of scrolling through the FYP was especially important. It would later show the transformative behavior of the algorithm. I soon began to realize that to properly understand

the platform, the algorithm, and myself, I must create a TikTok account that reflects my true personality and interests. The goal here is to be transparent with the algorithm and observe its interactions with me. By faking my identity online, it would not result in accurate observations and perceptions on my end. On day two (October 25, 2024) I changed my username. I set my new username to elisam 0899. Given that this is the account on which I will ultimately contact users to participate in the interview phase, I decided that my username should reflect my identity in some way.

In order to facilitate the analysis process, all actions performed on the platform, all changes observed on the FYP, and perceptions of the algorithm are captured through handwritten notes. These notes were later typed up in Microsoft Word. This document was then transferred into MAXQDA 24 software. I began to investigate the trajectory of every day. As such, relevant codes were created, such as ‘holidays’ with the subcodes of ‘Christmas’ and ‘Halloween;’ ‘location’ with the subcodes of ‘home,’ ‘work,’ ‘Canada’ and ‘Montreal;’ and ‘engagement’ with the subcodes of ‘liking,’ ‘sharing,’ ‘commenting,’ ‘hashtags,’ and ‘views.’ These codes were then grouped into the relevant themes mentioned above and will be shown in greater detail in Section 3: Thematic Analysis.

## 3 Key Findings

### 3.1 Algorithmic Personalization and User Engagement

This theme primarily centers on the technical and operational aspects of TikTok's algorithm, including how content is curated and personalized based on user interactions. Specifically, I analyze the algorithm's role in recommending content based on the initial preferences that I indicated in my profile. I will also explain how the algorithm changed content types based on my engagement (likes, shares, comments, etc.) and how it learned and adapted

over time. Finally, I will discuss the impact of passive versus active user engagement on the diversity and frequency of content updates.

### *2.1.1 Content Recommendations*

TikTok is primarily recognized for its elaborate algorithmic content recommendation system (Klug et al., 2021, p. 84). The algorithm takes into consideration many factors to recommend content to its users. The TikTok recommendation algorithm curates a FYP for users based on previous and continuous user engagement. User engagement is described as video viewing time, liking, commenting, and sharing, as well as trending sounds and hashtags (2021, p. 85). As Klug et al. (2021) puts it, “by constantly learning users’ video content preferences, the output of the TikTok algorithm can become visible to users through the curated content feed that selects videos related to their apparent preferences.[ It ] applies natural language processing to classify text elements and audio components in TikTok videos and computer vision technology to automatically locate and categorize visual objects. Together with analyzing hashtags and video captions, this information is seemingly used to evaluate a video for its selection by the recommendation algorithm” (p. 85). Overall, experts such as Klug et al. (2021), Agner et al. (2020), and Siles et al. (2022) reveal that TikTok's algorithm, and its machine learning recommendation system are dependent on human actions.

During every observational period, I documented the majority of the video recommendations the algorithm made on my FYP. Moreover, I tracked the actions I took and if they had any correlation with the recommended videos. On the first day, the algorithm displayed a variety of video genres, including sports, video games, music videos, animal videos, and more. The thing that stood out to me the most was how the algorithm was showing me verified creators and videos. These verified accounts are visible by a small blue check mark beside the username.

The platform categorizes them as ‘verified’ accounts’ due to their high engagement and follower count. Furthermore, the algorithm offers these accounts more exposure, due to their substantial presence on the platform. This observation makes sense when considering TikTok's support page, "How TikTok recommends content," which describes their initial strategy of providing users with a feed of recently uploaded videos that have gained popularity among other TikTok users. The recommender system searches for popular videos that fit a variety of demographics and are tailored to a user's language and location (TikTok, n.d., para. 2). While I did not explicitly share my location with TikTok, the application was downloaded from the Apple App Store, which is set to Canadian settings. Also, the language of my iPad and my language preference on TikTok is English. Therefore, the algorithm retrieved this information and suggested popular videos and sounds. For instance, all videos on my FYP were in English. This suggests the preferred language viewing on TikTok. Also, I noticed that most videos contained trending music. I recognized these popular songs as I hear them quite often on the radio. The radio stations are based in Montreal; therefore, it reflects the interest in music near me. However, the algorithm at this point, does not understand my preferences. In this case, the algorithm is assuming I like the same content as people surrounding me. However, this is not true, and I found myself skipping those suggested videos after only seconds of watching them. After a few instances of this, TikTok asked me for feedback. I clicked cancel, ensuring not to respond to this question. My goal is to see how long and how well the algorithm assessed my actions and curated the ‘perfect’ FYP for me based only on how I engaged with content. Hence, I did not deliberately tell the algorithm what videos I like and do not like, in the form of TikTok feedback.

Content recommendation is present throughout the whole TikTok experience. Based on my observations, I discovered that the first videos recommended were the ones that were already

trending on the platform. As the algorithm was still trying to learn about my identity, it decided to demonstrate videos on my FYP that people with similar demographics found entertaining. Hence, these recommendations were based on an assumption that I enjoy the same content as my surrounding peers. Later, the content recommendation system became more personalized. As the algorithm gathered information about my preferences and interests with every swipe I made on the platform, it tailored a personalized FYP.

### *2.1.3 Active vs passive engagement*

During the first week of digital autoethnography, I utilized a passive approach. The goal was to merely scroll down the FYP, watch videos that interested me and take notes. I observed trends, explored different creator videos in hopes of understanding the platform's culture and how the algorithm initiates interactions with a new user. This first week was crucial in understanding the beginnings of a TikTok user's FYP, how it is developed, the initial dynamics between the user and the algorithm, and how it tries to gather information about preferences. Hence, I offered little to no engagement, which included a minimal number of likes and one comment. I mainly watched videos fully, halfway, or skipping completely. These actions can be described as passive engagement (Gainous et al., 2020). Gainous et al. define passive online media use as "where consumption is merely reading and observing" (Gainous et al., 2020, p. 465). Specifically, during my first day as a new user of TikTok, I was pleasantly surprised with the first curation of my FYP. Although it did not reflect my full interests, there were some indications of my ideal FYP. This initial experience underscores the early stages of the algorithm's learning process, as it began to tailor my feed based on limited interactions. Kang and Lou (2020) state that "TikTok's algorithm is so powerful and aggressive that it can learn the vulnerabilities and interests of a user in less than 40 minutes" (p. 4). This demonstrates the remarkable effectiveness and rapid learning capabilities of TikTok's algorithm. Even though my



actions on the platform during the first week did not reflect extreme engagement, the algorithm still found a way to provide content I enjoyed. The second week of the autoethnography consisted of a more active engagement. I began to showcase my presence on the platform a bit more. This included liking more videos, commenting, searching for specific videos, adding friends, sharing to friends, and following creator accounts. Gainous et al. (2020) describe this more active role as one “where the user makes the conscious decision to share information or comment” (p. 465). However, I did not pay close attention to the specific details of each video. Here, I specifically liked videos I enjoyed and shared with friends. My friends were aware of my new TikTok account and offered the same engagement as they would for my personal one. Moreover, I only followed certain accounts that completely aligned with my interests. The goal here was to have them on my FYP more often and keep up to date with their content. It was not for the purpose of interviewing them. Overall, this second week was enlightening for both the algorithm and myself. As discussed below, my increased engagement on the platform allowed the algorithm to generate a more accurate representation of my identity and reflect it on the FYP. During the third week of observations, I maintained my active presence on the platform, while also paying close attention to information about the videos I was being presented, such as the number of likes, comments, shares, views, types of hashtags connected to them, and creator engagement. I was interested in the specific hashtags creators used for their videos. I wanted to understand the use of hashtags and how they may have used them to their advantage. Also, I observed their engagement in the comments. The goal here was to see if they engaged with their audience in the comments. This allowed me to gain further insight in potential tactics used by creators. At this point, scrolling through the FYP became more natural and less forced. I viewed content I enjoyed and wanted to share with friends.

In the final week of my observations, I modified my profile to prepare for the next methodological phase: digital ethnography and interviews. Therefore, I decided to turn on my location in hopes of reaching a closer audience that I could most likely interview. Even though the algorithm already knew my location from the beginning, this assures the algorithm of my exact location. Due to this, I saw a large number of girls from Montreal, some of whom I knew. Moreover, I added a profile picture. Adding personal touches to my profile will reassure users that I am not a spam account. In the 'Bio' section of my profile, I indicated my full name, along with my degree and university. During this final week, I clicked on many accounts to figure out if they fit the qualifications for digital ethnography and interviews. If so, I followed them. This enhanced my FYP, as I was giving the algorithm a clear sign of what I liked and wanted to engage with. A majority of the profiles fit exactly the niche content I like; thus, this did not disrupt my FYP.

#### *2.1.4 My Engagement Outcomes*

Initially, when engaging in digital autoethnography on TikTok, my passive presence on the platform was characterized by watching content that corresponded to my specific interests. This initial engagement served as foundational data points for TikTok's algorithm, which quickly began tailoring my feed to align with these preferences. While I was scrolling over content that did not interest me, I came across my first dog video. This was the first video I watched fully. This essentially indicated to the algorithm that I enjoy watching dog content, simply based on the fact that I watched one video from beginning to end. After viewing another dog video, I clicked the heart icon to like the video. This was another direct message to the algorithm that I enjoy this type of content. This opened the flood gates for dog content. On October 24, during both periods of the day I viewed approximately 15 videos of dogs. The majority of the content I 'liked' was in fact videos which included dogs. My specific interests lie

with a specific breed of dogs; golden retrievers. However, during this period I viewed videos with different breeds of dogs. The genre of these videos was ‘comedy’. While this does not resonate with my preferred genre on TikTok, they were in fact still entertaining to watch.

Another major content genre that appeared within the few hours of my new TikTok account was Canadian content. This included videos and ads about Tim Hortons, Toronto, animals in Canadian forests, Canadian winters, stereotypes of Canadians and more. While it is not one of my main interests, it was shocking to see the algorithm curate a FYP with Canadian content included. Due to my shock, I inevitably watched these videos fully. It was interesting to see how Canada and Canadians are depicted on TikTok. Some indicators of Canadian content were the Canadian flag, the location attached to each video, hashtags such as “#Canadian, #Toronto, #Tim Hortons”, and lastly the start screen of the video had Canadian symbols such as the flag, geese, and the maple leaf. While I did not like any of these videos, Canadian content continuously appeared throughout the entire digital autoethnographic process. This proves that simply watching a video in its entirety sends a clear message to the algorithm that you like this content, without having to ‘like’ or comment or share these videos. Hence, even passive engagement offers a lot of information that the algorithm uses to shape the FYP.

As I continued to engage with TikTok, the algorithm progressively refined its understanding of my interests, leading to a more personalized and tailored user experience over time. On day 1, I came across a hair tutorial video. I watched the video from beginning to end, signalling to the algorithm that I want to see more of this. I passively watched a couple of hair videos that day. On day two, the majority of my videos were again dog and Canadian videos, but also aesthetic videos. I watched more hair tutorial videos, as well as makeup tutorials and clothing hauls. Clothing hauls are videos that demonstrate the clothing ordered and bought.

Creators show the specific clothing items and explain where they bought it from. While a few appeared, it was not enough to keep me fully engaged, leading me to log off quite promptly. On day 2, I began to see videos on my FYP with fewer likes and engagement metrics. This shows how the algorithm is deviating from showing popular content to personalized content. I noticed many macro-content creators, with similar interests. There were coffee recipes, house tours, and clothing hauls (Amazon and Shein), all relating to the genres I enjoy: lifestyle and beauty aesthetic content. I was pleasantly surprised at how quickly the algorithm understood my interests and delivered. However, even though the genre aligned with my interests, I realized that I enjoy TikTok by watching videos within that genre, but only those from content creators I relate to and like watching. On October 26 (day 3-week 1), I enjoyed my TikTok FYP experience. Surprisingly enough, the passive engagement phase was rewarding. There were clothing hauls (H&M, Zara, Amazon), dog videos, coffee orders (from Starbucks), #getreadywithme videos, makeup tutorials (using Sephora products), and more. Famous content creators appeared on the FYP, like Emilie and Spencer Barbosa. They fit into the girl aesthetic niche. The content recommendations continuously aligned with my interests and preferences, leaving me to be more intrigued and engaged for longer periods of time. Over the weeks, I offered more engagement on TikTok, such as liking, commenting, sharing with friends, and saving videos.

The shift from popular content to Canadian and dog videos to girl aesthetic videos, happened quickly. It made me realize that even with the slightest engagement, the algorithm can offer a personalized experience. My initial assumptions were that I needed to engage actively and continuously on the platform to receive positive feedback from the algorithm. I can concur that the algorithm learned from even my most passive interactions on TikTok. The evolution of

my FYP depended on interactions as simple as watching videos, enabling the algorithm to curate a personalized FYP and experience. Overall, the data revealed that there is a compelling correlation between user engagement and the platform's algorithmic personalization. Within a brief timeframe of engaging with the platform, I witnessed the algorithm's ability to adapt and refine its recommendations based on my interactions. Each action served as a valuable insight that informed the algorithm's understanding of my preferences and interests. This ongoing process of interaction and adaptation underscores the dynamic relationship between user engagement and algorithmic responsiveness. It is clear that "the human–AI dynamics contribute to user engagement." (Kang and Lou, 2022, p. 1).

### *2.1.5 In connection with New Materialism*

Taking into consideration Bollmer's new materialism theory in relation to TikTok, it is evident that there is a constant interaction between user engagement and algorithmic personalization. My early activities on the platform, like watching videos of dogs and content with Canadian themes, left a digital trail that the algorithm quickly converted into tangible actions. These tangible actions in this case are defined as the algorithmic processes which involves content curation and recommendation. According to a new materialist perspective, my online actions, such as likes, shares, and views, have a real impact on the content delivered to the FYP. Here we can visualize Bollmer's concept of performativity, as my specific engagements on TikTok are performative acts that contribute to the continuous construction of my digital identity. The algorithm then interprets these performative acts as expressions of my interests and preferences, thereby shaping the content I see through content recommendations. In contrast, the collection of this data can refer to his concept of 'social objects'. The algorithm is a social object that interacts with and analyzes human behaviors on the application, and then transforms these into relatable content. As such, the algorithm is an active agent that influences the user

experience. Moreover, Bollmer's concept of 'discourse' plays a part in this discussion as well. Here, user interactions help produce and circulate meanings and narratives on the platform, which then fuel the algorithm. As I engage with different types of content, I am not only consuming but also involved in the creation of discursive patterns that affect what becomes popular or relevant on TikTok. This, in turn, impacts what other users see in their own FYPs.

As time progressed, there was a noticeable shift in the types of content presented to me, reflecting the algorithm's capacity to learn from interactions, a key principle of materialist media theory. Specifically, Bollmer's concept of vital materialism highlights the algorithm's ability to adapt and evolve based on user behaviors, which reflects the dynamic material relationships within digital ecosystems. For instance, my transition from primarily viewing dog videos to exploring makeup tutorials exemplifies how the algorithm materializes user preferences into curated content streams over time. Ultimately, through the lens of Bollmer's new materialism, TikTok's algorithmic personalization highlights the complex relationship between user actions and material consequences within contemporary media environments.

### 3.2 Content Preferences and Identity

This theme explores the implications of content preferences on personal identity and self-perception within the TikTok environment. The algorithm's goal is to deliver content to users based on their interests, tastes, and identities (Schellewald, 2023, p. 1570). In one study, it was shown that participants were satisfied with their experience with their FYP and described it as 'relatable', 'authentic' or 'close to home' (2023, p. 1575). This echoes my own experience during this phase. This suggests that the algorithm's ability to match users' interests and identities contributes to an affective and emotional connection with the platform. Furthermore, the content consumed on TikTok does not only reflect users' existing preferences but also has the

potential to shape and influence their self-perception and identity formation. Through exposure to diverse content creators, cultural trends, and societal narratives, users could be exposed to a variety of perspectives and experiences that may resonate with or challenge their own identity. However, Simpson and Semaan (2021) and Karizat et al. (2021) highlight how the TikTok algorithm can silence and alter parts of some people's identity (as cited in (Schellewald, 2023, p. 1570). Consequently, users may be exposed to biased content that reinforces existing beliefs or prejudices, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and hindering critical thinking. In addition, the role of human self-perceived identity and personal values has been a major factor when discussing social media algorithms. Ersanlı and Sanlı (2015) note that "self-perceived identity refers to an individual's subjective interpretation and understanding of themselves, their environment, and various aspects of their lives and encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consistency in how they perceive and define themselves" (as cited in Ionescu & Licu, 2023, p. 2). Overall, there is a clear relationship between self-perceived identity and content preferences on TikTok. This idea will be discussed in relation to the research project, the digital autoethnographic method and Bollmer's theory.

### *2.2.1 A reflection of my identity and preferences*

Through the autoethnographic research, I realized that my TikTok content preferences are directly linked to my self-perceived identity. However, what the TikTok algorithm believed I liked and what I thought I liked, were separate in some cases, to the reality of my content preferences. This section dives into the intricate relationship between my content preferences, my self-perception, and my lifestyle choices, focusing specifically on interests in beauty and fashion, Montreal content, and more. This will highlight how my interests influenced the types of

videos that surfaced. Also, how some random content appeared on my FYP that I surprisingly enjoyed.

### **Beauty and Fashion**

My interests in beauty surfaced on my FYP. Users, like myself, who are intrigued with beauty and fashion content often find their FYP flooded with beauty tutorials, product reviews, makeup transformation videos, hair tutorials, clothing hauls and more. This content mirrors my passion for this genre of videos on TikTok, but also reinforces my identity as a 24-year-old woman, living in Canada who has access and opportunity for such passion. On the first day, my FYP presented me with hair tutorial video. Due to my interests, I watched the full video. From then on, I have viewed multiple beauty videos and have engaged with this content throughout the four-week process. Similarly, on the first day I was presented with a fashion video. Specifically, it was a woman showing her viewers what she ordered from Amazon. These pieces were all clothing and shoes. This is considered a ‘clothing haul’ on TikTok.

In the first week, I passively consumed beauty and fashion content, but in the second and going forward I also actively participated by liking, commenting, and sharing videos that resonated with me. This engagement further refined the algorithm as the research progressed, making my FYP even more tailored to my interests. The beauty and fashion community on TikTok has given me valuable tips and tricks, introduced me to new products, and connected me with users who share my enthusiasm for beauty and fashion. Furthermore, my active engagement with this content on TikTok has influenced my daily routines and personal style. I find myself experimenting with new makeup techniques and skincare routines recommended by influencers. This content also inspired me to evolve my clothing style and buy clothing items that I may have overlooked in store. This continuous exposure has been a source of creativity, allowing me to



express myself in new and exciting ways. As I continued to explore beauty and fashion content on TikTok, I looked forward to discovering more trends, techniques, and products that complement my personal style and interests. Overall, this genre of videos validates my self-perceived identity and interests.

While this type of content is not trending for all users, I believe the TikTok platform has taken actions that acknowledge its influence and use it as a tool for further success. For instance, TikTok introduced TikTok Shop to allow creators, sellers, partners and affiliates, to sell items through a live shopping experience, shoppable videos, product showcase and shop tab (TikTok Shop, nd). This allows brands to actively engage with their community and grow their business. I never used TikTok shop, but I found myself leaving the TikTok app and searching an item of clothing on Amazon, H&M, Zara, etc. This shows the impact certain video genres on TikTok have and how it influences users daily.

To conclude, exploring content preferences with the TikTok platform reveals significant implications for identity and self-perception. The algorithm delivers content that specifically aligns with users' interests and identities, in this case my interests for beauty and fashion, which enhances user satisfaction and connectivity. There is a clear relationship between content preferences and self-perception. It not only reflects user identities but also exposes them to diverse perspectives and experiences. This specific genre of videos not only reinforced my interest and identity, but also inspired a further interest in different styles and products. Thus, the interaction between users and content delivery mechanisms is a crucial topic in understanding algorithm and user interactions, and how it impacts user experience and everyday life.

### **Montreal Content**

While I do not have a direct passion for Montreal/Canadian content on TikTok, this genre is relevant to my location and occasionally interested me. Since I am a user who is based-in Montreal, it was not surprising to me that I encountered Montreal or Canadian content on my FYP. However, it is interesting that this occurred even though I did not turn on my location. The algorithm still managed to obtain this information from me. This was evident right at the beginning of the research period when the algorithm began by showing me specific ads related to Canada. The first Ad was for Tim Hortons, showcasing its winter classic drinks. The second Ad was about Toronto's mall. Due to my shock that I was being presented with Canada-related content despite not sharing my location, I viewed these ads in their entirety. I saw multiple ads linked to Canada in some way, including ads for Virgin Radio, BMO, Petro Canada, Montreal Canadians (hockey) and much more. It was fascinating to see that Canadian content was displayed on my FYP this early. On the second day of digital autoethnography, I encountered many videos about winter and snow. Due to the period and location of my observations, this is relevant. This reflects Canadian climate. As the days went on, I began seeing content closer to home. I viewed videos about Montreal restaurants, activities and events coming up for the winter season. While I did not purposely hint to the algorithm that I enjoy this content, it was nice to see. I got some ideas, such as to try a new coffee to try at Tim Hortons, go to a restaurant I have never been too, and participate in a Montreal activity. Closer to the Christmas season, I encountered videos of a Montreal Christmas market. This video inspired me to go with friends that weekend. Another Montreal activity that appeared on my FYP was skating in a forest in Montreal. I engaged with this video by liking it and sending it to my partner. This content allowed me to be more knowledgeable about Montreal and Canada, as well as participate more in the community. Hence, this influenced my behaviors and interests throughout the process.

In conclusion, being presented with Montreal and Canadian content on TikTok, despite not sharing my location, demonstrates the platform's abilities to gather information about the user. This reinforced the idea that the TikTok algorithm tailors content to users based on every action and data it can find. Moreover, this type of genre on my FYP shows how the algorithm reinforces self-perceived identities by presenting relevant content to the user. This localized content kept me engaged and influenced my behaviors and interests. It specifically allowed me to engage in local activities. Here, the algorithm displayed its powerful role in both reflecting and shaping user identities.

### **Disney**

My first encounter with Disney content on my FYP was through a Disney Plus ad. I downloaded the Disney Plus application on my iPad, and moments later I viewed a Disney Plus ad on TikTok, which shocked me. A day later, I saw the same ad on my FYP. Later that night, I watched a show on Disney Plus. Here it is either my activity on the Disney app known by the algorithm and informed the content TikTok displayed, or the Disney app influenced my emotions by allowing me to connect to Disney content on TikTok, which in turn influenced what the algorithm presented. I am not quite sure which influenced the algorithm, but they are both clear possibilities. Specifically, as I went through the Disney app, it reminded me of shows and movies I watched as a kid. These thoughts subconsciously transferred through my experience on TikTok. I began to see content such as a video of creators visiting Disney World in Florida. This video allowed me to relive cherished memories of when I visited Disney as a young child with my family. I engaged with the video by liking it. As my autoethnographic journey continued, I engaged with other Disney content. Some creators were showing everything they ate at Disney. Every video or vlog reaffirmed my connection and memories with Disney, and the joy it brought

me as a child. This experience inspired me to watch old Disney classics on Disney plus like Cinderella, Lilo and Stitch, Marvel movies and more. Due to the research period being close to Halloween, I was inspired to buy a Cinderella costume. Furthermore, my partner bought me a Funko Pop of the character Stitch for Christmas, due to my evident interest in Disney, which emerged thanks to TikTok. In fact, my childhood dog was named after Stitch. Lastly, on October 30<sup>th</sup>, there was a TikTok sticker at the top of my FYP that indicated “100 years of Disney”. These instances show the power and influence the TikTok algorithm has on user experiences and behavior, whether on the platform or in real life. This experience was nostalgic and enjoyable but also clearly influenced by the content presented on my FYP, even though much of it ended up taking place off the platform.

To conclude, I learned through the autoethnography that content preferences on TikTok are deeply intertwined with users' self-perception, lifestyle choices, and personal identity. Whether it be interests in makeup, Disney, Montreal, or other niche topics, the content that surfaces on the platform reflects and shapes users' sense of self and belonging. By analyzing my content consumption patterns, trends, and engagement metrics, it becomes evident how TikTok content aligned with my lifestyle choices and preferences in a dynamic and relational way. In other words, my experience shows that users actively curate their digital identities through the content they consume and engage with, seeking validation and connection within like-minded communities.

It is important to note that TikTok content often reinforces existing lifestyle preferences and broadens users' perspectives. This experience allowed me to revisit past interests and explore alternative facets of my identity. However, my exposure to beauty and fashion on my FYP might have also been the algorithm's way of reinforcing stereotypes based on my identity. Also, the

algorithm attempts to broaden user perspectives by incorporating trending content on the FYP that might not align with user interests. The goal here is to constantly present new content to viewers, even those that might challenge their interests. In this case, this genre reinforced my identity and allowed me to explore different parts of it as well. Moreover, this demonstrates the relationship between the user and the algorithm, and how they are in constant interaction with each other, without even knowing.

In addition, this relationship is important when discussing content creators. While certain content creators may align with the trending niche and identity, others may not. This results in the exclusion of content creators due to their identity. As noted previously, the algorithm may favor certain demographics and genres, therefore paving the way for exclusion, stereotypes, and societal norms. Through my experience, TikTok seems more oriented toward reinforcing self-perceived identity than challenging it. This has serious implications for the representation and visibility of different identities and communities on the platform. Identity reinforcement can perpetuate stereotypes and exclude content creators who do not conform to popular trends.

### *2.2.2 In connection with New Materialism*

The relationship between content preferences and personal identity on TikTok can be understood through the lens of Grant Bollmer's new materialism. Bollmer's theory focuses on the materiality of digital media and its ability to shape human experiences and identities. According to Bollmer, digital media acts as an active agent that influences and transforms human perception. However, in the context of TikTok, the algorithm acts as a material force that reinforces user identities by providing content that aligns with their perceived interests and behaviors. In fact, the TikTok algorithm transforms human perceptions in only limited ways. Specifically, by not only displaying videos that align with user interests but also content that is

simply trending. This is in line with Bollmer's view that technology and human agency are intertwined.

Through my engagement with beauty, fashion, Montreal, and Disney content, my identity was continuously influenced and refined. The algorithm suggested videos, based on my previous interactions, which essentially mirrored my interests and self-perception. This process reflects performativity, where my interactions with the content are considered performative acts that construct my digital identity. This reciprocal relationship highlights the active role of technology in the ongoing formation and development of identity. The algorithm takes part in the construction of user self-identity by reinforcing certain behaviors and interests. Furthermore, Bollmer's theory and concept of discourse suggest the significance of digital media in shaping societal norms and stereotypes. TikTok produces and circulates discourse that can reinforce existing stereotypes and cultural norms or challenge user perspectives through content curation. For example, the beauty and fashion content on my FYP has reinforced my identity as a 24-year-old woman interested in these areas. Considering my niche content, the algorithm attempted to expand, refine, and develop this area. While the content revolved around this type of genre and my interests, it decided to expand on this genre and open my eyes to different styles. Specifically, it presented me with different clothing styles and makeup routines that I was not particularly fond of but appreciated. Thus, it has provided me with opportunities to explore and expand my personal style and interests. Lastly, the Montreal and Disney content has not only reflected my location and nostalgic interests but has also influenced my behavior and engagement with local and cultural activities. This demonstrates the impact of TikTok as part of a network that has an impact even off the platform. It does not just impact what content users

consume but also what they do when they are not on the platform. It inspired me to try different things, like going to a new restaurant near me or participating in a local activity.

Hence, the TikTok algorithm embodies this relationship by acting as a material agent that creates and enables user identities. This shows the importance of recognizing the material impact of digital technologies like the TikTok algorithm on our lives and vice versa.

### 3.3 Location and Contextual Factors

My autoethnographic experience showed that even the most minimal pieces of information, like location and language, shape one's experience on TikTok. Through this autoethnographic process, I learned that you do not need to "Share Location" with the application in order to experience the benefits and/or downfalls of this feature. According to TikTok's Support Page, under "Location information on TikTok", they explain that if you turn Location Services on, they receive your approximate location from your device. This is an estimate of at least 3 square kilometers based on your current location (TikTok, nd, para. 1). However, if a user decides to turn off Location Services, they will continue to "estimate other approximate location information based on your device or network information, such as SIM card region, IP address, and device system settings" (nd, para. 3). In this case, the approximate location is limited to the country, region, city, zip code or postal code, in which the user may be located (ibid). Furthermore, TikTok states that they collect location information "to help improve [user] app experience, [they] use location information for the purposes set out in [the] Privacy Policy, such as to show [user's] popular content in [their] area, and where applicable, to show ads that may be more relevant to [users]" (para. 4). Hence, TikTok uses location to recommend trending videos near you. In my experience on the platform, even though I did not turn on my location until the final week of my observations, TikTok knew from the beginning my

approximate location and recommended videos based in Canada, and even in Montreal. Specifically, my iPad is connected to my iCloud account. This account is also synced to my cellphone and laptop. Therefore, it recognizes the SIM card region and provider on my cellphone, the IP address of all devices, the location settings on each device and all applications used, and many other factors. All this information was collected and influenced my experience during my autoethnography. In the following section, I will use specific examples in correlation with my research question and new materialism theory to demonstrate the predominant influence of location and other contextual factors when it comes to algorithmic suggestions on TikTok. Also, I will demonstrate implications for content creation and privacy settings.

### *2.3.1 Geographical Influence:*

During the setup of my new TikTok account, one of the steps was to “Allow” or “Don’t Allow” Location Services to be on. In attempts to hide some parts of my identity from the algorithm, I decide to click “Don’t Allow”. Once setup was completed, I scrolled down the FYP. Interestingly, the FYP displayed videos but also highlighted the location of each video. To my understanding, this is the algorithm’s attempt to grasp my attention towards location in the hopes I share mine or engage with a video with a similar location. This is one of many tactics used by the algorithm to understand the user and recommend relevant videos. On day one, in the afternoon session, I opened the application, which directly brings you to the FYP. The second video was about Canada. During this earliest period of autoethnography, most of my videos revolved around Canadian culture, landscape, and more. It was shocking to see how quickly the algorithm could find out my location. While ‘Canada’ was not precise, it was off to a promising start. On October 25<sup>th</sup> (day 2, week 1), I noticed videos that were more precise to my location. The first video was of a girl walking through the streets of downtown Montreal. This was evident



because of the location mentioned in the video and other architectural factors that I immediately noticed. After a couple of videos, there was a Montreal ad promoting AI. It was as if the algorithm had discovered I lived in Montreal and was studying the concept of AI. In addition, there was a video of the Montreal metro system, "STM.". Based on the information provided by TikTok Support, it doesn't seem like TikTok is using an 'approximate' location. From this day on, I observed many videos with Montreal content. Moreover, the algorithm was always suggesting content creators from Montreal. I noticed some creators I personally know; however, I did not engage with their content right away.

While TikTok explicitly states what information they are gathering about their users, I believe there is a need for a greater discussion about privacy and sharing location data online. The concept of location in the TikTok platform presents significant implications for both users and content creators, particularly when examining privacy settings and sharing location data. The capability of this feature demonstrates the intricate and somewhat invasive nature of algorithms in determining user location to better the user experience. Even though these features are stated in the "Terms and Conditions" when first signing up to TikTok, it is clear that it is not common knowledge. A Deloitte survey of 2,000 U.S. consumers in 2017 found that 91% of people do not read the Terms and Conditions and still agree to them. For younger people, ages 18-34, that rate went up to 97% (Guynn, 2020). Hence, this type of data collection should be reevaluated for user personal privacy reasons. Furthermore, TikTok should offer different options to control user privacy preferences.

When looking at this feature from the perspective of users, there are benefits. Users are inevitably exposed to localized content, like new restaurants, news, and events occurring nearby. This can foster a positive relationship with the community and provide a sense of belonging. On

the other hand, this can often limit a user's exposure to different perspectives and reinforce existing beliefs. Evidently, there are pros and cons to this. Considering the content creation perspective of TikTok, location data enhances their engagement outcomes. By tailoring content to a user's geographical location, the algorithm can provide a more personalized experience that it must believe or have evidence to show increases engagement. This feature allows content creators to have a personal connection with their viewers, only furthering their success on TikTok. Also, this gives them the opportunity to work with local businesses and brands. Essentially, this is the TikTok experience and the whole point of the algorithm. The goal is to relate to their users, offer engaging content, give opportunities to content creators, and overall make it an enjoyable experience for all. However, the goal of my research is to highlight the implications, provide transparency about the algorithm, and hopefully promote change.

### *2.3.2 Physical Contexts*

In this section, I will explore how different physical settings where I did my observations, such as my home and work, influenced the content shown on my FYP and user engagement on TikTok. I will also consider the role of Wi-Fi settings in content personalization. It is important to reiterate that all physical settings are in Montreal, within a vicinity of 10 kilometers. However, I will not focus on this fact, but rather how the physical context in which I produced my observations affected my viewing patterns, my perceptions, and content recommendation. This autoethnographic experience demonstrates how the algorithm adapts to different physical locations, by tailoring content based on the environment in which TikTok is viewed. This shows the algorithm's power in shaping user engagement based on location and in understanding and taking into account other physical contexts.

### **Home**

The first predominant location in which I conducted my autoethnographic observations was at home. This location was where I spent most of my observations. Whether it was in my bedroom, on the kitchen island or on the living room couch, it was always a quiet and comfortable setting. The content that was viewed during these periods were influenced by the stable and consistent environment. The home setting provided a secure Wi-fi connection, where only my parents and sibling were connected too, allowing the algorithm to gather uninterrupted data on my viewing patterns, preferences and location. Hence, the algorithm could have leveraged my frequent usage patterns and stable Wi-fi connection to continuously adapt and refine the content recommendations to make it more relevant to my interest and local context.

After analyzing my notes, I realized that when my observations were conducted at home, the majority of the content revolved around home inspiration, house tours, a creators' #dayinthelife, morning routines at home, deliveries shipped to a creator's home, clothing hauls in a creator's home, and recipes. This reflected my consistent engagement with these topics. I do engage in most of these activities in my home; I tend to do a lot of online shopping and showing my friends on FaceTime what I got. Also, I search baking recipes on my cellphone and do a lot of cooking at home. In addition, I follow a specific home routine, which perfectly aligns with my interests in these types of videos I see on TikTok.

Moreover, I noticed that I had engaged more with content when at home. The comfort and familiarity of my home environment likely promoted a deeper engagement into this process. I felt more relaxed and concentrated in this setting, which lead to more likes, comments, and video shares, further hinting to the algorithm about my identity and preferences. Also, I spent longer periods of time on the TikTok platform during my home observations. I felt more

motivated to complete my observations in this setting. This allowed the algorithm to have a better idea of who I am and what I liked, producing the best content recommendations.

### **Work**

Using TikTok at work displayed a slightly different dynamic. The shift to the work Wi-fi network, given the fact that many other individuals are using the same network, provided new data for the algorithm. This location was often times quiet, on a work desk, beside a window overlooking the street. My routine of waking up early, having breakfast, getting ready and commuting to work was reflected through content on my FYP. I was exposed to a variety of #getreadywithme videos, coffee recipes, makeup and skincare tutorials, Starbucks and Tim Hortons ads. This is due to the fact that every morning before work I make myself a cup of coffee or I get Starbucks or Tim Hortons coffee, do my skincare and put on makeup, and try to figure out what to wear to work. Moreover, during my work hours or commute to work, I listened to Virgin Radio This led to me viewing Virgin Radio ads on my TikTok FYP. This allowed to me to investigate the presence of advertisements on TikTok. During my observations at work, I noticed that I was exposed to multiple ads. I believe it is due to my commute to work, where I listen to the radio, which constantly produces advertisements, or the fact that I listen to the radio at work or the location of my work. I am not quite sure which aspect contributed to the effects, but it is interesting to examine. My workplace is in an industrial area with a wide range of businesses nearby, including banks, fast food restaurants, bars, construction and remodeling companies, grocery stores, and more. As a result, the algorithm gathered all this information and produced a relevant FYP based on these factors.

However, this location is where I was the least engaged. During these observational periods, I did not spend much time on TikTok. I felt less focused and interested in the content

that the algorithm was recommending to me. I was also more passive in this setting, only offering some comments and likes. I believe that the more time you spend on TikTok and the amount of engagement affects the recommendation system of the algorithm. With increased time and engagement, the algorithm can grasp your routines, interests, and preferences, delivering accurate recommendations.

To conclude, TikTok's algorithm heavily relies on location data in order to deliver a personalized experience for users. Evidently, even without enabling Location Services, TikTok can obtain an approximate location of a user using device setting or network connections. Overall, location influences the types of videos displayed on a user's FYP. The goal once again is to enhance user satisfaction and engagement on the platform. The two relevant locations during my observations, were home and work. They introduced new data points for the algorithm to feed off of and deliver new experiences. Overall, this autoethnographic process reveals how location and other contextual factors significantly influence TikTok's algorithm and user experience. While location-based content can offer benefits to the viewer and the creator, it also raises important privacy concerns that need to be addressed.

### *2.3.3 In connection with New Materialism*

Bollmer's new materialism theory offers an insightful link to the relationship between location and contextual factors on TikTok. The algorithm's ability to retrieve location data from users and recommend localized content reflects the principle of Bollmer's concept of vital materialism, which highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of digital ecosystems. The algorithm not only adapts and learns from the users' interactions and behaviors on the platform, but also from the locations and setting in which they use the platform. This underscores the vitality and agency of digital materials like the algorithm in shaping user experiences.

Furthermore, this specific data stored on TikTok, such as location, SIM card region, IP address,

and device settings, align with Bollmer's idea of 'storage'. This stored data that the algorithm collects functions as digital memory and is used for future content recommendations. Moreover, the social object in this case is the algorithm. It is not a passive object but rather an active agent who collects location data in order to influence the TikTok user experience. In addition, Bollmer's concept of discourse is reflected throughout this process, due to the fact that this recommended localized content often reflects societal norms and values. For example, the ads and videos related to a user's location can sometimes reinforce stereotypical identities and preferences. Overall, Bollmer's ideas reveal the impact of digital technologies and the need for a further discussion on the consequences of our interactions with material objects.

### 3.4 User Interaction and Network Effects

This theme reflects upon the role of user interactions, specifically engaging with other users of TikTok. I will discuss how these social features impact user engagement and the overall success of this platform. Interacting with friends, whether it be through TikTok or in real life, plays a significant role in the TikTok algorithm. Sharing content with friends is one of the core elements that TikTok strives for. This not only increases the reach of the content, making it more popular, but also deepens the engagement by creating this shared experience. Also, friends discuss the content they shared through the TikTok 'Inbox' or in real life. This can lead to further engagement, as users often return to the app to see what their friends have shared and commented on.

Creating your own network, by following friends, influencers and content creators is another aspect of user interactions. This feature of the app helps further build the personalized content feed, which reflects a user's interests and social circle. TikTok encourages this behavior and constantly reminds you to share with friends and engage with their content. It is evident

through TikTok's application design, where you can view content solely from the users you follow by clicking the tab “Following” or view content that the algorithm generates for you by clicking “For You”. Hence, only the user can control the “Following” page, as it is only people they decide to follow. The algorithmic affect only takes place on the FYP. By following users, you can keep up to date with their most recent activities and videos, only producing a better curation of content and experience on the platform. In other words, a user exercises more control by following creator accounts, allowing a more personalized experience. Moreover, it builds a community that enhances communication and engagement. These interactions are essential because they foster a sense of belonging and loyalty amongst users. In essence, TikTok bases themselves off of the interconnectedness of its users. Every type of interaction on the platform is key for the algorithm to perform its functions. This analysis will allow us to better understand the effects of user interactions and a user’s network on TikTok algorithm. In contrast, analyzing the effects of the algorithm on user interactions and networks will be beneficial as well.

#### *2.4.1 Following Accounts and Adding Friends*

As mentioned, on Day 2, the algorithm already understood some parts of my identity and interests. This is when I began observing popular influencers and content creators that I frequently engage with on my own pre-existing TikTok account. These creators align with my interests in beauty, fashion, and lifestyle. My initial presence on TikTok research account indicated to the algorithm that I enjoy this type of content. Consequently, the algorithm gradually began to curate my FYP by incorporating these popular creators. I built my network by following some accounts, such as Emilie, Kaeli Mae, Spencer Barbosa, Avery Woods, Alix Earl and more. Each following delivered new data to the algorithm and was then reflected on my FYP.

However, it is important to note that following accounts was not the only factor that contributed to the curation of my FYP, but a combination of all engagements.

The first account I followed was Kaeli Mae. Her account revolves around lifestyle. She creates a lot of content based on what she does in a day, for example, the food she eats, the errands she runs, home maintenance and decoration, events, get-ready-with-me videos, and much more. While liking and commenting on videos hints to the algorithm that I enjoy this type of content, following an account solidifies this interest. As such, the algorithm continued to display her content on my FYP, as well as other content that related to her niche. This is when I began seeing videos from Emilie. This is another influencer who shares the same niche by sharing almost every aspect of her life. I enjoyed her content so much that I clicked on her account to view more. These creators also relate to my identity as a white female in my 20s. Hence, my connection and gravitation towards them and their content. Following these accounts transformed my FYP. This was a clear signal to the algorithm that I like this content and it reacted by curating my FYP mostly with similar content. In turn, this increased my engagement with the content presented to me on TikTok, as well as my duration of observations. I felt more motivated to stay on the application longer, to like content, to comment and more.

Moreover, after receiving such a positive response from the algorithm about following accounts, I was able to add some friends during Week 2 of my observations. I began by adding three close friends, who I intended to communicate with on TikTok. Wright (2020) notes that “by sharing TikTok's, we were not only conveying the information present in the videos themselves, but also demonstrating our relationships with each other. [...] With each TikTok sent, we were reaffirming the relationship ties between us (p. 5). This shows that even casual users that do not create content, can still have an effect and be involved in the community. After



a couple of observational sessions, I added more friends. I viewed videos that reminded me of certain friends who would enjoy this type of content, therefore, I requested them to be friends with me. As a result of my follower count on TikTok, the algorithm kept suggesting I add people who my newly added friends are also "Friends" with on TikTok (i.e., friends of friends on TikTok). This exposed me to some of the accounts whose owner I later interviewed.

Overall, following accounts and adding friends significantly influenced my FYP, reinforcing my interests in fashion, beauty and lifestyle. My actions provided the algorithm with concrete information about myself and my interests, which enhanced my engagement on the platform. In addition, adding friends on TikTok creates a personalized community. This demonstrates how user interactions shape the content TikTok curates to reflect personal preferences and social connections.

#### *2.4.2 Social Interaction*

It was clear from my autoethnographic fieldwork that the TikTok platform and the algorithm value social interactions amongst users. In this section, I will focus on social interactions between my friends and I during the four-week observations. Already on day 2, the TikTok inbox tab keep flashing, hinting to me to share videos with friends. It continuously asked me to add my phone number on the application so I can "Find Friends". In addition, while scrolling down my FYP, the algorithm kept suggesting accounts and friends I should follow that were in my vicinity. In fact, the algorithm once asked me if I would like to add my pre-existing personal account. This was so shocking and enlightening. Perhaps it is related to location, but I believe that my account for this study resembles so much to my personal account, that it found out I have two accounts. In other words, it identified an account that I had a lot in common with, since it was essentially me. Similar to how the algorithm generates content on the FYP; the

algorithm suggests friends that also reflect the users self-perceived identity. I of course did not add my personal account, however, it was a fascinating observation.

I began the social interaction journey by sending two dog videos to the same friend on October 31st (week 2). After this, I observed around 10 dog videos in a matter of 20 minutes. Sharing dog videos revived the algorithms initial data on my preferences and curated the personalization of my FYP to reflect this. I mentioned to one friend in our TikTok chat that I want a golden retriever puppy. As a result, the algorithm mainly showed me videos of the golden retriever breed. Moreover, I sent my friends other videos like cooking recipes, Starbucks coffee orders, funny videos, shopping across the border, and other related topics. In addition, my friends sent me messages on TikTok which included funny videos from local content creators, restaurant recommendations in Montreal, recipes and more. All these interactions fast tracked the FYP personalized curation, and I began seeing multiple videos and ads about these topics. It is clear that sharing videos with friends allows the algorithm to better understand a user's preferences and deliver results. Finally, because of these relatable results, my enjoyment on TikTok and engagement increased. I was inclined to like more videos and share content with my friends. I believe communication with friends on social media platforms enhances the experience and exposes the user to a different type of communication and friendship. Overall, social interactions on TikTok are encouraged due to the high engagement it brings.

Another type of social interaction I engaged in that influenced the algorithm was offline communications with my friends. The first indication of this idea occurred on October 29<sup>th</sup>, at my house with some friends over. As I scrolled through my FYP, I watched a funny video. I laughed and my friend asked me to show her the video. Therefore, we both watched one more time and both laughed. This invited some dialogue with my friend. That same night, one of my

friends was hungry and decided to UberEATS McDonalds. After speaking about it, I saw a McDonalds advertisement on my FYP. While some may think this is a coincidence, I believe this is purposely done by the algorithm. My friends and I are all under the same Wi-Fi connection. Therefore, he used my Wi-Fi to order food, while i was using the same network connection to view my TikTok feed. In another instance, I was with a friend, and we were talking about the Akon concert happening in Montreal. At this moment I had my iPad on me, however, I was not using it. When I opened the TikTok app, a couple of videos into my journey, I saw a video of someone recording the Akon concert they attended. Also, Akon's music kept appearing in other videos. This shows the powers of the algorithm and its ability to pick up on conversations, even the ones in real-life. TikTok's Privacy Policy page highlights that it gathers information about "audio settings and connected audio devices" (TikTok, 2024). While it does not explicitly state that it listens to your conversation, there is the assumption that it can track audio on your device and in real-life. Another example of this is when I did my observations at a friend's house, as a group we discussed many topics like the Taylor Swift concerts, Football, and Travis Kelcy. Football was a main topic, due to the fact that it was Football season, and we were watching a game on television. The FYP then began producing content about girls getting ready to go to the Taylor Swift concert, videos of her performance, the gossip about Taylor Swift and Travis Kelcy relationship, and Football content. These are fascinating observations that further demonstrate the capabilities of the algorithm. With a simple discussion of these topics in the presence of electronic devices, the algorithm was able to deliver content on my FYP. Not only does it collect data on a user's engagement on the application but also offline. This also shows how the TikTok algorithm's network effect extends beyond the platform itself and connects with conversations and interactions happening off of it. While this highlights the powers of the algorithm, this can

also be a tactic users can use to force the algorithm to demonstrate content they want. If you talk about it long enough, perhaps you can have the power to shift the algorithm in your favor.

Once again, this experience has only increased my engagement with the platform and also my enjoyment. This proves that social interactions, whether online or offline, shape the use experience and platform engagement. The algorithm collects data based on your interactions, in hopes to curate a personalized FYP and experience.

#### *2.4.3 In connection with New Materialism*

Bollmer's theory connects with the notion of user interactions and network effects on TikTok. New Materialism theory shows the impact of social interactions on TikTok, and how the platform's material forces shape user engagement and experiences. More specifically, the algorithms' quick responses to user actions, such as following accounts and adding and sharing content with friends shows how the non-human (the algorithm) influences and participates in social processes. Also, this theme suggests performativity through the way these specific user actions conveys the user's identity and preferences. Following certain accounts and sharing specific content can be described as performative acts according to Bollmer. This sends a clear message to the algorithm that the user likes this type of content. Moreover, the social object in this case are the videos that mediate interactions between users. When users like myself share and talk about TikTok content, essentially the focal point is the video. Lastly, the role of discourse is evident during such communication and shared experiences facilitated by TikTok. Both my digital interactions and real-life discussions with friends about TikTok content contribute to the discourse. This discourse shapes user experiences and engagement and reflects how the algorithm integrates itself in daily conversations and social relationships, in order to be understood

## 4 Conclusion

To conclude, the digital autoethnography provided valuable insights into the interaction between the algorithm and content creators. By directly participating in this environment, with a newly created account, I was able to capture the behaviors and influences exerted by the algorithm. This process highlighted several key findings that significantly informed my research on the power dynamics between TikTok's algorithm and content creators.

I specifically witnessed the process of algorithmic personalization on my FYP. The autoethnography revealed the personalized experience a user faces when scrolling on the FYP. The algorithm quickly adapted to my behaviors and actions on the platform, which transformed into a FYP that aligns with my interests and preferences. This aligns with Bollmer's idea that the algorithm shapes user experiences. Moreover, I observed parts of my digital and real-life identity and how they were curated by the algorithm. While my identity informed the algorithm, thus influencing what I saw on my page, it also influenced my identity, which affected my interests and behaviors in real life. This reciprocal relationship can be understood through Agger's concept of the virtual self, where digital identities are performed and always changing. Also, this method revealed location and contextual factors. Despite my efforts to anonymize my account, the algorithm found a way to figure out my location, language and time zone to influence content recommendations. This suggested that even the slightest input into TikTok can lead to substantial personalization, further demonstrating the algorithm's abilities. Lastly, I noticed that user interactions, such as likes, comments, and shares, were pivotal in dictating the algorithm's behavior. These actions informed the algorithm of what was trending, thus creating a network effect where users navigated their online presence.

Overall, these findings enhance my research, further suggesting the power dynamics between the algorithm and content creators. This demonstrates not only human agency, but the algorithms' agency as well. This provides a base for investigating the intricate interactions and power structures embedded in the platform, which will be demonstrated further in the subsequent chapters.

# Chapter 6: Digital Ethnography

## 1 Introduction

The digital ethnographic process revealed that TikTok creators between 18 to 30 continuously interact with the algorithm, which thus affects their actions on their TikTok account. Conversely, this method allowed me to visualize the tactics TikTok influencers and creators use to manipulate the TikTok algorithm in their favour. This is demonstrated through a two-part ethnographic process. The first observations took place a day or two before the scheduled interview with the participant, and the second was right after the interviews. The goal was to ensure eligibility and analyze creator patterns and engagement metrics. I investigated the type of content they create and the specific tactics they display to influence the algorithm in their favor. Moreover, I analyzed their targeted audience, audience reactions to the participants' content, the companies they work with, the hashtags, symbols, and captions they use, and much more. I was especially looking for indications of algorithm manipulation. The ethnographic approach allowed me to comprehend their behaviors, identity, and actions on TikTok. Also, the two-part process allowed me to understand their actions and personalities; by revisiting their profile and identifying any preconceived notions I had before the interviews.

The findings of digital ethnography align with Bollmer's work, as it suggests that digital media and technology are active agents that shape human behavior, identities, and social interactions. Here, I observed the continuous interaction between the algorithm and the creators, which exemplifies the idea that human actions and digital processes are co-creators in this environment. Moreover, Rainie and Wellman (2012) inspired my approach in this process as I observed these creators with the idea that they are all networked creators. Essentially, TikTok mediates the creator's social interactions and how they present themselves online. This further

suggests the reciprocal relationship between the creator and the algorithm. Lastly, Agger's (2004) offers a profound framework for examining how the participants navigate their digital identities and interactions on the platform. I will explore how content creators construct their virtual selves with the help of the algorithm. Overall, these concepts reveal the power dynamics between creators and the algorithms. While this section will not focus on the creators' perceptions of the algorithmic influence, it will shed light on how they navigate the influence of the algorithm on their content creation and engagement strategies through my personal observations of their profiles.

## 2 Data Organization and Preparation

Once participants agreed to participate in my study and signed the consent form, I organized myself to begin digital ethnography of their TikTok accounts. I used solely my iPad and notebook for the observations. I began this part of my study in December of 2023 and ended in March of 2024. To view the participants profile, I would either search their username in the search engine or simply find them under my "Followings". In my notebook, I stated clearly the date and time of my observations, their username, and any basic statistical information about their page, such as number of "Following", "Followers" and "Likes". I noted their "bio" information, as well as their "Playlist", if they had any. A playlist is a series of videos categorized by a specific topic of the users choosing. This allows for organization within their profile and content. When looking at their content, I decided to start from the very first video they posted. This demonstrated the evolution of their page, the growth of their views and the changes in their interests and niche. Furthermore, I observed the key components mentioned above, which gave me a better understanding of their presence on TikTok, their interactions with other users and their possible relationship with the algorithm. After this, I did the semi-structured



interviews, which will be discussed in the next chapter. This methodological process helped me to understand the participant and refer to any aspect of their profile with a clear understanding. This allowed for a smooth conversation. Once the interviews were completed, I observed the accounts of each participant again. While going over once more their basic information, I observed the specific elements discussed in the interviews. I looked at their perceptions of their niche, interests and how that reflected onto their profile. Also, I went over their content and noted the tactics they mentioned and if that was visible on their profile.

### 3 Overview of the Content Creators

I observed the accounts of seven content creators and influencers on TikTok, four of them are female, and three are male. The participants are all from Canada; four live in Montreal and three in Toronto. As all of them fit the requirements to participate in the study, there were still some differences in their tiers as content creators and influencers. Due to the difficulties of finding participants, I lowered my follower requirement to 500 followers or more. This would be considered a nano-influencer, as they have less than 10,000 followers. However, surprisingly, only three of my participants were nano-influencers: ‘Tim’, ‘Brittany’ and ‘Alice’. One was a micro-influencer: ‘Iryna’ (10,000–50,000 followers), two were mid-tier influencers: ‘Kyle’ and ‘Bibi’ (50,000–500,000 followers), and finally one participant was a macro-influencer: ‘Max’ (500,000 and more followers) (Macready, 2023). Their videos are a mixture of vlogs, product reviews and hauls, skits, tutorials, music and dance videos, and challenges. Moreover, through observations, I noticed that most participants began their TikTok journey because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, there is a noticeable shift in participants niches over time. Most of them began with trendy and popular content, which included memes, dance videos and funny sounds. However, as they progressed on the platform, they began to demonstrate their interests more and

find their specific niche. Specifically, the female participants revolved their content around lifestyle, aesthetics, fashion, and beauty. The male participants focused on comedic content.

#### 4 Comparison of Pre-Interview and Post-Interview Observations

I conducted thorough observations of each individual participant during the first phase of the digital ethnographic process. My goal was to understand their identity, their content, and their engagement. At a glance, I noticed that these creators are simply regular people. They don't represent the persona of a big influencer on TikTok. However, through this project, it made me realize that even though they do not have millions of followers, they can still make an impact and the algorithm can affect them too. Hence, I will compare my observations during the pre-interview process and the post-interview process, and how it changed my perspective about the participants and their TikTok pages.

First, I realized that they all have different engagement metrics. In comparison to each tier, the nano-influencers have fewer followers, fewer likes, and on average less content on their profiles. The micro-influencer, in fact, has more content, more followers, but the same amount of likes as the nano-influencers. The 2 mid-tier influencers have numerous videos, more followers than the previous tiers, and more likes (over 2 million). Finally, the macro-influencer excels in every aspect with continuous posting, the highest number of followers, and over 100 million likes. During the 3-to-4-week span between both observations, all of the influencers/content creator's follower counts slightly increased. Moreover, most of them produced more content and gained more likes. Specifically, the nano and micro influencers began producing consistent content on their pages. During our discussion, we spoke about the subject of consistency in correlation with success. While the mid and macro tier influencers continued to produce regular content, I observed the nano and micro tier influencers began to produce content more frequently

from the first observation period to the second. This inevitably increased their engagement metrics. This highlights the theory of new materialism, where the material conditions of the platform and the algorithm affect the creators' behaviors, strategies, and performance.

In addition, my pre-interview observations were very impersonal, given the fact that I did not yet interview them. I attempted to grasp the most I could about the participant, in order to better understand them through the interview process. However, the post-interview observations changed my perspective about some creators and enlightened me on their identity and how it is reflected on their profile. Specifically, I noticed that all users were displaying their authentic selves, a concept related to Agger's virtual self, where individuals construct their virtual identities in digital spaces. I first believed that most creators produced content to make money. However, after the interviews I realized that for most creators TikTok is an outlet for creativity, pleasure, and community. From my observations it was clear that at the beginning of their TikTok journey, all they wanted was to be 'trendy' and 'go viral'. This was reflected in the fact that most of the participants produced the same content in the beginning. However, as time went on their content reflected their interests and personalities more. This is also due to the platform's evolution. TikTok became popular in the U.S. and Canada due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Initially, the nature of the platform was to simply participate in trends. However, after the pandemic, the platform's goals changed. It became more about letting users produce any content they want. This notion is reflected when looking at the creator's evolution of content on their profiles. Furthermore, when comparing their most recent content during the pre-interview process and their new content during the post-interview process, I noticed that all participants continued to create the same genre of videos. After our discussion, perhaps the participants were

motivated to create authentic content, further demonstrating the virtual self in their digital expressions.

Overall, this two-part process was necessary to analyze the changes in my perspective and the possible changes in the participants actions. This step enlightened my approach and the idea of influencers and content creators. It allowed me to understand the thought and effort that goes into every video. Every action taken by the participants is purposeful. Their priorities are producing content they love and enjoy, sharing it with friends and fellow users, and possibly gaining exposure and working with brands they love. While they do not all share the goal of becoming ‘famous’ on TikTok, the engagement on their videos is important to them. This demonstrates the interplay between human agency and algorithmic influence, as described by the virtual self and networked individualism.

## 4.1 Analysis of Engagement Metrics

### 4.1.1 *Follower Count*

After my observations, I identified a clear correlation between number of followers and engagement. Specifically, the creators classified in the nano and micro tier, show signs of lower engagement. This can be in the form of likes, shares, comments and views. This was not always the case because these tiered creators can produce a successful video with a high engagement, however, considering my observations, it is less likely. The participants classified as mid and macro tier, are more likely to produce content that invites high engagement. There are several factors that can contribute to this phenomenon. Mid- and macro-tier creators often have more exposure on the platform, due to their increased presence, increased follower count, which attracts a larger audience on TikTok. It is most likely that their followers are more engaged and loyal to the creator, which leads to high interaction rates. For example, ‘Bibi’ is a mid-tier

influencer, who has 73,000 followers. Due to this, she has high engagement rates, such as 2 million likes in total, around 100 shares per video, and on average 500 likes per video. This suggests that TikTok algorithm tends to favor content from creators with a high following and high engagement rates. This aligns with the observation of how the FYP presents content, as described in the digital autoethnography. This only amplifies their reach and visibility on the platform. A positive feedback loop is created, where their content is more frequently viewed because of their continuous high engagement. This is a clear indication of new materialism theory, where the creator is in constant interaction with the algorithm, which then shapes user behavior and engagement patterns. Here, both parties complement each other, through this feedback loop. In contrast, the nano and micro-tiered influencers might struggle with this aspect. However, through my experiences, I noticed that it only takes one video to go viral. In other words, it's still possible for their videos to go viral and it only takes one video going viral for a content creator to be favoured by the algorithm. Another aspect to consider is the networking between mid and macro-tiered creators. They are more likely to work and collaborate with other creators or brands, and companies, due to their reach. These collaborations then attract new followers and increase the overall interaction with their page and content. Hence, the networks created, and collaborations performed on the platform, display the concept of networked individualism as it shows the dynamics of engagement on TikTok.

However, it is important to note that engagement can be variable and inconsistent depending on numerous factors, such as quality of the video, timing, relevance, and the evolution of people's interests. As said, these conditions are constantly evolving, therefore, what might work one day, may not work the next. Creators in the nano- and micro-tiers can achieve the same engagement levels with proper strategies and niche content. This illustrates Agger's concept of

the virtual self, where users continuously adapt and perform their identities in digital spaces like TikTok to engage their audiences.

#### *4.1.2 Posting Frequency*

Upon reflection on my observations, I noted that there exists a strong correlation between posting frequency and engagement rates. When considering the evidence from the digital ethnography, it is clear that if a creator frequently posts videos on TikTok, they will have higher engagement metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and views. This can be associated with some underlying factors that influence their audience's behaviour and algorithmic functions.

First, regular posting maintains visibility on the platform. The TikTok algorithm prioritizes users who actively participate on the platform. The algorithm is essentially rewarding creators who post consistently, leading to greater exposure. This means that their content is more likely to appear on a follower's FYP and also be recommended to new users. Secondly, posting frequently creates certain patterns for the algorithm and for the audience. Followers anticipate and look forward to the creator's videos, thus driving more traffic to their profiles. Also, this sends a clear message to the algorithm about your actions and interests on the platform. Predictability is key for the algorithm, and engaging in such frequent posting makes the algorithm happy. The observations suggest that those who posted more frequently produced the best results. Lastly, creators who post often have certain expertise. They have learned from their mistakes and have mastered the art of producing content. The quality of the content remains a critical factor as well. Posting every day with poor quality videos may not result in the desired engagement rates. Therefore, frequent posting of high-quality videos is essential for high engagement. Overall, using the platform tools and features shape the content creation process

and outcomes. This aligns with Bollmer's concept where the human and machine are in constant interaction with each other, shaping and affecting one another.

When comparing the accounts of nano and micro-tiered influencers to mid and macro-tiered influencers, there is an evident factor that distinguishes the two. On average, the mid and macro-tier influencers; Kyle, Bibi and Max, tend to post more frequently. They post weekly videos, if not multiple times in one week. Whereas the nano and micro influencers; Alice, Tim, Brittany, and Isabella post biweekly or monthly. However, after the interview process, I noticed that Iryna began posting content more frequently, which led her to gain more followers and engagement. This is a clear example of virtual self; the creator, in this case Iryna, changed her strategies and adapted to her online identity in order to increase her follower count and engagement.

Overall, engagement rates can be affected by multiple factors, one of which is posting frequency. Without presence or action on the platform, the algorithm 'forgets' about you. In order to remind them, a creator must post daily, even multiple times a day.

#### *4.1.3 Niche Content*

Based on my observations, there is a strong relation between creators who produce niche content and high engagement. This personal connection between creators and their audience is based on the principles of networked individualism, where creators construct and maintain personal networks based on shared interests. Creators who focus on a specific genre, whether it be comedy, fashion, beauty, lifestyle, or other genres, attract a community-based audience and a niche market. This focused approach allows creators to create videos that align closely with the distinct interests of their audience, enhancing interactions and engagement rates. The participants who followed a consistent genre, for example, 'Iryna', a micro-tier influencer who created videos

based on beauty tips, tutorials, and product reviews, received positive feedback from her audience. This is because she has stayed consistent with her content and delivered niche videos that her viewers enjoy. Another example of this is the macro-tier participant ‘Max’, who focused on a comedic niche, where he created funny videos about his personal life, celebrity look alike videos and more. This relatable and comedic content allows for positive engagement from his followers. Specifically, he has a substantial number of comments, shares, and likes per video. Most of his audience encourages him and inspires him to do more videos related to this niche. His audience leaves comments like “You look like ...”. This comment then gets featured on one of his videos by reacting to the look alike celebrity they are implying. This consistency helps these creators establish a strong identity and attract followers who are particularly interested in that genre. As a result, their content resonates deeply with viewers, leading to increased interactions. Creators can establish a personal connection with their audience, because they in fact share the same interests. A third example is the nano-influencer ‘Brittany’, who shares shopping hauls and recommends products to her followers. Her target audience is women who are perhaps interested in fashion. This develops a dedicated following of women with similar interests, who actively engage with each post, seeking recommendations for clothing, sizing advice, and overall support.

Furthermore, the TikTok algorithm plays a significant role in promoting niche content. It tends to prioritize videos that quickly generate engagement, and niche content achieves this. Niche content is aimed at the specific interests of a target audience. When viewers actively engage in niche content, the algorithm is informed and classifies this content as valuable and engaging. Moreover, creators who produce niche content are knowledgeable of this subject matter, which enables a higher quality of video. This expertise enhances their credibility as a



content creator and further appeals to viewers on TikTok. For example, the nano-tiered influencer “Alice”, produces content based on her skills as an aesthetician. Her videos about skincare, facial treatments and beauty tricks, establishes her expertise in the area and enhances her reputation. This drives higher engagement and trust within her community and genre. Her audience tends to ask her questions in the comments about tips and tricks, only furthering her success on the platform. Here, Alice is demonstrating her virtual self, by using her expertise and skills to build trust and connect with her audience

To conclude, my observations prove that there is a significant correlation between niche content and high engagement rates. By consistently making videos based on a specific genre, these creators attract a dedicated following and strong connections. This aligns with my experience during digital autoethnography, where I was most attracted to videos that related to my interest in the genres of beauty, fashion, and lifestyle. I was considered that dedicated follower who gravitated towards a certain niche and the creators who participate in it. This shows that success on TikTok is not only determined by follower count but also by the relevance and genre of the content. This hyper focused content can determine a creator's engagement and growth on TikTok.

## 4.2 Analysis of Content Types and Themes

Using the data from my observations, I conducted an in-depth analysis of the types of videos produced by the 7 content creators. By viewing their content before and after the interview process, I identified key themes and topics. This analysis demonstrates a connection between different content types, audience engagement, and creator identities. There are a variety of content types, like challenges, dances, tutorials, tips and tricks, vlogs, skits, parodies, and collaborations. I began by identifying the types of videos created by the seven participants,

which then led me to inspect their engagement metrics and virtual identities on TikTok.

Moreover, I connected these findings to the 3 theoretical frameworks. The theories and concepts of new materialism, networked individualism, and the virtual self provided a lens for analysis.

#### *4.2.1 Dance and Comedy*

The three male content creators produced content based on trendy challenges, dances, and comedic skits. One of the male content creators, Tim, focused on comedic content, which included skits and parodies. He specifically produced videos that were relatable and entertaining. Some examples of subjects were making fun of Montreal, imitating the life of living at home, relationship failures, the life of a student, and much more. His content reflected his identity as a male student in his 20s, living at home in Montreal, and currently single. This demonstrates the concept of the virtual self, where his online persona as a relatable male student living in Montreal is performed through specific, identifiable themes. More specifically, his content mirrored his real-life experiences, which is a clear example of this performative aspect of the virtual self. His online identity is constructed by his offline persona, tailored to engage with a specific audience. As a result, his videos experienced many views, over 500 likes per video, and some comments. Although I must note that his limited subject matter, somewhat restricted his audience reach and engagement metrics.

Another male participant, Kyle, produced content based on dancing. All of his videos included the same dance but in different locations. This informed the viewer of his identity as a male in his 20s living in Montreal and sharing his interests in dancing and engaging with his audience. From beginning to end, his account gained a lot of traffic, driving users to want more. However, while these videos generated high engagement and increased his following, there was very little creativity between videos. They all followed the same format, same length of video

and same subject. Similar to Tim, it demonstrated a very limited niche. Overall, this limited his content reach after a while, which resulted in him taking a break from producing videos. In other words, it seemed like the algorithm did not promote his videos because they did not belong to a certain niche. While his engagement rates stayed stagnant, I believe the lack of improvement in metrics discouraged Tim. The lack of creativity and evolution put his experience on TikTok to an end, possibly exposing the material constraints of the platform, as suggested by new materialism. This theory suggests that the platform and the TikTok algorithm shape and constrain the types of content that can be shared, produced, and go ‘viral’. The algorithm encourages certain types of videos like short, engaging videos and it rewards consistent posting. Specifically, Kyle’s experience highlights how the platforms and algorithms’ material constraints can limit creative expression and engagement over time. This highlights the importance of networked creators, like Tim and Kyle, maintaining creating diverse content and connections, considering the evolving nature of social media platforms.

#### *4.2.2 Lifestyle and Beauty*

Moreover, when looking at the female participants, they created different types of videos. The 4 women usually created educational content like tutorials, tips and other informative formats. They also gravitated towards personal stories and vlogs. This type of content allowed them to share their personal lives, experiences, and day in the life vlogs. For instance, Bibi shared videos about her studying habits. Most of her videos involved her reading and taking notes, using her devices, such as her computer or iPad, timing her study sessions, drinking coffee, listening to music, etc. These videos were informative for other students in a similar situation, needing motivation and tricks to study more efficiently. Her content highlighted her identity as a female student in her 20s, sharing her skills and tactics for studying at home.

In addition, most of the female participants used mixed-types videos. In fact, Bibi also posts lifestyle videos where she shares her daily routines, like waking up in the morning, taking walks, and using products she bought, like candles and beauty products. Her mixed content goes together because she demonstrates a realistic life as a student. This invites high engagement for her videos as she focuses on a specific niche of content and audience. Whether it be students, females, or users who enjoy aesthetically pleasing videos, will gravitate towards Bibi's content. Another example of educational content and lifestyle content is by Iryna. This female content creator focuses on sharing beauty product reviews, tips for acne-prone skin, and 'pr hauls'. This highlights her identity and interests as a female content creator in her 20s, sharing her passion and knowledge on beauty and skincare. Once again, this reflects the virtual self, where Iryna's identity as a beauty expert is performed and validated through her content and audience interactions. Moreover, Bibi's related content links her with a wider network of students who share similar interests and challenges. Her videos received many comments, anywhere between 1000 and 50,000 likes per video and about 100 shares per video. This means that her viewers are sharing her videos to other users, only furthering her reach on the platform. Overall, this shows their networked approach to content, and how it fosters a sense of mutual support and advice, which results in higher engagement on the platform. Also, their ability to mix content, demonstrate diversity in videos and engage with their audience on a personal level strengthens their networked presence.

The analysis demonstrates how different content types and themes impact engagement rates and relate to certain identities and preferences. Considering the two male participants, their comedic and entertaining videos gained high traction for a while but became static due to the fact that their content pertained to a very small audience. Over time, this limits their exposure on the

platform and reduces their engagement rates. On the other hand, female creators focused on educational content, personal stories, and vlogs. Bibi's study habit videos and Iryna's beauty product reviews effectively catered to a larger audience, leading to high engagement through likes, comments, and shares. Their mixed-content strategy balanced informative and lifestyle content, targeting a specific niche of women who share the same interests and experiences. Based on my observations, it seems that customizing content based on audience preferences and integrating personal identity into videos is crucial to enhancing engagement and building a strong creator presence on TikTok. Moreover, with the help of new materialism, networked individualism and virtual self, I demonstrated how digital tools and strategies, personal networks, and performed identities build engagement and success on social media platforms. This sheds light on the constant interaction between the user and the algorithm and how one action affects another's behavior.

### 4.3 Audience Interaction and Engagement Strategies

In my digital ethnography, I observed various strategies employed by the seven content creators to foster audience interaction and high engagement rates. The analysis reveals how different engagement strategies can be implemented by the creators to build an active and loyal follower base.

#### 4.3.1 *Responsive engagement*

All seven content creators that I observed displayed the importance of being responsive to viewers. This was visible through the comment responses made by the creator of the video. While comments drive engagement, responding to those comments heightens the interactive experience on TikTok and allows a viewer to be heard. Creators like Max, BiBi, Kyle, and Brittany actively participated in the comments. They specifically liked comments, responded to

questions, thanked users for the kind words, and shared advice. Specifically, Brittany would answer her viewers' questions about clothing sizing, where she got certain items by providing company names, links, product codes, and much more. Moreover, Bibi engaged with her audience by answering comments, which invited more users to comment and engage with the videos. She responded to questions like "Which MacBook do you have?" or "Where is your laptop case from?" and any other questions pertaining to her content. Also, she reacted to comments by answering with heart emojis, laughing emojis, and more. This relates to Bollmer's concept of performativity, where these content creators respond to comments, which then reinforce their online personas and maintain a dynamic relationship with their audience. Moreover, the way in which they interact with their viewers through comments constitutes as a form of discourse. This discourse shapes the expectations of the viewers and reinforces their niche content.

#### *4.3.2 Shoutout videos*

Producing shoutout videos played a significant role in expanding reach and boosting engagement. Creators like Kyle, Max, and Iryna utilized this strategy to inspire new videos and to show recognition and appreciation to their followers. For instance, Kyle, produced mainly dance videos. It was, in fact, the same dance moves but in different locations. He received high engagement because of the location of the videos. This led viewers to suggest different locations in the comments for him to perform. He would then tag the comment in his new video and perform the dance in the location of the user's choosing. Similarly, the macro-influencer Max produced content based on his viewers' comments. His viewers would suggest a celebrity that he resembled. He would then upload a video of his reaction to the celebrity look alike. This often resulted in significant engagement, particularly in his comments. Lastly, Iryna tagged comments

in her videos to inspire her to try new products and share her reviews. She would mention in her videos that she received many comments asking her to try a certain product or a certain brand. She would also tag comments in her videos to address a reoccurring question or topic her users mentioned. These actions demonstrate how they perform and adapt their identities and videos online by interacting with followers. By tagging comments and responding to user suggestions exemplifies networked individualism. Involving their audience in the creative decisions of their content fosters a sense of community and mutual engagement. Overall, these strategies align with Bollmer's concept and Rainie and Wellman's networked individualism, emphasizing the dynamic relationship between content creators, their audience, and the platform features.

#### *4.3.3 Hashtags and Tagging brands*

Utilizing hashtags and tagging brands in video captions is another strategy used by content creators to affect their engagement metrics and manipulate the algorithm. Firstly, creators use hashtags to increase their content exposure. For example, Brittany uses trending and niche-specific hashtags like #springoutfits, #ootd, #dailyoutfitideas, #sneakerunboxing, #tryonhaul, #vacationoutfits, and more. This approach increases her visibility, by making the content more discoverable to users interested in these topics. A user simply needs to go in the search bar, and write any of these words, and her content is most likely to appear. On the other hand, micro creators like Alice and Tim used mostly hashtags like #fyp, #foryou, #foryoupage, #montreal, #mtltiktok, #greenscreen, and different variations similar to this. These hashtags do not reflect the subject matter of the video, resulting in less engagement. This shows that simply incorporating any hashtag with your video is not enough, it must relate to the contents of your video in order to be successful.

Furthermore, several participants tagged brands in their videos as a strategic approach to manipulate the algorithm and go viral. Creators such as Brittany, Bibi and Kyle tagged brands they work with and to describe where they received a product from. In particular, Brittany tags accounts such as @prettylittlething, @PEPPERMAYO, @YSL Beauty, @Saie, @sephora @garageclothing, @ardene, @FirstAidBeauty, @Lounge, and much more. She works with some of these companies, by sharing her shopping link or discount code. Also, she tags the companies of products she is using or perhaps hoping to work with in the future. This alleviates having the answer multiple comments asking her where she purchased something she is wearing or using. These accounts relate to her interests in fashion and beauty, furthering indicating her identity and niche. Additionally, the content creator Bibi tagged accounts like @Paula's Choice UK, @Kérastase, @Dove, @Miniso Official, @FirmooGlasses, and more. This is a mixture of beauty products, clothing companies, and self-care companies. This relates to her targeted audience of students and also relates to her identity as a female, passionate about self-care and the female aesthetic. Moreover, Kyle tagged accounts such as @mrpuffscanda, @timhortonscanada, and @petrocanada. This highlights the different locations he went too in order to produce his dancing video. Evidently, he worked with these companies to promote their business and product. In one of his videos, he was eating a box of Mr. Puffs donuts while dancing. This invites users all over Canada, who have used these company products to relate to him and his content. Hence, this feature allows a constant interaction between creators and viewers. It also opens the doors for increased exposure, increasing engagement with other users on TikTok.

These examples demonstrate that the way that creators use hashtags and tagging accounts shows how they interact with material aspects of the platform and the algorithm. Using trending and niche-focused hashtags reflect the creators' understanding of the effects of the algorithm on



their content and how they can strategically manipulate it. Furthermore, these actions are a creator's way of adapting to the network effects of the platform and algorithm, which inevitably categorizes them as networked creators. They tag companies to not only promote products but also align their content with their personal interests and audience demographics. Similarly, while hashtags are used to categorize content, it can also be a way for creators to communicate their interests and identity to their audience. They are essentially displaying their virtual self on their profile.

#### *4.3.4 Trending sounds and Creator's voice*

Accompanying sounds such as music with videos is a pivotal feature of the TikTok platform. Through my experience in digital ethnography, I observed how content creators leverage trendy sounds and music to enhance engagement and create deep connections with their audience.

Trending sounds resonate with viewers, instantly grasping their attention and encouraging interaction. By implementing popular music, movie scenes, and viral voice overs and memes into their videos, creators can drive a direct link to their audience. This not only increases views, likes, and shares, but also encourages users to engage in the comments and listen to these trendy sounds as well. All creators I observed used different types of sounds for their videos. It appears that it is essential when creating a video on TikTok. More specifically, they used sounds that were popular during the period they were creating the video. A sound that was trending in December, is most likely not popular right now. For example, Bibi and Brittany continuously incorporated popular songs in their content, while showing an outfit, a product or study session. Here, Bollmer's concept of performative is present. Creators perform their identities with the help of sound and music, thereby influencing and being influenced by the

platform and algorithm. What I noticed specifically with Brittany was that pre-interview she did not speak in her videos; it was only music. However, after the interviews, she started creating content using her own voice with soft music in the background. This creates a dynamic and personal approach to creating TikTok. The viewer can now relate to the creator and feel as if they are close friends. Whereas Bibi is consistent in her content, displaying videos with music playing. The sounds are usually instrumental or vocal music. Compared to Brittany, Bibi has more engagement on her profile. However, when looking at mid- to macro-tiered creators, the majority use their own voice in their videos. For instance, Max and Iryna use mainly their voices to make funny content, reaction videos, product reviews, hauls, and more. Max and Iryna are clear examples of high engagement due to many factors, one of them using their original voice in their videos. This drives a personal connection with their viewers, allowing them to engage with the content. This strategic use of sounds also reflects Bollmer's idea of vital materialism, where the materiality of sounds plays an active role in shaping the interaction with content creators and their audience. TikTok's algorithm promotes content that uses trending sounds, as well as original sound. It recognizes the relevance of the video and suggests it to a broader audience, demonstrating the link between human actions and algorithmic responses. Overall, I observed the strategic use of sounds in all seven on the content creators' videos. It is also important for creators to stay up to date on the current trends and incorporating small factors into their content. This is their way to gain points with the algorithm, hopefully extending their reach to bigger audiences. This also highlights the concept of networked individualism, as creators leverage their knowledge of trends and audience preferences to grow their digital networks.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the digital ethnographic process revealed several key insights regarding digital content creation on TikTok, and the relationship between the creator, the content, the audience, and the algorithm. By examining the pre and post interview observations, I was able to comprehend the content creators' patterns, interests, and tactics. The data shows how creators adapt their strategies to align with platform dynamics, which are constantly evolving. The content creators' goal is to produce content they enjoy, enhance their engagement, and connect with their audience.

Moreover, the study demonstrates the significant impact of follower count, posting frequency, and niche content on engagement rates. Also, my observations revealed that the content type and theme influence engagement rates and audience interactions. Lastly, the analysis of creator tactics like responsiveness, shoutout videos, hashtags and tags, and using trending sounds and voices, shows how content creators attempt or succeed at manipulating the algorithm to increase their engagement and reach on the platform.

Finally, while the method of research was enlightening for the study, there can be improvements and future recommendations for research. It would be interesting to explore the long-term effects of the engagement strategies performed by the content creators and how it affects their success on TikTok. Furthermore, it would have been beneficial to observe their accounts for a longer period of time in order to explicitly understand the creator and their experience on TikTok. However, the interview process in the following chapter will enhance the findings of the digital ethnography.

# Chapter 7: Semi-Structured Interviews

## 1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will be analyzing the data from the semi-structured interviews. I gathered seven TikTok content creators to participate in my study. They provided key insights into their experiences on the platform and their interactions with the TikTok algorithm. This phase of the project was complimented by the digital ethnographic approach, which established a baseline of information in the pre-interview observations and helped validate interview data in the post-interview period. The interviews focused on specific areas such as creator personal interests, content evolution, experiences on the platform, engagement, privacy boundaries, algorithmic manipulation, success, and more. The research identified four important themes that will be explored in this chapter: influence and power dynamics, content creation and engagement, virality and trends, and user experience and ethical considerations. With each creator's response, I was able to determine the relevant themes and sub-themes, furthering my understanding of user strategies and interactions on TikTok.

Again, this aspect of the study is supported by three theoretical frameworks highlighting the relationship between human and non-human behavior. Bollmer's new materialism supports the idea that the platform and the algorithm act as active agents that shape interactions and identities of creators and users. Moreover, Rainie and Wellman's (2012) concept of networked individualism explains the social dynamics on TikTok, where creators' interactions are mediated by the platform, influencing the way they act and present themselves. Lastly, Agger's concept of the virtual self helps understand how creators display their identities online in response to the algorithm's presence.

## 2 Data Organization and Preparation

In this section, I will go over details pertaining to research preparation and data organization for the semi-structured interview process.

As mentioned in the Methodology chapter, participants were recruited through TikTok messages. Consent was obtained before the interviews, storing all consent documents on my laptop. The interview guide was designed and stored on my OneDrive, which I can locate on my laptop or iPad. The questionnaire was designed to uncover the creator's personality, interests, motivations, strategies, and perceptions of the TikTok platform. Moreover, as the researcher, I was interested in how creators influence and are influenced by the TikTok algorithm. Other subjects that surfaced during the interviews were evolution of content, the aspect of going viral, how and if they engage in trends, privacy concerns about the algorithm, and more. The interview data highlighted the importance of specific elements like niches, attention spans, and content strategies. Overall, this process insured further analysis beyond autoethnography and digital ethnography by focusing on the experiences of content creators on the platform, and the power dynamics at play.

All interview data such as transcripts and video recordings are stored on my One Drive account and on my laptop, in a specific file I can easily locate. My One Drive account requires a password, as well as a Two-Factor Authentication system. Also, my laptop requires a password, which demonstrates my overall effort to ensure confidentiality. I edited all transcripts by replacing the participant's name with the coded name. Furthermore, I took brief notes during the interviews in my notebook. The interview transcripts were later transferred into MAXQDA 24 software. I analyzed each interview separately to find emerging ideas and themes. I began creating relevant codes such as 'influence', 'power', 'algorithm', 'FYP', 'privacy', 'trends', 'tactics', 'journey on TikTok', 'going viral', 'engagement', 'audience', 'consistency', 'niches',

‘user attention spans’, ‘evolving’, ‘definition of TikTok’, and finally, ‘interests’, These codes were then grouped into the relevant themes mentioned above and will be shown in the following section.

## 4 Interview Findings - Themes

### 3.1 Influence and Power Dynamics

In this section, I will explore the concept of power through the perspectives of the participants. I am specifically interested in the power dynamics on TikTok, and how the creators and algorithm influence each other. It is important to first comprehend the TikTok platform, by analyzing the definitions and descriptions given by the participants. This will provide a clear understanding of the environment and the agents at play. Second, I will analyze content creator perceptions of the algorithm and how it affects their platform experience. Finally, I will explore the power dynamics between the content creator and the algorithm, highlighting how they perceive and navigate their relationship with the platform and the algorithm to achieve success. This analysis will provide a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between both agents and how it affects the TikTok experience. Furthermore, my analytical lens is inspired by the theories of new materialism, networked individualism and virtual self.

#### 3.1.1 *Description of TikTok*

When posed the question, “Can you describe in your own words the TikTok platform? What elements differ from other social media platforms?” the seven content creators offered both shared and unique perceptions of TikTok. Here, I will analyze the similarities in their responses and the points that stood out the most. This reveals their common understanding of the platform and how it contributes to their experience and opinions. Moreover, it reveals their relationship with the platform and their perceptions of power.

Most of the participants agreed that the TikTok platform offers opportunities and accessibility, encourages organic and related content, is dynamic and engaging for all users, and finally that it provides educational and informative content. More specifically, Iryna, Max, and Kyle highlighted the platform's accessibility and the equal opportunity for users to be successful on the platform and go viral. They emphasized the fact that new creators can quickly build and maintain a following compared to other social media platforms like Instagram. For example, Max stated, "the element that makes it different is it gives everyone an equal opportunity to get discovered."

In addition, Bibi, Alice and Iryna mentioned that TikTok feels more personal and relatable compared to other platforms. They explained their appreciation for the platform's less judgemental and more authentic environment, where users can express themselves freely. For instance, Iryna mentioned the organic nature of the platform, and how she enjoys its unique features. Similarly, Bibi believes that TikTok is more niche, and can be a personal and relatable space for all users. Alice states that the platform "is less judgmental" and that you can express yourself any way you want.

Moreover, participants such as Max and Tim felt that the platform's features allowed for more engagement. They explain that features such as content creation, the use of sounds and music, collaborations, participation in trends and challenges, are what make the platform stand out when compared to others. These interviewees felt that these unique features make the platform more dynamic and engaging for both content creators and viewers. Specifically, Max states that "it's a really unique platform, that allows you to do a bunch of stuff." Also, Tim mentions that "TikTok is obviously a social media platform that inspires creativity."

Finally, Brittany and Kyle shared their perception of TikTok and its role as an educational and informational platform. They explained how users participate on the platform, not only for pleasure but also for practical advice and information. The platforms invite a wide range of content, enabling users to not only share their life but also their knowledge. Brittany noted, “I think TikTok is definitely more of an entertainment and educational platform rather than like Instagram, which is so much more about showing off. It’s something more informational than when you're scrolling through Instagram.”

To summarize, the participant responses offered unique perspectives on the TikTok platform. The majority appreciated the platform’s feasible potential for success, the authentic and organic content, the features that encourage engagement, and lastly, the educational and informational abilities. These insights demonstrated the content creators’ understanding of TikTok and their relationship with it. Their perspective hinted at their behaviors on the platform, and how it affects their overall performance.

### *3.1.2 Description of the Algorithm*

During the interview, the participants were asked, “What is your view of the TikTok algorithm? Do you have any firsthand experiences with the algorithm?”. Most of the participants started off a little unsure about how to respond or at first started that they were not quite sure. After rephrasing the sentence and encouraging them that there is no wrong answer, they began to share their thoughts. The participants described the algorithm as a dynamic and personalized system that is always evolving. The algorithm creates a personalized experience for all users. Also, the algorithm gathers information about user engagement to promote content. Finally, they described the algorithm as a complex system, that provides analytics to users and promotes trends. Overall, these algorithmic features must always be monitored in order to be successful on



TikTok.

### Evolving Nature of the Algorithm

Bibi, Brittany, and Max pointed out the evolution of the algorithm. They believe that the algorithm is always changing, therefore it is hard to define it. Brittany and Max shared their perception that the factors, such as the number of comments, followers, watch times, and more, used to promote content are always changing. This means that strategies and tactics used by the creators can work one day and be ineffective the next day. This requires the creators to be constantly up to date with the latest adjustments and trends. This is a clear indication of the agency of the algorithm in a human and non-human interaction, where the human must constantly adapt to the changes on the non-human.

### Personalization

One theme that emerged across the interviews was the perception that the algorithm uniquely tailors all user experiences on TikTok. Iryna stated that “the algorithm is different for everyone,” and it depends on each user’s interactions on the platform. Moreover, when discussing the algorithm, most of the participants included the For You Page in their discussion and how the algorithm curates personalized content on a user's FYP based on their behaviors and actions. Iryna used the example that she and her friend share most of the same interests, however, they noticed that their FYP’s are not similar. For Iryna, this proves that the algorithm treats every user differently and will not produce the same FYP for different users, no matter how similar they are. Hence, Iryna said, “The algorithm is just learning who you are.” Here, through the ideas of virtual self and networked individualism, the algorithm helps shape and reflect digital identities and form digital networks.

### User Engagement

The participants emphasized that the algorithm does not work on its own but in fact feeds off of user engagement to function. The algorithm depends on user actions and their engagement with content to promote content on their FYP. Kyle and Tim noted that being intentional with user interactions is key to maintaining visibility and virality. Tim stated, “[TikTok] has the most important algorithm, the most influential algorithm.” This is due to its vast ability to gather information about user interactions and create a unique experience for all. As Bibi put it, “the algorithm is always trying new things” in order to keep users engaged. While the algorithm will feed you with content you like, it will try at times to deliver different content on your FYP. This algorithmic strategy is to not allow the viewer to be bored and always present them with new content. This is similar to the previous findings of how the algorithm presents content that is not too new or beyond what it has perceived as a user's past interests. Once again, this shows the interconnectedness of the user and the algorithm.

### Analytics and Trends

Finally, the algorithm provides analytics to each creator as a form of feedback, based on the information collected on their videos. Brittany and Bibi mentioned the importance of constantly checking video analytics in order to stay on top of trends. While the algorithm encourages trends, as mentioned, they rapidly evolve. Therefore, this feedback mechanism allows creators to comprehend and adapt their content strategies accordingly. This is the algorithm's way of encouraging content creators to align with its preferences, and in return, they will be successful on TikTok. This specifically shows how content creators form their digital selves by adapting their strategies to gain and maintain exposure.

To conclude, the participant responses highlighted their perceptions of the algorithm and how their experience is affected by it. They showed difficulty in attempting to define the

algorithm, revealing the evolving nature of it. This demonstrated the complex power dynamics between the creator and the algorithm. Creators must constantly adapt their behaviors and strategies to align with the dynamic algorithm, showing the algorithms influence on content success. The need to monitor analytics and trends shows the creators' ongoing attempt to manipulate the algorithm and its preferences. This back and forth reveals a power struggle where success is dependent on understanding and responding to the algorithm's evolving preferences. This idea will be fleshed out in the next section.

### *3.1.3 The Power Dynamics*

One of the goals of the interviews was to see who the content creators perceived as having more control: humans or algorithms. During the interviews, I posed the question, "What is your perception of the power dynamics between content creators and TikTok's algorithm? Do you feel in control of your content's success, or do you think the algorithm exerts more influence on your content's outcome? The content creators expressed two different answers. Some believed that there was a balanced relationship between the algorithm and the user. However, the rest believed that the algorithm has the ultimate control. I will present their responses, along with their reasoning. I will also present the impact of the algorithm on user identity and content, based on participant perceptions. Finally, the analysis will include the three theories, which will help answer the research question.

#### Balanced Relationship

The results show that three out of seven participants perceive that there is a balanced relationship between content creators and the algorithm. In particular, Kyle, Bibi, who are mid-tier influencers, and Max, who is a macro-influencer, argued that while the algorithm seems to have the most power due to its influence on success, it is important to realize that creators have

significant influence over audience engagement. For example, Kyle noted that even though the algorithm gives the initial push to exposure and success, the established follower base ensures visibility beyond the algorithm's control and changes. Bibi supported this claim and explained how influencers can direct their audience to other platforms, demonstrating their ability to shape their digital footprint beyond TikTok. A lot of influencers and content creators go on to do podcasts, YouTube videos, Instagram stories, and more. Moreover, Max described the mutual influence between both parties as creators leverage trends and tactics through engaging content to maintain visibility, while the algorithm performs other duties. This suggests a balanced relationship where they both contribute to content circulation and viewer engagement. He stated, “it’s a balanced relationship,” where sometimes one has more power over the other.

### Algorithmic Power

In contrast, most participants argued that TikTok’s algorithm demonstrated predominant control over content creators, their content visibility, and their success. More specifically, Tim, Brittany, Alice, and Iryna asserted this and offered explanations as to why. For instance, Tim believes algorithms hold most power on TikTok as they decide which content gets discovered, prioritize specific content, and influence engagement metrics. He believes that the only way a content creator can have some control over the algorithm is if they are a macro-influencer, because they have a larger presence and follower base when compared to nano- and micro-influencers like himself. Similarly, Brittany noted how algorithmic changes impact her content’s performance without any particular reasons. She stated, “the algorithm is technically dictating what I’m doing”. Also, Alice shared an instance where, despite her efforts, the algorithm’s decisions and preferences influenced her content’s reach and viewer engagement. This suggests a hierarchy on TikTok where creators must align with the algorithm in hopes of increasing

exposure and success, rather than the other way around. Lastly, Iryna supports these perspectives by emphasizing the algorithm's ability to shape digital content consumption habits and trends. She explains that "maybe the only control that we have is [incorporating] hashtags, or the text on videos, or the commenting and answering [the audience]. I feel like those things can help aid your video and kind of aid exposure." However, she acknowledged that this is a minor influence when compared to the algorithmic power of TikTok.

In conclusion, the analysis of my participants' perspective on the power dynamics between content creators and the algorithm demonstrated a distinct relationship. Although some participants believed in a balanced relationship where both agents influence each other, the majority believe the algorithm has more control over the platform. It is also interesting to note that the mid- and macro-influencers were more likely to express the balanced relationship between the algorithm and content creators, while the lower-tiered creators believed that the algorithm demonstrated more power. These results are crucial in understanding the dynamics of TikTok and, essentially, how content is consumed. Essentially, the algorithm's material agency shapes the digital environment and influences content visibility and success. No matter the content creator's efforts, the algorithm shapes their virtual selves and turns them into networked creators who constantly adapt to the evolving digital machine. However, the content creators have shown their resilience and ability to navigate these power dynamics, by balancing their personal interests with the algorithm's preferences. Even though the participants perceive that the algorithm has more control, there is still a constant interaction between the two, reinforcing the fact that there is still a reciprocal relationship.

### 3.2 Content Creation and Engagement

The TikTok platform has had a profound effect on the relationship between digital content creation and engagement. It is important to understand how content creators develop their strategies to engage with their audience and how it evolves over time. This theme explores the various aspects of content creation and engagement on TikTok, based on creator interests, the strategies they use to maintain consistent engagement, and finally, the importance of niche markets.

### *3.2.1 Content Creator Interests and Authenticity*

A content creator's passion and interests are often visible through their videos, reflecting not only their unique perspectives and skills but also their authenticity. Their motivations to create content can range from personal passion and knowledge to a professional goal. Their videos offer little snippets of their lives and their identities, displaying their genuineness and openness to sharing with others. Their content is inspired by their real-world interests and hobbies. The concept of the virtual self, developed by Agger, is useful to analyse how individuals, like those on TikTok, construct their identities online. The goal was to investigate if this was the case in my study. The first question I posed during the interviews was, "What are your personal interests outside of TikTok? How do these aspects of your life influence your content on the platform?" My goal was to examine my interviewees' motivations for creating content and gain valuable insights into the components that shape their content, identity, and authenticity on TikTok.

The majority of the participants shared how their personal interests directly aligned with their content creation choices. For example, Tim shared that one of his interests is music. This inspires his content creation because when he listens to certain songs, it inspires him to create a video with the song being featured. Most of Tim's videos included music or trending sounds,

which not only resonated with the algorithm but also his followers. Moreover, Iryna stated, “When I was little, I used to dance. I still dance now. It's one of my passions, and I've always had a thing for makeup and skin care because I used to suffer with severe acne. I feel like I was put on here to help people with that because I'm someone that suffered from it. I can share my experience with someone, and that can help someone, so my interests outside of TikTok influence what I do on TikTok, and I try to be like my pure authentic self. I don't wanna influence people to do the wrong things”. Here, it is evident that Iryna's content specifically aligns with her passion for skincare, makeup, and helping others with acne. This is a personal and sensitive topic that Iryna utilized in her videos to create trust amongst her viewers, which led her to have high engagement and a dedicated follower base. The algorithm is attracted to genuine content as it often results in longer watch times and more interactions.

Similarly, Brittany explained that she is a very social person who loves to go out and spend time with friends. This inspired her content creation, which displays her outfit inspirations. She shared her passion for fashion and music, which are also reflected in her profile on TikTok. Contrarily, Kyle expressed his passion for real estate, which did not align with his content creation. While they did not reflect his interests, he did believe it reflected his identity and his goal to pass time during Covid.

For the creators that I interviewed, their profiles and content reflected their off-line identity and preferences. They used the platform to extend their interests and share them with others. Their identity motivates their content creation and determines how to perform on the platform. This study suggests that TikTok creators' personal interests affect their content and how it is perceived by their audience and algorithm. The main factor here is authenticity, as the algorithm prioritizes content that engages viewers on a personal level. When creators are

passionate about a topic, it resonates more profoundly with their audience. Hence, the algorithm rewards those who create engaging videos that include their personal interests and identities. Adding this personal touch to content creation helps maintain authenticity, which results in loyal and engaged audiences. This demonstrates a clear perceived connection between authentic content, audience engagement, and algorithmic favorability.

### *3.2.2 Tactics and Consistency*

One reoccurring theme in every methodological approach used in this study is engagement. This is the main ingredient for success on TikTok, and the interviews showed that creators employ many strategies to keep the audience, and the algorithm interested. In order to obtain information pertaining to this subject from content creators, participants were posed the question, “What strategies, techniques, or tactics do you use to optimize your content for the TikTok algorithm? They shared enlightening points that enhanced my understanding of the platform and the algorithm. The creators discussed how trending sounds, hashtags, audience interaction, and good quality videos are some of the most effective techniques to increase engagement. Furthermore, consistency in posting is just as important, as constant exposure and presence on TikTok facilitate the retention of followers and invite new ones. Discovering and understanding these strategies from the perspective of content creators shows how they strive for effective content creation that generates audience interaction. Additionally, it demonstrates how creators attempt to manipulate the algorithmic functions on the platform in order to be successful and maintain viewers’ interest. In discussing strategies for audience engagement with my interviewees, there was an emphasis on the non-human agent, in this case, the algorithm, which actively influences the visibility of content by favoring specific types of content and strategies. This relates to the principles of new materialism described by Bollmer.



### High-quality videos

The results show that all participants, from nano-influencers to macro-influencers, agree that the quality of video is a key tactic for success and engagement on TikTok. This pertained to lighting, sounds, the device used, and audio. For instance, macro-influencer Max shared that lighting and quality of video are important. He claims that if the video is dark and blurry, the algorithm will not push it to other viewers. Also, he claims that short videos (i.e., 7 seconds) will not be successful when compared to 1-minute videos. In his experience, the algorithm prefers longer videos, because it keeps the audience engaged on the platform longer. This aligns with Smith's point that the goal of TikTok is to keep users on the platform as long as possible, encouraging addictive behavior (Smith, 2021). Similarly, Alice explains that a creator will lose engagement if the "audio is off". If users are unable to listen properly to the video, there will be less engagement. Also, Bibi stated that the second most important technique for success on TikTok is the quality of videos. Bibi shared how she does not enjoy videos that are blurry or when the camera cannot focus. She believed it was a big factor in engagement.

### Consistent posting

In addition, consistent posting is another common strategy used by the participants. Specifically, Bibi believed that the most important tactic for gaining traction on the platform is consistency. Posting two to three times a day is key on TikTok. She recalls that during Christmas season; she was posting two times a day for one week and she gained 10,000 followers. This example shows the power a content creator can have on the platform to ensure their success. Also, Iryna similarly believed consistent posting was essential for success on TikTok. However, she shared how the expectations of posting every day, several times a day, felt overwhelming to her. In order to fulfill the requirement of posting daily, Iryna made a batch of content on days

when she was feeling motivated. Therefore, when she was not in the mood to make content one day, she had a backup stock of videos to choose from. This relays the importance of consistency, and how successful content creators are dedicated to producing content weekly and daily in order to please their audience and the algorithm. As Alice put it, “I think you just have to be annoying and post, post, post”. This reflects the assumptions of the new materialism perspective. This practice encourages constant interaction with the algorithm. Both parties co-create the conditions for engagement and visibility on TikTok

### Hashtags and Sounds

My interviewees also expressed that the use of sounds and hashtags is a great strategy for high engagement on TikTok. Bibi specified that creators must incorporate not only trending sounds and music to appeal to the algorithm but also relevant hashtags in their videos in order to see a positive outcome. However, she emphasized that it is not about the number or ‘trendiness’ of the hashtags used in one video but, in fact, the relevancy of them. She shared how she would spend hours trying to find the most trending hashtags and attempt to use them all for each video. However, she soon realized that the quality of the hashtag was more important than the quantity or popularity. Applying the right measures and elements to a video increases its likelihood of appearing on the FYP. Moreover, Brittany stated that she does not use hashtags and sounds to simply appear on the FYP. She uses them because applying relevant hashtags to a video allows it to be “more searchable”. Here, she described how the keywords within the hashtag make it relevant to the subject or genre. Brittany stated, “if you put a ton of hashtags that don't correlate with the video or are confusing or they're conflicting, the algorithm is gonna be like ‘I don't know what to do with this’. So I found that keeping it to 5 hashtags, that [relate] to each other [is the best way]”. Overall, Brittany qualified her approach is not only to catch trends but also to

make her content easy to find for interested users. Hence, the creators perceived that the use of hashtags signaled to the algorithm the genre of the content and shared it to users who were interested in this topic and genre. Moreover, Iryna explains how she certainly uses hashtags because she is aware of the TikTok feature, where the algorithm creates categories for their videos by genre and theme. Also, she explained how she sees positive results from her videos when she uses original sounds. This means that her viewers and the algorithm appreciate when she is directly speaking to the audience rather than simply putting a trendy song. Overall, using trending sounds and hashtags has proven to improve engagement metrics, however, here we see how some content creators I interviewed take a step further. Their strategies of tapping into original sound and relevant hashtags demonstrates the power dynamics between the content creator and the algorithm. Once again, here we see the interaction between the algorithm and the creator, and how they define content creation success.

### Audience Engagement

Another fundamental strategy that all participants believed contributed to their success was audience engagement. They believed that interacting with their followers and viewers in various ways led to higher exposure on the platform. Nonetheless, building a loyal community on TikTok is the interviewees strategy for reducing dependency on the algorithm. If the creator has a loyal audience that keeps coming back to their content, they will not be as dependent on having their content pushed by the algorithm. This strategy considers the concept of networked individualism, as regular interaction with their audience fosters a sense of community and strengthens their online network. For example, Bibi emphasized the importance of engaging with her followers through comments and direct messages. Her goal was to build a loyal audience. She explained how users would send her a direct message on TikTok showing their support for

her content and sharing their study habits. Moreover, Bibi shared how she enjoys engaging with other creators, following them back and liking all of their content. This type of engagement allows for a sense of community and builds friendships online. Similarly, Tim and Brittany talked about how they believe that engaging with followers by responding to comments and messages boosts their video's visibility and performance. Tim stated, "I made a rule for myself [that] every single person that comments, [I will] like it and answer back [...]" It's important to engage with the people that are engaging with you...it makes the video do better". While Brittany shared how she made connections with girls in the industry of beauty and explained to them that perhaps their videos are not doing so well because they decide to not respond to comments. As such, my interviewees expressed how they believe that constant interaction with their audience will encourage the algorithm to share their videos more.

Another participant, Max, engaged with his audience through comments and incorporating their feedback into his content. He shared how "People now are just messaging me and every time I take their message and then I make a video, or I will respond to their comment. And it [creates] a cycle of [more comments]". Essentially, he believed that the more you engage with your audience, the more they will comment on your videos. This interviewee demonstrates more independence and freedom, when compared to nano- and micro-influencers like Tim. Due to Max's dedicated and large following, he does not focus as much on what the algorithm wants, he in fact focuses on what his followers want. Mid- to macro-influencers expressed more confidence during the interviews, demonstrating their loyal following and constant success. Whereas, nano and micro influencers were very focused on pleasing the algorithm, and less focused on their followers.

In conclusion, the interviews demonstrated the complex power dynamics between the algorithm and the creator. In order to combat this, creators used content creation tactics such as producing high quality videos, posting frequently, using popular/relevant hashtags and sounds, and lastly, engaging with their audience. These techniques were meant to align with the algorithms' preferences, in order to boost engagement and increase their success on TikTok. Also, at a certain point, this strategy led to some type of independence on TikTok, where the creators did not necessarily need the algorithm to be successful. The results show that while the algorithm holds substantial power on the platform, creators also exercise agency through strategic content creation. The dynamics between content creators and the algorithm shape TikTok, illustrating the collaborative and competitive nature of their relationship.

### 3.2.3 *Niches*

Understanding the strategies content creators use in their relationship with the TikTok algorithm mentioned above is important; however, another critical factor for content creation success is producing niche content. Participants mentioned how by consistently creating videos that align with a specific topic or genre, such as beauty tutorials, comedy skits, and fashion hauls, creators can build a loyal following and increase their chances of being successful on TikTok. Essentially, the participants described the importance of specialized content and how it contributed to their overall success on the platform. Here, the concepts of the virtual self and new materialism are relevant to my analysis of the data.

Specifically, Bibi said “being consistent in the video genres you post” is key. She described her passion for creating ‘study talk’ videos, and how TikTok allowed her to share a mundane act and make it more ‘aesthetic’. Furthermore, during my interview with Tim, he stated that “focusing on one niche is better ... [it] constantly keep[s] people engaged.” This shows once

again how creators tend to stick to one genre of video because their viewers love it, and so does the algorithm. Brittany asserted that “focusing on that niche [will] eventually get that following.” She described her experience as a user of TikTok who feels comfort when looking at a creator profile and understanding exactly what kind of content you will get from them. She stated that “I think it's the most important to be consistent [in your content] and when someone clicks on your page, what are they gonna find and why are they gonna follow you?”

On the contrary, Alice believed that her content had no niche. She stated that she creates a mix of content. However, this contradicted my findings during digital ethnography, where I observed her clear niche for aesthetics and lifestyle content. This shows how my ethnographic observations do not always align with participant perceptions and that the interview process can sometimes complement previous findings or challenge them. This specific finding suggests that perhaps nano creators may not feel they are a part of a niche, a community, or a group of people. Participating in niche content and acknowledging your niche are two different things. Acknowledgement can enhance content creation and perhaps further Alice's exposure on TikTok.

To conclude, in analyzing the interview data, I found that niche content is essential for a creator's success on TikTok. By taking part in a specific niche, genre, or topic for content creation, creators can increase their engagement and generate a loyal audience. Most of the participants believed that if they focused on niche content, they could better engage an audience and align with the algorithm's preferences. The results shed further light on the power dynamics between content creators and the TikTok algorithm and how they are both influenced by the strategic creation of niche content. Creators who recognize and leverage their niches can effectively navigate the platform by building strong relationships with other users and achieving

long-term success. This shows how creators perceive and manage their relationship with the algorithm through focused content creation. In this case, the creators are demonstrating their virtual selves as they produce niche content and adapt to the algorithm's presence. Lastly, new materialism is relevant here as there is a constant interaction between the creator and the algorithm.

### 3.3 Virality and Trends

Virality and trends were two concepts repeatedly mentioned throughout the interviews. It is crucial to understand the idea of 'going viral' and popular trends on TikTok in relation to the platform's influence on content creation. The participants described the process of going viral and participating in trends and how it is essential for success. In this section, I will explore the content creators' journeys, as they seek to gain popularity, as well as their methods of engaging with trends to please the algorithm. The analysis will provide an understanding of how creators interact with the algorithm and how it affects their actions on the platform. Here, the content creators' journey will demonstrate the evolution of their virtual selves and how they transformed into networked creators. Moreover, the relationship between the algorithm and the user will be demonstrated, aligning with the ideas of new materialism.

#### 3.3.1 *The TikTok Journey*

In order to understand my participants' journey as content creators and a user of TikTok, I posed this question: "Can you describe your experience as a user of TikTok so far? Why did you begin this journey on TikTok?" The goal was to understand why they created a TikTok account and began creating content and what the journey looked like from beginning to end.

In response to this question, most of the participants explained that they began their TikTok journey due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the restrictions put in place, most of the creators expressed their boredom and the need to escape their reality. For example, Iryna explained that she began during the pandemic and said, “I think that's when a lot of people started using TikTok, and it was honestly very addicting.” She expressed her boredom, and the platform offered many fun things to do. In similar circumstances, Alice, Kyle, and Tim decided to hop on the trend of TikTok during the pandemic. With a lot more time on their hands, they thought it would be an entertaining outlet to participate in. Most of them mentioned how they heard that everyone was using TikTok; therefore, they wanted too as well. This demonstrates the power of the platform to provide meaningful user interaction. Moreover, Iryna stated, “I started creating content because I've always liked the idea of being like an influencer or like influencing people.” Bibi, who once had a personal account where she was simply a passive viewer, shared this sentiment. One day, she decided she wanted to start creating content. Also, Max shared his passion for film and photo editing during the interview, and that is why he wanted to partake in this journey and become an ‘influencer.’

To sum up, the participants highlight the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the rise of TikTok usage and content creation. In order to combat boredom, many creators turned to TikTok during lockdowns to seek a fun escape from reality. The platform's popularity inspired creators to begin their TikTok journey, not only to create videos but also to connect with people and share their interests. Testimonies from a majority of the participants revealed that TikTok provided entertainment and a space for self-expression. This is essentially where their relationship with the algorithm began. Every action taken since the beginning of their journey



has and been influenced by the algorithm.

### *3.3.2 Going Viral and Participating in Trends*

During the interviews, I asked participants the following question: “How did you go ‘viral’? Did it begin with original content, or did you hop on a trend(s)?” Here, I wanted to understand the content they create, whether they mostly participated in trends or more enjoyed producing original content. The results showed the influence of the platform on content creation and identity. After, I asked, “How long did it take to get multiple views and a large following? Did you achieve success off of one video or was it an accumulation of videos?” My goal was to understand their journey as influencers, how they achieve and how they measure their success on TikTok. Also, I was interested in knowing if they were ‘one hit wonders’ or if they were producing consecutive viral videos. The responses varied, demonstrating different paths to virality and success on TikTok. For some creators, their success was unexpected and rapid, with one video driving them to virality. For others, the process was gradual, with every video inviting and increasing consistent engagement. In particular, I noticed that the lower-tier influencers either do not follow a specific niche or participate in too many trends, resulting in less success on the platform. While the higher-level influencers offer consistent, engaging content that follows a specific genre or trend. A common theme among the participant responses was the strategic use of trends to go viral. Also, there’s evidence of unexpected virality, which demonstrates the power of the algorithm in relation to content creation.

For example, Max and Iryna, experienced gradual success but large amounts of engagement throughout their journey. Iryna’s first experience going viral came from a video discussing her initial niche of marketing. This gained traction and visibility for her account; however, after changing her niche, she noticed even more engagement with every video she

posted. Similarly, Max's early days on TikTok involved participating in trends like recreating television series introduction songs; however, when he changed the type of content he made, he gained even more attention. He stated, "It's kind of gradual, but when I started doing [videos about] Kylie Jenner, like making fun of [her], it literally like blew up." His following gradually increased; he noticed that as soon as he posted something, he received "500 likes in one minute." While Max is a macro influencer and Iryna is a micro influencer they share similarities. They both changed their niche early on, because they expressed how they were participating in any trend to simply go viral. However, as their journey went on, they both realized they must produce content that reflects their identity, while still producing original content that reflects certain trends related to their niche. They do not deviate from their niche, but still engage in trends, leading to a more sustainable future on the platform. In addition, Brittany shared her experience and said, "It's very much a slow growth," producing one outfit video at a time, gradually increasing her engagement. Here, Brittany, a nano-influencer, maintains her genre of videos, however, this is a very saturated trend. Without some sort of originality, creators will not stand out to the algorithm, leading to slow or lack of success.

For some, like Alice and Bibi, fame came from unexpected sources. Specifically, Alice shared how she posted a random video on TikTok about a live fight occurring in a McDonald's. She gained traction, noting that she just created this video for fun, and it received multiple views. Also, her exercise and physical health videos that showed progression invited significant attention over time. In other words, these videos went viral, resulting in an increase in views and followers. Here, Alice is a clear example of a nano-influencer, who is not very consistent with the genre of her videos. While Bibi, a mid-level influencer, has been unique and consistent with her niche from the start. Bibi's unanticipated success came from her study videos, where she

filmed herself studying. She explained, “I would just like put my camera beside my desk and videotape myself studying. Those went viral, which was so unexpected because I didn't really ever think... but people loved like the strangest things.” While they both participate in trendy videos like lifestyle and aesthetics, the mid-tiered influencer’s strategy is more sustainable. This demonstrates the unexpected power of the algorithm in correlation with content creation. As well as the importance of participating in trends to please the algorithm while still maintaining originality and aligning your content with your identity and niche.

While Alice and Bibi went viral without expecting it, participating in trends was a clear strategy employed by many participants to begin their journey and enhance their visibility and engagement. First off, Brittany participated in the trend of styling and clothing haul videos. However, she introduced a unique strategy in order to go viral. She discovered that creating content that immediately sparked questions and comments allowed her to increase her reach. She stated, “I was just showing my outfit and it was to an audio, so I wasn't necessarily saying where the piece was from. Then people were gonna ask in the comments, and the video would get boosted.” This shows that while she did participate in a trend, she added her own touch, which she considers a strategy to gain traction on her profile. Tim’s experience on TikTok also highlighted the power of leveraging trends. He created videos that involved popular movie scenes and celebrity impersonations, which showed his resemblance to one star: Adam Sandler. This strategy resulted in his most successful video to date. He shared, “There was a trend going around... saying a scene from a movie but dressed as a different celebrity. I get told that I look like Adam Sandler. And that one was the one that did the best.” Overall, my participants’ experiences showed there is a clear correlation between participating in trends and success on

TikTok. However, this evidence showed that going viral involves a combination of original content and trending videos.

To conclude, the journey of going viral on TikTok is a moment every content creator cherishes. All participants recalled their initial high engagement video, as it was an important step in their success. Whether it was through original content or trend participation, the creators have been successful by continuously producing content that engages their audience. However, there is an emphasis on niche content rather than trendy content. Higher level influencers are more likely to produce content that is familiar to a trend but includes their personal touch to it. Participating in oversaturated trends can lead to slow success on TikTok. In other words, originality is the key to content creation. This analysis provides valuable insights into how content creators interact with the TikTok algorithm and the factors that contribute to their success. Here we can understand the mutual relationship between both agents, shedding light on the power dynamics and strategies that shape digital content. The need for the creator to balance trend participation with originality reflects a power dynamic where the algorithm dictates visibility and reach. Yet, it is important for creators to assert their individuality to stand out. This interaction suggests that while the algorithm exerts considerable influence by favoring certain content types, creators retain some control by navigating these trends and incorporating their unique style. This balance is essential for sustainable success, demonstrating that understanding and utilizing the algorithm's tendencies while maintaining one's identity, is essential for long-term growth on TikTok.

### *3.3.3 Content Evolution and Attention Spans*

Understanding the evolution of content is crucial to examining how content creators adapt to the rapidly changing environment on TikTok. Content evolution considers the way in

which content creators change their content genre over time to increase engagement, stay up to date with trends, and respond to changing interests from their audience. I asked the seven participants, “Do you feel like your content has changed over time? If so, why?” The responses allude to the impact of algorithmic shifts on content creation and success on TikTok. Moreso, it reveals the changes in audience engagement as their attention spans decrease, inevitably changing the structure of content creation. Overall, this discussion reveals the never-ending interaction between the algorithm and content creators. Algorithmic changes influence what content gets promoted on the platform, pushing creators to constantly adapt their strategies to maintain or increase their reach. At the same time, innovative responses to these changes can affect how the algorithm evolves, creating a dynamic, mutual relationship. This perpetual cycle of adaption emphasizes the continuous nature of the interaction between the creator and the algorithm.

The majority of my participants expressed that their content evolved significantly over time. Brittany shared that her content evolved from random posts to more thoughtful and engaging videos. This shift was essential in order to meet the demands of her audience. She said, “Your content kind of has to change. Especially within different niches, certain things trend really well.” Max shared this sentiment as he emphasized the necessity of frequent changes in content styles to maintain audience engagement. He remarked, “It changes like every three months. People get bored of the same thing.” This showed the importance of creative evolution and adaptability. While he still maintains his comedic niche, Max tries to always be on top of new trends within this community, hence giving his viewers what they want. Furthermore, Bibi and Iryna had similar experiences where they both diversified their content to adapt to different interests and maintain engagement over time. Overall, these experiences underscore the

importance of flexibility and innovation in content creation. By continuously evolving their content, creators can better meet audience expectations and sustain their engagement. This refers back to a previous notion about adaptability, where changes in content are often driven by algorithmic shifts, and in turn, the creator's innovations can influence how the algorithm prioritizes and promotes content. Hence, these creators adapt to the changes based on user engagement and trends promoted by the algorithm. Hoping onto trends is a great strategy, however, like mentioned before, it is not everything. Therefore, being static can have its downfalls, but so can participating in too many trends without a sense of identity or niche.

Contrarily, Tim and Kyle expressed how their content has not changed over time. While they have adjusted to new content creation techniques, their overall genre has not evolved. Tim shared that he maintained a consistent comedic tone but adjusted some strategies, like incorporating the Montreal location or different hashtags, to increase his visibility. Kyle highlighted that his content always consisted of the same dance video; the only thing that changed was the setting of the video and the suggestions from the audience. This shows that while. While we are looking at one nano-creator and one mid-creator, they share a similar experience. More specifically, the nano-influencer Tim has not evolved his content, and as such, he does not receive a high engagement rate (along with other factors). Whereas, Kyle, a mid-level creator, received high engagement rates without changing his content, he essentially got bored and stopped producing consistent content. The lack of creativity is noticed not only by viewers but also by creators as they struggle to continue their journey. As such, evolution is somewhat necessary in order to adapt to the ever-changing landscape of the platform, the algorithm, and viewer interests.

Furthermore, in some cases, the evolution of content is influenced by the algorithm and viewers' attention spans. Brittany specifically pointed out that "back then [during the pandemic], any video had the potential to go viral, but now, content must offer something valuable to hold viewers' attention." She stated, "I think that has a lot to do with like our attention spans being so like you need to be hooked on the video, or else you're just gonna scroll." This shows how creators perceive their audience to have short attention spans that need to be engaged quickly and with impact. This translated into the need for creators to constantly evolve and produce compelling videos for their audience. In this case, Brittany's content did not completely change but she has refined her content creation strategies to better appeal to her audience and algorithmic expectations. Moreover, Iryna noted that "people don't have the attention span nowadays. So I feel like that's the reason certain trends go viral." This reflects the fact that things trending are temporary and constantly changing, which means so too is the content and how it will grasp the attention of viewers. Users love trends because they are incredibly captivating in the moment and then wear off. Iryna, a mid-tiered influencer, gradually evolves her content, to fit the needs of her viewers, all while fitting into her niche. Finally, this reflects my findings in other areas of my research where the algorithm tends to show viewers new things, while still maintaining a perfectly curated FYP based on their interests. The algorithm does anything to keep users on the platform longer, hence, showing people new things is the algorithm's tactic for longevity.

In conclusion, my analysis shows that most participants believe that content evolution is necessary for success on TikTok. By adapting to algorithmic preferences, audience interests, and participating in trends, creators can continue to go viral on the platform. Some participants shared that it would be appreciated to receive more detailed analytics about their videos reach on

the platform in order to perform better and cater to their audience. Understanding the videos reach through the analytics page can be informative for users, allowing them to see who their viewers are and implement certain changes if necessary. Once again, the findings reveal the significant influence of TikTok's algorithm on content creation and engagement. The participants suggest that they do have some control over their content, but it is heavily influenced by the algorithm. This also impacts how users present their identities online and their relationships with their audience.

### 3.4 User Experience and Ethical Considerations

In this final section, I am focusing on creator perceptions and experiences regarding privacy concerns, ethical considerations about the algorithm, and mental health on the TikTok platform. By exploring these issues, my goal is to uncover the interplay between user satisfaction, algorithmic governance, and the ethical standards that creators value in creating their content. In this part of the interviews, the participants described their For You Page experience and their concerns for user data and privacy. Moreover, we covered the ethical implications of algorithm-driven content and its impact on users.

#### 3.4.1 *The FYP experience and Privacy*

All participants shared positive feedback based on how the algorithm curates their FYP. Similar to my experience during the autoethnography, they believe that the algorithm understood them and produced a relatable and entertaining page. However, while they expressed their content, they also mentioned their concerns about user data and privacy. Specifically, their concerns included how the algorithm collects, uses, and protects personal information. While users appreciate the personalized experience and the freedom to express themselves, they remain wary of the potential risks to their privacy and data security. This balance of enjoyment and



caution reflects the complex relationship users have with digital platforms, and in this case, the algorithm as well.

When confronted with this topic, Bibi explains the boundaries she put in place to maintain her privacy, which included limiting the amount of personal information she shared online. She says, “I don't really like talking to the camera and I also don't like just like showing my face blatantly in the camera like I'll do like morning routines were like you'll see me washing my face. But it's kind of from a distance. But I don't really want even like my name. Like I will never show like clips with my full name, or I try never to show outside my house.” Similarly, Brittany shared how she set boundaries on TikTok by not including personal information in her content and focusing more on interests and passions that do not reveal her whole identity. She explains, “I think because of my like interest and my niche that it's very like close focus. I don't feel the need to really share anything about my personal life.” In similar circumstances, Max explains, “It's very hard because like literally, if you search me my information is all out there and I'm like I don't even know how it got there. But yeah like there's people put my height like my whatever so you have to be careful, but I've always made sure not to mention my work.” Max also shared how he does not post content that contains family members without their knowledge. He understood the consequences of being present on social media platforms and tried his best to keep parts of his identity a secret for safety reasons. The majority of the participants also shared this sentiment, sharing the inevitability of being online.

Overall, my participants expressed their concerns about data privacy online. While their goal is to increase their exposure on TikTok, they still believe measures should be put in place to protect their privacy and safety. This topic inspires a greater need for a discussion about online safety. It is important to keep in mind that the algorithm functions based on user data; therefore,

it is a tricky problem to tackle. The TikTok platform depends on the algorithm to function and perform its unique platform features. Hence, there needs to be a balance in data collection to ensure user safety. I demonstrated a similar finding in the autoethnography, where TikTok gathered information about myself and my identity, sometimes through conversations I had with other people surrounding me, through people using the same Wi-Fi network, and more. While I expressed my shock, I felt as though this was inevitable and assumed they covered this topic in the Terms and Conditions, that I blindly accepted. After doing more research, it was clear that TikTok does gather information online actions matter, but so do offline.

### *3.4.3 Ethical Implications of the Algorithm*

During the interviews, we also discussed the ethical implications of the algorithm's presence. The algorithm shapes what creators produce as content and how they feel. This raises questions about the algorithms' impact on the content creators' experience, their creativity, and their mental health.

For instance, Tim shared that the algorithm could affect creativity by limiting the type of content he wishes to post because it is not 'trending' enough. This is true, as other participants mentioned sometimes feeling forced to participate in trends to increase their engagement metrics. Kyle suggested greater transparency and insight when it comes to the algorithm. He is suggesting that a greater understanding of how the algorithm works and what it specifically likes would empower creators to make informed decisions about their content creation. In essence, this knowledge could help reduce the pressure to conform to trends, allowing for more authentic and diverse videos. Transparency in this case can foster healthier habits where creators are less concerned about what the algorithm wants and more driven by their genuine interest and creativity.

Moreover, Iryna and Max discussed their emotional experience with the algorithm. Iryna explained how she received hate comments, which impacted her mental health. She stated, “It's definitely draining on mental health, and you kind of overthink everything that you weren't overthinking before.” However, she expressed that while it can be discouraging at times, it also made her stronger. Max also shared his experience with negative comments on his videos and how he handled them. There are some hate comments that he, in fact, pinned on his new videos in order to empower himself and not take these comments so seriously.

As a content creator gains popularity on the platform, it is inevitable that they will not please all viewers. This can result in violent comments and bullying. Hence, there is a need for greater regulation of TikTok and more transparency about the power of the algorithm. Regulation can help decide how content is promoted and who can see it, reducing the likelihood of negative interactions. Transparency allows users to understand how the algorithm works and how moderation policies are enforced, fostering a safer and more positive community. Also, participants mentioned that TikTok can provide educational and wellness resources to further empower creators on how to manage their content and audience interactions. Overall, there are changes that can be made to make TikTok a positive and enjoyable environment for all. This shows the occasional unbalanced relationship between the algorithm and the user.

## 4 Conclusion

The results of my semi-structured interviews with content creators revealed the power dynamics in their relationship with TikTok's algorithm, regarding content creation and engagement, virality and trends, and ethical considerations. The power dynamics between the algorithm and content creators are complex, with each affecting the other. While some participants believed they had a balanced interaction with the algorithm, the majority claimed

that the algorithms have more power on the platform and shape their digital identities and experiences in more of a one-sided way. At the same time, content creation and engagement are always driven by a creator's personal interests, which encourages their authenticity while also aligning with the algorithm's preferences. The importance of niche content and evolving content strategies also emerged from the interviews as strategies creators use in order to maintain audience engagement and achieve success. Finally, creator experience and ethical considerations highlight the broader implications of the algorithm. Privacy concerns and the emotional impact of the algorithm are significant, demanding greater discussion, transparency, and regulation to ensure the safety of users. Overall, my analysis in this chapter sheds light on the interactions between the algorithm and the creator, how one impacts the other, and the dynamics of power involved.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion and Future Considerations

This study investigated the intricate relationship between TikTok content creators and the platform's algorithm. Each step provided valuable insights, contributing to an in-depth understanding of the constant interaction between TikTok's algorithm and content creators. The findings suggest a reciprocal relationship, allowing one another to survive on the platform. While content creators hold some power because of their ability to produce engaging content, implement innovative strategies, and build a community of followers, they often tailor their content to meet the algorithm's preferences to maintain visibility and engagement. This leads to creators constantly adapting their strategies in response to algorithmic feedback, resulting in an ongoing cycle of content modifications and performance measurement. Here, I suggest that the TikTok algorithm show its own agency. Although it is assumed that humans possess the most power in society, the results demonstrate that algorithms also play an essential role in everyday life. Key themes that emerged from the research include the power dynamics between creators and the algorithm, user identity, creator authenticity and self-expression, strategies for algorithmic engagement, and more.

### 1 Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework draws on several key concepts that help contextualize the findings. The theories of new materialism, networked individualism, and virtual self provide critical insights into the TikTok experience. New materialism theory by Grant Bollmer describes the complex relationship between humans and non-humans. While the emphasis is usually on human influence, he describes the abilities of non-human agents and their influence on humans. This theory aligns with the ideas introduced in this research, which describe the relationship between the content creator, known as the human, and the non-human algorithm. Particularly,

this theory was limiting in my research. New materialism focused on the agency of objects and materiality, and how it shapes reality, leaving the important role of humans in the dark. My project attempted to show the strong presence of both agents and their reciprocal relationship. It is important to note that the relationship is not perfectly balanced all the time. Sometimes one has more power than the other, hence, where the power dynamics come into play. Furthermore, I noticed that they both have their own separate agency however, they are more powerful together. Specifically, higher tiered influencers were more likely to say that it was a balance relationship, while lower tiered influencers stated that the algorithm is more powerful. In this case, their response is subjective to their experience and therefore proves my initial argument.

In addition, the concept of networked individualism, a concept introduced by Rainie and Wellman, describes the effects of networks and how it influences human experiences, perceptions, and identities. This is crucial to how TikTok creators navigate their online communities, utilizing networks to maximize visibility and engagement. Finally, Agger's concept of the virtual self refers to the performance of identity in digital spaces. In this case, TikTok requires users to present versions of themselves, frequently influenced by the algorithm. The virtual identity of content creators is impacted by the TikTok algorithm, once again demonstrating its considerable influence.

## 2 Methodology

The three methodological approaches in this research offered important perspectives and insights. Each method provided a unique lens to observe and understand the interactions between creators and the TikTok algorithm. Digital autoethnography allowed for a detailed analysis of the researcher's own experiences with the TikTok algorithm, providing personal insights and reflections that enhanced the comprehension of algorithmic influence. In addition, observing and

analyzing the activities and interactions of various TikTok creators through digital ethnography provided a greater understanding of how they navigate the platform's algorithm. This revealed the common strategies they employ to manipulate the algorithm and the challenges they face. Lastly, conducting semi-structured interviews with content creator's sheds light on their perceptions, motivations, and experiences, revealing a divided opinion about who is in charge. Hence, while content creators have some influence through their content and strategies, the algorithm still plays an important role in determining engagement rates and platform reach. The qualitative data obtained from all three methods identified similar themes, emphasizing again the reciprocal relationship between the algorithm and creators, the power dynamics present, and the ethical considerations of it all.

Throughout this project, I faced two methodological challenges. The first being recruitment. Recruitment was a long and hard process that needed tweaking. I edited my recruitment guide to ease the process and allow for a broader scope of content creators. I used different avenues to recruit participants, such as direct messages on TikTok or Instagram or through word of mouth. Moreover, since I was only contacting creators who were visible on my FYP, I was exposed to niche-specific creators. Widening and exploring different types of content would have introduced me to creators that share different interests outside of fashion, makeup, lifestyle. The second challenge was acknowledging my positionality. It was quite difficult to navigate my role on the platform. In the beginning, I was debating whether I should be my true self or attempt to manipulate the algorithm myself by fooling it by pretending to be someone else. I soon realized that in order to get the full experience on TikTok, you must be your true self. In any case, i quickly realized that it wouldn't have been that easy to fool the algorithm. Interestingly, the algorithm continuously suggested I follow my personal TikTok account.

### 3 Key Findings

The research revealed several three key findings, such as the reciprocal relationship, content creation and engagement, and finally, ethical considerations. First, when considering the reciprocal relationship, it is evident that both parties affect each other. Creators consistently demonstrated their efforts and strategies; however, they were conscience their content's visibility and engagement were heavily influenced by the TikTok algorithm. They revealed the constant need to adapt their strategies to maintain and increase their visibility. In my experience, it was a 'give and take'. I observed the dynamic relationship with the algorithm and how my actions affected what I viewed on my FYP and vice versa. It is important to note that the dynamics of this relationship is not balanced. There are times when the algorithm conveys more power, and other times when the creator does. This is demonstrated through the interviews. Some creators feel more empowered than others, when it comes to their relations with the algorithm. These depends on many factors, but the status of the creator is the main one. Overall, some believe that humans are the rulers, and some believe that the machine will take over. While these are both extremes, they are possible, but not true in this case. Both elements have their own agency, however, considering the TikTok atmosphere, there is not one without the other. The uniqueness of the TikTok platform is not just about personalization but also the reciprocal relationship between the algorithm and the user. It brings a higher level of virality and success for social media platforms like no other.

A second key finding was the aspect of content creation and engagement. A creator's personal interests guide content creation and engagement on TikTok. This inevitably encourages their authenticity, while also aligning with algorithmic preferences. The interviews revealed that there is a delicate balance between being authentic and participating in trends. Many creators



shared how they navigate this balance in order to see positive results. Also, the participants discussed the importance of niche content, and the evolution of content strategies used by creators to maintain their popularity and sustainability on the platform. Some strategies included the relevant use of hashtags, participating in trends, particular sounds/music, and more. The third finding addresses the digital identity (preferences and interests). There is the way we portray ourselves online, the influence of the algorithm on our identities and vice versa. First, creators are seen as performative online beings. While still being their true authentic self, creators sometimes adjust their content to align with algorithmic preferences. The participants stated that their content reflects their interests and preferences. However, content creators expressed that they felt the need to use trending topics, sounds, and formats to stay relevant and please the algorithm. Moreover, a creator's level of comfort with sharing personal information influences the online behavior. Second, the algorithm influences the digital identity. The algorithm determines what content we see, potentially reinforcing our existing beliefs and biases. The people we connect with online can influence our self-perception and how others see us. The number of likes, comments, and shares we receive can impact our self-esteem and how we present ourselves. Hence, there is this online pressure. Also, what we see online can influence our behaviors online but also offline. Certain trending content might alter our preferences. For example, on my FYP I was constantly exposed to current activities happening in Montreal. In fact, I kept seeing Christmas markets all over the city and it in fact inspired me to participate in this activity. I might not have known about these events happening in Montreal and might not have been as interested if it was not for the repetitive exposure on TikTok. Finally, users also influence the algorithm. The more users interact with certain types of content, the more likely they are to see similar content in the future. A users likes, dislikes, searches and actions on the

platform can help the algorithm understand their interests and tailor recommendations accordingly. The digital networked users use tactics such as hashtags, sounds, music, and more, to influence the algorithms promotion of these trends and users. Overall, it is clear that there is a reciprocal relationship between the creator and the algorithm.

Finally, the results revealed ethical implications. There were specific concerns with privacy and the emotional impact of the algorithm. Creators explained that they were aware that the algorithm collects their data, however, they wish for greater transparency regarding how the algorithm functions and how user data is utilized. Also, creators demonstrated the emotional impact of being a popular figure on TikTok and how the negative comments they receive are the price to pay for being online. Overall, this research revealed rich data that can further our awareness of AI and algorithms.

## 4 Importance of this Research and Future Considerations

This research focuses on the evolving relationship between content creators and algorithms on social media platforms. This overlooked relationship is becoming more relevant as it contributes to a deeper understanding of our digital culture. The objective is to advocate for more transparent and ethical practices in algorithm design. This information is essential for developing ethical guidelines and policies to protect users and their well-being, while also promoting innovation on digital platforms. Future research should examine the long-term impact of algorithmic presence on various aspects such as mental health, creativity, and career sustainability of content creators. As algorithms become more powerful, continuous monitoring and adaptation by creators will be essential. Comparative studies across social media platforms can inform the best practices for algorithm design and explore AI and machine learning's role in shaping user experiences. While this study provides valuable insights, it acknowledges the

limitations of sample size. Future research should diversify participant demographics, creator specifications, and extend the study's duration to capture global impacts and trends in creator-algorithm interactions. It would be interesting to explore the perceptions of creators with different tiers or status, creators with different niches, and different types of users such as brands, workers, etc. Overall, it is important to note that this field is evolving every second, therefore, it is important to continuously monitor the presence of algorithms in our everyday lives. While this innovative machine can enhance human lives, it can also affect it negatively. It can lead to algorithmic dependency, where we cannot perform, work, or socialize without the use of algorithms. Hence, this project is just the beginning.

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