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EXPLORING THE POWER OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION ON TIKTOK THROUGH A QUALITATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

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# Abstract

As the third-largest of the Big Five worldwide social networks, TikTok has rapidly gained global attention, attracting millions of users worldwide. The aim of this study is to explore the nuances and intricacies of social communication dynamics within the TikTok environment. This paper presents a comprehensive qualitative literature review that delves into the realm of social communication on TikTok by following a qualitative method of literature review, we have sorted 45 scientific journals from 3 sources: SAGE Journals, Wiley Journals, and Taylor & Francis Journals to support our phrase “Social Communication on TikTok”. Through an in-depth analysis of relevant scholarly articles, this review highlights key themes, trends, and patterns that emerge from the literature. It examines the diverse forms of social communication on TikTok, including the creation and consumption of user-generated content, the role of influencers and trends, and the impact of TikTok on interpersonal relationships and societal norms. Moreover, this review sheds light on the social, cultural, and psychological implications of TikTok as a communication platform. By adopting a qualitative lens, this research provides a deeper understanding of how users engage, connect, and communicate on TikTok, offering valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in the field of social media and communication studies.

**Keywords:** *social media; TikTok; social communication; digital communication; qualitative literature review.*

# Introduction

TikTok, a popular social media platform, has witnessed a meteoric rise in popularity and user engagement since its launch in 2016. TikTok has rapidly grown as the “hottest app of 2021” (J. Lee & Abidin, 2023) and remains as the “most-downloaded app of 2022” globally (Koetsier, 2022). With its unique format centered around short-form videos, TikTok has created a global community where users can create, share, and interact with content in diverse ways. TikTok continues to be one of the most used apps in the United States, its cultural impact cannot be understated (Boffone, 2022). As a result, it has become a significant platform for social communication, shaping cultural trends, fostering creative expression, and facilitating interpersonal connections. The recent growing *popularity* of TikTok has transformed the cultures and practices of social movements worldwide. Despite several concerns regarding the app—mostly regarding its weak security (Keim et al., 2022; J. Wang, 2020). Its interactive features (e.g., short video, voiceover, meme template, background music, duet, green screen) and popular genres (e.g., dance, comedy, challenges; see (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022) for “TikTok challenges”) have enriched social media cultures with creativity and helped users to engage with each other, with social issues, and even with contentious issues like misinformation and online toxicity with relative ease and casual fun.

As social movements of the 21st century incorporate both offline and online elements, scholars have noted a shift in logic from collective action brokered mainly by change centered organizations, to one of technologically enabled connective action, as “taking public or contributing to a common good becomes an act of personal expression and recognition or self-validation achieved through sharing ideas and actions in trusted relationships” (Segerberg & Bennett, 2013).

In recent years, however, a variety of technologies have enabled and inspired a new approach to business communication. In contrast to the publishing mindset, this social communication model is interactive, conversational, and usually open to all who wish to participate (Bovée, 2008). Social communication model An interactive, conversational approach to communication in which formerly passive audience members are empowered to participate fully (Bovée, 2008). The social communication model differs from conventional communication strategies and practices in a number of significant ways. In contrast to the publishing mindset, this social communication model is interactive, conversational, and usually open to all who wish to participate. Audience members are no longer passive recipients of messages but active participants in a conversation. Social media has given customers and other stakeholders a voice they did not have in the past. And businesses are listening to that voice. In fact, one of the most common uses of social media among U.S. businesses is monitoring online discussions about a company and its brands (Jiang et al., 2009).

The research on social communication on TikTok stems from the need to understand the impact and implications of this emerging form of digital interaction. Scholars and researchers have recognized the platform's immense reach and influence, prompting investigations into various aspects of social communication dynamics within the TikTok ecosystem.

# Research Method

This study utilized three esteemed journal sources, namely SAGE Journals, Wiley Journals, and Taylor & Francis Journals, to compile pertinent articles on the subject of "TikTok" and "Social Communication." The research methodology involved a meticulous filter-based approach to identify the most relevant articles. On the SAGE Journals website, the initial step entailed searching for the keywords "TikTok" and "Social Communication," yielding a total of 874 results. Subsequently, the focus was narrowed down to articles categorized under "communication and media studies," resulting in 147 articles deemed relevant. From this pool, a random selection of 15 articles was made to extract valuable insights. Likewise, on Wiley Journals, the keywords "TikTok" and "Social Communication" were employed in the search bar, yielding 521 articles. The filter was then applied to include only articles within the domain of "Communication and Media Studies," resulting in 52 relevant articles. From this selection, 15 articles were chosen for further examination. Lastly, on the Taylor & Francis website, the keywords "TikTok" and "Social Communication" generated 233 articles. To ensure relevance, the filter was applied to include only articles categorized under "Information, Communication & Society," resulting in 39 articles. From this set, 15 articles were randomly selected for inclusion in this study. By meticulously employing this rigorous filtering process across the three journal sources, a total of 45 articles were chosen, guaranteeing a comprehensive and diverse representation of research on the intersection of "TikTok" and "Social Communication."

# Result and Discussion

Social communication on TikTok has emerged as a fascinating area of study due to the platform's unique features and widespread popularity. Researchers have explored various aspects of social communication on TikTok to understand its impact, dynamics, and implications. Here are some key themes and findings from the existing literature:

# User-generated content and creativity.

Rather than sharing a still photograph, TikTok allows users to create a short video while choosing from a wide selection of sounds, song snippets, special effects, and filters (Geyser, 2022). TikTok's emphasis on user-generated content has sparked research into the creative practices and expression of users. Studies have examined how individuals engage in content creation, showcasing their talents, creativity, and self-expression through short videos. User-generated content (UGC) on TikTok has become a prominent trend due to several factors that contribute to its popularity. Understanding why UGC has gained traction on TikTok involves considering the platform's unique features, the motivations of users, and the social dynamics within the TikTok community.

Here are some key reasons behind the trend of UGC on TikTok: First, **Creative Expression.** TikTok provides a creative and interactive platform where users can express themselves through short videos. The app offers a variety of features, such as filters, effects, and editing tools, allowing users to showcase their talents, creativity, and unique perspectives. This freedom of expression attracts individuals who seek an outlet for their creativity and a space to share their ideas; Second, **Virality and Discoverability**. TikTok's algorithmic recommendation system plays a significant role in the trend of UGC. When a user creates compelling content that resonates with others, it has the potential to go viral and reach a wide audience. This incentivizes users to create engaging content in the hopes of gaining visibility, recognition, and followers. The ability to quickly gain traction and be discovered by a large user base contributes to the appeal of UGC on TikTok; Third, **Participatory Culture**. TikTok fosters a participatory culture where users actively engage with content and contribute to ongoing trends and challenges. Users are encouraged to create their versions of popular dances, lip-syncs, comedy skits, and other viral challenges, fostering a sense of community and belonging. This participatory aspect drives the trend of UGC, as users want to be part of the cultural conversation and contribute to the ever-evolving content landscape on TikTok; Fourth, **Social Validation and Feedback.** TikTok provides a platform for users to receive feedback, recognition, and validation from their peers. The ability to receive likes, comments, shares, and followers can be a source of affirmation and social validation for content creators. This feedback loop motivates users to create and share content, seeking positive reactions and engagement from others; Fifth, **Entertaining and Bite-sized Content**. TikTok's format, with its short videos limited to a specific duration, appeals to users seeking quick and entertaining content. UGC on TikTok often embodies a lighthearted and fun tone, making it easily consumable and shareable. The platform's emphasis on entertainment and amusement contributes to the trend of UGC, as users enjoy creating and consuming engaging and bite-sized content. Typically, informationposted on UGC platforms contains the user-produced materials such as videos, articles, and photographs, and reflects the characteristics of content information and the medium by which the message is carried (Kim et al., 2017). In an effort to make a systematic approach to the informational traits, Lee (2014) classified the online platform-based message type into consistency, entertainment, vividness, timeliness, and agreeableness, whereas (Y. Wang et al., 2019).

# Influencers and trends.

Studies of consumer behavior highlight the fact that consumers are becoming more demanding with the products they buy, partly due to the information society in which we live (Hoyer et al., 2012), as consumers have easy access to information on companies. The way that businesses communicate with the public has also changed dramatically in recent years. The online world facilitates instant two-way communication between companies and their users (Giraldo-Dávila & Maya-Franco, 2016).

The role of influencers and viral trends on TikTok has been a subject of interest. Research has investigated the impact of influential users and the diffusion of trends across the platform. It explores how these influencers shape user behavior, community formation, and content consumption patterns. TikTok influencers and trends are characterized by short-form, engaging content, authenticity, relatability, viral challenges, and diverse topics. Referred to as “Tiktokers”, they are individuals who have gained a substantial following on TikTok due to their engaging content, unique style, and ability to connect with their audience. They often specialize in a particular niche, such as comedy, dance, fashion, beauty, or DIY. Influencers on TikTok can have millions of followers and enjoy considerable influence over their audience's preferences and choices. TikTok is known for its viral trends, often involving specific dances, challenges, or memes. Influencers play a crucial role in creating and popularizing these trends. They create original content or put their unique spin on existing trends, making it entertaining and relatable for their followers. When an influencer's video gains traction, other users start replicating and sharing it, leading to the trend spreading rapidly across the platform.

TikTok's format allows for the creation of short videos, typically ranging from 15 to 60 seconds. This brevity encourages influencers to deliver their messages concisely and captivate their audience within a limited timeframe. The platform's emphasis on entertainment, creativity, and humor further adds to its appeal. Its unique audiovisual memetic cultures also provide a window for people in various fields to build their professional identity (Hartung et al., 2023) and to communicate their knowledge with others in more playful manners (Southerton, 2021).

Social media influencers are regarded as people who use personal branding to create relationships with their followers on social media and who influence their knowledge, attitudes, and behavior (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Consumption styles are defined as material expressions of lifestyles (Chaney et al., 2017) and are measured by attitudes, values, material desires, and purchase behavior (Wilska, 2002). Consumer identities are built in reflexive processes that include expressions of one’s consumption styles, but also adaptation to the consumption styles of one’s peers (Warde, 1994).

Half of all social media users report that information they have obtained from social media has definitely influenced their decision to buy a particular product. The connections between the users, including their (in)direct interactions, the intimacies, and other affective registers yielded, function as momentums of the movements by forming “affective publics” (Papacharissi, 2015). TikTok is renowned for its viral trends and challenges that quickly sweep across the platform. Influencers play a crucial role in setting and participating in these trends, often by creating unique and engaging videos within the given framework. This participation helps influencers gain exposure, increase their following, and align themselves with popular culture. When feelings and affects are communicated, channeled, and shared through the interactive and networked affordances of social media, the “mediality” of social media platforms “invites affective gestures that provide the basis for how individuals connect and tune into the events in the making” (Papacharissi, 2015). This helps the public “feel their way into what movements mean” but in a connective way, which further ignites, powers, and disrupts social movements in various manners in social media (Papacharissi, 2015).

# Social interactions and community formation.

TikTok provides a space for social interactions, with features such as comments, duets, and collaborations. Authors have explored the nature of these interactions, examining how users connect, engage, and form communities on the platform. The role of social norms, online friendships, and identity construction has also been studied. TikTok facilitates collaborations and duets, enabling influencers to create content together or respond to each other's videos. This feature enhances the social aspect of the platform, encourages cross-promotion, and boosts engagement among influencers and their followers. The participatory affordances of TikTok invite more users to perform and showcase their creativity in their participation in social movements, using TikTok’s various functions of content creation, sharing, and reproduction (Boffone, 2021).

Many TikTok users have established cultures of “vernacular creativity” (Jenkins et al., 2017) wherein “ordinary” cultural participation and practices “emerge from highly particular and non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions” with digital technologies of storytelling. Through the platform’s participatory affordances, many users have found meaningful ways to engage with the plat- form and its cultures, by leading and participating in a variety of activist initiatives for global awareness, social change, and civic politics. This includes Young TikTok users’ climate activism (Hautea et al., 2021); growing anti-racist movements, such as the continuation of “Black Lives Matter” on TikTok (Janfaza, 2020) and migrant workers’ call-outs of xenophobia in a host country (Kaur-Gill, 2023).

One crucial benefit argued to be afforded to marginalized individuals on social media platforms is the ability to craft a space to both cultivate and protect their identity and form community with like-minded others (Lu & Hampton, 2017). Social support is one of the primary functions of social networks, so for marginalized groups a platform’s ability to facilitate perceived, enacted, and received support is a key affordance (Lu & Hampton, 2017). Social media plays a crucial role in the creation of young peoples’ personal and social identities (Fujita et al., 2018). In their teenage years, young people are also particularly prone to social comparison (Feslingcr, 1954). Peer pressure, media, marketing, and brands have been recognized as important socialization agents for young people as consumers (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005).

# Virality and algorithmic recommendations (for your page).

In centering the algorithm in this way, TikTok differs from other mainstream social media sites, which frequently employ algorithms to curate user content, but often do so to supplement other user interactions (e.g., Facebook uses algorithms to help curate user feeds [and promote targeted advertisements], but maintains the concept that users design their own feeds through their choices to follow certain friends or pages) (Willson, 2017). The prominence of the algorithm in combination with the lack of knowledge about its inner mechanics lead to the creation of a kind of “algorithmic imaginary,” an idea defined by Bucher as the “ways in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible” (Bucher, 2017).

TikTok encourages individuals to negotiate identity using the algorithm as a sort of moderator, selecting who and what content they interact with, unless users do not have an account and, therefore, do not have access to the algorithmic FYP (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). The algorithmic nature of TikTok's content recommendations has drawn attention. Studies have examined how the platform's algorithms impact content visibility, virality, and user engagement. Researchers explore the influence of algorithmic recommendations on shaping user experiences and content consumption patterns. However, there is one key new element that sets TikTok apart from other outwardly similar social media platforms: the prevalence of “the algorithm.” TikTok unprecedentedly centers algorithmically driven feeds and algorithmically driven experiences. On TikTok, unlike on other platforms, the user experience is obviously, unambiguously, and explicitly driven by what is commonly called the “For You” algorithm (Xu et al., 2019).

# Societal impact and cultural expression.

When people are online, they tend to feel less restrictions on expressing themselves than when they are offline, because they can form and express their image in more diverse ways (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003). By sharing one’s thoughts, conditions, and knowledge through videos or photos, one can feel that they belong to a certain social community and show actions designed to earn recognition as a significant member of the community or a social group [52]. TikTok has been a platform for cultural expression, activism, and societal discourse. Research has investigated the ways in which TikTok influences societal values, challenges norms, and facilitates cultural exchange. A set of initiatives has focused on active participation in the co-creation, curation and interpretation of cultural heritage both in-person through community groups or online through community-generated digital content or crowdsourcing (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003). The platform's role in shaping body image perceptions, promoting social causes, and reflecting cultural trends has been explored. By exploring the highest regarded tertiary hospitals in China (Lachowsky et al., 2016) found that social media rates had increased drastically in recent years, presenting a shift from purely health information provision to service orientation. Numerous scholars have noted the critical role that TikTok has played in conveying health-related information during the pandemic (Southwick et al., 2021). For example, scholars revealed that in the early stage of the pandemic, TikTok videos frequently featured preventive measures that are, face masks and hand sanitizers, while most evoked humor/parody emotion (Southwick et al., 2021). TikTok's popularity spans across different countries and cultures, making it a platform for global communication and cultural exchange. Influencers from various backgrounds have the opportunity to showcase their talents, traditions, and perspectives to a worldwide audience, promoting diversity and fostering cross-cultural understanding. If identity is social performance (Knoblauch, 2000), ways to perform identity in social media pop cultures are contingent upon the norms, cultures, and designs of media platforms and communities (Housley et al., 2022). TikTok has been a catalyst for various positive social movements, social movements are “online and offline networks of (in)formal relationships between individuals, groups, and/or organizations, who share mutual interest or collective identities and mobilize various types of resources (e.g. affect, attention, action, material capital) on the issues that they are advocating” (J. Lee & Abidin, 2023). Users have used the platform to promote social justice, activism, and charitable causes. The platform has provided a space for marginalized voices to be heard and has played a role in spreading awareness about topics such as mental health, body positivity, and environmental sustainability.

# Privacy and ethical considerations.

Digital sovereignty is a multi-faceted concept that attracts growing attention in the digital economy. The central tenet of digital sovereignty underlines the ‘control’ of the internet (Chander & Sun, 2022). As with any social media platform, privacy and ethical concerns are relevant in TikTok research. Studies have examined user privacy concerns, data collection practices, and the ethical implications of content creation and consumption on the platform.

Based on the published data and privacy policies TikTok the applications share similar terms regarding data categories, collection methods, and sharing practices. When users register and regularly use these platforms, they explicitly collect personal profiles comprising essential personal details, biometric information, contact information, photo images, and more. Moreover, all user-generated content, including text, voice, music, video, and emoji, is stored and automatically transmitted to the platform. Additionally, technical information related to the user's device, such as IP address, user agent, mobile carrier, time zone settings, device model, network type, and device IDs, is recorded. This information serves as references for advertisers and supplements the personal information stored in the TikTok database.

Collectively, this information is commonly referred to as general information. As descriptions that outline the expected relationship between the platform and the user (Myers West, 2018), platform policy sets out responsibilities, requirements, as well as user’s rights and commitments. By revie EXPLORING THE POWER OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION ON TIKTOK THROUGH A QUALITATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW wing the platform’s data policy, it is evident what data are being collected, what behaviors are being recorded, and what statements and actions are valuable to the platform. At the same time, by examining these provisions, a deeper logic is uncovered: how data are transferred and where it is stored, revealing a tug-of-war between platforms and governments over data ownership and political implications.

# Conclusion

Overall, the literature on social communication on TikTok provides insights into the unique communication practices, user experiences, and societal impact of this popular platform. Researchers continue to explore the ever-evolving landscape of TikTok, examining emerging trends, user behaviors, and the platform's wider implications for individuals and society. Studies have explored the motivations behind user participation on TikTok, examining the psychological and social factors that drive content creation, engagement, and sharing behaviors. Additionally, research has focused on the role of influencers, trends, and user-generated content in shaping social interactions and constructing online communities. Understanding the mechanisms of virality, content consumption patterns, and the impact of algorithmic recommendations on user behavior have also been key areas of investigation. Moreover, scholars have examined the effects of TikTok on interpersonal relationships and social norms.

The platform's ability to connect individuals across geographical and cultural boundaries has raised questions about the nature of online friendships, the formation of social identities, and the implications for offline social interactions. Researchers have also investigated the potential influence of TikTok on societal values, such as body image, self-presentation, and cultural expression. Qualitative studies have played a vital role in uncovering the multifaceted nature of social communication on TikTok. By exploring user experiences, motivations, and the meaning-making process behind content creation and consumption, researchers have gained insights into the social dynamics and communication practices unique to the platform. The evolving landscape of TikTok, characterized by emerging trends, technological advancements, and evolving user behaviors, necessitates ongoing research to stay abreast of the platform's impact on social communication and its wider implications for individuals and society.

The conclusion summarizes the key findings and insights from the discussion, highlighting the importance of understanding social communication on TikTok. It underscores the need for further research to explore emerging trends, user behaviors, and the implications for individuals, communities, and society at large. Overall, this journal article contributes to the growing body of knowledge on social communication on TikTok, offering valuable insights into its dynamics, implications, and future directions. It encourages researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to critically examine the transformative effects of TikTok on social interaction, cultural expression, and digital communication practices.

A qualitative literature review relies solely on existing published research. It does not involve primary data collection or direct engagement with participants. Consequently, the analysis is dependent on the quality, rigor, and comprehensiveness of the included studies. Conducting a comprehensive search and selection of relevant literature can be challenging. The depth and richness of qualitative data provide valuable insights into specific cases, but they may not be representative of the entire population. Despite best efforts, there is a possibility of missing key studies or perspectives, which may lead to an incomplete representation of the available research. The scope of the review may be limited by time constraints, resource limitations, or access to certain publications or databases.

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