



# UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

“CODE-DEPENDENCY”: TIKTOK’S AI & SUGGESTED  
CONTENT FEED. USERS CIRCUMSTANCES TO GO OUTSIDE  
OF THEIR FILTER BUBBLES.

Dissertation to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to obtain  
a Master’s Degree in Communication, Marketing and  
Advertising

By  
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Universidade Católica Portuguesa

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## DISSERTATION

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Universidade Católica Portuguesa  
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## **Abstract**

This dissertation's main objective is to understand users' perceived usage of TikTok's algorithm, particularly focusing on their reasons for exploring content beyond the platform's suggested feed. This exploratory study aims to look into user search behavior concerning algorithmic recommendations. To gain a comprehensive understanding, the theoretical framework addresses three key areas: the concept of "Platform Society," the role of artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms in social media, and the phenomenon of "Algorithmic Sovereignty."

With this theoretical approach, this research addresses user interactions on TikTok by examining how users navigate and engage with the platform's algorithmically curated content, versus actively searching for content independently. Through a detailed examination of TikTok's algorithm, user behavior, and engagement strategies, the study provides insights into the interplay between user agency and algorithmic control.

Findings indicate that TikTok's algorithm significantly influences user behavior by personalizing content feeds based on user interactions, preferences, and engagement patterns. The study reveals that while many users rely heavily on algorithmically suggested content, some actively seek diverse content, demonstrating varying degrees of algorithmic awareness. The algorithm's influence is most evident in shaping user engagement and interaction patterns, guiding content discovery, and reinforcing specific content preferences.

Moreover, the study identifies a complex relationship between user agency and algorithmic influence, highlighting the need for greater transparency and user awareness in navigating algorithmically mediated environments. The implications of these findings extend to understanding digital behavior on social media platforms, emphasizing the importance of balancing algorithmic personalization with user autonomy. Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to the broader discourse on the societal impact of AI and algorithms, advocating for strategies that enhance user empowerment in the digital age.

**Keywords:** TikTok, Algorithms, Algorithmic Recommendations, Personalization

## Resumo

O principal objetivo desta dissertação é investigar o impacto percebido do algoritmo do TikTok nos utilizadores, com um foco especial nas suas razões para explorar conteúdos além do *feed* sugerido pela plataforma. Este estudo exploratório procura investigar o comportamento de busca dos utilizadores em relação às recomendações algorítmicas. Para alcançar uma compreensão abrangente, o enquadramento teórico aborda três áreas-chave: o conceito de "Sociedade da Plataforma", o papel da inteligência artificial (IA) e dos algoritmos nas redes sociais, e o fenómeno da "Soberania Algorítmica".

Com estes insights teóricos, esta investigação examina as interações dos utilizadores no TikTok, explorando como navegam e se envolvem com o conteúdo curado algoritmicamente pela plataforma, em contraste com a busca ativa de conteúdos de forma independente. Através de uma análise detalhada do algoritmo do TikTok, do comportamento dos utilizadores e das estratégias de envolvimento, o estudo oferece insights práticos sobre a interação entre a agência dos utilizadores e o controlo algorítmico.

Os resultados indicam que o algoritmo do TikTok influencia significativamente o comportamento dos utilizadores ao personalizar os feeds de conteúdo com base nas interações, preferências e padrões de envolvimento dos mesmos. O estudo revela que, embora muitos utilizadores dependam fortemente do conteúdo sugerido algoritmicamente, uma parte deles procura ativamente conteúdo diverso, demonstrando diferentes graus de consciência sobre o algoritmo. A influência do algoritmo é mais evidente na modelação dos padrões de envolvimento e interação dos utilizadores, orientando a descoberta de conteúdos e reforçando preferências específicas de conteúdo.

Além disso, o estudo identifica uma relação complexa entre a agência dos utilizadores e a influência algorítmica, destacando a necessidade de maior transparência e conscientização dos utilizadores na navegação em ambientes mediados por algoritmos. As implicações destes resultados estendem-se à compreensão do comportamento digital nas plataformas de redes sociais, enfatizando a importância de equilibrar a personalização algorítmica com a autonomia dos utilizadores. Em última análise, esta dissertação contribui para o discurso mais amplo sobre o impacto societal da IA e dos algoritmos, defendendo estratégias que promovam o empoderamento dos utilizadores na era digital.

**Palavras-chave:** TikTok, Algoritmos, Recomendações Algorítmicas,  
Personalização

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# Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Abstract</b> .....   | 3  |
| <b>Resumo</b> .....   | 4  |
| <b>Acknowledgements</b> .....   | 6  |
| <b>Index of Tables</b> .....  | 9  |
| <b>Introduction</b> .....   | 10 |
| <b>Chapter I</b> .....  | 12 |
| <b>Exploring the Intersection of Platform Society, AI, and Algorithms</b> .....                     | 12 |
| <b>1.1 Platform Society</b> .....   | 12 |
| <b>1.2 AI &amp; algorithms.</b> .....   | 15 |
| <b>1.2.1 Humans and algorithms.</b> .....   | 17 |
| <b>1.3 Algorithms and Platforms (Social Media).</b> .....   | 18 |
| <b>1.5 Algorithmic Sovereignty.</b> .....   | 25 |
| <b>Chapter II</b> .....   | 29 |
| <b>Unveiling the Algorithmic Landscape: Identity, Audience, and Biases in the Digital Era</b> ..... | 29 |
| <b>2.1 Algorithmic Identities</b> .....   | 29 |
| <b>2.2 Algorithmic Audience</b> .....   | 30 |
| <b>2.3 Filter bubbles and echo chambers.</b> .....  | 33 |
| <b>2.4 Gatekeeping on Social Media Platforms</b> .....  | 36 |
| <b>2.5 Gatekeeping practices.</b> .....   | 37 |
| <b>2.5.1 Content Moderation.</b> .....  | 37 |
| <b>2.5.2 Recommender Systems</b> .....  | 38 |
| <b>2.6 Algorithm Awareness.</b> .....   | 39 |
| <b>2.7 Conclusion.</b> .....  | 42 |
| <b>Chapter III</b> .....  | 43 |
| <b>The TikTok Ecosystem: Exploring the Structure, Algorithm, and Filter Bubbles</b> ....            | 43 |
| <b>3.1 Evolution of the App</b> .....   | 44 |
| <b>3.1.2 TikTok’s structure; Feature &amp; Functions</b> .....                                      | 46 |
| <b>3.2 TikTok's Algorithm</b> .....   | 49 |
| <b>3.2.1 Different dynamics: People's relationship to the Algorithm</b> .....                       | 50 |
| <b>3.3 Algorithmic Identities, audiences, and Awareness on TikTok</b> .....                         | 51 |
| <b>3.4 Filter Bubbles on TikTok</b> .....   | 53 |
| <b>Conceptual Framework</b> .....   | 54 |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Chapter IV.....</b>   | <b>56</b>  |
| <b>Empirical Study .....</b>   | <b>56</b>  |
| <b>4.1. Research Relevance .....</b>   | <b>57</b>  |
| <b>4.2 Research Question &amp; Goals .....</b>   | <b>58</b>  |
| <b>4.3 Research Design .....</b>   | <b>60</b>  |
| <b>4.4 Data Collection Method .....</b>  | <b>61</b>  |
| <b>4.5 Participants .....</b>  | <b>63</b>  |
| <b>4.6 Data collection &amp; procedures .....</b>                                      | <b>65</b>  |
| <b>4.7 Ethical Consideration.....</b>  | <b>67</b>  |
| <b>4.8 Data Analysis.....</b>  | <b>67</b>  |
| <b>Chapter V .....</b>   | <b>69</b>  |
| <b>Results Presentation .....</b>  | <b>69</b>  |
| <b>5.1 Theme 1: Content Discovery and Interaction:.....</b>                            | <b>70</b>  |
| <b>5.1.1 Interaction on TikTok.....</b>  | <b>70</b>  |
| <b>5.1.2 Passivity on the app.....</b>   | <b>71</b>  |
| <b>5.1.3 Proactivity on the app.....</b>   | <b>75</b>  |
| <b>5.2 Theme 2: Influence of Algorithmic Personalization on User Perspective:.....</b> | <b>76</b>  |
| <b>5.2.1 Algorithmic Reflection of Interests.....</b>                                  | <b>76</b>  |
| <b>5.2.2 Exposure to New Ideas.....</b>  | <b>77</b>  |
| <b>5.2.3 Cultural and Societal Norms.....</b>  | <b>78</b>  |
| <b>5.3 Theme 3: Content Diversity, Personal Growth and Data Privacy Concerns.....</b>  | <b>81</b>  |
| <b>5.3.1 Diversity of Content.....</b>   | <b>81</b>  |
| <b>5.3.2 Diverse Viewpoints.....</b>   | <b>84</b>  |
| <b>5.3.3 Impact on Identity and Personal Growth.....</b>                               | <b>85</b>  |
| <b>5.3.4 Privacy vs. Personalization Trade-off.....</b>                                | <b>86</b>  |
| <b>Chapter VI.....</b>   | <b>90</b>  |
| <b>Discussion .....</b>  | <b>90</b>  |
| <b>6.1 Contextual Insights.....</b>  | <b>91</b>  |
| <b>6.2 Addressing the Research Question .....</b>                                      | <b>96</b>  |
| <b>Chapter VII: Conclusion.....</b>  | <b>102</b> |
| <b>7.1 Summary of Findings .....</b>   | <b>102</b> |
| <b>7.2 Key Themes and Implications .....</b>   | <b>102</b> |
| <b>7.2.1 Content Discovery and Interaction Patterns.....</b>                           | <b>102</b> |
| <b>7.2.2 Algorithmic Influence and User Autonomy .....</b>                             | <b>103</b> |
| <b>7.2.3 Impact on Personal Growth and Identity.....</b>                               | <b>103</b> |
| <b>7.2.4 Privacy vs. Personalization Trade-off.....</b>                                | <b>104</b> |
| <b>7.3 Contributions .....</b>   | <b>104</b> |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>7.4 Limitations &amp; Future Research Suggestions.....</b> | <b>105</b> |
| <b>References.....</b>  | <b>107</b> |
| <b>Appendix.....</b>  | <b>125</b> |
| <b>Appendix A - Informed Consent Form.....</b>                | <b>125</b> |
| <b>Appendix B - Interview Script.....</b>                     | <b>127</b> |
| <b>Appendix C - Codebook.....</b>                             | <b>129</b> |
| <b>Interview Transcripts.....</b>                             | <b>131</b> |

**Index of Figures**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Summary .....</b> | <b>56</b> |
|---|-----------|

**Index of Tables**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Table 1: Characteristics Of Participants.....</b>        | <b>64</b> |
| <b>Table 2: Themes &amp; Examples from Interviews .....</b> | <b>88</b> |

# Introduction

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has profoundly transformed how we communicate, interact, and consume information. Central to this transformation are social media platforms, which have become primary intermediaries for content and social interaction. Among these platforms, TikTok stands out for its explosive popularity and unique use of artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms to personalize user experiences. This dissertation aims to explore the perceived impact of TikTok's algorithm on user behavior, with a particular focus on users' circumstances to explore content beyond the platform's suggested feed.

The concept of "Platform Society," developed by José van Dijck (2018), addresses how digital platforms have become central structures mediating social and economic interactions in the digital age. According to van Dijck, platforms do not merely reflect society; they actively shape it by influencing our communication, consumption, and socialization practices. In the case of TikTok, the platform leverages sophisticated algorithms to deliver personalized content to its users, creating a highly individualized experience that significantly impacts how people consume and interact with content.

Artificial intelligence and algorithms play a crucial role in the operation of social media platforms. These systems analyze vast amounts of user data to create personalized content recommendations. TikTok's algorithm, for instance, scrutinizes user behavior—such as video viewing times, likes, comments, and shares—to continuously tailor the content feed to individual preferences. This real-time adaptability and personalization exemplify the concept of "Algorithmic Sovereignty," where algorithms exert substantial control over the information accessible to the public (Reviglio & Agosti, 2020).

Algorithmic Sovereignty refers to the power of algorithms to shape human actions and control the flow of information. This sovereignty is particularly evident on platforms like TikTok, where algorithms determine which content users see, influencing their perceptions and behaviors. This algorithmic control raises important questions about transparency, accountability, and user autonomy. Understanding how users perceive and respond to this algorithmic influence is crucial for assessing the impact of these technologies on our society.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate how TikTok's algorithm interacts with user behavior, specifically regarding their reasons for exploring content beyond the algorithmically suggested feed. The research seeks to answer the following research questions: *Under what circumstances do TikTok users actively seek out content outside their AI-curated filter bubbles? What role does the TikTok algorithm play in reinforcing or limiting users' content diversity? How do users balance their content consumption between leisure and the need for diverse viewpoints on TikTok?*

This research adopts an exploratory approach to address these questions, utilizing a qualitative method to collect and analyze data. Detailed analyses of user interactions on TikTok are complemented by semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insights into user perceptions and behaviors. Additionally, the research examines the structure and mechanisms of TikTok's algorithm, providing a technical context to understand how content recommendations are generated and adjusted.

Understanding the role of algorithms in shaping digital experiences is critical as we navigate an increasingly digitized world. Promoting greater transparency and accountability in using these technologies ensures that users can exercise their autonomy in an informed and conscious manner. This research underscores the importance of investigating and comprehending the pervasive influence of algorithms on user behavior and the broader implications for society.

# Chapter I

## Exploring the Intersection of Platform Society, AI, and Algorithms

This research aims to study the perceived effect of TikTok's algorithm on users by examining their reasons to search beyond the suggested content feed, using the search function as an indicator. The first chapter covers various topics, including the "Platform Society" concept by van Dijk in 2018, which emphasizes the significance of platforms today. It also provides an overview of AI and algorithms and how they interact with humans through social media. Due to the algorithm, social media provides a personalized content feed and controls the information available to the public, making it an example of "Algorithmic Sovereignty."

### 1.1 Platform Society.

Tim O'Reilly (2009), a leading commentator on the evolution of the Internet, has proposed a framework for understanding the development of the World Wide Web, dividing it into two distinct phases. The first phase, Web 1.0, characterised by its "static nature" and primarily accessed via email. In contrast, the second phase, Web 2.0, is characterised by an "architecture of participation" in which dynamism emerges through user interaction and integrating the Web into daily routines. With the introduction of multimedia and interactivity, the Internet has reentered, with social media emerging as the most widely used communication platform. Social media can be further divided into content-sharing sites and platforms based on user interaction (Beer, Burrows, 2007). However, recent research has expanded on this categorization, acknowledging the role of newer platforms like TikTok, which combine both content sharing and interactive elements to create highly engaging user experiences (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

Web 2.0 has been characterised by what Beer and Burrows (2007) called "democratisation rhetoric." Stories and images showing "the people" conquering the Internet and taking control of its information, a sort of "people's Internet," or, less favourably, the rise of the amateur cult, serve as examples (Terras, 2010). As a result, a new cooperative,

participatory, or open culture has developed. According to Beer and Burrows (2007), there are opportunities for our ideas to be heard, our films to be viewed, and our music to be heard. In addition, there is a need to analyse the strengths of the new culture industries in terms of the issues and subversions resulting from a culture of collaboration, social participation, the creation of new 'in-crowds', viral marketing strategies, and who can be heard above the din of Web 2.0 in a detailed and critical manner. We have seen, however, that Web 2.0 is a commercial and weakly regulated sector (Beer & Burrows, 2007).

The emergence of social network sites and connected public participation practices added complexity to the continuing transformation over the past ten years (Artieri & Marinelli, 2018). As van Dijk (2013) defines them, “connective media” became a constant presence in everyday routines. As a result, they absorb a substantial part of identification processes and social relations (Boccia Artieri et al., 2017). Technology platforms like social media are more pervasive in people's everyday lives (Burgess, 2017) and are becoming ubiquitous. These zones of connection are where our closest friendships, the news, interest groups, and interpersonal contact come together (Figueiredo & Bolano, 2017). Stocks of firms that hold social networking sites are precious due to the convergence of mass and interpersonal communication, as these platforms serve as both media and telephone companies (Taş, 2018).

Platforms are the new backbone of social reality enabled by the ubiquity of the Internet and connected devices. The term 'platform' is a dominant concept today, used to self-place themselves in the global market of tech companies that shape sociality or promote the disintermediation of sectorial markets (van Dijk, 2013). As van Dijk (2013) explains, today, platforms are social subjects that have become hegemonic in the web space, both as technological structures and as environments that host economic and social relations. Platforms mediate between those who produce contents and services and those who want to consume them, interweaving different operational levels: that of technologies used to achieve purposes defined by users who are private citizens/consumers but also politicians, journalists and advertising organisations, that of social relations, i.e. the spaces in which connected users participate in the construction of communicative dynamics; that of commercial-type organisations, which produce revenue from the commodification of users' data.

Van Dijck, with co-authors Poell and de Waal, contribute an impetus to platform studies by noting that platforms' ubiquity in terms of presence and level of use now influences essential areas of public utility (Risi & Ponzato, 2022). Van Dijck states that platforms do not reflect the social: they produce the social structures in which we live. Therefore, the concept of a "Platform Society" was introduced. The term "platform society" emphasises that platforms are an integral part of society, in which conflicts of interest occur at various levels. Platforms are not neutral constructs; they presuppose specific norms and values inscribed in their architectures. These norms may or may not collide with the values inscribed in the social structures in which platforms struggle to assert themselves (*Platforms Are Not Neutral*, 2018).

Burgess-Wilkerson et al. (2018) define the Web 2.0 as the second generation of the World Wide Web, and its characteristic is the ability for users to interact and collaborate through social media, user-generated content, and other interactive features. The platform society refers to the emergence of large digital platforms, such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon, that have become central to the digital economy's organisation and distribution of information and goods. The emergence of Web 2.0 technology is associated with the platform society (*Angelinarivero's Reflective Journal | Just Another CSU Thinkspace Site*, n.d.) and social media has enabled the development of these large digital platforms, which have come to dominate many aspects of online activity and have a significant influence on the way we communicate, consume, and participate in the economy (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

According to Boccia Artieri & Marinelli (2018), the platform ecosystem exhibits a deficit of equality, with certain platforms having a disproportionately large effect over others. The divergence between platform architecture and the platform market is to blame for this discrepancy. The role played by platform infrastructure is of particular significance, as it serves as the foundation upon which numerous other platforms and applications are constructed. Following van Dijck's (2018) theory of the Platform Society, digital platforms use algorithms to curate and distribute information and material to users, potentially affecting their habits and patterns. The Platform Society is shaped by these algorithms, which choose and show information and material to users and govern how people interact with platforms and one another (Kapsch, 2022). Moreover, the platform society refers to the

emergence of large digital platforms, such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon, that have become central to the digital economy's organisation and distribution of information and goods. The association between Web 2.0 and platform society is that the rise of Web 2.0 technologies and social media has enabled the development of these large digital platforms, which have come to dominate many aspects of online activity and significantly influence the way we communicate, consume, and participate in the economy.

## **1.2 AI & algorithms.**

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a rapidly growing field that has the potential to revolutionise many industries and impact our daily lives in significant ways. Burns et al. (2023) claim that AI is concerned with developing intelligent systems that mimic human cognitive processes, such as learning, reasoning, and problem-solving. It leverages various technologies and algorithms, including “machine learning, computer vision, and natural language processing” (Gupta, 2019), to analyse large amounts of data and make predictions (*What Is Machine Learning?* | IBM, n.d.). According to Kang & Lou (2022), the ability of AI to change and even develop algorithms depending on user-learned knowledge, as opposed to only using pre-programmed algorithms, is a fundamental feature.

Different authors have defined the concept of Artificial Intelligence in various ways. According to Tecuci (2012), AI is a field of study that encompasses science and engineering to create systems that display human-like intelligence. Simmons (1988) views AI as the branch of research from which these systems emerge. Boden (2018) describes AI as having two main aims: technological and scientific. Dobrev (2012) defines AI as developing machines that are capable of carrying out tasks that traditionally need human intelligence, and all of these definitions are pertinent to the subject being investigated (Buchanan et al., 2020).

While these definitions are all relevant, it is crucial to consider how more recent perspectives have expanded on these ideas. According to Russell and Norvig (2021), AI has evolved significantly, particularly with advances in machine learning, natural language processing, and robotics. They describe AI as a multifaceted discipline aimed at creating systems that mimic human intelligence and enhance decision-making in complex environments. Schmidt and Cohen (2021) further emphasize the transformative potential of

AI in their work, discussing how AI is poised to reshape industries, governance, and even the global economy. They stress the importance of understanding AI as a tool that can significantly influence human futures, necessitating careful oversight and regulation (Russell & Norvig, 2021). AI is being used in various ways to boost automation and efficiency. It is crucial in of designing, developing, and deploying sophisticated algorithms that can handle massive volumes of data in real-time and make complicated judgements. As AI evolves and matures, it will become an increasingly important tool in developing new algorithms. Therefore, it is essential to have a solid understanding of its capabilities, limitations, and ethical implications.

Gillespie (2017) defines algorithms as “encoded procedures” that transform “input data into the desired output through specific calculations” (p2). The term "algorithm" is frequently used for a sophisticated machine-learning procedure, rather than a singular equation (Carah, 2017). Algorithms possess the capability to learn and adapt. They are not fixed sequences but are continuously modified based on feedback. This adaptation process is initiated by creating a training model on a pre-existing dataset, and the capacity for self-improvement through machine learning allows algorithms to adapt to new data, refine their accuracy, and make more nuanced decisions as they process more information (Goodfellow et al., 2016).

The ability of algorithms to learn and adapt through machine learning is one of the most transformative aspects of modern AI. This capacity for self-improvement is especially evident in deep learning models, which are designed to process vast amounts of data and identify intricate patterns that would be impossible for humans to detect. For example, in natural language processing (NLP), algorithms have developed understanding and generated human language with increasing accuracy, enabling advancements in applications like chatbots, language translation, and sentiment analysis (Devlin et al., 2019). However, the growing reliance on AI and machine learning algorithms also brings about significant ethical and practical challenges. One key issue is the potential for bias in AI systems. Since algorithms learn from data, any biases present in the training data can be perpetuated or even amplified in the algorithm's outputs. This has raised concerns about fairness and discrimination in AI-driven decision-making processes (e.g., Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018). Additionally, another critical aspect to consider is the interpretability of AI systems. As

algorithms become more complex, understanding how they arrive at certain decisions becomes increasingly complex—a phenomenon often referred to as the "black box" problem (Brožek et al., 2024). As a result, there is a pressing need for transparency and accountability in how algorithms are designed, trained, and deployed.

### **1.2.1 Humans and algorithms.**

As previously mentioned, connecting to van Dijk's platform society, Gillespie (2017) believes that the utilisation of algorithms has become increasingly significant in determining information deemed most pertinent to individuals, a vital aspect in the engagement of individuals in the social sphere. Algorithms jointly assist individuals in finding information, but they also give them a method to interpret the available knowledge and how to obtain it, participate in various dialogues, and gain a better understanding of the social spaces in which they work (Gillespie, 2017). They now serve as the guiding principles for the information flow that individuals and society rely on.

As James Gleick (2011) highlights in his book, "The Information", algorithms have been granted a significant role in the twentieth century (Striphas, 2015). Algorithms became such an influential part of human life and decision-making, to the point that Striphas introduced the concept of "Algorithmic Culture" (2015). Cultural values and preferences are evaluated depending on their characteristics, according to Striphas (2015), who contends that cultures are fundamentally evaluation processes. Thanks to recent technological advancements, we can now replicate different sorts of judgement, which is crucial since culture and its evaluation processes were initially assumed to be uniquely human (Carah 2017).

On the other hand, Seaver (2017) talks about algorithms as culture. The idea that algorithms are "unstable objects" formed and impacted by the cultural practices and procedures used by people in their interaction and usage calls into question the notion of algorithms as unique technological beings that engage in numerous cultural interactions. A product of collective human practices and cultural norms that influence their development and operation, algorithms are not only technological entities that analyze data and information (Seaver, 2017). They can be viewed as an expression of culture itself rather than being purely defined by their purpose or the particular situations in which they are used.

Understanding algorithms as cultural entities underlines the intricate and dynamic character of their function within society and underscores the significance of taking into account the cultural influences on their creation and use.

According to Bucher (2018), algorithmic systems are used as performative intermediates and monitoring tools for online experiences, in addition to mediating, to actively shape and affect the formation of social interactions (Risi & Pronzato, 2022). These platforms co-produce and change the character of social encounters and interactions using algorithms. As explained from Risi and Pronzato (2022), who cite Gillespie (2016) and Zuboff (2019), "variables, steps, and indications" are used in online platforms to convert the "complex social activities into a functional mathematical" depiction (p.154). Therefore, Risi and Pronzato (2022) introduce the "algorithmic prosumer" concept.

In 1980, American writer Alvin Toffler coined the term "prosumer" to describe an individual who embodies the characteristics of both a producer and a consumer. This term was used to acknowledge the changing role of the consumer in the economy, as the abundance of information available to them has enabled them to become active participants and creators in the production of new products and services. According to Risi & Pronzato (2022), the interdependence of the relationship between individuals and algorithms is demonstrated by the fact that digital services' production and consumption activities are essentially algorithmic in character. Scraping through material, sharing, and creating one's own content are all behaviours that support data gathering and content-based recommendation procedures, highlighting the useful collaboration between humans and algorithms.

### **1.3 Algorithms and Platforms (Social Media).**

Algorithms play a significant role in the efficient operation of social media. They are used to show targeted advertisements, suggest friends, tag faces, and curate content for particular individuals (Barnhart, 2021). These algorithms are powered by artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning techniques, which lets them scrutinize vast amounts of information and user behaviour to produce more individualised information (Burns, 2021). The posts, adverts, and recommended content that users see are selected by algorithms according to their preferences and interaction history. The use of algorithms on

social networking sites has raised questions about algorithmic bias, individual privacy, and the effect on democracy and public discourse (Reviglio & Agosti, 2020). Swart (2021) claims that since customized media platforms are increasingly used, a fundamental knowledge of how algorithms work has emerged as a critical component of news literacy.

The ability to successfully manage and create material in a timely manner has been substantially improved by the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) technology into well-known social media networks. The application of AI streamlines the process of managing social media by automating a number of functions, including curating and categorising user-generated material, customising news feeds, and even regulating dialogues (Sadiku et al., 2021). As a result, incorporating AI has significantly reduced the time and resources required to run and maintain these platforms effectively. Figueiredo and Bolano (2017) believe that algorithms play a crucial role in facilitating interactions between humans and software, and mediating interactions between individuals within the context of social media. In particular, algorithms can produce tailored content and advertisement recommendations by using data taken from user interactions with the profiles of other users and businesses as input. This demonstrates how crucial algorithms are in determining how users interact with social media networks (Muhlenbach & LARGERON 2014).

Swart (2021) claims that people have the ability to exercise agency over the choices taken by algorithms through both deliberate activities, like customising a platform, and hidden activities, like altering their browsing habits. In the same way that Primo (2007) has highlighted, the drive for technological advancements that enhance interactivity has been primarily motivated by commercial interests and has focused mainly on the interaction between humans and machines, as determined by parameters set by the developers of the technological systems (Figueiredo and Bolano, 2017).

According to Kang & Lou (2022) the operation of artificial intelligence in the construction and management of social media algorithms has made it possible to create customised user interactions through the self-directed learning of people's interests and tastes (Hummel et al., 2021). This is accomplished by analysing the users' actions and inputs on the platform, which enables the curating of information specifically designed for each user. Additionally, AI-based technologies have made multimedia creation easier by introducing functions like facial detection filters and sophisticated sound editing skills. Boccia Artieri &

Marinelli (2018) believe that the accessibility to online data sources, notably search and social platforms, has been dramatically enhanced by the spread of smartphones and the accompanying pricing practices of telecoms firms. The architecture of platforms enables chances for communication that are later altered by user behaviour through their distinctive affordances, such as Instagram stories. These behaviours include taking new stuff, appreciating it, remixing it, contributing it, and sharing it with other users.

Social media algorithm use significantly impacts how people communicate and interact with one another and how society as a whole is shaped. As seen in the Facebook News Feed or TikTok's "For You Page," algorithmic models transform raw data into customised content displayed in users' social feeds (Taylor & Choi, 2022). According to Taylor and Choi, users of different social media platforms generally believe their feeds are algorithmically curated based on personal engagement indicators, particularly the digital footprint left by the user's exchanges with material, such as likes, comments, and views. This implies that to select and deliver material, the algorithms must analyse the data generated by these activities to determine what could be of interest to each user (Bucher, 2018).

The Digital Services Act (DSA; European Commission, 2023), which came into effect in February 2024, represents a significant shift in the regulation of online platforms within the European Union. The DSA aims to create a safer and more transparent digital environment by addressing the challenges posed by digital platforms' rapid expansion and influence, particularly those involved in social media, content sharing, and online marketplaces. The DSA's primary goal is to protect consumers and their fundamental rights online, ensuring that digital platforms operate in a manner that is transparent, fair, and aligned with European values. It establishes clear and proportionate rules that apply to all online intermediaries and platforms. Social media platforms must now adhere to stringent transparency requirements, particularly regarding the algorithms they use to curate and present content to users. The DSA mandates that platforms provide clear information about how their algorithms work, including how content is selected, prioritized, and recommended. This is crucial in combating the spread of disinformation and ensuring that users have greater control over the content they see. For platforms designated as Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs), which reach more than 10% of the EU's population, the DSA imposes even stricter obligations. These platforms must assess and mitigate systemic risks associated with their

services, such as disseminating illegal content or the potential for algorithmic bias. VLOPs are also required to undergo independent audits of their risk management systems, ensuring that they are accountable for the societal impacts of their algorithms. The DSA also includes specific protections for minors, prohibiting targeted advertising based on sensitive personal data and enhancing the safety of online environments for younger users. These measures are particularly relevant for platforms like TikTok, which are popular among teenagers and young adults. The introduction of the DSA marks a significant step towards a more accountable and transparent digital ecosystem. By clarifying digital platform responsibilities and enhancing user protections, the DSA aims to balance innovation with the need to safeguard fundamental rights and societal well-being in the digital age.

Some of the most popular social media platforms that utilise algorithms include Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok.

1. Facebook: Each user's newsfeed is carefully curated by its algorithm, which takes into account things like their prior interaction with particular types of material, their friends and pages they follow, etc. The user experience on Facebook is significantly shaped by Facebook's algorithms. Several important features, such as personalisation, predictive analytics, relevance scoring, hidden filtering, and continuous development, are taken into consideration when creating these algorithms (Hitlin & Rainie, 2019). The algorithms employ predictive and machine learning analytics to recognise patterns in user activity and forecast what content will be most appealing to serve content and adverts that are most relevant and entertaining to each specific user (Sarker, 2021). According, Hitlin & Rainie (2019), the tab called "Your ad preferences" on Facebook allows users to see how the platform's algorithm has classified their interests. However, until they were pointed toward it as part of the research being discussed, almost 74% of Facebook users were not aware of this function. In 2016, Facebook's algorithm was a major subject. Debate was sparked by Facebook's contribution to the spread of false information and its potential impact on the results of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election (Presuel, 2019). As a result, Facebook adjusted its algorithms to prioritise posts from friends above news, which hurt some reputable news organisations' bottom lines. Despite Facebook's efforts to combat false news, the company has come under fire from journalists tasked with

finding a solution who contend they did not express enough concern (Oremus et al., 2021).

2. Instagram: The Instagram algorithm determines which posts appear on the users' home feeds and is based on factors such as the users' interests, interaction with other accounts, and timeliness of posts. There are several important aspects of Instagram's algorithm that affect what content is shown in users' feeds. Engagement is one of the key elements since the algorithm gives priority to displaying material that will probably get more likes, comments, and shares (McLachlan, 2022). The system favours displaying more recent content over older stuff, thus time is another consideration. The user's connection to the content and its author is another crucial factor since the algorithm prioritises displaying content from profiles that users engage with more often, or with whom they have a closer relationship. The algorithm also considers the user's previous choices and behaviour, as well as how well-liked the content is. The algorithm also mixes content from many sources, such as posts from friends, family, and influencers, as well as content pertinent to the user's interests and location, to provide a diversified and well-rounded feed (Barnhart, 2021).

3. YouTube: The platform uses an algorithm that recommends videos to users based on their viewing history, search history, and engagement with videos and channels. YouTube's algorithm has several key characteristics shaping the platform user experience (Cooper, 2021). First, the algorithm emphasises relevance and engagement by recommending information that is likely to be of interest to the user through a mixture of machine learning and human curation. Based on elements like the number of views, likes, comments, and shares (Kang & Lou, 2022). Second, the algorithm places a heavy emphasis on customization, adjusting each user's feed to reflect their unique interests and preferences. The usage of information like search history and previously viewed videos allows for this. Thirdly, the algorithm makes suggestions for fresh and relevant material after a video has stopped playing in an effort to keep users on the platform as long as feasible. By doing so, user retention and engagement are boosted.

4. TikTok: The movies that show up on each user's "For You" tab are chosen by TikTok's algorithm, which takes into account their preferences, viewing patterns, and video interaction. The algorithm used by TikTok is distinguished by its original method of content discovery and tailored recommendations. The platform's algorithm takes into account a number of variables, such as user involvement, the popularity of particular hashtags, and the individual viewing tastes and habits of each user (Geysler, 2022). The system creates the "For You" page, a tailored feed of suggested content that is particular to each individual user, using machine learning and artificial intelligence. To keep the platform lively and interesting for users, the algorithm also gives the highest priority to the most recent and up-to-date content and viral trends. Additionally, TikTok's algorithm adapts in real-time, gaining knowledge from user engagement and enhancing its suggestions over time (Newberry, 2022). This combination of factors makes TikTok's algorithm a key component of the platform's user experience and helps to explain its popularity and success.

#### **1.4 Interactivity and Social Media.**

Interactivity, algorithms, and social media are closely related concepts that significantly impact how people communicate and interact online. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are designed to be interactive, allowing users to share and receive information, opinions, and content (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). The terms "interactive media" or "interactivity" are frequently used to distinguish new media from traditional media and to draw attention to one of its distinctive qualities (Bolano, 2017). Algorithms play a crucial role in this interactivity by determining which content is displayed to users, how it is ranked, and how it is personalized (O'Brien, 2022). To deliver a more customized and pertinent user experience, these algorithms are based on a variety of variables, including user behavior, previous interactions, and engagement. (Shin et al., 2022).

The use of algorithms in social media has both positive and negative effects on interactivity. On one hand, algorithms make it easier for users to find and consume content that interests them, and can also help reduce the spread of false or misleading information

(Rainie, Anderson, 2017). Algorithms, however, can also reduce the variety of information offered to consumers, reinforce preexisting biases, and maintain echo chambers (Grimes, 2017). The social sciences depend heavily on interaction, which is especially important in the discipline of sociology. It refers to the dynamic exchange that takes place between two or more individuals, in which their respective behaviors and actions are influenced and shaped by one another (LaMorte, 2022). In essence, interaction is characterized by a mutual adaptation between the individuals involved and is based on the idea that each person adjusts their actions and behaviors to suit the actions and behaviors of the others in the given situation (Figueiredo & Bolano, 2017). Therefore, individuals engage in a mutual exchange, altering each other's actions and behaviors through their interactions.

In the field of sociology, it is widely acknowledged that communication and interaction go hand in hand. Without communication, it is not possible to interact with individuals. Interaction is defined as the mutual adaptation of behaviors and actions between two or more individuals in a given situation (Tylén et al., 2012). It is a dynamic and reciprocal process, where individuals reciprocate and adjust their behaviors based on the actions and behaviors of others (William, 2016). On the other hand, communication refers to the exchange of information or messages between individuals. However, communication can take place without interaction, such as in unidirectional communication. In this type of communication, one individual sends a message, but there is no reciprocal exchange of information or behaviors. Therefore, it is important to note that interaction and communication are interrelated concepts in sociology, but interaction cannot occur without communication (Figueiredo & Bolano, 2017).

Interactivity, algorithms, and social media are closely related concepts that significantly impact how people communicate and interact online. The terms "interactive media" or "interactivity" are frequently used to distinguish new media from traditional media and to draw attention to one of its distinctive qualities (Bolano 2017). This interactivity, shaped by algorithms, aligns closely with the idea of 'networked individualism' (Rainie; Wellman; 2012). According to Rainie & Wellman (2012) algorithms curate personalized content feeds based on individual user data, reinforcing the trend towards individualized networks where users interact with content and other individuals based on personal preferences and behaviors.

The algorithms used by platforms determine what content is shown to users, which can significantly impact their online experience (Barnhart, 2021). The way in which algorithms are designed, implemented and controlled can influence the degree of user agency and control over their online experiences (Kang & Lous, 2022). The idea of algorithmic sovereignty enters the picture here since it relates to users' power to influence the algorithms that regulate their online interactions and choose the information and material displayed to them (Reviglio & Agosti, 2020). When algorithms are developed and maintained with corporate interests placed ahead of user agency, it may reduce user interaction and the variety of viewpoints and information that are available to them. (Bozdog, 2013).

### **1.5 Algorithmic Sovereignty.**

The concept of algorithmic sovereignty, (Amoore, 2017; Reviglio, 2020; Lustig, 2016) implies the power of algorithms in shaping human actions and controlling what information is made available to the public. Lustig (2015) highlights the influence algorithms have on managing human behavior and the flow of information. For example, Bitcoin users tend to favor algorithmic sovereignty over conventional institutional authority due to the perceived untrustworthiness of the latter. However, this preference for the algorithmic authority does not stem from blind faith in algorithms (Lustig, 2016). Rather, the community recognizes the need for a balanced approach incorporating human judgment in decision-making. Integrating Bitcoin with established institutions versus resistance to integration creates a tension within the community, and this dichotomy is worth exploring.

Reviglio and Agosti (2020) claim that in its broadest sense, technological sovereignty frequently refers to a break with "state sovereignty," although other times it refers to the obligation of "public services" to maintain complete authority over "their computing" duties for the sake of "citizens," much like Richard Stallman's concept of "computing sovereignty" (Couture & Toupine, 2019). In their study, Couture & Toupin (2017) report that the writings of Machiavelli, Bodin, and Hobbes are where the idea of sovereignty, which refers to the supreme power over a political entity, first emerged. The concept of sovereignty was largely used to refer to the supreme power inside a certain geographic territory up until the 20th century. However, recently, the concept of sovereignty has been reframed in ways that depart

from past ideas, affecting the various ways digital and technological sovereignty are understood (Couture, Toupin, 2017).

Algorithmic sovereignty, therefore, refers to the control and power of algorithms over human behaviour and decision-making and their influence on what information is accessible to users (Reviglio, 2020). It implies that algorithms have increasingly shaped our experiences and perceptions of the world due to their capacity to process and interpret massive volumes of data (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). The concept of algorithmic sovereignty raises questions about the accountability and transparency of algorithms and the extent to which they should be subject to regulation and control. The word includes several essential algorithmic characteristics, including as opacity, automation, supremacy, authority, and legitimacy. The algorithm has the power to make decisions about resource allocation, modify outcomes, and pass judgment. Those it impacts recognise it as a trustworthy and reputable control source. It has access to vast amounts of information that it can analyse and use as the basis for decisions, and its authority transcends that of other actors or decision-making institutions (Castelluccia, Le Métayer, 2019). An essential part of algorithmic sovereignty is the ability of algorithms to operate independently without human input. Because it is generally unknown and difficult to understand how algorithms work, they are opaque (Reviglio, Agosti, 2020). Their dependence on the Internet, and particularly social media, compromises their right to personal freedom. Techniques like learning and priming, which use punishments and rewards can alter users' behaviour (Reviglio, Agosti, 2020). Furthermore, algorithms might independently investigate manipulative tactics that endanger people, further jeopardising their autonomy.

One of the main reasons we refer to it as “algorithm sovereignty” is because the characteristics of social media nowadays have personalization feeds curated by the algorithms. Personalized algorithms are widely used across many platforms. However, research shows that some consumers are unaware that these algorithms are being used, for example, on Netflix for content recommendations (Shin et al 2022). For example, research from Hamilton (2014) shows that only a small percentage of social media users—about 20%—know how algorithms shape their social media feed. Moreover, Gran et al. (2021) reported that, according to their survey, 61% of the Norwegian population does not have or present low awareness of algorithms. Rader and Gray (2015) revealed that users often

underestimate the role algorithms play in content personalization, with many attributing personalized feeds to their own activity or random chance. Customized systems can create, organize, and send information uniquely for each user to prevent overstimulation. According to Bozdag (2013), online services achieve this by creating a model of the user that encapsulates the presumptions and knowledge the system has about the user. By removing the useless information, the system can forecast what will be important for the user, boosting relevance and importance for a certain user.

For instance, the usage of personalized algorithms can affect how users behave and make decisions by providing them with advice and information that is catered to their preferences, past actions, and areas of interest (Kozyreva, 2021). The automation and opaqueness of algorithms can also make it difficult for users to understand and anticipate their effects, which can lead to unintended consequences (Vaassen, 2022). The algorithms used to automate suggestions and the content given to users are shaped by customization elements, such as the information gathered about users and their behaviour (Bhandari, 2022). This can lead to gatekeeping, where certain information or viewpoints are censored or removed, and filter bubbles, where users are shown information that is narrowly customised to their tastes. The idea that incorporates these outcomes as well as the power dynamics that result from the employment of algorithms in our daily lives and society is called algorithmic sovereignty. (Hokkanen, 2019). Traditional media bias is addressed by the "gatekeeping hypothesis," which examines how some significant events are given more attention than others and how institutions or powerful people decide whether information gets to the recipients (Bozdag, 2013).

Swart (2021) states that when algorithms are used often, customers are unlikely to notice them unless they start producing odd, irrelevant, or unexpected results. Users of social media might not always comprehend the term "algorithm," but they can still be able to understand how news is shaped by media consumers based on their everyday experiences. As previously mentioned, Hamilton et al. (2014) reported that less than 20% of social media users were aware of how algorithms influence their social media feeds. According to Pasquale (2015), the "enigmatic technology" of algorithms has "hidden workings." We can therefore presume that social media users are unaware of being a part of an algorithmic sovereign, given that research suggests that they aren't always aware of the algorithm or how

it affects their feeds. The concept of "platform society" highlights that platforms are a central aspect of society and have multiple conflicting interests. These platforms use algorithms to manage and distribute information and materials to users, potentially influencing their behavior. Algorithms play a crucial role in the smooth functioning of social media, but their use on social media sites raises concerns about algorithmic bias, individual privacy, and its impact on democracy and public discourse. Algorithms can personalize content and advertisements by analyzing user data, leading to the idea of algorithmic sovereignty, meaning the influence of algorithms on human actions and the control of information available to the public. The personalization and selection process of these platforms often results in information being restricted and controlled, with certain content being shown to specific users, leading to the creation of filter bubbles and echo chambers.

## Chapter II

# Unveiling the Algorithmic Landscape: Identity, Audience, and Biases in the Digital Era

Algorithms and data-driven systems have greatly impacted our online experiences in the current digital environment. They heavily influence the information we receive, the content we consume, and even how we build our identities in the digital world. This chapter delves into the intricate connections between algorithmic identities, filter bubbles, and gatekeeping, highlighting their wide-ranging effects.

### 2.1 Algorithmic Identities

Personalization factors play a crucial role in the construction of algorithmic identities. Algorithms utilize personalization factors, such as user data and behaviors, to infer and define individuals' algorithmic identities, categorizing them into specific segments or profiles (Soffer, 2021; Thorson et al., 2021). Individuals commonly unintentionally disclose aspects of their identities through various online behaviours, such as status updates, postings, likes, dislikes, group memberships, images, and more (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Although users frequently do not perceive these actions as “identity-sharing”, they serve as a means for other social media users to recognise and discern the individual's unique characteristics (Alruwaili, 2017). Prey (2017) asserts that user interactions with online media produce precise consumer data, allowing businesses to target and tailor media content more accurately.

Cheney-Lippold (2011) introduced the concept of "New Algorithm Identity". "New Algorithmic Identity" refers to creating identities by mathematical formulas that infer identity categories for anonymous people. In this method, one's gender, class, or race are automatically determined and defined using statistical models of commonalities. Thus, the algorithmic identity categorizes people and influences how gender, class, and race are understood and valued (Karizat et al., 2021). According to Raieli (2021), recent studies have revealed that contemporary algorithms are not exempt from bias, consequently perpetuating biased outcomes. Notably, a study conducted by MIT demonstrated that artificial

intelligence systems developed by prominent companies like Amazon exhibit biases in accurately recognizing individuals from marginalized groups, such as people of colour or women. Furthermore, Raieli (2021) reports that an alarming incident occurred when a facial recognition system supplied by Amazon to law enforcement identified 28 members of the U.S. Congress as criminals, highlighting the potential adverse consequences of biased algorithmic technologies.

According to Prey (2017), our online behaviors act as inputs for the creation of profiles that are then classified into observable "measurable types" (Cheney-Lippold, 2017, p47), such as "young African American" or a woman with a college education. These backgrounds seek to characterize people by influencing how they engage with others, media content, and how they perceive themselves (Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Prey 2018). Furthermore, these profiles serve as filters which regulate our interactions with one another both online and offline, changing our viewpoints and how we view ourselves (Pariser, 2011). The idea of algorithmic identity is at the heart of personalized experiences, as algorithms build their algorithmic identities using the data of individuals, allowing for customized recommendations, content, and advertisements based on each person's particular traits and preferences (Kant, 2020). Algorithmic identity defines people's characteristics through algorithms, while personalisation uses this information to tailor and personalise people's experiences based on their identified characteristics.

## **2.2 Algorithmic Audience**

These algorithmically constructed identities then inform the creation of algorithmic audiences. The algorithmic audience represents the collective group of individuals who share similar algorithmic identities or characteristics (Fisher & Mehozay, 2019). By understanding the algorithmic identities of users within an audience segment, platforms can deliver personalized experiences, content, or advertisements tailored to that audience's preferences and characteristics. To address the rising volume of online information, personalization functions have been implemented by data-based intermediaries, which use algorithms to tailor to a user's preferences, requirements, and social network connections (Bozdog, 2013). According to the Oxford Dictionary, "personalization" is constructing or producing anything to satisfy a specific person's needs or demands (Chandra, Verma, 2021). AI makes it

possible to mass-personalize communication content (Hermann, 2021). This leads to variations in search engine results and social media updates based on a user's past engagement with the platform, resulting in potential filter bubbles or echo chambers, which can limit user exposure to diverse perspectives and opinions (Bozdag, 2013).

Pariser (2011) states that filter bubbles occur when algorithms selectively guess what information a user would like to see based on their past behavior, effectively isolating them from content that may challenge or broaden their worldview (Seargent et. Al, 2019). Whereas Echo chambers compound this effect by not only filtering content but also amplifying it within closed networks, such as social media circles, where users interact primarily with like-minded individuals (Kamin, 2019). De Vries (2020) talks about algorithms playing a vital role in user profiling and providing personalised content within the context of Netflix. One of Netflix's advantages is its capacity to tailor content recommendations based on the target user's preferences. Only 10–20% of content seen on the platform is found directly; the remaining content is clicked based on suggestions (Stenovec, 2012). This process entails leveraging the comprehensive dataset generated by user activities on the platform, including their viewing history, duration of viewing sessions, and film ratings. This data aggregation and analysis makes categorising and profiling users based on quantifiable attributes and characteristics feasible. An algorithm like this is the foundation of 75% of “suggestion” activity, which helps users make decisions in the future (Love, 2012). In contrast, user-generated content (search results) is more important than ratings.

Gilbert (2022) reports that the highly complex viewing experience promised by streamers' algorithms has also fallen short of expectations. In actuality, recommendation systems point users in the direction of particular options, commonly possessed original material, or information that best supports complex investment directives, like global names to help build demand for a worldwide catalogue or known from broadcast television intended to stabilize an innovative streaming platform (Gilbert, 2022). Prey (2017) states that this idea is consistent with Negroponte's (1995) idea of the audience as a generalized abstraction by tailoring media material to personal tastes. According to media professionals and the advertising business, developing sophisticated measurement tools and procedures has given them real insights into the target demographic they are engaging with (Blakley, 2012, 2016).

Another example of Algorithmic audiences can be found on Spotify. With more than 150 million active customers, Spotify is the most well-known streaming platform in the entire world. Through analysing vast amounts of user data, Spotify constructs algorithmic audiences, distinct segments of users with similar music preferences and characteristics. These algorithmic audiences allow Spotify to deliver tailored recommendations, curated playlists, and targeted advertisements, enhancing the overall user experience (Engineering, 2023). According to Prey (2017), Discover Weekly is Spotify's recommendation service, in which there is both a content-based filtering and collaborative filtering. It is a custom playlist of 30 new songs sent to each subscriber every Monday morning (Prey, 2017). Since its launch in July 2015, Discover Weekly has become Spotify's most popular product, with over 40 million listeners streaming five billion tracks through the service (Spotify Press, 2016). Moreover, Spotify launched “Spotify Wrapped” in 2017, which made its audience enthusiastically screenshot and share their streaming statistics across social media platforms (Adenuga, 2022). While users appear to enthusiastically embrace Spotify's data collection, celebrating their streaming statistics on social media each year, the question arises whether they are fully aware of the monetary value their data holds (Adenuga, 2022). Additionally, Spotify’s ability to generate value across multiple dimensions for various stakeholders, positions the platform as a pivotal force in embedding music streaming into the fabric of daily life, thereby solidifying its influence on the construction of algorithmic audiences (Adenuga, 2022).

Pasick (2015) describes how saving songs will make Spotify automatically introduce the user to similar songs and artists. Werner (2020) provides a deeper understanding of this algorithmic by describing her experience mapping out artists on the platform. While listening to Irish singer-songwriter Damien Rice, she realized she started getting folk-rock and men singer-songwriters as suggestions. The author realized that artists identified as related by Spotify might share group identities related to gender, nationality, social class, and race, thus indicating a potential correlation between their respective affiliations. Moreover, the concept of algorithmic audiences brings forth the discourse surrounding the consequential formation of filter bubbles or echo chambers due to algorithmic profiling. These filter bubbles materialize when social media and news platform algorithms personalize and filter content based on user’s preferences and characteristics (Arguedas et al., 2022). As algorithms profile individuals, they are situated within specific filter bubbles that reinforce existing beliefs

while limiting exposure to alternative viewpoints. This phenomenon can result in the development of "echo chambers," where individuals are surrounded by opinions and information that validate and amplify their existing positions, resulting in opinion polarization and reduced understanding of diverse perspectives. The associated risks include the dissemination of misinformation, limited debate, and diminished diversity and inclusivity in public discourse. Recognizing the influence of algorithmic audiences and identities on forming filter bubbles, it is crucial to proactively address these risks to foster informed and pluralistic dialogues within the digital society (Pizolati, 2024).

### **2.3 Filter bubbles and echo chambers.**

Pariser (2011) states that “The basic code at the heart of the new Internet is pretty simple. The new generation of Internet filters looks at the things you seem to like—the actual things you’ve done, or the things people like you like—and tries to extrapolate. They are prediction engines, constantly creating and refining a theory of who you are and what you’ll do and want next. Together, these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us—what I’ve come to call a filter bubble—which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information” (p. 8). A poignant metaphor for the digital environment in which people live is Eli Pariser’s idea of the “bubble.” “In this metaphor, people are imprisoned in a digital cage where their choices, preferences, and online interactions are painstakingly recorded and examined by algorithms, creating comprehensive profiles” (Bianca, 2019, p. 44). Pariser (2011) believes that the individual, the user, is isolated within the bubble. Unlike on television, Pariser (2011), believes that it is hard to recognize when a specific channel is biased. In the digital age, users are not made clear about how and why content is personalized. Therefore, Pariser (2011) believes that this opacity can lead to misconceptions that the information presented is unbiased, when in fact, it is tailored based on undisclosed assumptions about the user, making it challenging to perceive any bias from within the bubble.

Raieli (2021) believes that in digital platforms like search engines, online dating apps, social networks, and e-commerce sites, users typically only see a small fraction of the available information, excluding about 99%. This selective content presentation has implications for users’ access to diverse perspectives and knowledge, influencing their

perceptions and choices. This idea highlights the emergence of echo chambers and filter bubbles, where people's access to knowledge becomes progressively customised and personalized, posing benefits and disadvantages (Bruns, 2019). When algorithms detect filter bubbles and echo chambers, they establish communication, which encourages people to interact with others who share their interests, this can result in overexposure to certain content. (Onitiu, 2022). Eg et al., (2023), believe that “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers” are often used interchangeably, although they are not entirely synonymous. However, Brun (2019) divided the terms. The author suggests that filter bubbles are related to the selective dissemination of information. They are the effect of personalized filters that enable us to access a unique universe of information (Grandinetti, 2021). Hermann (2021, p.1266)) defines them as “content selected by algorithms according to individuals' previous behavior and interactions with the system, respectively”.

Meanwhile, echo chambers are formed by creating selective ties on social media platforms (Brun, 2019). Therefore, individuals are predominantly exposed to content generated by individuals who share similar beliefs and viewpoints (Hermann, 2021). Bozdag (2013) highlights the issues associated with implicit personalization, which relies on user interaction data to shape the content individuals encounter (Kümpel, 2020). Pariser (2011b) adds that due to this personalization, people may unintentionally lose touch with a comprehensive understanding of current affairs, which could develop incredibly unique perspectives on the importance of political and current events (Bruns, 2019). These individualized perceptions can hinder the development of informed citizens and pose challenges to democratic societies (Deuze, 2008).

Grandinetti (2021) claims that the conversation surrounding the prioritization of content by algorithms on social media platforms is significant to individuals seeking to leverage their social media presence for monetization purposes (Jacobson, Harrison, 2022). In his study, Grandinetti (2021) states that nowadays often, celebrities and influencers strategically employ tags such as “for the algorithm” in their posts, aiming to enhance the visibility and trending potential of their content on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Napoli (2019) claims that filter bubbles can be seen in our daily lives regarding how we consume news online. Algorithms curate and prioritize content when people access news primarily through social media platforms or customized news aggregators based on their

prior interactions, preferences, and behaviors. For instance, Parisi and Comunello (2020) found that dating app algorithms reinforce users' tendency to like similar people.

The authors conducted a study on an Italian dating app in which they talked about relational filter bubbles. Parisi and Comunello (2020) claim that the "relational filter bubble" is shaped by two key dimensions: "homogamy" and reliance on existing social networks. Homogamy refers to individuals' tendency to choose partners with similar social characteristics. Additionally, people often rely on their social circles, mainly friends of friends, when seeking romantic partners, resulting in overlapping connections and similar extended relational networks. Another episode of filter bubbles is in the political field. Bianca (2019) claims that the bubble, for political purposes, shows its inherent danger in negatively affecting the formation of collective and political consciousness, representing an instrument for annihilating democracy and individual consciousness in general. For example, in the context of filter bubbles, an individual trapped within an automated process experiences a resetting of their will and awareness to zero (Bruns, 2019). This refers to the phenomenon where algorithms and personalized content recommendations limit the exposure of individuals to diverse perspectives, resulting in a narrow and biased information diet (Bianca, 2019).

One notable episode of the political filter bubbles occurred during the 2016 United States presidential election. As a central social media platform, Facebook was scrutinized for its role in creating filter bubbles and echo chambers among its users (Mahrt, 2019). It was revealed that Facebook's algorithmic news feed prioritized content aligned with users' beliefs and preferences, effectively reinforcing their existing viewpoints and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives (Alahsri et al., 2018; Papa & Photiadis, 2021). The spread of false information and fake news during the election was a prime example of this phenomenon. The algorithmic nature of Facebook's news feed caused the propagation of false information that appealed to users' prejudices, potentially affecting their perceptions and voting decisions (Giglietto et al., 2016).

## 2.4 Gatekeeping on Social Media Platforms

A.I. plays a secondary gatekeeper role in mass personalization, which takes on creating, selecting, filtering, and distributing the content that individuals ultimately come across. As defined by Shoemaker (1991), gatekeeping involves the intricate process of filtering and transforming the vast multitude of available messages in the world into a condensed selection of messages that reach an individual on any given day (Thomas-John, 2014). It serves as the mechanism through which the overwhelming volume of information is curated and refined to more manageable and personalized content (Barzilai-Nahoon, 2008). According to Barzilai-Nahoon (2008) and Shoemaker (1991), gatekeeping is a “top-down” process rather than “one-way communication”.

Lewin (1943) first created the concept of gatekeeping. He concentrated his research on the decision-making processes that housewives used to alter their food consumption during World War II. He understood that food had to go through a series of decision-making thoughts, starting from its origin, like a store or a garden, before getting to the table (Lewin, 1943). This classical theory proves inadequate in capturing the dynamic nature of new media in light of technological advancements (Pałka-Suchojad, 2021). However, it does provide insights into the dynamics of communication and elucidates various social transformations that occur during this process. Moreover, the actors in charge of these streams can be considered gatekeepers because they can determine which messages get through and which do not (Welbers, 2018). Wallace (2017) states that gatekeeping happens because of user interactions. Shaw (2012) coined the term "decentralized gatekeeping" to describe the mechanisms involving numerous micro-level interactions among individuals that result in the selection of prominent topics (Wallace, 2017, p.283).

According to Welbers (2018), networks of interrelated gatekeepers are forming increasing use of media as a platform for news dissemination. Therefore, individuals directly connected to the initial user through social media become part of this network of gatekeepers. A gatekeeper traditionally refers to someone who controls specific channels through which news is filtered and decides what information reaches the audience (Welbers, 2018). In the digital age, some argue that multiple channels undermine the idea of discrete gates and, consequently, challenge the role of gatekeepers. According to this perspective, the notion of

gatekeepers becomes obsolete if there are no clear gates through which political information flows (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018; Williams & Carpini, 2000).

## **2.5 Gatekeeping practices.**

With the rise of the Internet, social media, and smartphones, individuals now produce information but are also influenced by algorithms on these platforms, which shape what content they encounter (Potnis & Tahamtan, 2021). This has redefined how information is controlled and accessed, with digital entities playing a key role in the new dynamics of gatekeeping (Potnis & Tahamtan, 2021). These counterparties are now arising gatekeepers in our society driven by their roles in expertise, business, politics, and communication on social media platforms. This gatekeeping role was traditionally associated with journalists in traditional media (Bozdag, 2013). Some examples of gatekeeping practices platforms employ are content moderation and recommender systems.

### **2.5.1 Content Moderation.**

Content moderation involves the implementation of policies and guidelines to moderate and filter user-generated content, removing or restricting content that violates community standards or legal regulations (Einwiller & Kim, 2020). This practice aims to maintain a certain level of quality, safety, and compliance on the platform. Ever since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, there has been a significant rise in both academic understanding of the issues with the current platform governance status quo as well as public awareness of content moderation concerns, which are currently seen as a crucial part of central data systems and system policy debates (Gorwa et al., 2021).

According to Grimmelmann (2005) and Gorwa (2021), "forms of content moderation have existed as long as group-based online communication has" (p.3). Harsher policies have been implemented due to debates over platforms' authority and responsibility for content moderation and recommendation (Aswad, 2018). For instance, YouTube has ambiguous policies in place regarding the posting of conspiracy videos on its website. Misinformation is allowed as long as it does not directly provoke violence or endanger the public's health, like when it pertained to COVID-19. Schellingerhout, Beraldo & Marx (2023) believe that as a result, platforms, such as YouTube, have grown to be a hub for a variety of conspiracy

communities, with millions of people watching videos that promote ideas like the flat Earth or government conspiracies. However, content moderation can be done by machine learning and users. Frequently users flag posts they believe are not safe or appropriate.

### **2.5.2 Recommender Systems**

To adapt and personalize presented content, leading web platforms like Amazon and Netflix rely on ML-based RS *innovation.content*. Recommender systems are the most prominent personalization applications in the Machine Learning field (Zanker et al., 2019). Recommender systems are algorithms that curate, filter, and personalize content across many of the world's largest platforms and applications (Stray et al., 2024). Recommender systems filter and curate the available options by looking at user preferences, behavior, and previous interactions, then present a subset of options that fit distinct user profiles (Zhang et al., 2020). Additionally, according to Deldjoo et al. (2024) recommender systems have a significant impact on the information we encounter online, particularly on social media, which in turn can shape our beliefs, decisions, and actions.

The concept of a recommender system originated within the domain of E-commerce and is characterized as a tool that assists users in navigating vast collections of information that align with their specific interests and preferences (Schafer et al., 1999). Prawesh and Padmanabhan (2014) provide evidence that in recommender systems, that do not rely on personalization, suggesting the "top-N popular items" can result in the amplification of their popularity, making the system vulnerable to manipulations (Zhang et al., 2020, pp6). A personalized recommendation system can employ content-based and collaborative filtering depending on the approach. In collaborative filtering, Adomavicius et al. (2021) believe that once the user consumes items, they offer preference ratings to the system, which serve as new data that can be used to enhance the system's future predictions. This iterative process forms a feedback loop.

The product recommendation function frequently found on e-commerce platforms like Amazon illustrates a recommender system (Schafer et al., 1999; Stadilis et al., 2023). Amazon, which initially focused on book recommendations (Stadilis et al., 2023), now employs an advanced system that not only personalizes the shopping experience but also prompts customers to rate their purchases on a scale from 1 to 5, with five representing "I

love it". Such recommendation system then examines user rating trends and predicts users' preferences for items they still need to consume (Zhang et al., 2019). Recommender systems use collaborative filtering to make personalized recommendations by leveraging a group of users' collective behavior and preferences. They use user similarity as a crucial variable in predicting individual interests. The fundamental presumption is that individuals with similar tastes are more likely to be drawn to similar products. Moreover, the process involves analyzing the historical data of users' interactions with items, such as ratings, reviews, or purchase history, to identify patterns and similarities in their preferences (Huang et al., 2004).

Sarwar et al., (2001), discuss the two main methods of “user-based and item-based collaborative filtering.” To find users with similar preferences and recommend products they have liked, user-based collaborative filtering compares the preferences of a target user to those of other users. On the other hand, item-based collaborative filtering emphasizes similarities between individual items and suggests products comparable to those the user has previously expressed interest in (Sarwar et al.,200; Tewari, 2020). Filtering based on content (CBF) is based on an examination of item characteristics and user preferences. It recommends items similar in content to the ones a user has previously liked or interacted with (Martinez et al., 2010; Tewari, 2020). It focuses on matching the features or attributes of items to the user's preferences (van Meteren, van Someren, 2000).

The system initially creates each user's profile based on prior habits or explicit preferences (such as genres or artists). In Spotify's case, for instance, the next step is to find songs with similar content by comparing song attributes to the user's profile, including genre, tempo, instrumentation, and lyrics. This precisely happened to the previously mentioned Spotify case in Werner's (2020) studies. By focusing on the content and characteristics of items, content-based filtering can provide personalized recommendations even for new users with limited interaction data (Lops et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020).

## **2.6 Algorithm Awareness.**

In modern digital consumption, algorithms play a significant role in shaping our online experiences. They quietly work in the background, affecting the information we encounter, the advice we get, and the choices made on our behalf. However, it is becoming

more crucial to address how much user awareness there is of such algorithms and their effects. This silent shaping extends beyond content curation, forging what is known as an algorithmic identity. This identity is a digital construction, a mirror reflecting our online behavior, preferences, and interactions (Cover, 2015).

Swart (2021) introduces the concept of algorithm awareness (A.A.), which encompasses users' awareness of the existence and operation of algorithms in particular contexts of consumption. To start, it entails acknowledging that algorithms are used by various online platforms and services, including social media sites, search engines, and recommendation engines, to filter, curate, and customize the information that users are presented with (Hamid et al., 2021). For example, Gruber (2021) found that while many people are not explicitly aware of algorithms and artificial intelligence in voice assistants, they are aware of automatic decision-making processes in digital devices and services.

According to Ytre-Arne and Moe (2021), individuals' awareness of algorithms varies depending on whether they are asked about algorithms in a general sense or specifically concerning a particular platform, such as TikTok. The primary source of algorithm knowledge typically stems from "experiential education" (Taylor, 2023, pp6), wherein individuals understand the algorithm through actively utilizing the platform (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020; DeVito et al., 2018). For instance, Siles et al. (2019) discovered that few Netflix subscribers explicitly used the term "algorithm" (Swart, 2021). However, they developed hypotheses regarding the reasons behind the system's recommendations. Relates to how users of social media may not understand the term "algorithm." However, they can still reflect on how media tailor the news they see based on their daily experiences (Swart, 2021).

An instance exemplifying algorithm awareness involves users on a social media platform who observe that the content presented in their feed predominantly revolves around specific topics or aligns with their personal interests. This awareness arises from realizing that the platform's algorithm is responsible for curating its content based on their previous interactions and preferences. Notably, users of platforms like TikTok are becoming increasingly adept at "taming" these algorithms. Ellison et al. (2020) conducted a study titled "Why We Don't Click: Interrogating the Relationship Between Viewing and Clicking in Social Media Contexts by Exploring the 'Non-Click'" in which they investigated the

distinction between active and passive use of social media. Such utilization has become a well-known forecaster of significant social and psychological results on social media (Liu et al., 2019; Verduyn et al., 2015). Specifically, negative outcomes have been associated with "passive use," which entails scrolling and viewing without active engagement, such as publishing or reacting. Conversely, "active" practices, including posting, sharing, and commenting, have been linked to improvements in several dimensions of well-being (Ellison et al., 2020, pp403).

Users can strategically shape algorithmic outcomes based on their perceptions of the system. According to Gruber et al., 2023, this can be accomplished through conscious actions such as selectively liking specific posts, expressing interest in contradictory content, or posting with intent, considering factors like timing, language choice, and the inclusion of visuals (Simpson et al., 2021). By employing these deliberate strategies, users seek to optimise algorithmic recommendations. Algorithm awareness can also encompass the recognition of bias within algorithms. Users may become aware that the algorithms employed by social media platforms, search engines, or recommendation systems exhibit certain biases in the content they present or their recommendations (Eslami et al., 2017). This awareness can arise from observing patterns of underrepresentation, overrepresentation, or skewed perspectives in the information or suggestions received. Governments have also called for regulation of algorithmic systems to increase algorithmic transparency and prevent discrimination through algorithms risks of biased algorithms (Chander, 2017).

Chander (2017) discusses that considering recent events, such as the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which has brought to the forefront the evident presence of racial and gender discrimination in our society, Pasquale's cautionary message becomes particularly significant. This awareness is underscored by a well-known study conducted by Bertrand & Mullainathan (2004,) where job applicants with names perceived as white, such as Emily, received a significantly higher rate of callbacks than applicants with names associated with African American heritage, such as Lakisha. For instance, Noble (2018) explores the biases embedded in search engine algorithms, highlighting how they can perpetuate discriminatory or unbalanced representations (Howard, 2018). Similarly, Eslami et al. (2015) discuss the filter bubble effect, as previously mentioned, wherein algorithms

tailor content to users' preferences, inadvertently limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and potentially reinforcing existing biases. Moreover, by recognizing these biases, users can better understand the algorithmic processes shaping their online experiences. Algorithm awareness regarding bias can empower users to seek out alternative sources of information, engage with diverse viewpoints, and challenge the potential limitations of algorithmic recommendations.

## **2.7 Conclusion.**

This chapter has examined several facets of algorithmic influence and its effects on the world of social media. It addresses the ideas of algorithm identity, algorithmic audience, filter bubbles, and echo chambers because it was understood the significant influence these phenomena can have on how users interact with the online world. It has been highlighted how social media platforms can curate information and shape our content by looking at their gatekeeping functions in content moderation and recommender systems.

The significance of algorithmic awareness has become a key theme throughout this discussion. To comprehend and engage critically with the content they come across, users' awareness of algorithms, as well as their existence and operation in particular contexts of consumption, is essential. Acknowledging algorithmic bias, particularly regarding racial, gender, and other types of discrimination, highlights the necessity of algorithmic transparency and accountability. To better understand user engagement and openness to alternative viewpoints, it is essential to investigate whether users actively seek diverse content outside algorithmic recommendations. It reveals their agency in avoiding echo chambers and filter bubbles, encouraging exposure to a wider variety of information, and encouraging a more well-rounded and informed digital experience.

Moving forward, this study aims to investigate the circumstances as to why TikTok users, in particular, are willing to actively explore content outside of their filter bubbles and algorithmic recommendations. By examining users' behavior and attitudes on this popular platform, this research intends to gain insights into their relationship with the TikTok algorithm and their receptiveness to diverse perspectives. The next chapter will delve into the intricacies of TikTok as a platform, exploring its algorithmic mechanisms and examining users' experiences and interactions within this context.

## **Chapter III**

### **The TikTok Ecosystem: Exploring the Structure, Algorithm, and Filter Bubbles**

TikTok is a social media platform and video-sharing app that allows users to create, share, and discover short videos. Launched in 2016 by the Chinese technology company ByteDance, TikTok quickly gained global popularity and has become one of the most widely

used social media apps. Chu et al., (2022), report that TikTok is a social media site that increasingly focuses on short-form videos and is well-liked by users. TikTok has developed into "the leading destination for short-form mobile video" since its 2016 launch (TikTok, 2021). Users can create, share, and participate in short-form videos of up to 15 seconds on TikTok that feature dancing, lip-syncing, lifestyle content, and humorous moments. (Chu, 2022; Wong, 2019). ByteDance, a Chinese tech company, owns TikTok. TikTok debuted in 2017 as the foreign extension of the well-known Chinese platform Douyin and quickly gained popularity worldwide after purchasing Musical.ly in 2018. According to Statista 2022, TikTok seemed to have estimated 656 million users worldwide in 2021. This number was anticipated to rise by about 15% annually, reaching 755 million users in 2022.

In recent years, there has been a surge in the popularity of short-video apps following the decline of Vine and the success of apps like musical.ly (Klug et al., 2021). Among these apps, TikTok stands out as a leader in user numbers and engagement worldwide, including in the United States. Kaye et al., 2019, report that in 2019, TikTok gained widespread popularity in significant markets and social media platforms, including Facebook, the U.S. and India, and the most prominent internet market in the world: China. It also solidified its position alongside other critical online media and WhatsApp (Kaye et al., 2019). TikTok has gained significant traction, especially among teenagers and young adults, who form the majority of its user base in the U.S. Sharing photos and videos has become one of the most popular online activities on TikTok (Klug et al., 2020). In the second quarter of 2017, "Tik Tok" received extensive promotion following the name change, going from "Douyin" to TikTok. The app is mostly used by young people and women. The user can choose a 15-second short video with "background music, motion editing, and special effects processing" in the "Tik Tok" application (Xu et al., 2019, p59).

### **3.1 Evolution of the App**

The growing trend in social media has seen the rise of video creation and sharing, ranging from short looping videos to live-streaming (Anderson, 2017). One unique platform that gained significant popularity in this realm is TikTok, developed by the Chinese technology company ByteDance. Created in 2012 by Zhang Yiming, ByteDance initially focused on news aggregation and machine learning technologies (Brennan, 2020). However,

recognising the potential of the emerging short video format, ByteDance launched Douyin in 2016, a lip-synching app tailored for the Chinese market (Anderson, 2020).

As the popularity of short-form video content continued to grow, platforms like Vine became pioneers in the field. Vine was a unique and widely loved video-sharing app known for its short looping videos. Unfortunately, it was discontinued in 2017 (Kaye et al., 2020). When Vine was shut down in early 2017, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat had already introduced similar features (Anderson, 2020). However, the discontinuation of Vine was mourned as the loss of a distinct online realm known for its peculiar and humorous content. Vine was celebrated for fostering the creation of memes that permeated mainstream culture, making it a truly unique platform (Anderson, 2020; Feldman, 2016).

This created an opportunity for TikTok to fill the void left by Vine and cater to the increasing demand for short videos. Following the discontinuation of Vine, a significant number of Vine users transitioned to Musical.ly; hence the comparison between TikTok and Vine is not unexpected. However, certain Vine enthusiasts may contest that Musical.ly is an adequate substitute for Vine (Anderson, 2020). Musical.ly, a short video platform focused on lip-synching music, achieved significant success in the United States. In 2017, ByteDance introduced TikTok as a global version of Douyin, merging it with another popular short-form video app, Musical.ly, acquired in 2018 (Ma, Hu, 2021). Kaye et al., 2020, state that while TikTok and Douyin share similar digital architectures, they target and cater to distinct user bases. Notably, many of TikTok's initial users migrated from Musical.ly, boasting over 200 million subscribers in the United States before it was acquired by ByteDance (Kaye et al., 2020).

TikTok seems more similar to Vine than to the stories on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter as a spot for creativity and experimentation, although there are undoubtedly variations between the channels (Anderson, 2020). TikTok quickly gained traction, attracting millions of users worldwide with its innovative video creation and sharing approach. Users could create 15-second videos featuring lip-synching, dancing, lifestyle content, and humorous moments (Kong, 2018). The platform capitalised on low-cost production and shareability, blurring the lines between creators and consumers. By October 2018, short video platforms had garnered a staggering 648 million users in China alone, encompassing nearly 80% of the country's internet users (Kaye et al., 2020).

With its blend of creativity, entertainment, and community engagement, TikTok solidified its position as a social media leader. It tapped into the evolving preferences of users, offering a platform where individuals could showcase their talents, participate in challenges, and connect with like-minded communities (Anderson, 2017). The success of TikTok exemplifies the continued evolution of social media platforms and the enduring appeal of short video content in capturing the attention and imagination of global audiences.

### **3.1.2 TikTok's structure; Feature & Functions**

TikTok, a widely used smartphone app, has become among the top 10 most downloaded apps globally over the past ten years. With the help of its extensive range of features, including effects, stickers, filters, augmented reality, and green screens, users can produce brief videos that are enhanced with audio clips, songs, or pre-recorded video sequences. Users of the TikTok app, available for Android and iOS platforms, frequently include music and lip-syncing in their posts, demonstrating the app's preference for original audiovisual content (Vizcano-Verdú et al, 2022).

The app allows viewing and searching without requiring an account, but full engagement, as with all social media apps, necessitates an account. The user will be prompted to select their interests after creating an account from a list that includes animals, comedy, travel, food, sports, beauty and fashion, art, gaming, and science and education (Anderson, 2020). Vizcaíno-Verdú (2022) states that TikTok stands out with its unique short-form videos that cater to the fast-paced information consumption habits of the modern digital society. The platform offers a user-friendly video editing system for recording, applying transitions, adjusting speed, and more. Additionally, TikTok features a streamlined interaction structure, facilitating actions such as following, commenting, liking, and sharing posts. Notably, the app's default "For You Page" gives users an endless scroll of personalised content recommendations (Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2022).

TikTok's most essential interactive advancement is its full auto playback feature, which enables users to access content immediately after opening the app (Qu, 2022). This full-screen playback acts as a passive trigger, freeing users from having to choose or think actively. This feature improves the overall user experience on TikTok by reducing the operational pathway and users' acquisition costs (Qu, 2022). The user is immediately

empowered as a cultural creator by allowing the app access to their smartphone's microphone and camera, enabling them to instantly create videos and choose from about 100 different trendings, new, fashion, animal, vlog, face, and AR filter options. The user's profile can also be updated with animated stickers and music. The platform's features are all designed with mobile use and the seamless creation and consumption of smartphones and micro-video in mind (Collie, 2020).

Anderson, (2020), reports that the user must perform a vertical swipe to progress to the following video, as the app presents only one video at a time. The current video continues to play uninterrupted until the user swipes up or taps the screen to pause. Conversely, swiping down allows the user to revisit previously viewed videos. The default video feed, known as the "For You" feed, is generated by an algorithm. However, users can prioritize videos exclusively from the accounts they follow, which can be accessed at the top of the screen (Anderson, 2020).

The video screen on TikTok contains various icons that offer different functionalities. These icons include the user's avatar, a heart, a chat bubble, a share arrow, and a spinning circle with musical notes. The user profile page is accessed by clicking on the user's avatar, resembling Instagram's layout. This page displays the user's followers, the accounts they follow, and all of their uploaded videos. Users can be followed by clicking the follow button on their profile page. Pressing the heart icon allows users to like the video, and the number of likes is displayed below it. The chat bubble icon indicates the number of comments and clicking on it reveals the comment section. Users can like comments, sorted based on the number of likes, with the most popular comment appearing at the top. Like other social media platforms, users can be tagged in comments using the "@" symbol. Lastly, the arrow icon presents various sharing options for the video, including messaging apps and other social media platforms (Anderson, 2020). The user can browse and select a song from various categories, including Trending, Country, Hip Hop, and Featured, by selecting the Sound icon, which provides a menu reminiscent of Spotify. You cannot pick which part of a song you want because these segments are pre-written and usually have a catchy part that lends itself to dancing, lip-syncing, or some other kind of video-able action or replicable micro-narrative (Collie et al., 2020).

TikTok gives users a variety of options for curating their content experiences. They can decide whether to actively search for content using the Discover page, which includes a search tool and trending hashtags, or follow users recommended to them on the For You page (Collie et al., 2020). The TikTok app's content ecosystem is significantly influenced by challenges, which the platform or users frequently organize. These events encourage user engagement and add to the app's sense of infinity. Beyond the usual liking and commenting, users interact with one another by taking part in challenges, making duets or reaction videos, and lip-syncing to other people's audio. TikTok stands out from earlier social media platforms that rely on natural social networks and mediated forms of commentary thanks to its distinctive features that encourage users to share, replicate, extend, and collaborate on content (Collie et al., 2020). Additionally, Collie et al. (2020) state that the algorithmic control over TikTok's content distribution allows videos to become famous even if they have a small following, giving the app a sense of democratization, though the degree of this democratization may be disputed due to the algorithm's influence.

In Qu's (2022) study regarding Interactive Modes on TikTok, he reports that TikTok uses effective gesture interactions, such as double-clicking to like a video, swiping up and down to switch between content, and swiping left to access the creator's profile. For several reasons, Qu (2022) states that TikTok's double-click "like" feature stands out as a gesture interaction:

1. Users only need to double-click to express their preferences, making learning simple.
2. The feedback is clear; a round, red heart appears on the screen following the double-click.
3. It raises user engagement by enabling users to repeatedly double-click and start an endless display of tiny hearts covering the entire screen.
4. It increases interaction efficiency by expanding the operation area so users can "like" videos from anywhere on the screen rather than being limited to a specific control area.

### 3.2 TikTok's Algorithm

The proprietary algorithm used by TikTok is a sophisticated system that chooses which content is displayed to users. The algorithm examines user interactions, preferences, and behavior to deliver relevant and personalized content (Karizat et al., 2021). Based on past and ongoing user engagement with the proposed video content via video streaming time, liking, commenting, and sharing, the TikTok algorithm tailors content for the specific user's "for you" page. Additionally, videos incorporating popular hashtags or sounds generate the "for you" page feed (Klug, 2021, p.85). As Klug et al. (2021) states, the TikTok algorithm's results can be made visible to users through the carefully selected content feed, which chooses videos relevant to their apparent preferences by continuously learning about users' preferences for video content.

The AI algorithm TikTok and Douyin uses is derived from Toutiao, another ByteDance app that creates personalized news feeds for each user based on their preferences and interactions with the content (Ma, Hu, 2021). Because of the technology that can modularize complicated types of content to lower the bar for user participation and guarantee the continuity of the content's core nature, TikTok users can create chain effects for a song or dance. The technology then guarantees the persistence of the emotion contained in the categorized content (Ma & Hu, 2021). By transferring the powerful AI-based algorithm system from Douyin, TikTok can free users from the constraints of the vast video selection and precisely deliver their preferred content (Ma et al., 2021). By examining the content of each video and observing users' preferences for an endless and highly desirable video stream, TikTok's AI-based algorithm determines users' tailored information distributions (Ma et al., 2021).

As Zhao (2021) reports in his study regarding Douyin's recommendation system, users can use a third-party social account to sign in to Douyin for the first time. This also works for TikTok. This enables the algorithm model to analyze user habits more by mining existing user information and historical social behavior from external data (Zhao, 2021). TikTok distributes traffic in real-time based on analyzing user personas, hashtags, and feedback information such as views, likes, comments, and shares, as well as audience breakdown information such as market segmentation, age range, gender identities, and

devices (Ma, Hu, 2021). TikTok puts its philosophy into practice by providing everyone with personalized, uplifting content by consistently suggesting related, shareable, replicable, and expandable content. In order to serve users' interests, TikTok promoted the algorithm as computer vision that uses users' viewing histories and engagement patterns to extract and categorize visual data (Ma & Hu, 2021).

Klug et al., (2021), report that new videos are first shown likely to involve a select group of users who are most with them, and if they do so favourably, more users are then shown the video. This implies that virtually any video from any user may be promoted to a "for you" page, and a "for you" page may display both recently released and viral videos alongside older content or content with a small number of likes (Klug et al., 2021, p.85). According to Bandy et al. (2020), the TikTok algorithm primarily relies on the audio, hashtags, and captions associated with videos a user interacts with. Based on these elements, the algorithm suggests comparable content for the user to view. As stated by Kang & Lou (2022), TikTok uses computer vision to categorize the visual elements of the videos, natural language processing to identify the textual and audio components (such as sounds) of the videos that users enjoyed, and analysis of hashtags and captions to locate the videos. The algorithm used by TikTok is so strong and aggressive that it can quickly identify a user's weaknesses and interests. (p. 4)

Because people's needs constantly change, the recommendation algorithm must be time-effective (Siles et al., 2021). Douyin processes most user profiles dynamically using a stream computing technique. The algorithm will update the labels if there are user actions (Zhao, 2021). After a user expresses their preference by indicating whether they like or dislike a video and swipes to the next one, the algorithm updates its user profile with new information (Zhao, 2021).

### **3.2.1 Different dynamics: People's relationship to the Algorithm**

TikTok is an excellent place to study the interaction between the algorithmic power of AI and user agency, and its implications because its user-centric algorithm is more important than other social media platforms' peer-network-driven recommendation strategies (Kang, Lou, 2021). Although the general perception of algorithms is that they are completely undetectable to the lay user, people are frequently aware of algorithms shaping

their online experiences—at least on a fundamental level (Simpson et al., 2022). With the presence of an algorithm, community members can hold it responsible for addressing concerns related to content moderation and hostile interactions on the platform (Simpson et al., 2022). Some users must know that these algorithms shape the content they see in their feeds. According to Karizat (2021), users develop "algorithmic folk theories" regarding how the algorithm filters content concerning their identities. The study further reveals that users modify their behavior to influence their algorithmic identities and counteract the marginalization of specific social identities.

In Klug's (2021) study, it was observed that users on the platform develop a nuanced understanding of how to strategically engage with the algorithm to optimize their videos' visibility and popularity. These users have formulated various tactics and techniques to "trick and please" the algorithm, increasing the likelihood of their videos trending. Additionally, the study highlighted that video engagement plays a crucial role in determining the visibility and success of a video. Users are cognizant of the importance of generating high levels of engagement, such as likes, comments, and shares, as these metrics positively influence the algorithm's assessment of a video's relevance and popularity. Furthermore, the timing was identified as another critical factor, with users recognizing that posting their videos at specific times can significantly impact their chances of achieving trending status. By aligning their behaviors with the algorithm's preferences and leveraging these insights, users aim to optimize their video's performance and maximize its reach within the TikTok community.

### **3.3 Algorithmic Identities, audiences, and Awareness on TikTok**

The algorithmic identity concept proposed by John Cheney-Lippold (2017) highlights the need for our digital representations to accurately reflect our authentic selves or self-perceptions based on trace data (Simpson et al., 2022). TikTok employs the term "algorithmic identities" to describe how its algorithm constructs and shapes users' online personas by analyzing their interactions, preferences, and behaviors (Karizat et al., 2021). Audiences' engagement with social media platforms varies in terms of activity levels, ranging from passive viewing to active interaction, creation, and sharing, as observed in the

research by Jenkins, Ito, and Boyd (2015). This engagement within online environments for creating fictional worlds implies different degrees of immersion and interactivity (Vizcaino-Verdú, 2022).

The TikTok "For You Page" (FYP) has both the potential to hinder and support identity work and affirmation, selectively highlighting certain LGBTQ+ identities while suppressing others, as discussed by Simpson et al. (2022). The authors introduce the concept of algorithmic exclusion, emphasising how algorithms can perpetuate exclusionary structures within a specific socio-technical system or even across broader societal structures. TikTok's algorithm collects user data on actions such as video consumption, likes, comments, and shares to personalise user profiles or "identities" and tailor the content users are exposed to (Wang et al., 2022). This process leads users to perceive themselves as having an algorithmic identity, as they recognise patterns in the presented content and observe the algorithm's customisation of their TikTok experience.

Content serves as the foundation for connection on TikTok, according to Collie et al. (2020). Algorithmic processes drive the emergence of the network as an endless stream of shared responsiveness, prioritising social interaction and connections over the traditional logic of "following" and "friends" found on other platforms. Algorithmic audiences on TikTok refer to specific demographics that the algorithm targets and curates content for. By examining user behaviour, preferences, and demographic data, the algorithm determines which videos are most likely to engage and appeal to each user (Lee et al., 2020).

Thanks to its algorithmic audience segmentation, TikTok's platform can deliver tailored content recommendations to users based on their interests, engagement patterns, and demographic details (Hang et al., 2022; Fisher et al., 2019). On TikTok, users take on the roles of particular local communities with their participants, memories, and imagery, whose stories are linked by their membership in and distancing from various groups (Vizcaino-Verdú, 2022). The platform excels at producing content for incredibly niche micro-subcultures. For each, TikTok amplifies and designs unique environments. Compared to Facebook Groups, where users must search and opt-in to find their group, TikTok makes it simpler for members of micro-cultures to find one another (Greenwald, 2021). TikTok's algorithmic audience plays a significant role in shaping users' experiences and interactions

on the platform. This dynamic interaction between users and the algorithm contributes to TikTok's influence in shaping culture and fostering online communities.

### **3.4 Filter Bubbles on TikTok.**

Filter bubbles on TikTok refer to the phenomenon where users are exposed to personalized and limited content that aligns with their preferences, interests, and behaviors (Boeker et al., 2022). The TikTok algorithm plays a crucial role in creating a customized feed for each user, taking into account various data points such as user interactions, engagement trends, and demographic information (Kang et al., 2022). The concept of "Filter Bubble" was first introduced by Pariser in 2010, highlighting the highly homogeneous information flow created by algorithmic recommendation mechanisms that can isolate individuals on islands of information, limiting their understanding of the real world (Xu et al., 2019). While it may provide an enjoyable experience by showing users the content they want to see, this filter bubble can also limit their exposure to diverse perspectives and hinder their ability to make informed decisions (Xu et al., 2019).

TikTok's emphasis on the "For You Page" (FYP) further amplifies the impact of filter bubbles on the platform, as it heavily relies on the algorithm to curate and present content to users, rather than content from people they follow, unlike other social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram (Smith, 2020). This algorithm-driven approach raises concerns about the potential reinforcement of existing biases and preferences within the TikTok community. In particular, there have been investigations into how TikTok's algorithm may inadvertently contribute to reinforcing racial divisions within the recommended content (Mellor, 2020). The algorithmic recommendation system, while aiming to optimize user engagement and satisfaction, may unintentionally limit exposure to content outside users' racial bubbles, perpetuating stereotypes or biases (Kitchens et al., 2020). This raises important questions about the role of algorithms in shaping users' understanding of the world and their access to diverse viewpoints (Mellor, 2020; Areeb et al., 2023). Overall, the presence of filter bubbles on TikTok and their potential impact on users' exposure to diverse content and perspectives is a subject of ongoing concern and investigation.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The concept of the Platform Society, as discussed by van Dijk (2018), highlights the major role of digital platforms like TikTok in today's world. These platforms are active players that shape social, economic, and cultural structures, not just passive tools. Key to this is Algorithmic Sovereignty where algorithms have considerable control over what information people see, influencing their views and actions (Amoore, 2017; Reviglio, 2020; Lustig, 2016.). TikTok's algorithm shows this by customizing content for each user, creating a feedback loop where how people interact guides what the algorithm shows them next to match their apparent tastes (Kang et al., 2022) and this makes us think about the balance

between user freedom and algorithmic control, and the wider impacts for society of such powerful systems.

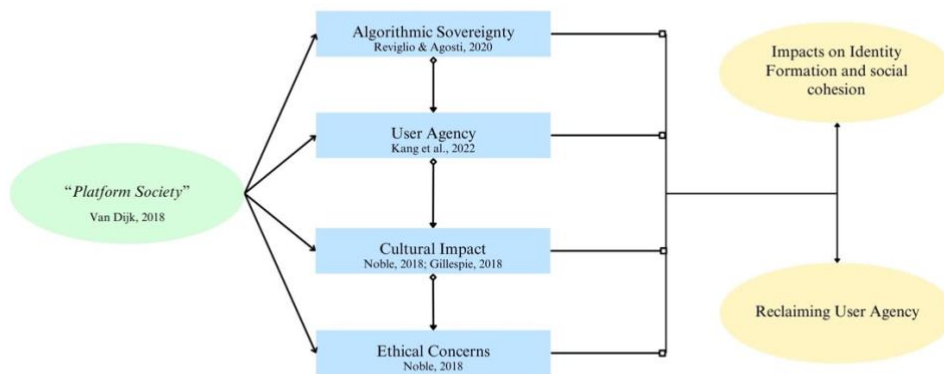
TikTok's algorithm and users interact back and forth. What people do shapes what the algorithm shows them and then the personalized feeds it creates also impact how people behave. This constant loop creates algorithmic identities - basically digital profiles that keep changing based on all these interactions (Bucher, 2018). So its not a one-way thing: users can guide their experience, but often they just end up in echo chambers and bubbles where they only see stuff that matches their existing interests (Kang et al. , 2022). TikTok is crazy good at getting people addicted by showing them more of what they already like (Kitchens et al. 2020). But that personalization means people may miss out on new ideas and get stuck in their ways (Pariser, 2011). Both filter bubbles (only seeing certain types of content) and echo chambers (getting the same perspectives amplified again and again) can make users more closed-minded.

According to Gillespie (2018), TikTok's algorithm does more than just personalize material; it also contributes to the formation of cultural norms by favoring content that fits in with current trends and influences both public discourse and individual viewpoints. As Gillespie (2018) points out, the notion of "audiences" builds upon this idea by grouping users into communities according to the content interests they have in common. Although this strategy might increase user involvement, it also has the drawback of increasing filter bubbles and limiting exposure to differing viewpoints. People are particularly impacted by this process because the materials they interact with shape how they perceive themselves.

While personalized content offers opportunities for personal growth, it also raises significant privacy concerns. The data-driven nature of TikTok's algorithm requires continuous monitoring of user behavior, leading to potential risks associated with data privacy and algorithmic surveillance (Bucher, 2018). Moreover, ethical concerns also become apparent with algorithmic bias, where algorithms can preserve social inequalities. On TikTok, the algorithm's role in content curation has the power to both challenge or reinforce biases related to race, gender, and other social categories (Noble, 2018). This highlights the importance of transparency and accountability in algorithmic processes, with calls for platforms to be more transparent and for regulatory frameworks to ensure responsible algorithm use.

Moreover, There is also a lack of research on how long-term exposure to curated content affects identity and social connections. This gap in studies highlights the need for research to explore how long-term content curation influences users' beliefs, behaviors, and overall well-being. Additionally, more focus is needed on how users can regain control over these systems. In short, TikTok's algorithm is a complex mix of technology, user behavior, and societal factors. While it boosts engagement, it also brings up serious ethical and social issues. More research is needed on the long-term effects of algorithms to help build more responsible and ethical systems.. A summary of the conceptual framework is provided in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Summary**



## Chapter IV

### Empirical Study

In order to examine the intricate relationship between Gen Z users' behaviours and preferences on TikTok, the following part's goal is to give a clear understanding of the chosen approach for the present dissertation. This section will start with an overview of the relevance of this research and continue presenting the research questions and objectives of this study. Subsequent sections will unfold the research design, followed by an overview of data collection methods, encompassing sampling procedure, moderation and ethical considerations. The chapter will unravel TikTok's users' engagement patterns.

## 4.1. Research Relevance

Investigating TikTok's users' interactive patterns offers academic and practical insights. Based on the literature review, in which it's highlighted how algorithms play a leading role into shaping online experiences (Van Dijk et al., 2018), this study aims to explore TikTok's AI system and the circumstances behind users' choices to go outside of their suggested feed, or the so called "filter bubbles".

The concept of a filter bubble, a state of informational isolation resulting from personalized algorithms, has been subject to scrutiny and debate, especially concerning its implications for user autonomy and exposure to diverse content (Pariser, 2011). By examining TikTok's AI through the lens of user interactions and the reasons to explore content, this study endeavors to contribute to the discourse on algorithmic influence and user agency in digital environments. In an era marked by the transformative influence of social media platforms and the essential role played by algorithms in shaping user experiences (Burell et al., 2019), TikTok has emerged as a formidable force, captivating audiences with its advanced artificial intelligence (AI) that tailors content to individual preferences (Kang et al., 2022). This study directly addresses these matters by investigating the reasons as to why TikTok users are willing to step outside their algorithmically defined content boundaries.

By examining user behavior and preferences, this dissertation contributes the discussion surrounding user autonomy in digital spaces and the potential impact of algorithmic suggestions on users' exploratory tendencies. This study explores how TikTok's AI-driven content recommendations impact user behavior and engagement, focusing on how users interact with algorithm-curated content. It raises questions about whether algorithms limit exposure to diverse information and affect user independence. By examining these interactions, the study also looks at the broader social effects, such as the variety of content users see and the consequences of relying on algorithms for information.

This study provides valuable insights into the dynamic of content consumption and helps us navigate the complexities of the digital age. This study also aims to clarify the

existing fine line between personalization factors and the circumstances behind users' willingness to search content outside of their suggested feed. The intricate relationships between TikTok users, algorithmic filter bubbles, and the broader implications for digital communication and uniqueness in contemporary society are all extensively examined in this thesis.

## 4.2 Research Question & Goals

The primary goal of the present dissertation is to unravel the intricate dynamics of TikTok user behavior within the context of algorithm-driven content curation. Adopting an exploratory approach, this study aims to bridge the gap in existing research by investigating how users interact with content beyond their AI-curated filter bubbles. Given the nascent nature of this exploration, no hypotheses are posited.

### Primary Research Question:

- *RQ1: Under what circumstances do TikTok users actively seek out content outside their AI-curated filter bubbles?*

### Complementary research questions are related to:

- *RQ1A: What role does the TikTok algorithm play in reinforcing or limiting users' content diversity?*
- *RQ1B: How do users perceive the accuracy and relevance of TikTok's content recommendations?*
- *RQ1C: How do users' personal goals (e.g., learning, entertainment, social interaction) influence their engagement with content outside their usual recommendations?*
- *RQ1D: How do users balance their content consumption between leisure and the need for diverse viewpoints on TikTok?*
- *RQ1E: What strategies do TikTok users employ to adjust or manipulate their feed to include more diverse content, and how effective do they perceive these strategies to be?*

Through a qualitative approach, this study focuses on analyzing the interaction between TikTok users and the platform's content recommendation algorithm. A crucial aspect of this investigation is understanding the role that TikTok's algorithm plays in either reinforcing or limiting the diversity of content to which users are exposed. The study will explore whether the algorithm tends to create "filter bubbles" that confine users to a narrow range of homogeneous content or if it promotes sufficient exposure to diverse perspectives, thereby broadening users' horizons.

Another fundamental objective of this research is to assess how users perceive the accuracy and relevance of the content recommendations they receive from TikTok. This involves delving into users' satisfaction with these recommendations, examining whether the content aligns with their interests, and identifying discrepancies between their expectations and the algorithm's output. Understanding these perceptions is key to evaluating the effectiveness of TikTok's recommendation system and its impact on user engagement.

This research also investigates how users' personal goals, such as learning, entertainment, or social interaction, influence their engagement with content outside their usual algorithm-driven recommendations. This aspect of the research aims to uncover the motivations that lead users to seek out new content, despite the algorithm's strong influence on what they see. By exploring this dynamic, the study can shed light on the balance between user agency and algorithmic suggestion in content consumption. Furthermore, the research examines how users manage their content consumption on TikTok, particularly how they balance the need for leisure with the desire for exposure to diverse viewpoints. This part of the research seeks to understand whether users prioritize entertainment over exposure to new ideas, or if they consciously strive to achieve a balance between the two, contributing to the broader discussion on the social impact of personalized content feeds.

Finally, the research identifies and evaluates the strategies that TikTok users employ to adjust their content feeds to include more diverse content. This involves assessing the effectiveness of these strategies from the users' perspectives, providing insights into the extent to which users feel they can control their content consumption on the platform. By understanding these strategies and their perceived effectiveness, the study offers a comprehensive view of how users navigate and potentially break free from the limitations imposed by algorithm-driven content curation on TikTok. This study also aspires to offer a

comprehensive perspective on how TikTok users navigate the algorithmic landscape, contributing insights that may benefit individual users and inform platform improvements and content diversity strategies.

### **4.3 Research Design**

To answer the research questions, a qualitative methodology was applied as it aligns more with the topic and the analysis of behaviours and preferences of Gen Z users on TikTok. One essential feature of qualitative research is its underlying assumption that people create their reality by actively engaging with their sociocultural contexts. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Dörnyei (2007) highlights that qualitative approaches are best to comprehend human experiences. Thus, Nordhus (2021) says that qualitative investigations aim to characterize the unique aspects constituting an individual's experience rather than identifying a predominant or average experience within a collective (p. 126). Furthermore, according to Winter (2000), researchers with a qualitative approach immerse themselves in their investigations, in contrast to quantitative researchers who maintain detachment (Nordhus, 2021). Moreover, Dörnyei (2007) highlights how interviews are often the chosen methodological tool because of their advantage in facilitating subsequent inquiries, a feature that is not present in questionnaires.

The research is guided by a constructivist paradigm, which suggests that individuals construct their understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiences and interactions with others (Mills et al., 2006). This paradigm is apt for examining how users perceive and make sense of the AI-driven content suggestions on TikTok, since it acknowledges that user experiences are subjective and influenced by their unique contexts, which can reveal how they navigate through, accept, or challenge their filter bubbles. Constructivism also emphasizes the active role of individuals in constructing their knowledge and understanding (Nanjappa et al., 2003). TikTok users actively engage with the platform, interacting with suggested content. The paradigm enables a focus on users' active participation, shedding light on how they navigate through content, accept certain suggestions, or challenge algorithmic recommendations.

A phenomenological methodology is employed to gain insight into the lived experiences of TikTok users. This methodology is chosen because it allows for an in-depth

exploration of how individuals perceive and experience the phenomenon of being in a filter bubble, and what meaning they ascribe to their actions when they encounter suggested content. The aim is to uncover the essence of these experiences and provide a rich, textured understanding of the phenomenon. Phenomenology allows researchers to step into the lived world of individuals, capturing the subjective and personal nature of their encounters with algorithmically curated content (Lupinacci, 2022). The phenomenological approach focuses on individual experiences but also considers the social and cultural contexts that shape these experiences. The analysis is attentive to the diversity of user backgrounds, as this diversity may affect their reasons to engage with different content. This consideration ensures that the study captures a comprehensive picture of the influence of TikTok's AI on user behavior, free from the constraints of a one-size-fits-all narrative.

#### **4.4 Data Collection Method**

The study involves 12 in-depth interviews with active TikTok users. Participants were chosen carefully to ensure they have direct experience with TikTok. Besides being active users, factors like age, how they use TikTok, and diversity were also considered to get a full picture of Gen Z's experience on the platform. By focusing on active users, the study aims to get real insights into how this group interacts with and is influenced by TikTok, giving a complete understanding of their engagement with the platform.

Research shows that one-on-one interviews provide detailed and personal responses, allowing for a deep exploration of individual perspectives (Smith et al., 2014), which is paramount for this study. The exclusivity of the discussion enables participants to feel more comfortable sharing information without fearing being judged by other participants.

Moreover, the questions set can be tailored to each participant and include focused follow-up questions. On the other hand, interviews may not capture diverse viewpoints as effectively as focus groups (Morgan et al., 1984), asking for further attention when analyzing and comparing the data from multiple interviews. Focus Groups are known for encouraging interactions and discussions among participants, disclosing diverse sets of opinions. They also contribute to idea generation, stimulating brainstorming and concept sharing among participants (Paulus et al., 2007).

On the other hand, group dynamics can strongly limit the expression of dissenting views and potentially lead to conformity in opinions (Levitan et al., 2016), which was a concern for this study. Within a focus group dynamic, individual responses may lack depth of insight and allow dominant voices to silence quieter ones. In both cases, time constraints were also taken into consideration. Conducting individual interviews can be time-intensive, while focus groups' proven efficiency lies in their ability to gather data from multiple individuals simultaneously (Oates et al., 2017).

The above-mentioned key factors informed the decision to employ one-on-one interviews over focus groups in this research methodology, as the primary data collection method for this study is underpinned by the alignment of this approach with the research question at hand: what are the circumstances as to why TikTok users are willing to explore content beyond their suggested feed. Firstly, the research objective of investigating the workings of the TikTok algorithm necessitated a deeper exploration of individual perspectives and a nuanced understanding of personal experiences. Despite time constraints, the one-on-one interview format was deemed more conducive to achieving this level of depth, allowing participants to share their thoughts and experiences in a private and confidential setting. Moreover, the potentially sensitive nature of the topics under investigation made it imperative to prioritise participant comfort and openness, which could be more readily achieved through individual interviews (Liamputtong et al., 2006). While focus groups could have facilitated group dynamics and discussions, the potential for dominant voices and groupthink led us to opt for interviews, ensuring a more controlled and in-depth exploration of the subject matter. This design encourages participants to expound upon their TikTok usage patterns, content preferences, and proclivity to explore content beyond the confines of algorithmic recommendations.

The interviews for this study were conducted in English and were done both in person, in Rome, and online using Zoom, and they were audio-recorded for detailed analysis. They took place between November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023 and February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024. To ensure ethical standards and protect participants' rights, all participants gave informed consent before taking part, as explained in the appendix.

The informed consent process was carefully created to make sure participants fully understood the study's purpose, how it would work, and their rights. This included making

sure they knew that joining was voluntary and that they could leave at any time without any consequences. By using Zoom, we were able to have smooth and inclusive interactions with participants, no matter where they were located. Recording the interviews in audio format added more depth to the research. It helped create accurate transcripts and allowed for a closer look at what participants said. Using Zoom's video features made the interviews secure and easy to use, while also allowing for a detailed exploration of the research questions, ensuring both safety and convenience in the online setting.

The interview duration, spanning approximately 18 to 50 minutes, is a deliberate choice aimed at soliciting comprehensive responses. This temporal dimension is instrumental in unearthing the intricacies of user behavior on TikTok, unraveling the multifarious factors influencing their reasons to diversify their content consumption. On the day of the interviews, the researcher provided participants with information regarding the nature and the background of the research, asking participants to be as sincere and honest as possible and making sure everyone felt comfortable and was aware that there was not any type of judgment behind their TikTok's content consumption.

The researcher memorized the questions before-hand, in a way that the interviews could be conducted in a naturalistic manner, aiming to keep the conversations going in a fluid way and to do follow-ups based on the answers provided by interviewees.

#### **4.5 Participants**

The participants for this qualitative study on TikTok's AI and content suggestion algorithms consists of 12 individuals. This sample size is selected to facilitate a detailed exploration of each participant's experiences while also allowing for the identification of cross-cutting themes and patterns. The demographic of interest includes TikTok users aged between 20 and 30 years old, a group that is likely to be actively engaging with the platform and encountering its AI-driven content suggestion features on a regular basis. To capture a comprehensive view of experiences, the study includes both male and female participants from this age group. This gender inclusion is essential to understand any potential variations in how different genders interact with and perceive their content feed on TikTok. Including participants of varying genders will also strengthen the study's findings by ensuring that the data reflects a range of experiences.

The participant pool is comprised of both students and working professionals. This distinction is important as it allows the study to account for the different ways in which TikTok may be integrated into the daily lives of individuals with varying routines, obligations, and social environments. It is anticipated that students and workers may have different motivations for using TikTok, variations in their free time, and thus potentially different experiences with the platform's content suggestions and filter bubbles. Recruitment of participants is purposeful, targeting individuals known to use TikTok regularly and who fall within the specified age range. The recruitment strategy involved advertising the study through university campuses, workplace bulletin boards, online forums, and social media groups that are frequented by individuals within the target demographic. Advertisements will briefly outline the study's aims and the participant criteria, inviting those who are interested to come forward.

The number of participants is deemed sufficient for a phenomenological study, which seeks depth and insight over breadth (Chamberlain, 2009; Todres & Galvin, 2005). A smaller sample size is also more manageable and allows for in-depth data analysis, ensuring that each participant's narrative is carefully considered. This sample size is considered adequate to reach thematic saturation, where no new themes are emerging from the data, thereby providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the central research question (Creswell, 2007; Guest et al., 2006). Demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1:** *Characteristics Of Participants*

| <b>Interviewee</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Nationality</b> | <b>Profession</b>        | <b>Selection criteria: TikTok users</b>                                 | <b>Interview Date</b> | <b>Interview Duration</b> |
|--------------------|---------------|------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| G.                 | F             | 27         | Italian            | Researcher in Psychology | Did research on LGBT representation on media – got interested in TikTok | 10.11.2023            | 35 mins.                  |
| A.                 | M             | 30         | Irish              | Project Manager          | Project Manager for a Brand that recently opened a TikTok account       | 15.11.2023            | 41 mins.                  |

| Interviewee | Gender | Age | Nationality | Profession   | Selection criteria: TikTok users | Interview Date | Interview Duration |
|-------------|--------|-----|-------------|--|----------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| C.          | F      | 28  | Italian     | Museum Curator                                       | Is a TikTok user.                | 18.11.2023     | 44 mins            |
| D.          | M      | 27  | Italian     | Researcher in Psychology                             | Is a TikTok user.                | 29.11.2023     | 23 mins            |
| E1.         | F      | 25  | Dutch       | Executive Assistant                                  | Is a TikTok user                 | 10.12.2023     | 19 mins            |
| E2          | F      | 29  | English     | Researcher in Communication                          | Doing research on TikTok.        | 16.12.2023     | 30 mins            |
| R           | F      | 25  | Hungarian   | Account Executive                                    | Is a TikTok user                 | 20.12.2023     | 28 mins            |
| I           | F      | 20  | Italian     | Law Student  | Is a TikTok user                 | 8.1.2024       | 50 mins            |
| S           | F      | 28  | Spanish     | Social Media Specialist                              | Uses TikTok for work             | 14.1.2024      | 21 mins            |
| M1          | F      | 29  | Colombian   | HR   | Is a TikTok user                 | 17.1.2024      | 40 mins            |
| F           | M      | 23  | Italian     | Biology Student                                      | Is a TikTok user                 | 21.1.2024      | 18 mins            |
| M2          | F      | 26  | Italian     | Strategic Insight Researcher in pharmaceutical field | Is a TikTok user                 | 1.2.2024       | 27 mins            |

#### 4.6 Data collection & procedures

To collect the data for this exploratory research, a meticulous data strategy was applied to delve into the intricate landscape of TikTok user experiences. The objective was to get insights into user behaviors, preferences, and perceptions by systematically exploring various aspects of their engagement with the platform. To establish a comprehensive

understanding, questions were designed starting from the chronology of users' experiences on TikTok, focusing on the duration and frequency of usage (Hargittai et al., 2010). This temporal framework provides a foundation for analyzing the evolution of user engagement over time. Furthermore, a thematic structure was employed to explore content interaction dynamics. This involved investigating the decision-making processes users employ when encountering content in their recommendations and whether intentional efforts are made to explore beyond their curated feed (Bucher, 2018; Sundar et al, 2010). The aim was to unravel the intricacies of content consumption patterns and user engagement strategies.

The impact of TikTok's algorithm and personalization features was another critical dimension explored (Gillespie, 2014). Questions were curated to discern the user's perception of how the algorithm influences societal perspectives and how TikTok strikes a balance between personalization and diverse viewpoints. Additionally, the strategy probed the user's awareness of potential biases in content recommendations, unraveling the underlying mechanics of algorithmic influence (Bucher, 2018; Noble, 2018). Delving into the realm of content diversity and personal growth, the data strategy sought to uncover intentional efforts by users to broaden their content consumption horizons. Through targeted inquiries, the study aimed to unveil instances where TikTok played a pivotal role in expanding users' perspectives and fostering the discovery of new interests.

Perceptions of TikTok's data practices were investigated, addressing the user's comfort level with data collection for personalization. This segment aimed to understand the delicate balance between the benefits of tailored content recommendations and users' privacy concerns (Acquisti et al., 2015; Dijk, 2014). The data strategy culminates in a holistic reflection and suggestion segment, allowing users to articulate their overall experiences, desires for operational enhancements, and any additional insights deemed pertinent to their interaction with TikTok's algorithm, content recommendations, and community interactions (Braun, Clarke, 2006).

Through this meticulously crafted data strategy, the subsequent questions aim to unravel the nuanced tapestry of TikTok user experiences, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the platform's impact on individuals and communities alike. In summary, these questions cover a broad spectrum of topics, ranging from users' initial experiences with TikTok to their reflections on algorithmic impact, content diversity, personal growth, data

practices, and suggestions for improvement. The discourse aims to capture the diverse and nuanced ways individuals engage with TikTok and navigate its algorithmic landscape (Bucher, 2018).

#### **4.7 Ethical Consideration**

All the participants gave informed consent, which covers their understanding of the study's goals, the voluntary nature of their participation, confidentiality guarantees, how their data would be managed, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. They also provided consent for the interview to be recorded, understanding that the gathered information would be solely used to comprehend their perspectives and contribute to this dissertation. Prior to commencing the interviews, each participant received comprehensive briefings on the study's primary objectives. The consent process was thorough to ensure that participants are fully aware of the study's scope and rights. To safeguard participants' confidentiality, the recordings, names, or any other identifying information remained strictly within the confines of the study. Through these measures, the research aimed to uphold the dignity and safety of all participants involved.

#### **4.8 Data Analysis**

Following the one-to-one interviews, during which audio recording was made, the sessions were subsequently transcribed *verbatim* to initiate a comprehensive analysis. It's crucial to highlight that the interviews were carried out in English to ensure universal accessibility of the data. After assessing various qualitative data analysis methodologies and aiming for rigorous analysis, this dissertation opted to utilise thematic analysis for interpreting the interviews (e.g., Lanneskog, 2023). Thematic analysis was chosen as it is deemed the most suitable technique for the subject matter at hand.

In the realm of analyzing interview data, the application of thematic analysis stands as a methodological choice that brings forth several advantages, adding depth and structure to the investigative process. Braun and Clarke (2006) provide one of the most lucid definitions found in methodological literature. They describe thematic analysis as a technique for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) in data (Lochmiller 2021). First and foremost, thematic analysis presents a flexible approach that seamlessly

adapts to the diverse nuances of qualitative data, rendering it a versatile and applicable method across various research contexts (Braun, Clarke, 2006)). It is a flexible and widely applicable tool, suitable for various research paradigms and disciplines (Herzog, 2019). The process typically involves coding and theme development, with an emphasis on the active role of the researcher (Clarke, 2017).

Lochmiller (2021) states that “When focused on interviews (...), thematic analysis presumes that the participant’s recollections have value that merits exploration, synthesis and intensive description” (p. 2030). Thematic analysis also serves as a powerful tool for uncovering inherent patterns and themes embedded within interview datasets (Naeem et al., 2023). In their research, Naeem et al. (2023), state that this capability goes beyond surface-level observations, allowing researchers to delve into the deepest shades of the content, thereby fostering a profound understanding of the narratives encapsulated within the interviews. Moreover, the structured nature of thematic analysis provides a methodical means to identify and interpret meaningful insights derived from interview transcripts. This organized approach enhances the interpretative process, enabling researchers to distill key themes and extract valuable meaning from the wealth of qualitative data (Dawadi, 2021).

Thematic analysis stands out not only for its flexibility but also for its compatibility with both deductive and exploratory approaches (Fereday et al., 2006). Whether researchers embark on deductive interviews with pre-established themes or undertake exploratory interviews to uncover unforeseen patterns, thematic analysis seamlessly accommodates both strategies, showcasing its versatility in data analysis (Bastrygina et al., 2024). In summation, in the context of this dissertation, the use of thematic analysis serves as a methodological cornerstone, providing a comprehensive and insightful lens through which to explore the intricacies of the interview data at hand.

Initially, the interview data was transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, all transcripts underwent a thorough review, being read twice to ensure a comprehensive understanding before the coding process commenced. Preliminary codes were developed and systematically organized into sub-themes. The final analysis identified three primary themes, each accompanied by sub-themes and substantiated with quotations from participants. These themes were named and structured in a final thematic tree, as outlined in the codebook provided in the appendix.

Interview schedules were carefully designed in a semi-structured format to delve into the participants' experiences, with the topics specifically informed by the research question. Upon completing the data collection, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed word-for-word using Amberscript (<https://www.amberscript.com/en/interview-transcription/>), and each transcription was manually checked to ensure accuracy. To protect participant confidentiality and maintain anonymity, all personal identifiers were removed from the transcripts.

## **Chapter V**

### **Results Presentation**

The upcoming section of this dissertation is dedicated to the exposition and assessment of the data procured through the interviews. This analysis plays a crucial role in addressing the primary research inquiries regarding the reasons why TikTok users engage with content beyond their AI-curated filter bubbles. The 'Findings' segment will present the assessed data, elucidating prevalent themes and noteworthy observations. Following this, the 'Discussion' segment will undertake a thorough examination of these findings, placing them within the broader context of existing literature and offering discerning insights into their implications. Thus, this segment endeavors to furnish a comprehensive understanding of the dissertation's research objectives and questions. The qualitative analysis of the interviews provided valuable insights into TikTok users' behaviors and attitudes regarding content discovery, diversity, and perceptions of the platform's algorithm. These insights shed light

on users' reasons to engage with content outside their AI-curated filter bubbles and how their interactions shape their TikTok experience.

## 5.1 Theme 1: Content Discovery and Interaction:

Content discovery and interaction refer to how users engage with content on TikTok, including how they find new content and their patterns of interaction. This theme explores the methods users employ to discover content, their engagement patterns, and their perceptions of TikTok's algorithm in curating their feed. This section is divided in three sub-topics, namely:

- Interaction on the app
- Passivity on the app
- Proactivity on the app.

### 5.1.1 Interaction on TikTok.

In examining how interviewees describe their interactive patterns on TikTok, the analysis will focus on user engagement activities such as liking, sharing, commenting, and following creators. Throughout the 12 interviews, several users have shared insights into their engagement behaviors on the app, providing a clear picture of the varying degrees of interaction.

Participants admit they like videos, like M1 and C:

*M1: I hit the **like button** when something really resonates with me or if I find it super informative or entertaining. As for sharing, I do that less often, but when I stumble upon something funny or particularly insightful, I'll **send it** to my friends. It's like my way of saying, "Hey, check this out, it's worth our time." (M1, female, 29 years old)*

*C: "Primarily, I **'like'** and share through direct messages; I rarely also share on other social networks, such as Instagram and Twitter." (C, female, 28)*

Interviewees M1, C, and M2 all engage actively with TikTok content, frequently using the 'like' feature. M1 also selectively share content that resonates, primarily through direct messages. Adding to this, M2 states:

**M2:** *I'm quite active with **liking, pinning, and sharing** content. I comment or follow creators less frequently though. (M2, female, 26)*

M2 also actively likes and shares, though she comments and follows creators less frequently. Their interactions show a pattern of thoughtful engagement with the content they find most compelling.

As opposed to M2, some interviewees, like F and I admit they follow creators.

**F:** *"I mainly just **'like'** videos. If I really enjoy a creator's content, I might **follow** them for more". (F, male, 23)*

**I:** *"I mostly **share and like**, sometimes I **save** contents but there are just a few creators that I **follow**. I **never leave comments**. I don't consider myself to be an active user to be honest." (I, female 20)*

Participants M1, C, and M2 are highly active, often liking and sharing content, with M2 being less inclined to comment or follow. In contrast, F and I demonstrate more selective engagement, with likes being frequent but follows reserved for creators who consistently deliver content they enjoy, reflecting a more reserved but targeted approach to interaction on the platform.

### **5.1.2 Passivity on the app.**

The second part of the content analysis focuses on the "passive" use and the "for you page" or also called "fyp". Interviewees M1, and S mentioned using the app in a "passive" way and E, C and G the For You Page (FYP) as their primary method of discovering new content on TikTok. The focus on the "passive" use of TikTok, drawing on the insights provided by S and M1 from their interviews.

**S:** *"Honestly, I'm quite **passive** about it. I use the search bar if something specific comes to mind, but I don't go out of my way to find new content. I tend to let TikTok's algorithms do their thing and bring content to me, which is pretty much how I use other social media too." (S, female, 28)*

S presents a passive interaction with TikTok, describing her content discovery as largely algorithm driven. She says, "I tend to let TikTok's algorithms do their thing and **bring**

*content* to me," indicating a preference for a hands-off approach akin to other social media usage. S acknowledges this passive consumption as a "double-edged sword," suggesting it streamlines her experience by delivering content it predicts she will enjoy, yet simultaneously restricts her exposure to potentially inspiring content outside her regular browsing patterns. Interviewee M1 also emphasized passive scrolling through the FYP as their main method of content discovery. Stating:

**M1:** *"I pretty much go with the flow of the algorithm – it has its own rhythm, and I like the surprise element of not knowing what's going to pop up next. I **don't actively search**; I let the content find me. My usage of the app is quite like how I used to watch tv (I don't anymore), I would just watch what the channels offered and kind of **passively** stay there for a few hours. The only difference now is that tiktok, unlike tv, has a higher chance of showing me content I enjoy."* (M1, female, 29)

M1 echoes this sentiment of passive consumption, likening her TikTok use to her previous experience with traditional TV watching, "I would just watch what the channels offered." She embraces the unpredictability introduced by the algorithm's "own rhythm," enjoying the "surprise element." Yet, there's an acknowledgment of a shift in her content consumption behavior: TikTok, with its tailored feeds, has raised her expectations for immediate and personalized entertainment and information, reducing her tolerance for less engaging content.

This analysis delves into the subtleties of passive content discovery on TikTok, where we explore various facets of user engagement—or the lack thereof—with the platform's algorithmically generated content streams. Our assessment includes a close examination of users' interactions with the content that is presented to them and the frequency and intention behind those who venture beyond the algorithm's suggestions.

Users like S and M1 rely on TikTok's algorithm to curate their content feed, suggesting a high level of trust in the platform's content recommendation system. Passive users typically consume what is presented to them without actively seeking out new content, which may limit their exposure to diverse content and reinforce existing preferences. There is a transformative effect on users' expectations for entertainment and information gathering. M1 describes TikTok as a more immediate and personalized form of TV, shaping her

tolerance for content engagement. Users recognize the convenience offered by algorithmic selection but also the potential drawbacks, such as missed opportunities for discovery. This dual recognition by S suggests users are at least partially aware of the limitations of a passive consumption model.

In conclusion, passive use of TikTok, as exemplified by S and M1, reveals user interactions characterized by convenience and algorithmic trust, yet tinged with an awareness of potential content echo chambers. This nuanced consumption shapes their expectations and engagement with digital content, providing valuable insights into the passive user experience on the platform.

Incorporating the statements from E1 and C provides further insight into the nature of passive content discovery on TikTok, particularly in relation to the platform's For You Page (FYP).

E1: "*I **never tend to search** content up, whenever I scroll through my for you page it's where I find most of the new content.*" (E1, female, 25)

E1's admission of never actively searching for content and instead relying on the FYP aligns with a broader user behavior pattern where TikTok's algorithm plays a significant role in content delivery. This reliance underscores a confidence in the platform's ability to understand and cater to individual preferences. It is an implicit endorsement of TikTok's personalized curation system, suggesting that for users like E1, the platform has effectively replaced the need for active search with a stream of content that feels tailored and relevant.

When asked if C searches outside of her feed, she states:

C: "*It happens infrequently, but it does happen when I want to 'adjust' my algorithm and therefore insert content that rarely appears automatically - such as, for example, the title of a book I'm currently reading or an artist that I'm particularly interested in. Basically, I must say that I use the app somewhat **passively**, so I generally don't look beyond my feed.*"  
(C, female, 28)

This user, C, articulates a typical passive interaction with TikTok. She mentions that she rarely seeks out content beyond what is presented to her in the feed, indicating a reliance

on the platform's algorithm for content curation. When she does search, it is with the intention to "adjust" her algorithm, suggesting a reactive rather than proactive approach to content discovery. This adjustment is not a regular part of her TikTok usage but is done to introduce specific interests into her feed, like a current book she's reading or a particular artist she likes. Moreover, when asked what she meant exactly by "passively", she replied:

*C: "Let's say I open the app and scroll for an indefinite amount of time. Sometimes I don't even like, I just watch. I'm not active in the sense that I rarely comment or, indeed, search in the search bar." (C, female, 28)*

C's description of passivity – opening the app and scrolling indefinitely, often without liking or commenting, and rarely using the search function – fits well within the theme of passiveness. It highlights a user behavior characterized by low engagement, where the app's ease of consumption encourages users to view content without actively interacting with it. This passiveness is indicative of a user experience designed for ease and entertainment, where the algorithm effectively anticipates user preferences, thereby reducing the need or motivation to actively search for new content.

In the evolving discussion of passive content consumption on TikTok, G's perspective offers additional substantiation to the prevalent user behavior patterns.

**G:** "I hardly ever set out to look for new content on TikTok. It simply *comes on its own on my fyp*. It's like it knows what I need at the right time". (G, female, 27)

This statement from G reinforces the trust users place in the TikTok algorithm's capacity to deliver content that not only resonates with their preferences but also arrives at a seemingly opportune moment. The phenomenon G describes encapsulates the essence of TikTok's algorithmic precision in anticipating user needs, suggesting a level of personalization that transcends active searching. G's experience suggests that the algorithm not only understands user preferences but also has the ability to predict and fulfill content desires before the user explicitly recognizes them. This predictive aspect of content curation could be seen as the zenith of passive content consumption, where users are not just passive recipients of content but also passive participants in the selection process.

### 5.1.3 Proactivity on the app.

In contrast to the passive consumption habits where users like M1 and S primarily absorb what the algorithm presents, a distinct trend of proactive engagement with TikTok surfaces. Participants like A and M2 exhibit a more active role in content discovery. A articulates this by highlighting his dual approach: he encounters new content incidentally on his 'For You Page' (FYP) and, notably, by deliberately seeking out information in areas pertinent to his professional aspirations, such as music and job-hunting tips.

*A: I find new content either randomly on my **fyp** or **according to the field I want to know more** about (music and professional growth mostly), because at the moment I am searching for a job and I find it useful for my intention. (A, male, 30)*

M2. echoes this sentiment. M2. states that while she usually follows the recommendations on her FYP, she also ventures into the 'hot topics' section, and uses hashtags to deepen her exploration when her interest is sparked.

*M2.: “I tend to stick to the 'For You Page' recommendations, but I also like to **dive into the 'hot topics' section** occasionally. And when something catches my interest, I'll use **hashtags to discover** more about it.” (M2, female, 26)*

This illustrates a blend of passive and active discovery, indicating that TikTok's algorithm serves as both a curator and a launchpad for user-driven content exploration. Adding to the narrative of proactive content discovery on TikTok, I. offers another dimension by describing her method of finding new content, which includes a combination of following favored creators and receiving recommendations from friends.

*I.: “I just know there's a few creators that I like, so I just **look for them** to see their new videos. My **friends also send me a lot of videos**, most of them are funny videos but they also send me contents that I might like based on what I'm interested in, like recipes, fashion or TV series. In general, most of the time my feed shows me videos that align with what I like to watch.” (I, female, 20)*

This demonstrates a personalized curation that extends beyond the algorithm, relying on social connections and personal interests to guide her exploration. This active yet

selective approach to content discovery shows that for some users, like I, the recommendation algorithm is just one of several sources that contribute to their TikTok experience.

## **5.2 Theme 2: Influence of Algorithmic Personalization on User Perspective:**

The exploration of TikTok's role in shaping user perspectives through content curation forms a theme rich with complexity. In this realm, we examine the duality of user experience — how the algorithm's echo of personal interests intersects with its capacity to introduce novel ideas and viewpoints. This theme scrutinizes the tension between comfortable familiarity and the potential growth stemming from diverse content encounters. It also reflects on the user's journey from passive content consumption to active exploration, alongside their evolving relationship with the platform's data practices. Through this lens, the research aims to understand the delicate balance TikTok maintains in personalizing user experience while fostering a broadened worldview. This analysis is divided in three sub-topics, namely:

- Algorithmic Reflection of Interests
- Exposure to New Ideas
- Cultural and Societal Norms

### **5.2.1 Algorithmic Reflection of Interests.**

This sub-theme aims to better understand how the algorithm understands and reflects users' interests and the degree to which users find personalized content relevant and engaging.

*S: "I'm really into cooking videos—there's this one account @gabbriette she's amazing. I also enjoy watching vlogs, outfit videos, and definitely marketing-related content because of my job. It's a mix that keeps me both **entertained and informed.**" (S, female, 28)*

S diverse interests, ranging from cooking videos to marketing content, are seamlessly catered to by TikTok's algorithm, highlighting its capability to blend entertainment with valuable information tailored specifically to her preferences. When asked E about her “fyp”,

in which she states that she gets shown mostly “Foodtok! All kinds of videos on recepies, taste tests, supermarket hauls.”, she also states, when asked about how she believes that the algorithm reflects her interests: “It’s incredible. The **app knows me better than I know myself.**” E's enthusiasm for the culinary-focused content dominating her "For You Page" underscores the remarkable precision of TikTok's algorithm in aligning with her interests, showcasing its ability to curate content that resonates deeply on a personal level.

G: *"I think TikTok is almost **excellent at understanding what my interests are.** The times it gets it wrong is actually more my fault, because maybe I linger on videos that I'm not fundamentally interested in, but at that moment make me think 'what the hell am I watching' and perhaps make me laugh."* (G, female, 27)

This acknowledgment highlights the interactive nature of TikTok's algorithm, suggesting that even accidental engagement with content can steer the personalized feed, sometimes adding a layer of unpredictability and humor to the user's experience.

### 5.2.2 Exposure to New Ideas.

This sub-theme is about the algorithm’s role in challenging users’ preconceptions by introducing them to new topics, communities, hobbies or perspectives they hadn’t considered or encountered before. In discussing the influence of TikTok's algorithm on expanding her cultural exposure, G recalls how her engagement with the app has serendipitously broadened her musical preferences:

G: *Maybe the only thing that comes to mind is about music. Sometimes I come across videos with **songs** that I might not be too excited about initially, or maybe they are from artists I don't listen to and don't like, but after hearing and re-hearing them on TikTok, they **end up in my playlist.*** (G, female, 27)

Similarly, F and M2 recall times in which they were introduced to new areas of interests:

F: *I got **curious about live streaming platforms** and ended up discovering some Twitch content creators through TikTok. It started with a clip from a streamer who was also into anime, and from there, I found myself exploring more of their content on Twitch. I guess*

*what prompts me to look beyond my usual interests is seeing someone passionate about their niche. And if they've got a good vibe or offer something that can add to my usual interests or my studies, even better. So now, I'm following a couple of Twitch streamers, and it's cool to see the live interaction and get a different type of content and community engagement". (F, male, 23)*

**M2:** *"Well, my fyp showed me not too long ago a few videos about **punch needle**, and I thought it was really cute. I enjoyed it to the point that I bought a kit, however I tried it once and wasn't any good at it so just left it, at least for now". (M2, female, 26)*

F's curiosity about live streaming led to discovering Twitch streamers via TikTok, showcasing how engaging content and community passion can expand a user's interests into new platforms and hobbies. Similarly, M2 was inspired by punch needle videos on her FYP to try out the craft, reflecting TikTok's role in sparking new personal endeavors, even if they're just a fleeting experiment.

### **5.2.3 Cultural and Societal Norms.**

This sub-theme aims to understand the way algorithmically amplified content may reinforce or reshape users' perceptions of societal and cultural norms, potentially affecting real-world perspectives and actions. As we delve into the impact of TikTok's algorithms on users' perceptions of societal and cultural norms, it's enlightening to observe how this technological influence varies from person to person. The interviews provide a window into this phenomenon, revealing diverse interactions with the app and how these experiences might reinforce or challenge personal viewpoints.

Participant I. states that the algorithm "**strengthens** my ideas on important topics, which involve societal and cultural norms. Most of the videos about societal norms just tend to make my ideas stronger." Moreover, R states about the algorithm:

**R:** *"I feel like it **influences my perception of society**. Often, I'm exposed to content that belongs to certain categories, like, let's say, feminism but it's so much more extreme than my basic knowledge on the topic, so I learn, and it **broadens** my perception." (R, female,*

*25)*

R's interaction with TikTok's content, particularly within topics like feminism, challenges and extends her understanding of societal issues, pushing the boundaries of her knowledge and contributing to a more nuanced perception of such movements. Moreover, interviewee G expresses satisfaction with TikTok's algorithm, which appears to echo their worldview. They appreciate how it reinforces their perspective and filters out content they disagree with, like political propaganda from the Italian right. While acknowledging this may limit exposure to alternative viewpoints, they prefer content that aligns with their beliefs over content they dislike.

*G: "I think TikTok's algorithm aligns closely with my worldview. It's as if it somehow **confirms** this vision I have and doesn't leave too much room for anything else. Which, from certain points of view, could be negative because it might deprive you of other perspectives. But honestly, I don't think I would ever watch videos on, for example, the political propaganda of the Italian right, because they have values that do not belong to me. Overall, I am satisfied with having videos that mirror my vision of the world, rather than having to endure content I despise." (G, female, 27)*

The excerpt explores how TikTok's algorithm shapes users' perceptions of societal and cultural norms. I. believes it makes her ideals stronger, whereas R. finds that exposure to content, especially on topics like feminism, broadens their understanding and challenges their views. On the other hand, G feels satisfied with the algorithm as it aligns with their worldview, filtering out content they disagree with, even though it may limit exposure to alternative perspectives. Both perspectives illustrate how algorithmically amplified content influences users' perceptions and interactions with societal norms. G also stated:

*G: If we're only ever seeing things that line up with what we already believe, it could lead to what we call an 'echo chamber.' This has the potential to **reduce our exposure** to different ideas, which might narrow our cognitive flexibility over time. We need a bit of challenge, something to push against our existing notions to keep our minds agile and open. While TikTok's algorithm is great for personalizing content, it does raise questions about how it might **reinforce** our biases instead of challenging them. I think we have to be proactive about seeking out diverse perspectives to really maintain our cognitive flexibility and openness. It's about finding a balance.(G, female, 27)*

G cautions that a TikTok feed filled only with familiar beliefs may create an 'echo chamber,' limiting exposure to new ideas and potentially diminishing cognitive flexibility. She advocates for the value of being challenged to keep the mind open and agile, suggesting users should actively seek varied perspectives to counteract the reinforcing nature of the algorithm and ensure a balanced viewpoint. Another interesting input, is from M1 who compared TikTok to how she used to watch TV

**M1:** *“It’s kind of **reshaped** the way I see what’s 'in' right now. On TV, you’re stuck with whatever’s scheduled, but TikTok throws at me what’s trending right this second and what I’m most likely to enjoy. I realize I’m definitely more aware of what’s happening in pop culture compared to maybe people outside of the platform. Socializing with friends that are not on TikTok make me realize that, which is kind of strange because I end up having to explain things to them all the time.” (M1, female, 29)*

Participant M1's experience with TikTok has altered her perception of current trends, providing her with a stream of real-time, trending content tailored to her interests. This personalized feed has heightened her awareness of pop culture, sometimes making her the explainer of trends to her friends who aren't on the platform, signifying a distinctive cultural insight fostered by TikTok's immediacy and curation. M1 also adds:

**M1:** *It’s a bit like living in a well-decorated **bubble**. You get to see the most polished, fun parts of life, which can be uplifting but also a bit misleading. This beautified view of society on TikTok makes everything seem more vibrant and livelier. It can raise your expectations for your own life, maybe a little unrealistically at times. And as for cultural trends, it sort of **amplifies** the flashier ones while the quieter, maybe deeper cultural shifts might not get as much airtime. It’s easy to start thinking that what you see on TikTok is all there is, which obviously isn't the case. It’s something I try to be mindful of, especially in my field where understanding the nuances of people and cultures really matters. (M1, female, 29)*

M1 notes that TikTok offers a real-time, personalized view of trends, enhancing her pop culture awareness, but she also cautions that the platform may present a polished bubble that overemphasizes certain trends, potentially skewing her perception of reality. She

remains mindful of this, especially as it pertains to her professional life where a broader cultural understanding is important.

### **5.3 Theme 3: Content Diversity, Personal Growth and Data Privacy Concerns**

In exploring the multifaceted landscape of digital interactions, Theme 3 delves into a pivotal triad of issues: Content Diversity, Personal Growth, and Data Privacy Concerns. This theme unpacks the intricate ways in which the variety of content that users encounter influences their personal development and raises critical questions about the safeguarding of their personal information. As we dissect this theme, we will consider the delicate balance between the benefits of exposure to diverse information and the imperative of protecting individual data privacy, all while fostering personal growth within digital ecosystems. This theme will be divided in sub-topics:

- Diversity of Content
- Diverse Viewpoints
- Impact on Identity and Personal Growth
- Privacy vs. Personalization Trade-off.

#### **5.3.1 Diversity of Content.**

This sub-topics touches upon how users perceive the variety of content on TikTok and the extent to which it fosters a diverse view of the world. The concept of "Diversity of Content and Viewpoints" examines not only how users perceive the variety of content on TikTok but also their propensity to actively seek out content beyond their 'For You Page' (FYP). It explores whether the platform encourages discovery that broadens their worldview and if users take the initiative to diversify their content consumption, stepping out of their algorithmically curated comfort zones. A states that:

*A: "Sure. There was this one time when my feed was just swamped with content related to job hunting and CV tips, which was helpful, but it became **too much**. I needed a break. I was motivated to look for something more creative, something to inspire me. So, I went*

*searching for travel vlogs from countries I'd love to visit one day. I think the monotony of my feed at that time just made me crave something different, something to spark a sense of adventure and take me away from the stress of job searching.” (A, male, 30)*

C: “(...) It gets a bit **repetitive**, so I tend to **look for maybe slightly different videos**, like about cooking, another TV series, or a makeup technique. I search for those terms and interact with those videos by liking or commenting, as a way to tell the algorithm that I want to see more varied content. It's a bit like giving a new direction to the compass of my preferences”. (C, female, 28)

A and C both experienced a saturation with their TikTok feeds, which motivated them to proactively search for content that differed from their usual feed to refresh their experience and introduce variety. To this, M2 adds:

**M2:** *Yes, I do look for content outside my feed, especially when I'm curious about something new or when I feel like I need to **shake things up** a bit, depending on my mood.*  
(M2, female, 26)

A, C, and M2 all share a common behavior of stepping beyond the content that TikTok's algorithm automatically serves them. When their feeds become too monotonous or overly focused on a single theme, they take proactive steps to diversify their content consumption. A seeks inspiration through travel vlogs, C looks for new topics like cooking or makeup to give a new direction to their feed preferences, and M2 searches for fresh content based on curiosity or the desire for change. This illustrates a conscious effort by users to venture outside their algorithmic recommendations in search of a more varied and personalized TikTok experience.

Another point of view, is searching for something specific when/if needed. For instance:

R: “I mainly use the **search option** when I have a **specific** recipe in my I want to try it, or for instance I'm going abroad and I want to check recommendations for it.” (R, female, 25)

R states that the app is good for recommendations for travelling, like restaurants, shops and so on and how it is an important part for planning trips. R adds:

R: *“Actually, TikTok has a pretty big say in my plans, especially when I’m **travelling**. Like this one time, I was heading to Rome, and I found this cozy little pizza place on TikTok, and it wasn’t super popular or anything, kinda hidden but the video sold it to me—the vibe, the pizza, it all just looked great. It was very traditional.”* (R, female, 25)

Whilst R speaks about looking something up for travelling, S also touches upon the “specific” type of research. S says:

S: *But sometimes I go on the search bar, especially when I’m on the hunt for **something specific**, like new recipes or when I need help with software. (...) Oh, yes. Always marketing oriented, but there was this one time I really wanted to get to grips with a **particular** Figma feature for a project I was working on. I ended up finding this whole community on TikTok that shares tips and tricks. It was super helpful. But also, recently, a coffee that was viral on tiktok during the pandemic came to my mind, and I searched how to do it.”* (S, female, 28)

Adding to R and S, also I admits to search for something specific.

I: *“A few days ago, I looked for an Italian guy who is a monologist. I looked for his videos because he’s gonna perform in a theatre in my hometown and I was undecided about whether to buy a ticket for the show or not. (...) I don’t normally look up things if not for an event to see if it’s worth the money. **I like to see what the event is all about** before spending the money.”* (I, female, 20)

R, S, and I utilize TikTok's search feature for specific inquiries, demonstrating a targeted use of the app. R consults the app for travel tips like discovering local dining spots, acknowledging its influence on her travel plans. S uses the search bar for practical needs, such as learning new software skills or recipes, even tapping into niche communities for advice. I, similarly, searches for performances by a particular monologist to inform her decision on attending a show, indicating the platform's utility in aiding decision-making for events. This behavior shows that users actively use TikTok as a resource for practical, real-world activities, highlighting the platform’s role beyond entertainment.

### 5.3.2 Diverse Viewpoints.

The theme of "Diverse Viewpoints" on TikTok explores the array of perspectives users encounter and whether the platform's content encourages a broadened worldview. It examines users' active engagement with the app, particularly their pursuit of new topics beyond their usual content feed, to understand how TikTok may facilitate or limit exposure to varied ideas and cultures. Regarding different viewpoints, C and S state:

C: *"I think the algorithm is quite consistent; it doesn't show me **ideals that do not belong to me.**"* (C, female, 28)

S: *"To be honest, I **don't have much diversity** on my "fyp". My feed is mostly the same, showing me things I'm into, like marketing or food".* (S, female, 28)

M2: *"(...) Considering my own fyp, I mostly just see **things that I like or could like.**"* (M2, female, 26)

R: *"My algorithm is a bit repetitive, so I'm **not sure if it introduces diverse viewpoints.**"* (R, female, 25)

C, S, R and M2 all indicate that TikTok's algorithm serves them content that aligns with their existing interests and preferences, suggesting a lack of diversity in their feeds. They describe an experience where the content they encounter is consistent with their likes and does not often introduce conflicting viewpoints or unfamiliar ideals, indicating that the algorithm reinforces their current preferences rather than challenging them with a broad spectrum of content. Also, M2 mentions how they don't get much variety in the content they usually enjoy, such as get ready with me (or grwm) videos. Stating:

M2: *"For instance, most of the grwm videos are white girls from clearly a high-up social class, so I wonder what I'm missing out since I never get any sort of diversity?"* (M2, female, 26)

M2 notes a homogeneity in 'get ready with me' videos, mainly featuring affluent white girls, prompting her to question the diversity and inclusivity of the content presented by TikTok's algorithm.

### 5.3.3 Impact on Identity and Personal Growth

This sub-theme tries to understand TikTok's influence on users' self-expression and identity exploration, including the role of content in sparking new hobbies, interests, or social connections. This concept examines the ways in which the platform's content influences users' self-expression, fosters new hobbies and interests, and facilitates the formation of social connections, contributing to the shaping of their identity.

A. discussed how TikTok's content on professional growth and music production matched his interests, pointing to a personalization that reflects existing passions rather than expanding them, stating: "I find new content (...) according to the field I want to know more about (music and professional growth mostly)". I. conveyed a similar sentiment, stating that while the app's recommendations align with her interests, they don't challenge her perspectives or significantly broaden her horizons. I stated: "I get different content, but it's all content that I'm into. So, in terms of content diversity or different perspectives, I don't think offers much."

The topic of finding community on TikTok is introduced through F's experience with the app, where they discovered new anime content and connected with a community that resonates with their interests.

*F: "I've been exposed to a lot of new anime content and found a community that shares my interests." (F, male, 23)*

On the other hand, C. noted that TikTok's algorithm doesn't diversify her content significantly but slowly introduces new elements that could lead to new obsessions, showing a gradual impact on her interests.

*C: "I am often influenced, especially when it comes to fashion. I see content creators who are not afraid to 'dare' with clothes, so I feel quite inspired by them to dare." (C, female, 28)*

Similarly, **M2** was impacted fashion-wise, stating:

**M2:** *“I see things, like shoes that maybe I would’ve never thought were nice, but sometimes the repeated content does works on me. There was a pair of Dr. Martens that I thought were a bit ugly, but now I’m even thinking of buying.” (M2, female, 26)*

**C** and **M2** express how TikTok subtly shapes their fashion choices; **C** finds inspiration in creators who experiment boldly with their attire, while **M2**’s views on certain styles, like Dr. Martens shoes, evolved from repeated exposure to content featuring them. Both reflect a gradual influence of TikTok content on their personal style preferences. **G** reflects on TikTok's role in influencing consumer behavior and affirming her sense of identity, as the platform often introduces her to new products and resonates with her personal experiences.

**G:** *“It definitely has some sort of impact, for example, in introducing me to new things to buy – like clothes or things for the house lol. But in general, rather than feeling an impact on my identity, I feel more validated in my identity. For instance, when I hear people talk about their own lives, and maybe they mention something that is similar to an experience of mine, I feel less alone.” (G, female, 27)*

**G** finds TikTok influential in suggesting new items to buy and feels the platform validates their identity by connecting them with content that mirrors their experiences, reducing feelings of isolation.

### **5.3.4 Privacy vs. Personalization Trade-off.**

This theme explores the perspectives of users who are comfortable with TikTok's balance between personalization and privacy. It focuses on those who prefer the platform's curated content experience, seeing the personal data exchange as an acceptable trade-off for the convenience and familiarity of their content feeds. These users often view the personalized environment as their digital comfort zone, indicating a trust in TikTok’s data management and a satisfaction with the platform as it currently operates.

Regarding whether the participants are comfortable or not with data used to personalized content, S says they're quite comfortable, adding that "At the end of the day, that's what all social media platforms do". R. share that they are okay with it, stating that it's the main reason why they enjoy their content. Stating also: "I'm happy that the algorithm somehow take care of it and doesn't give videos that are not at all related to my interests". On the other hand, participant I. define themselves as scared because of the accuracy of the algorithm.

**I:** *"I'm a little bit scared about this feature but until now it was pretty accurate." (I, female, 20)*

But adds, that they enjoy content they are shown and wouldn't enjoy it as much if it wasn't tailored to their own likings.

**I:** *"I would say I would like to see different content, but then again, my fyp is so customized to my own liking, that I don't see the point of requiring content that just not match with who I am. (...) I'm there to relax and see the content I already know I enjoy."*

Similarly, when asked about data practices, C. states that they are very much in favour of sharing data and states: "I'm very comfortable with the app. I like that my algorithm already knows what might interest me, it makes me feel in my comfort zone. That's kind of what I look for, since I use the app as a source of entertainment and to relax after a working day. (...) Personally, I don't want material that doesn't align with my ideals. I would end up not opening the app anymore." The interviewee, I. expresses a slight concern about TikTok's data usage, unlike C. who is comfortable with it, however both value the personalized content it provides, emphasizing comfort and relevance to personal tastes over content diversity. The user prioritizes a tailored experience that aligns with their identity and relaxation needs, indicating a willingness to trade data privacy for the convenience of a customized content feed. When asked about data collection practices, M2 states:

**M2:** *I have to admit, I'm not too keen on it. I value my privacy a lot, so the idea that my data is being used to tailor content does make me a bit uncomfortable. (M2, female, 26)*

This response from the interviewee M2 introduces a viewpoint of discomfort regarding TikTok's data collection practices. M2 values privacy and expresses unease with

the idea of personal data being utilized to curate content, highlighting a concern over how much of their information is being used and for what purposes. In response to questions about TikTok’s data personalization, the interviewee E expresses discomfort with the platform's data collection methods. They indicate that a more transparent system that explains the reasoning behind content recommendations could potentially make them more receptive to exploring a broader range of content, stating: if I know why it’s suggesting something different, I might give it a chance, especially if there's a good reason behind it. Transparency could definitely be a game-changer”. E suggests that understanding the rationale behind diverse content suggestions could pique their curiosity and openness to engage with new types of videos, hinting that transparency from TikTok might alter their content consumption behavior.

**Table 2:** Themes & Examples from Interviews

| <b>Theme</b>                                       | <b>Definition</b>  | <b>Example</b>  |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Themes from TikTok User Interviews</b>          | This table categorizes and defines the main themes identified from the qualitative analysis of TikTok user interviews, with examples provided to illustrate typical responses. |   |
| <b>1. Content Discovery and Interaction</b>        |  |   |
| <b>1.1 Interaction on TikTok</b>                   | Refers to how users actively engage with content on TikTok, including liking, sharing, commenting, and following creators.   | <i>"I hit the like button when something really resonates with me or if I find it super informative or entertaining."</i>                             |
| <b>1.2 Passivity on TikTok</b>                     | Captures user behaviors characterized by a passive approach to content consumption, relying on TikTok's algorithm to serve content without actively searching for new content. | <i>"I just go with the flow of the algorithm – it has its own rhythm and I like the surprise element of not knowing what's going to pop up next."</i> |
| <b>1.3 Proactivity on TikTok</b>                   | Involves users actively searching for content or exploring new topics, going beyond the algorithm's suggestions.   | <i>"I search for content related to music and professional growth because I'm looking for a job and find it useful."</i>                              |
| <b>2. Influence of Algorithmic Personalization</b> |  |   |

| <b>Theme</b>   | <b>Definition</b>   | <b>Example</b>   |
|--|---|--|
| <b>2.1 Algorithmic Reflection of Interests</b>                 | How well users feel the TikTok algorithm reflects their interests and curates content that resonates with them.             | <i>"The app knows me better than I know myself."</i>   |
| <b>2.2 Exposure to New Ideas</b>                               | Instances where the algorithm introduces users to new topics, hobbies, or perspectives that they hadn't encountered before. | <i>"I got curious about live streaming platforms and ended up discovering some Twitch content creators through TikTok."</i>  |
| <b>2.3 Cultural and Societal Norms</b>                         | How TikTok's algorithmic curation reinforces or challenges users' perceptions of societal and cultural norms.               | <i>"TikTok's algorithm aligns closely with my worldview. It confirms this vision I have and doesn't leave much room for anything else."</i>  |
| <b>3. Content Diversity, Personal Growth, and Data Privacy</b> |   |  |
| <b>3.1 Diversity of Content</b>                                | The variety of content available on TikTok and how it contributes to a diverse or narrow view of the world.                 | <i>"My feed became too monotonous with job hunting content, so I searched for travel vlogs to refresh my experience."</i>  |
| <b>3.2 Diverse Viewpoints</b>                                  | What users see that differs from what they already know.  | <i>"I think TikTok should definitely work on diversifying the algorithm a bit more."</i>   |
| <b>3.3 Impact on Identity and Personal Growth</b>              | How TikTok influences users' self-expression, hobbies, and identity.  | <i>"I see things, like shoes that maybe I would've never thought were nice, but sometimes the repeated content does works on me. There was a pair of Dr. Martens that I thought were a bit ugly, but now I'm even thinking of buying."</i> |
| <b>3.4 Privacy vs. Personalization Trade-off</b>               | User perceptions of the trade-off between privacy concerns and the benefits of personalized content on TikTok.              | <i>"I'm a little bit scared about the accuracy of the algorithm, but I do enjoy the content it shows me."</i>  |

## Chapter VI

### Discussion

In light of the data collected from interviews, this chapter seeks to provide a deeper analysis and interpretation of the findings relevant to our study and contrast them with the previous existing literature. The research embarked on an inquiry into the propensities of TikTok users to find out what are the reasons why they interact with content beyond their algorithmically-curated filter bubbles. The intention was to uncover the extent of user engagement with diverse content that transcends the boundaries of personalized recommendation systems.

The discussion is organized into two distinct sub-sections. The initial segment addresses observations that, while not directly answering the research question, unveil important aspects that can contribute to a holistic understanding of user behavior on TikTok. These insights encompass various themes, from exposure to new ideas to the trade between privacy and personalization, to cultural and societal norms on the app. We present a rich comparative analysis that bridges our empirical data with existing theoretical frameworks by weaving these findings with the literature review.

Subsequently, the latter section honed in on the core research question, examining under what circumstances TikTok users are willing to seek out content outside their AI-curated filter bubbles. This exploration delves into the dynamics between user-curated

exploration and algorithmic recommendations, assessing how these mechanisms influence users' content engagement patterns. It investigates the factors that may encourage or deter users from stepping outside their comfort zones.

Throughout this discourse, the aim is to shed light on the complex interplay between users' content engagement behaviors and the technological affordances of TikTok's recommendation algorithms. By juxtaposing our findings with academic literature, is to contribute to a wider understanding of the digital ecosystem's influence on information consumption and the potential for fostering a more inclusive and varied content landscape.

## **6.1 Contextual Insights.**

By exploring user behavior on TikTok offers a unique window into the complex interplay between technology and individual agency within digital spaces. Although the main purpose of this research focuses on answering certain questions regarding users' interaction with content prepared by means of algorithmic curation, the research has also less central queries that are nevertheless critical to the understanding of the underlying dynamics of the platform. These observations consist of how people feel about the balancing act between privacy and personalization offered by the app or, what new ideas are introduced to people, what is the level of assimilation to the new app and how does it impact the social frameworks.

This introductory section seeks to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive analysis by integrating these varied insights with existing literature. Its purpose is to enhance the knowledge by locating the results of this study into context of existing theoretical frameworks. Therefore, through this comparative approach, the present study enables a better understanding of the users of TikTok, highlighting not only the direct responses to the research questions but also the broader contextual factors that influence these interactions. In this case, it demonstrates a richer narrative that represents the complexity of how users are more engaged in TikTok, offering valuable perspectives that extend beyond the immediate scope of algorithmic interactions.

The findings reveal varied interaction patterns among TikTok users, from active engagement to passive consumption. This mirrors theoretical discussions presented in the

literature review, particularly surrounding user agency in algorithmic environments. Authors like Gillespie (2017) and van Dijck (2018) discuss how algorithms shape user experiences by selectively presenting content, which corresponds with the interview insights showing that while some users actively seek content beyond their algorithmically curated feeds, others largely consume what is presented.

Participants like M1 and C demonstrate active interaction through liking, sharing, and sometimes following creators. These behaviors reflect a conscious engagement with the content that resonates with them, highlighting the users' selective nature in their interactions. M1's description of selectively liking and sharing content that is "super informative or entertaining" indicates an active curation of their TikTok feed, aligning with Gruber et al.'s (2023) concept of users shaping algorithmic outcomes through deliberate actions.

Conversely, users like F and I exhibit more selective engagement, primarily liking videos but only occasionally following creators. This selective interaction points to a targeted approach to content consumption, where users engage deeply with content they find particularly valuable. The varying degrees of interaction highlight the complexity of user behavior on TikTok, where engagement is not uniform but tailored to individual preferences and content value. This behavior can be related to the concept of "networked individualism" described by Rainie and Wellman (2012), where users navigate digital networks based on personal interests and social ties, rather than passively accepting all content presented by algorithms. The varying degrees of interaction highlight the complexity of user behavior on TikTok, where engagement is not uniform but tailored to individual preferences and content value.

While examining the varied user interactions on TikTok provides valuable insights into how individuals engage with content, it is also critical to explore the deeper implications of these interactions on personal identity and growth. The algorithms that curate user experiences on TikTok do more than just filter content; they also play a pivotal role in shaping online identities and behaviors, acting as cultural entities that embed societal norms and values within the digital ecosystem. The role of algorithms in shaping online identities and behaviors is a significant theme in the literature. Algorithms act as cultural entities that influence social interactions and identity formation. Seaver (2017) argues that algorithms are not mere technical artifacts but are imbued with cultural values and practices, thus

shaping the way individuals interact and perceive themselves. Striphas (2015) also discusses the concept of "algorithmic culture," where cultural values and human practices are encoded into algorithms, thereby influencing social behavior and identity formation. This was evident in the interviews, where participants like A and I discussed how TikTok's content aligns with their existing interests in music production and professional growth. While this personalization is appreciated, it does not significantly challenge their perspectives or broaden their horizons. This aligns with Cheney-Lippold's (2011) concept of "algorithmic identity," where users are categorized and provided with content that aligns with these predefined identities, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and potentially reinforcing existing biases.

Participants like F and G found community and validation on TikTok through shared interests, such as anime content for F and relatable personal experiences for G. This mirrors the literature's discussion on the importance of platforms in forming social connections and validating identities (Boccia Artieri et al., 2017). The sense of community and validation found by these users is consistent with Prey's (2017) assertion that user interactions with online media create precise consumer data that help platforms target and tailor content more accurately, thus reinforcing user identities and social connections.

Participants C and M2's experiences with fashion content on TikTok also highlight how repeated exposure to certain styles can influence personal fashion choices, indicating a subtle but notable impact on personal growth and identity exploration. This reflects the findings of Bucher (2018), who discusses how algorithmically curated content can shape user preferences and behaviors over time, subtly influencing their identities and choices. The exploration of how TikTok algorithms shape personal identities and social interactions naturally leads to a discussion on another critical aspect of digital engagement: the balance between privacy and personalization. As users navigate the benefits of personalized content, they simultaneously confront the privacy implications inherent in the data practices that make such personalization possible. This trade-off between privacy and personalized experiences is a prominent theme both in scholarly discussions and within the insights gathered from user interviews.

The trade-off between privacy and personalization is a significant theme in both the literature and the interview findings. According to the literature, platforms leverage vast

amounts of user data to create personalized experiences, raising concerns about data privacy and algorithmic sovereignty. Amore (2017), Lustig (2016), and Reviglio (2020) discuss how the power of algorithms in shaping user experiences also raises issues of privacy and data control. This theme was echoed in the interviews, where participants like S and R expressed comfort with the personalized content provided by TikTok, viewing it as a fair exchange for their data. However, participants like I and M2 expressed discomfort with the extent of data collection and its implications for privacy, reflecting the ongoing tension between enjoying personalized content and concerns over data misuse. This aligns with Hamilton's (2014) findings on user awareness of algorithmic influence and the need for greater transparency and regulation in algorithmic practices to ensure user trust and protect privacy (Bozdag, 2013).

While the trade-off between privacy and personalization is a fundamental concern for TikTok users, another equally critical issue emerges from the ways algorithms shape user experiences—namely, the creation of filter bubbles. This phenomenon, where algorithms enhance user engagement by presenting primarily agreeable or familiar content, raises significant questions about the diversity of exposure and the breadth of information that users encounter on digital platforms. The literature extensively discusses the concept of algorithmic sovereignty and its impact on user behavior and information exposure. Algorithms have the power to shape human actions and control the flow of information, often leading to filter bubbles and echo chambers that reinforce existing biases (Pariser, 2011; Bruns, 2019). For example, Pariser (2011) illustrates how personalized algorithms on platforms like Facebook and Google create a "unique universe of information for each of us," which fundamentally alters our exposure to diverse ideas and information. This personalized filtering results in users being trapped in echo chambers where they predominantly encounter information that aligns with their existing beliefs, thus narrowing their worldview and reducing the likelihood of encountering opposing or novel viewpoints.

This phenomenon was observed in the interviews, where participants like C and S noted the repetitive nature of their content feeds, which consistently align with their interests without introducing diverse viewpoints. Participant C mentioned how the algorithm is consistent as it seems as if it doesn't show ideals that do not belong, while participant S shares that they don't have much diversity on the 'fyp'. And that their feed is mostly the

same showing them material they're into. These statements align with the literature's findings on algorithmic influence and its tendency to reinforce existing preferences and biases (Bozdag, 2013). Furthermore, the concept of filter bubbles and their societal implications is highlighted by Bozdag (2013), who discusses how personalized content can lead to a lack of exposure to diverse viewpoints, thereby reinforcing existing biases and potentially fostering polarization. This was also reflected in the interview with M2, who noted a lack of variety in the content she enjoys, such as 'get ready with me' (GRWM) videos, which predominantly feature affluent white girls. M2's observation underscores the literature's assertion that algorithmic curation can perpetuate a narrow representation of social reality, as algorithms tend to reinforce dominant cultural narratives and marginalize minority voices (Noble, 2018).

Participant E1's suggestion for a more transparent system that explains the rationale behind content recommendations highlights a potential solution discussed in the literature: increasing algorithmic transparency to enhance user trust and openness to diverse content. Pasquale (2015) argues that the "black box" nature of algorithms—where the inner workings and decision-making processes are hidden from users—contributes to mistrust and limits users' understanding of how their information is curated. Eslami et al. (2017) found that transparency in algorithmic processes could mitigate some negative effects of personalization, such as filter bubbles and echo chambers, by giving users a clearer understanding of how their content is curated and encouraging them to seek out diverse perspectives. For instance, if users are informed about the criteria algorithms use to suggest content, they may be more inclined to explore content outside their usual preferences, thereby reducing the insularity of their online experiences.

Moreover, the importance of algorithmic transparency is further emphasized by Gillespie (2014), who notes that making the operations of algorithms more visible and understandable to users can empower them to make more informed choices about their digital consumption. This can be particularly effective in educational settings, where teaching digital literacy includes an understanding of how algorithms influence information access and consumption (Williamson, 2017). Such educational initiatives can equip users with the skills needed to navigate and potentially counteract the limitations imposed by algorithmically curated content. In conclusion, addressing the challenges posed by

algorithmic influence and filter bubbles requires a concerted effort to increase transparency, educate users about algorithmic processes, and promote diverse content consumption. By doing so, platforms can foster a more informed and inclusive digital society where users are exposed to a broader range of perspectives and ideas.

## 6.2 Addressing the Research Question

It is essential to reiterate that this investigation was carried out in an exploratory way. This methodological choice stems from the noticeable lack of comprehensive studies regarding the circumstances in which TikTok users seek out content outside their AI-curated filter bubbles. In the heart of this research lies the critical question: *Under what circumstances do TikTok users actively seek out content outside their AI-curated filter bubbles?* This central inquiry not only addresses the direct impact of algorithmic influence on user behavior but also explores the broader implications of such dynamics on information diversity and user autonomy within digital spaces.

- ***RQ1** Under what circumstances do TikTok users actively seek out content outside their AI-curated filter bubbles?*

In direct response to the central research question regarding the circumstances of TikTok users seeking out content outside their AI-curated filter bubbles, this section delves into two pivotal themes: Passivity and Proactivity on the app. These themes are crucial for understanding the dynamics of user interaction with the platform's algorithmic content curation and provide a nuanced insight into user behavior patterns on TikTok.

The interview data indicate that some users exhibit a high degree of passivity, allowing algorithms to dictate their content consumption. This observation aligns with the concept of "Algorithmic Identities" (Cheney-Lippold, 2017), where algorithms play a significant role in defining user experiences and identities online. This passivity reflects a form of user adaptation to the overwhelming presence of algorithmic governance described in the literature review, which posits that algorithms not only curate but also shape user identity through interaction patterns.

Many interviewees show an inclination, towards passivity as a theme when it comes down their use of the platform "For You Page (FYP)" on TikTok for discovering content.

Users like S and M1 in particular exemplify this behavior pattern well. What characterizes the passive inclination is the dependent approach that users demonstrate towards TikTok's ability to curate content according to personal preferences. As stated by participant S, who let's the algorithm lead the way on their consumption of the app, proving that they believe in the algorithm's accuracy. Many people tend to consume content without realizing that they are falling into the trap of filter bubbles, a phenomenon in which algorithmic recommendations narrow their exposure, to different viewpoints and ideas as discussed by Pariser (2011) and Bruns (2019). This kind of consumption can reinforce existing beliefs. Lead to increased polarization of opinions according to the risks highlighted by the authors mentioned above. The fact that interviewees heavily rely on platforms, like the For You Page (FYP) showcases this trend where personalized content delivery can be both convenient and limiting in terms of experiencing perspectives.

Users, like E and C are happy to enjoy what's given to them without effort; they want satisfaction and personalized experiences right away without having to search actively for it themselves. The algorithm's effectiveness, in keeping users engaged without requiring them to search for content shows that TikTok really knows what its users like and prefer. Anderson (2020) explains how TikTok's app design and algorithm focus on making it easy to use and engaging immediately, reflecting the trend of consumption where people seek instant satisfaction and personalized content tailored just for them. After studying the feedback, from participants S, M1, E, C and G on TikTok's content discovery process it becomes clear that passive content discovery is quite common amongst TikTok users. Yet it's noted by S that there are drawbacks like overlooking diverse content that could expand perspectives. Participant G's encounter emphasizes the impact of these algorithm-guided content consumption habits, on TikTok. The system's algorithm acts as a curator and gatekeeper while also predicting outcomes to enhance user experience, with simplicity and apparent ease of use (research by Bandy et al., 2020 and Klug et al., 2021). This approach may spark discussions on how the algorithm impacts user freedom and the range of content accessed by individuals. However many users find the advantages of this system, such as saving time and energy in finding content, than any worries, about a lack of diversity or unexpected discoveries.

The contrast between active and passive users illustrates the tension between user autonomy and algorithmic control, a central theme in discussions of digital platforms. This conflict emphasizes how important it is for users to understand "algorithm awareness", as discussed by Swart (2021) in the literature, which can lead to more informed interactions with the platform. Understanding this tension and the role of algorithmic identities is crucial for understanding how users interact with digital platforms and the extent to which they exercise agency in their content consumption.

Swart (2021) emphasizes that enhancing algorithm awareness can empower users to make more informed choices about their content consumption. This can potentially reduce a passive consumption and interaction on platforms. This awareness is important as it would lead users to search for different perspectives and essentially break free from algorithmically imposed filter bubbles. By integrating these insights, it becomes evident that user interaction with TikTok's algorithm is a complex interplay of passivity and proactivity, influenced by the level of trust in the algorithm and the degree of user awareness about its workings. Addressing this dynamic is essential for developing strategies to enhance user autonomy and promote a more diverse and inclusive digital environment.

Compared to users who just scroll through content without interacting with it, participants like M2 and A are more engaged on the platform by actively pushing back against what's recommended by its algorithmic curation system. M2 for example not checks out suggestions, on her 'For You Page'(FYP), but they also delve into trending topics and uses hashtags to uncover content that catches their attention. This demonstrates their intention into expanding perspectives. Participant A also utilizes TikTok, for advancing their skills by exploring music related content and seeking job search advice independently. The engaged users mentioned in the discussions question the notion of "Algorithmic Sovereignty" (Lustig, 2016) showing that users are not just consumers of content but actively shape their interactions and thereby impact the algorithm itself. Van Dijck's (2018) perspective aligns, with the idea that platforms play a role, in guiding user engagement while also allowing users to impact how these platforms operate. Van Dijck (2018) elaborates that those platforms, though designed to direct user behaviour through algorithmic recommendations, can be actively navigated and manipulated by users. This dynamic interaction suggests a bidirectional influence where platforms and users continuously shape

each other. For instance, users engaging in behaviors like liking, sharing, and searching for content beyond what is suggested can gradually train the algorithm to reflect their interests better, thereby demonstrating user agency within an ostensibly controlled environment.

Another insight on whether users are willing to search outside of their feed and the reasons behind it, is connected to the personalization factor. The interview findings align significantly with the literature on the impact of algorithmic personalization, particularly in the context of TikTok. The platform's ability to reflect and cater to user interests is well-documented in the literature, which highlights the algorithm's role in shaping user experiences by providing content that aligns closely with their preferences. For instance, interviewee S expressed a diverse range of interests from cooking to marketing-related content, which TikTok's algorithm adeptly catered to, offering a blend of entertainment and valuable information. This personalization is consistent with the concept of "Algorithmic Sovereignty" discussed by van Dijk, where the platform effectively curates content to reflect user interests, reinforcing engagement.

Similarly, E's enthusiastic response about TikTok's precise reflection of her culinary interests underscores the effectiveness of the algorithm in creating a highly personalized user experience. This echoes van Dijk's assertion that platforms like TikTok do not merely reflect social realities but actively produce and shape them by mediating the content users consume. G's acknowledgment of the algorithm's accuracy, even when influenced by accidental engagements, further supports the idea of algorithms as dynamic entities that adapt to user behavior, as discussed by Gillespie (2018) and Seaver (2017), who view algorithms as cultural constructs influenced by user interactions.

The interview data reveals that TikTok's algorithm effectively mirrors users' interests by curating content that resonates deeply with their preferences. This aligns with the literature on algorithmic identities, as discussed by John Cheney-Lippold (2011), who emphasizes the construction of digital personas based on user interactions and preferences. Interviewees such as participants S and G describe how their feed consistently presents content they enjoy, reflecting a high degree of personalization. S mentions how the algorithm's ability to blend entertainment and information keeps her engaged, highlighting the balance between utility and enjoyment that TikTok manages to achieve.

This personalized curation process, as outlined by Cheney-Lippold and supported by research from Wang et al. (2022), indicates that users perceive themselves as having an algorithmic identity. They recognize patterns in the presented content, reinforcing their self-perception and digital persona. This mirrors the insights from the interviews where users acknowledge that the algorithm often "knows them better than they know themselves". While the algorithm tends to reinforce existing interests, it also has the potential to introduce diverse perspectives, thereby mitigating the risks associated with echo chambers. This dual role of the algorithm—reinforcing known interests while also introducing new content—is essential for fostering a well-rounded digital experience.

The role of TikTok's algorithm in exposing users to new ideas and interests is another crucial aspect highlighted in both the literature and interviews. Interviewees G, F, and M2 shared experiences of discovering new music, live streaming platforms, and hobbies like punch needle crafts through TikTok. This phenomenon aligns with the literature on "Algorithmic Audiences" as discussed by Prey (2017), where tailored recommendations can expose users to new content outside their usual preferences. This process of encountering novel content is crucial for breaking out of filter bubbles, as described by Pariser (2011). Risi and Pronzato (2022) discuss how algorithms can act as catalysts for cultural and social exploration by shaping and influencing social interactions and interests. This is evident in the experiences shared by interviewees who found themselves exploring new hobbies and interests that they might not have encountered without TikTok's algorithmic recommendations. This supports the view that platforms like TikTok can facilitate cultural and social discovery, enhancing users' experiences by broadening their horizons.

Lastly, the influence of TikTok's algorithm on users' perceptions of cultural and societal norms was a prominent theme in the interviews. Interviewees I and R discussed how TikTok reinforced or broadened their views on societal issues such as feminism. This mirrors the concerns raised in the literature about the potential of algorithms to create echo chambers and reinforce existing beliefs. While R appreciated the broadened perspective, G highlighted the risks of being confined to content that aligns with existing beliefs, cautioning against the creation of echo chambers that limit exposure to diverse viewpoints.

This discussion is particularly relevant to the concept of "Algorithmic Sovereignty" and the critiques of algorithmic bias and filter bubbles. The interviews underscore the dual

nature of algorithmic curation: while it can deepen understanding and introduce new perspectives, it also risks reinforcing biases and creating insulated environments. The awareness of these dynamics is crucial, as highlighted by the interviewees' mixed feelings about the content curation on TikTok. For instance, G's acknowledgement of the algorithm's reinforcing nature and the potential downside of creating echo chambers align with the literature on algorithmic awareness and bias by Eslami et al. (2017).

Given these dynamics, the interviews suggest that users' reasons to engage with content outside their AI-curated filter bubbles varies. Some users, like interviewee R, may be open to exploring diverse content, appreciating the broadened perspectives offered by the algorithm. Others, like interviewee G, may be more cautious, recognizing the potential downsides of algorithmic curation and the risk of echo chambers. In conclusion, the mixed feelings about TikTok's algorithm, as expressed by the interviewees, indicate varying levels of circumstances among users to seek out and engage with content beyond their algorithmic comfort zones. This variability is crucial to understanding how TikTok users interact with the platform and the extent to which they are willing to challenge the confines of their curated content, directly addressing the research question.

## **Chapter VII: Conclusion**

### **7.1 Summary of Findings**

The aim of this study was to explore how TikTok users tend to engage with content recommended by algorithms, focusing specifically on the circumstances that influence their interactions with material outside their algorithmically curated "for you page". By examining the 12 qualitative in-depth interviews, the study was able to recognise various interaction patterns among TikTok users, which varied from active engagement to passive observation. The findings illuminate the complex dynamics between user agency and algorithmic influence, offering valuable insights into the broader discourse surrounding digital consumption, diversity of information, and user autonomy.

### **7.2 Key Themes and Implications**

#### **7.2.1 Content Discovery and Interaction Patterns**

The research highlighted a distinction in interaction patterns on TikTok, which can be divided into active and passive behaviours. On the one hand, active users, represented by participants A and M2, showed intentional engagement on their "fyp" through liking, sharing and following creators. This suggests that their feed has been well curated, which resonates with the finding of Gruber et al.'s (2023) that thoughtful engagement can affect algorithmic results.

On the other hand, users, such as S and C, demonstrated how they trusted TikTok's suggestion system by passively using the app and letting the algorithm decide what they liked to consume. This tendency towards passivity, which suggests a preference for ease over active content exploration, resonates with the "Algorithmic Identities" concept introduced by Cheney-Lippold (2011), in which algorithms play a crucial role in shaping user experiences and identities in the digital realm.

Moreover, although most of the participants that defined themselves as "passive" or were categorized in such fragment, have also shown active behaviours, such as looking for specific content. Therefore, to answer the research question regarding the circumstances as to why users search for content outside their feed, it can be discussed that the participants of the interviews do look for content that is specific to their needs and interests in the moment. Although some more than others, participants showed an active behaviour in specific situations.

### **7.2.2 Algorithmic Influence and User Autonomy**

The results of the study highlight how algorithmic influence is dual in nature. TikTok's algorithm provides a highly personalized experience by efficiently mirroring users' interests, but it also runs the risk of restricting exposure to other perspectives and reinforcing preexisting prejudices. This phenomenon, known as the "filter bubble," can lead to informational isolation, as discussed by Pariser (2011). Interviewees such as M2 observed a lack of diversity in their content stream, which mostly showcased specific categories of videos. This supports the claims made in the literature regarding the potential of algorithmic curation to sustain limited depictions of social reality. This reinforcement of preferences is aligned with the work of Gillespie (2018), who highlights how algorithms impact user engagement by filtering content according to perceived relevance.

### **7.2.3 Impact on Personal Growth and Identity**

TikTok's algorithm plays a significant role in shaping online identities and behaviors. The study found that while some users appreciated the personalized content for aligning with their existing interests, others recognized the potential for algorithms to reinforce biases and limit personal growth. Participants like A and I highlighted how TikTok's content aligns with

their interests but does not significantly challenge their perspectives. This aligns with Cheney-Lippold's (2011) concept of "algorithmic identity," where users are categorized and provided with content that reinforces their predefined identities. The reinforcement of these identities can lead to a static experience where users are less likely to encounter content that challenges their views, thus limiting opportunities for personal growth and critical thinking.

#### **7.2.4 Privacy vs. Personalization Trade-off**

The trade-off between privacy and personalisation was a significant theme emerging from the interviews. Users generally expressed comfort with TikTok's data practices, viewing the exchange of personal data for a tailored content experience as acceptable. This perspective reflects a broader trend in digital consumption, where convenience and personalization are often prioritized over privacy concerns. Participants like S and R articulated this balance, indicating trust in TikTok's data management and satisfaction with the platform's operation. This trust in the platform's algorithmic processes can be linked to the concept of algorithmic sovereignty, where users relinquish control to the algorithm in exchange for a seamless and personalized experience, as discussed by Reviglio & Agosti (2020).

### **7.3 Contributions**

This study provides valuable insights into how users of TikTok interact with content that has been algorithmically curated.

First, the research enhances the understanding of how TikTok users either passively or actively interact with content outside their AI-curated filter bubbles. By identifying the behaviors of active users who seek out content intentionally and passive users who rely heavily on algorithmic recommendations, this study contributes to discussions about user autonomy in the digital age (van Dijk et al., 2018; Zuboff, 2019). By highlighting trends in both active and passive user behavior, it advances the knowledge of user autonomy in the digital sphere (Sundar & Marathe, 2010). The study also emphasizes the trade-off between privacy and personalisation, demonstrating that although consumers like tailored material, they have privacy concerns.

The study also looks at how TikTok's algorithm affects identity formation and variety in material, noting that it frequently limits exposure to alternative viewpoints and reinforces user preferences. These results add to the conversation about filter bubble dangers and algorithmic identity (Pariser, 2011). Finally, the study proposes that more varied content and increased openness in algorithmic processes may enhance users' experiences on social media sites (Bucher, 2018; Diakopoulos, 2016).

#### **7.4 Limitations & Future Research Suggestions**

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. It's critical to recognize the limits and extent of this research in order to evaluate the constraints of the current dissertation. Due to its qualitative nature, the study only included a small number of individuals. Although adequate for a qualitative study, the small sample size might not have allowed for a complete representation of the opinions of the larger community. Therefore, it would be advantageous to do more interviews in order to get a more thorough understanding. The focus on Generation Z users also limits the generalizability of the findings to other age groups. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews which can introduce biases. Although the original plan was to analyze the data using MAXQDA software, manual analysis turned out to be more practical taking time management into account.

Moreover, the qualitative nature of the study means that the findings are interpretive and context-specific, which might not fully represent broader user behaviors across different cultural and demographic contexts. Future research could benefit with a mixed methods approach. Adding to the interviews a quantitative approach, with a larger sample size, would benefit this research. To verify the qualitative findings and gauge the degree of algorithmic influence on user behavior, quantitative techniques ought to be utilized. It is possible to measure user engagement, diversity of material, and exposure to various points of view through surveys and experiments. This quantitative information would strengthen the knowledge of algorithmic implications and supplement qualitative findings.

Another limitation is the rapidly evolving nature of TikTok as a platform. Not only academic wise, with literature being published quite rapidly due to this new phenomenon, the app itself keeps being updated. Certain conclusions may become outdated as new

features are added and the algorithm is continuously improved. User behaviors and experiences may also change.

In order to produce more broadly applicable findings, future studies should concentrate on comprehending how various populations engage with algorithm-driven content curation on websites such as TikTok. Furthermore, investigation is required into the ethical and policy ramifications of these algorithms, including the necessity of educating users about algorithmic processes, potential regulatory remedies for prejudice, and platform duties for fairness. This would add to more general conversations about algorithmic control and digital ethics.

In summary, this research covers the intricacies of user engagement on algorithmically curated feeds and improves our understanding of TikTok user behavior in an algorithm-driven environment. By analyzing the trade-off between privacy and personalization and the consequences of algorithmic influence on identity and diversity, this research offers valuable insights for enhancing user experiences on social media and emphasizes the need for further research into user-algorithm interactions, advocating for open and user-centered algorithmic design.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A - Informed Consent Form

**Title of Study:** TikTok's AI & Suggested Content Feed: Users' Circumstances to Go Outside of Their Filter Bubbles

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**Purpose of the Study:**

You are invited to participate in a research study that aims to explore how TikTok's AI and suggested content feed influence users' engagement with content outside their personalized

recommendations or "filter bubbles." The study seeks to understand users' reasons to explore diverse viewpoints and the factors that influence their content consumption on TikTok.

**Study Procedures:**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview that will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will consist of questions related to your experiences with TikTok, specifically regarding how the platform's AI-driven content feed influences your content consumption habits and your openness to exploring content outside your usual preferences.

**Confidentiality:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and all information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. Your name will not be associated with the interview data, and all responses will be anonymized. The interviews will be recorded for accuracy, but only the researcher will have access to the recordings, which will be securely stored and destroyed upon completion of the study. Any quotes or data used in the final research report will not be traceable to you.

**Risks and Benefits:**

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. Some questions may prompt you to reflect on your content consumption habits, which could lead to minor discomfort. However, you are free to skip any question you do not wish to answer. While there are no direct benefits to you as a participant, your insights will contribute to a better understanding of how AI algorithms impact social media consumption and user behavior.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or explanation. If you decide to withdraw, any data you have provided will be destroyed and will not be used in the research.

**Contact Information:**

If you have any questions about this study or your participation, please contact the researcher.

**Consent:**

By signing below, you acknowledge that you have read and understood the information provided in this consent form, and you agree to participate in this study under the terms outlined above.

**Participant's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B - Interview Script**

### **Introduction to TikTok Usage**

1. Can you tell me about your experience with TikTok? How long have you been using it, and how frequently?
2. What kind of content do you typically engage with on TikTok? Can you give examples and explain why?
3. Could you walk me through the ways you come across new content on TikTok?

### **Understanding Content Interaction**

4. When you come across content in your recommendations, how do you decide if you engage with it?
5. How do you decide what content to view on TikTok? Please describe your process for discovering new content.

6. Have there been instances where you've sought out content that isn't typically recommended to you? What prompted that search?
7. Describe how you engage with content on TikTok. Do you mainly like, share, comment, or follow creators?

### **Exploring the Impact of TikTok's Algorithm and Personalization**

8. In what ways, if any, does TikTok's content affect your understanding of society and cultural norms?
9. In your experience, how does TikTok balance between personalizing content and introducing diverse viewpoints? Can you give examples?
10. How accurately do you feel the content recommended to you on TikTok matches your interests and preferences? Have you noticed any patterns or trends in the recommendations you receive?

### **Reflections on Content Diversity and Personal Growth**

11. Could you share your experiences with exploring different types of content on TikTok? What motivates you to explore new content areas?
12. Have you encountered content on TikTok that has altered your viewpoint or sparked a new interest? If so, could you describe that experience?
13. What role, if any, has TikTok played in the way you express your identity or explore new aspects of yourself?

### **Perceptions of TikTok's Data Practices**

14. TikTok collects data to personalize content recommendations. How comfortable are you with this personalization?

### **General Reflections and Suggestions**

15. How would you characterize your experience on TikTok regarding the variety of content and perspectives you encounter?
16. What changes, if any, would you like to see in how TikTok operates to enhance user experience or content diversity?

17. Are there any aspects of TikTok you think could be improved to better meet users' needs or interests? Please feel free to share any thoughts on enhancing user experience or content variety.

## Appendix C - Codebook

| Themes                                   | Subthemes              | Codes   |
|--|------------------------|---|
| <i>Content Discovery and Interaction</i> | Interaction on the app | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usage Frequency</li> <li>• Content Engagement</li> <li>• Algorithmic Influence</li> <li>• Engagement Growth</li> <li>• Selective Engagement</li> <li>• Routine Engagement</li> <li>• Private Engagement</li> </ul> |
|  | Passivity on the app   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content Consumption without Searching</li> <li>• Efficiency in Content Search</li> <li>• Passive Content Consumption</li> <li>• TV-Like Consumption</li> <li>• Feeling Hypnotized</li> </ul>                       |

| Themes  | Subthemes                              | Codes   |
|---|--|---|
|   | Proactivity on the app                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targeted Content Search</li> <li>• Content Diversification</li> <li>• Minimal Active Search</li> <li>• Exploratory Search</li> <li>• Looking for Diverse Perspectives</li> <li>• Content Reinforcement</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Influence of Algorithmic Personalization on User Perspective</i> | Algorithmic Reflection of Interests    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Algorithm Accuracy</li> <li>• Algorithmic Relevance</li> <li>• Value-Aligned Content Consumption</li> <li>• Algorithm Misinterpretation</li> <li>• Interest Related Content</li> <li>• New Interests Exposure</li> <li>• Comfort Zone Maintenance</li> </ul> |
|   | Exposure to New Ideas                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Algorithmic Limitation</li> <li>• Confirmation Bias</li> <li>• Selective Exposure</li> <li>• Limited New Perspective Exposure</li> <li>• New Perspective Exposure</li> <li>• Gradual Interest Development</li> <li>• Tailored Content</li> </ul>             |
|   | Cultural and Societal Norms            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interest-Based Content Reflection</li> <li>• Worldview Reinforcement</li> <li>• Selective Trust</li> <li>• Leisure-Centric Content Consumption</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Content Diversity, Personal Growth and Data Privacy Concerns</i> | Diversity of Content                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content Echo Chamber</li> <li>• Need for Content Variety</li> <li>• Content Repetition</li> <li>• Customization Desire</li> <li>• Selective Content Exposure</li> </ul>  |
|   | Diverse Viewpoints                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of Viewpoint Diversity</li> <li>• Bias Reinforcement Concern</li> <li>• Content Diversification Desire</li> </ul>   |
|   | Impact on Identity and Personal Growth | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New Skill Development</li> <li>• Identity Neutrality</li> <li>• Identity Validation</li> <li>• Identity Consciousness</li> <li>• Knowledge Deepening</li> <li>• Belief Reinforcement</li> </ul>  |

| Themes | Subthemes                             | Codes  |
|--------|---------------------------------------|--|
|        |                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New Point of Views</li> </ul>   |
|        | Privacy vs. Personalization Trade-off | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privacy Awareness with Acceptance</li> <li>• Resigned Privacy Acceptance</li> <li>• Positive Personalization Perception</li> <li>• Unconscious Interest Reflection</li> </ul> |

## Interview Transcripts

### G.

- 27
- Female
- Researcher in Psychology

#### Introduction

1. I: Thank you so much, G., for taking the time to participate in this interview. Your insights are incredibly valuable to my Master's dissertation, and I truly appreciate your willingness to share your experiences and thoughts on TikTok. Your perspective as a researcher in psychology is particularly important, and I'm excited

to delve into how TikTok's algorithms and content impact your daily life and professional reflections. Let's start...Can you tell me about your experience with TikTok? How long have you been using it and how frequently?

G: I started using TikTok during the pandemic. During that period, like many others, I found myself looking for new ways to pass the time and feel connected to the outside world, given the situation of isolation. TikTok was immediately appealing, with its short and engaging content. Initially, I used it sporadically, maybe for a few minutes a day. But over time, I realized that I was spending more and more time on the platform. Now, I spend about 1 hour and 45 minutes a day on TikTok, and I think that since I started using it, my time spent on the platform has grown exponentially. It has become a sort of daily routine, something I do during breaks or when I want to relax.<sup>1</sup>

2. I: What kind of content do you typically engage with on TikTok? Can you give examples and explain why?

G: I usually come across videos that align with my interests – like cute animal videos. I love videos of puppies and pets because they put me in a good mood and offer a moment of lightness in my day. Or, I'm very drawn to funny videos, like memes or comedic sketches, and POV videos with which I can "relate to" (sorry, I can't think of the word), probably 'identify.' I like seeing people who are living similar situations to mine, especially when it comes to daily situations or personal experiences that resonate with me. But also current affairs, reviews, podcast clips – these keep me updated on current events and trends. It's like my "daily newspaper." Now that I've moved to another city, I often come across videos about the city in question – places to eat, places to visit, or what to do on the weekend, and I find it very useful. It helps me discover my new city in a way that wouldn't be possible otherwise.

3. I: Could you walk me through the ways you come across new content on TikTok?

G: I rarely search for new content on TikTok. It simply comes to me on its own. It's like it knows what I need at the right moment<sup>2</sup>. I think that's one of the most fascinating aspects of

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<sup>1</sup> Routine Engagement

<sup>2</sup> Content Consumption without Searching

TikTok: *the algorithm seems to really know my tastes and interests almost better than I do*<sup>3</sup>. When I open the app, I never have a precise idea of what I want to see, but I know I'll always find something I like. And sometimes, *I'm surprised by how relevant the content that's proposed to me is to my mood or needs at the moment. It's like a continuous flow of discovery that adapts to me*<sup>4</sup>.

4. I: When you come across content in your recommendations, how do you decide if you engage with it?

G: If it reflects my interests. *I'm aware that if I engage with it, TikTok will propose more content similar to that one. This creates a reinforcement cycle that keeps me coming back to the platform*<sup>5</sup>. I know that by interacting with that video, more similar ones will be proposed.

5. I: Do you deliberately search for content outside of your feed? Can you give examples and explain why?

G: *I rarely search for new content on TikTok*<sup>6</sup>. *One thing I sometimes do is look for some information (for example, about a movie or a current event) directly on TikTok. I know that people are increasingly stopping using Google to search for information and are doing it on TikTok instead, and I feel like I'm following that trend too. It's interesting to note how TikTok is becoming a sort of alternative search engine for me. If I think about a movie I recently watched or an event that's happening, I often open TikTok to see what people are saying about it.*<sup>7</sup> It's not just about finding information, but also about seeing different opinions and interpretations, which are much more immediate and personal compared to what I find on Google.

6. I: Can you recall a time when you deliberately searched for content outside your usual recommendations? What motivated you to do so?

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<sup>3</sup> Algorithm Accuracy

<sup>4</sup> Algorithm Relevance

<sup>5</sup> Algorithm Influence

<sup>6</sup> Content Consumption without Searching

<sup>7</sup> Targeted Content Search

G: Recently, I wanted to find videos of an event that someone I know attended, so I used TikTok. I thought TikTok would be faster for this type of search compared to, for example, YouTube, and especially since I didn't need particularly long videos<sup>8</sup>. Plus, on YouTube, I would have had to open and load videos one by one, while TikTok's interface is much more user-friendly and intuitive if you know what you're looking for. I like that TikTok offers me a quick way to access relevant content without having to spend too much time searching. Everything is there, at my fingertips, and I can get the information I need in a few seconds.

7. I: Describe how you engage with content on TikTok. Do you mainly like, share, comment, or follow creators?

G: In most cases, I like, share videos with my friends, and repost those that resonate with me. I rarely comment or follow new creators. I like the idea of interacting with content I like, but I don't feel the need to do it too publicly, like with comments<sup>9</sup>. I prefer to share videos with specific people who I know will appreciate the content as much as I do. And as for following new creators, there has to be something really special about them to make me take that decision. It's a more selective process where I carefully choose who I want to see regularly in my feed.

8. I: How do you think TikTok's algorithm influences your perception of society and cultural norms?

G: I think TikTok's algorithm aligns closely with my worldview. It's as if it somehow confirms this vision I have and doesn't leave too much room for anything else<sup>10</sup>. Which, from certain points of view, could be negative because it might deprive you of other perspectives. But honestly, I don't think I would ever watch videos on, for example, the political propaganda of the Italian right because they have values that do not belong to me. Overall, I am satisfied with having videos that mirror my vision of the world rather than having to endure content I despise. This creates a kind of safe space for me where I feel validated and understood<sup>11</sup>. However, I do recognize the potential downside of this, as it could lead to a

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<sup>8</sup> Targeted Content Search

<sup>9</sup> Private Engagement

<sup>10</sup> Worldview Reinforcement

<sup>11</sup> Algorithm Accuracy

narrower understanding of the world if I only see what I want to see<sup>12</sup>. But at the same time, I believe that in my leisure time, it's important to consume content that aligns with my values and interests rather than constantly challenging myself with opposing views.<sup>13</sup>

9. I: You seem to have a clear boundary regarding content you dislike, such as right-wing political propaganda. How do you reconcile the need for informed awareness with avoiding content that contradicts your values?

G: On one hand, I feel it's crucial to stay informed, to be aware of all sides of the argument, to understand society in its entirety. But on the other, I have to protect my mental space from perspectives that I find fundamentally against my values. So what I try to do is balance it out. I'll check in with other news sources, you know, just to make sure I'm not living in my own little world. But also, when I'm on TikTok, I let it cater to my tastes and values because at the end of the day, it's also my leisure time, and I believe leisure should be enjoyable, not a constant battle against opposing views. It's about knowing when and where to draw the line, and I think that's a very personal decision that everyone has to make for themselves. I feel that by consuming content that aligns with my values on TikTok, I am nurturing a sense of comfort and self-assurance, which is just as important as staying informed.<sup>14</sup>

10. I: In your experience, how does TikTok balance between personalizing content and introducing diverse viewpoints? Can you give examples?

G: I don't think TikTok diversifies the content it proposes to me too much<sup>15</sup>. Or anyway, if it does, it does so in such a subtle and gentle way that I hardly even notice it. I am aware of the fact that before adding new content to my feed, it arrives gradually and in a way that, by the time I'm in it and realize it, it's too late, and I've already developed a new obsession.

11. I: You expressed that TikTok doesn't expose you to many new viewpoints. As a researcher in psychology, do you see any long-term effects of this on users' openness and cognitive flexibility?

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<sup>12</sup> Bias Reinforcement Concern

<sup>13</sup> Leisure-Centric Content Consumption

<sup>14</sup> Identity Consciousness

<sup>15</sup> Selective Content Exposure

G: If we're only ever seeing things that line up with what we already believe, it could lead to what we call an 'echo chamber.'<sup>16</sup> This has the potential to reduce our exposure to different ideas, which might narrow our cognitive flexibility over time. We need a bit of challenge, something to push against our existing notions to keep our minds agile and open. While TikTok's algorithm is great for personalizing content, it does raise questions about how it might reinforce our biases instead of challenging them<sup>17</sup>. I think we have to be proactive about seeking out diverse perspectives to really maintain our cognitive flexibility and openness<sup>18</sup>. It's about finding a balance. As someone who studies human behavior, I believe that this balance is crucial not just for individual growth, but for the collective understanding of complex societal issues. If we allow ourselves to become too comfortable within our own ideological bubbles, we risk losing the ability to empathize with and understand others who hold different views.

12. I: To what extent do you believe TikTok's algorithm understands your interests and preferences? Can you identify any biases in the content it recommends to you?

G: I think TikTok understands my interests almost excellently. When it makes mistakes, it's usually my fault because I might linger on videos that don't really interest me but that, in the moment, make me think, "What the f\*\*\* am I watching?" and maybe make me laugh. In those cases, the algorithm might wrongly interpret my interests and suggest content that doesn't entirely reflect me.<sup>19</sup>

13. I: Have you ever intentionally diversified the types of content you consume on TikTok? What led you to do this?

G: Honestly, it has never happened to me, no. I'm quite happy with the mix that's being offered to me.

14. I: Can you share any specific experiences where TikTok has significantly broadened your perspective or introduced you to a new interest area?

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<sup>16</sup> Content Echo Chamber

<sup>17</sup> Bias Reinforcement Concern

<sup>18</sup> Looking for Diverse Perspectives

<sup>19</sup> Algorithm Misinterpretation

G: Maybe the only thing that comes to mind is about music. Sometimes I come across videos with songs that I might not be too excited about initially, or maybe they are from artists I don't listen to and don't like, but after hearing and re-hearing them on TikTok, they end up in my playlist. This has happened several times where a song starts playing in the background of a video, and at first, I'm indifferent, but after hearing it in different contexts or with different visual stimuli, it starts to grow on me<sup>20</sup>.

15. I: How do TikTok's content curation and recommendation impact your identity expression or discovery on the platform?

G: It definitely has some kind of impact, for example, by introducing me to new things to buy – like clothes or things for the house, lol. But in general, more than feeling that it has an impact on my identity, I feel more like I am validated in my identity. For example, when I hear people talking about their lives and they mention something that is similar to my experience, I feel less alone. TikTok thus becomes a sort of mirror that reflects my identity and experiences, and this can be very reassuring. I like the idea that there are other people out there who share my same interests and values, and this makes me feel part of a broader community<sup>21</sup>. Even if I'm not discovering new aspects of myself, I feel that what I see on TikTok confirms and reinforces who I already am, which is just as important for my psychological well-being.

16. I: TikTok collects data to personalize content recommendations. How comfortable are you with this personalization?

G: It's not something I really worry about. If I think about it a bit, it unsettles me, but in the end, I'm just an ordinary person, and I don't think they can do anything particularly interesting with my data<sup>22</sup>. If they take it, it's fine, lol. I believe it's one of the compromises I accept to have a personalized experience on the platform.

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<sup>20</sup> Gradual Interest Development

<sup>21</sup> Identity Validation

<sup>22</sup> Resigned Privacy Acceptance

17. I: How do you describe your overall experience with TikTok in terms of content diversity and exposure to different perspectives?

G: Overall, I am very satisfied with the content that TikTok offers me. Currently, it's the only social media platform where I feel truly and daily active. I like the fact that it manages to entertain and inform me at the same time, without requiring too much effort on my part.

18. I: What changes, if any, would you like to see in how TikTok operates to enhance user experience or content diversity?

G: Right now, nothing in particular comes to mind.

19. I: Is there anything else about your experience with TikTok's algorithm, content recommendations, or community interactions that you think is important to share?

G: No, I don't think so.

I: Well, G., that's it! Thank you so much for participating in my research and for helping me out!

**A.**

- 30
- Male
- Project Manager

**I:** First and foremost, A, I want to thank you sincerely for taking the time to participate in this interview. Your insights are incredibly valuable for my Master's dissertation, and I truly appreciate your willingness to share your experiences and thoughts on TikTok. Your contributions are going to be essential in helping me understand how social media platforms like TikTok influence user behavior and content interaction, so thank you again for your time and openness. So, A, can you start by telling me a bit about your experience with TikTok? How long have you been using it, and how often do you find yourself on the app?

**A:** Sure! I've been using TikTok for almost two years now. It's actually become a regular part of my daily routine. I think I spend at least two hours a day on the platform, and sometimes even more if I have some extra free time in the evening or over the weekend<sup>23</sup>. It's pretty easy to get sucked in because the content is so engaging.

**I:** That sounds pretty typical for TikTok users! What kind of content do you usually engage with? Are there specific types of videos that you find yourself watching more often?

**A:** Definitely. I'm really into content related to professional growth, like career advice and CV tips, but I also love comedy skits – they're perfect for a quick laugh. Travel tips are another favorite because I love to daydream about future trips. And recently, I've gotten into music production videos. It's a bit of a mixed bag, but those are the main areas I focus on. For instance, I might watch a video on how to improve my LinkedIn profile because I'm currently job hunting, but then the next video could be a hilarious gag that just makes me laugh. It's a nice balance between learning something new and just unwinding.

**I:** That's a great mix. So, how do you usually find new content on TikTok? Do you rely mostly on your 'For You' page, or do you search for things more deliberately?

**A:** Most of the time I find new content either randomly on my fyp or according to the field I want to know more about. It's almost scary how well it knows what I'm into. But there are definitely times when I'll search for specific things, especially if I'm in a learning mood. For example, if I'm focusing on my job search, I'll look for videos that offer tips on interviews or CV writing<sup>24</sup>. It's pretty convenient because TikTok makes it so easy to dive deep into a particular topic when I need to.

**I:** It sounds like your 'For You' page really understands your interests! But I'm curious, when you come across content on your feed, how do you decide whether or not to engage with it?

**A:** It's usually pretty instinctive. If something catches my eye because it's entertaining or informative, I'll engage with it. For example, if I see a video that offers useful career advice, I might save it or share it with friends who could also benefit from it. And if it's a funny

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<sup>23</sup> Usage Frequency

<sup>24</sup> Targeted Content Search

video that makes me laugh, I'll probably like it or even share it with others<sup>25</sup>. The key is whether the content resonates with me at that moment – either by giving me something valuable or just making me smile.

**I:** That makes sense. Do you ever go out of your way to search for content that's different from what usually shows up on your feed?

**A:** Yes, definitely. Sometimes my FYP can get a bit repetitive, and I'll crave something new<sup>26</sup>. Like, if I've been seeing a lot of job-related content and it's starting to stress me out, I might search for travel vlogs or something more creative<sup>27</sup>. It's my way of diversifying what I'm consuming, just to keep things fresh and interesting. There's a real benefit to breaking out of the usual loop and exploring new types of content, not just for entertainment, but also to keep my mind engaged.

**I:** Can you think of a specific time when you actively searched for content outside of your usual recommendations?

**A:** I cannot remember.

**I:** How do you typically engage with content when you find something you like? Do you usually like, share, or comment on videos?

**A:** I'm pretty active when it comes to engaging with content. I usually like, share and comment the content I see, and if something really stands out, I might comment on it as well<sup>28</sup>.

**I:** And do you follow creators?

**A:** No, not really. I've noticed that even when I do follow someone, they don't always show up on my feed again, which is a bit frustrating. It makes me wonder if following someone even makes a difference sometimes. The few times I've followed someone because I really

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<sup>25</sup> Content Engagement

<sup>26</sup> Need for Content Variety

<sup>27</sup> Content Diversification

<sup>28</sup> Content Engagement

liked their content, they seemed to disappear from my feed, so I've become more cautious about hitting that follow button<sup>29</sup>.

**I:** That's interesting. It's strange that following someone doesn't always guarantee you'll see more of their content. Do you think TikTok's algorithm plays a role in shaping how you perceive society or cultural norms?

**A:** To be honest, I don't think it has a huge impact on my perception of society or cultural norms. The content I see is so tailored to my interests that it feels more like a reflection of what I already like, rather than something that's influencing my broader views<sup>30</sup>. That said, I'm aware that TikTok can shape opinions and trends on a larger scale, but for me personally, it mostly just reinforces what I'm already into, rather than introducing new perspectives.

**I:** That's a good point. Do you think TikTok does a good job of balancing personalized content with introducing you to diverse viewpoints?

**A:** I feel like I don't really have different point of views on my fyp, I think it's mostly personalized content, which is great for keeping me engaged but not so great for diversity of viewpoints<sup>31</sup>. Most of what I see is related to the topics I'm already interested in, like professional growth and music production.

**I:** That makes sense. Do you think the algorithm really understands your interests and preferences well? And have you noticed any biases in the content it recommends?

**A:** I think the app recognized and understands content quite well. It's actually a bit scary to think how accurate the content is.<sup>32</sup> For example, I get a lot of videos about job hunting, music production, and travel – all things I'm genuinely interested in. But the downside is that it can become very one-dimensional. There's a clear bias towards content that the algorithm thinks I'll enjoy, which sometimes limits my exposure to new ideas or topics<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Algorithmic Influence

<sup>30</sup> Interest-Based Content Reflection

<sup>31</sup> Lack of Viewpoint Diversity

<sup>32</sup> Algorithm Accuracy

<sup>33</sup> Algorithmic Limitation

It's almost like the platform is so focused on keeping me engaged that it doesn't risk showing me something outside my usual interests.

**I:** That's really insightful. Have you ever tried to intentionally diversify the types of content you consume on TikTok? What motivated you to do that?

**A:** Yes, I have. For example, I've made a conscious effort to watch more videos related to professional growth, like tips for improving my CV or LinkedIn strategies<sup>34</sup>. The motivation was really practical – I'm in the middle of a job search, so I wanted to use TikTok as a resource for self-improvement. It's been helpful to shift my focus and use the platform to pick up new skills and advice, rather than just for entertainment.

**I:** Have you found that TikTok has introduced you to any new interests or significantly broadened your perspective in any way?

**A:** One area where TikTok has definitely introduced me to something new is music production. I wasn't particularly interested in it before, but after seeing a few videos, I found myself getting really into it<sup>35</sup>. The short, informative clips make it easy to learn the basics, and now it's become a bit of a hobby for me. But when it comes to more serious topics, like social issues, I haven't found that TikTok has significantly broadened my perspective. Most of what I see on those topics tends to confirm what I already know<sup>36</sup>.

**I:** That's interesting. Do you think TikTok's content curation and recommendations have impacted how you express or discover your identity on the platform?

**A:** No, I don't think it impacts it<sup>37</sup>.

**I:** How do you feel about TikTok collecting data to personalize content recommendations? Are you comfortable with it?

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<sup>34</sup> Targeted Content Search

<sup>35</sup> New Skill Development

<sup>36</sup> Confirmation Bias

<sup>37</sup> Identity Neutrality

**A:** I'm generally comfortable with it, though I'm definitely aware of the privacy concerns<sup>38</sup>.

**I:** That's understandable. Overall, how would you describe your experience with TikTok in terms of content diversity and exposure to different perspectives?

**A:** My fyp is like a bubble that will never be popped. The content fits perfectly to my interests. While the platform is great at showing me what I like, it doesn't do as well at exposing me to new perspectives or ideas<sup>39</sup>.

**I:** If you could suggest any changes to how TikTok operates, especially regarding content diversity or enhancing the user experience, what would they be?

**A:** Sometimes Tiktok shows similar content repeatedly and it gets boring, so maybe they should try out a new function to increase different content. Maybe they could have a feature that mixes in videos from completely different genres or creators outside of my usual preferences. That might help break the monotony and offer a broader range of perspectives<sup>40</sup>. Also, I'd like to see an improvement in how followed creators appear in the feed – it would be nice to see their content more consistently after I follow them.

**I:** That sounds like a solid suggestion. You mentioned earlier that your 'For You' page can feel like a bubble. Can you tell me about a time when you actively searched for content that was different from what your feed was showing you?

**A:** Sure. Sure. There was this one time when my feed was just swamped with content related to job hunting and CV tips, which was helpful, but it became too much. I needed a break. I was motivated to look for something more creative, something to inspire me. So, I went searching for travel vlogs from countries I'd love to visit one day<sup>41</sup>. I think the monotony of my feed at that time just made me crave something different, something to spark a sense of adventure and take me away from the stress of job searching.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Privacy Awareness with Acceptance

<sup>39</sup> Content Echo Chamber

<sup>40</sup> Need for Content Variety

<sup>41</sup> Targeted Content Search

<sup>42</sup> Need for Content Variety

**I:** That makes a lot of sense. Is there anything else about your experience with TikTok's algorithm, content recommendations, or community interactions that you think is important to share?

**A:** No, I think we've covered most of it. TikTok is a fun and engaging platform, but like any social media, it has its limitations, especially when it comes to content diversity and how consistently content from followed creators appears. Overall, though, it's been a positive experience for me.

**I:** Thank you so much for your time! That was great!

## **C.**

- 28
- Female
- Museum Curator

**I:** Thank you so much, C., for taking the time to participate in this interview. Your insights are incredibly valuable to my Master's dissertation, and I truly appreciate your willingness to share your experiences and thoughts on TikTok. Given your background as a museum curator, your perspective is particularly unique, and I'm excited to explore how TikTok's algorithms and content impact your professional and personal life. So, can you tell me about your experience with TikTok? How long have you been using it and how frequently?

C: I started using TikTok in the spring of 2020 during the lockdown. Like many people, I was looking for new ways to pass the time and stay connected during a period of isolation. The platform quickly became a regular part of my routine, offering a mix of entertainment and distraction from the difficult circumstances. At the moment, **I use it more or less every day**<sup>43</sup>. On days when I'm not working, I might spend one or even two hours a day on TikTok. It has become the social media platform I use the most.

I: What kind of content do you typically engage with on TikTok? Can you give examples and explain why?

C: **I mostly engage with videos related to makeup, the artists I listen to, and the movies and TV shows I watch. I use the app mainly to deepen interests I already have and to discover new aspects or features**<sup>44</sup>. For example, I might find a makeup tutorial that teaches me a new technique or discover a behind-the-scenes video of a movie I'm excited about. TikTok serves as a platform where I can continue to explore my passions and find fresh content that keeps these interests alive. It's also a place where I can find new suggestions, whether it's a new artist to listen to or a film that fits my taste.

I: Could you walk me through the ways you come across new content on TikTok?

C: I mainly use the For You Page (FYP). **I tend not to actively look at the accounts I follow or the videos my friends post, so I usually find new content through the FYP and through what my friends send me in direct messages.**<sup>45</sup> **The FYP is incredibly efficient at curating content that aligns with my interests, even if I'm not specifically looking for anything. The algorithm seems to understand my preferences well, so I often stumble upon videos that I wouldn't have found otherwise**<sup>46</sup>. My friends also play a significant role in this discovery process; they know my tastes, so the content they share with me is usually spot-on. It's a mix of my fyp recommendations and my friends that keeps my TikTok experience fresh and engaging.

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<sup>43</sup> Usage Frequency

<sup>44</sup> Content Engagement

<sup>45</sup> Selective Content Exposure

<sup>46</sup> Algorithm Accuracy

I: When you come across content in your recommendations, how do you decide if you engage with it?

C: **If it falls within my interests (such as cinema, music, video games, and makeup), I often leave a like and share them with close friends via direct messages.** The content that really resonates with me – whether it’s a thought-provoking film analysis, a song I love, or a makeup tutorial that introduces a new technique – usually gets a like from me. I find it important to engage with the content I enjoy because it signals to the algorithm that I want more of that type of content.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, I share these videos with my close friends in direct messages because I know they’ll appreciate them too. Sometimes, I also save or bookmark videos so that I can revisit them later. These are usually videos that I save because they have info that I might want to go back to, like makeup tips or movie recommendations that I might want to check out later.

I: Do you deliberately search for content outside of your feed? Can you give examples and explain why?

C: **It happens rarely, but it does occur when I want to "adjust" my algorithm and add content that rarely appears automatically – like the title of a book I’m reading at the moment or an artist I’m particularly interested in<sup>48</sup>.** For the most part, I have to say that I use the app a bit passively, so I tend not to search outside my feed. I open the app and just scroll for an indefinite amount of time, without any particular goal in mind. Sometimes I don’t even like the videos; I just watch them. I’m not very active in the sense that I rarely comment or search for specific content using the search bar<sup>49</sup>. However, when I do feel the need to adjust my feed, it’s usually because I want to see more content related to a specific interest, like a book I’m currently reading or a particular artist. In these cases, **I’ll search for content related to that interest, interact with it by liking or bookmarking, and gradually guide my feed in that direction.<sup>50</sup>**

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<sup>47</sup> Content Engagement

<sup>48</sup> Targeted Content Search

<sup>49</sup> Passive Content Consumption

<sup>50</sup> Targeted Content Search

I: So then how does your experience differ when you actively search for content on TikTok compared to when you passively browse the FYP? Do you find one more satisfying or rewarding than the other?

C: When I actively search for content on TikTok, it's usually because I have a specific interest in mind. For instance, I might want to delve deeper into a makeup technique I've seen or look for reviews on an art exhibit. This kind of targeted search is satisfying because it's driven by a precise curiosity, and I want to learn or have fun in a specific way<sup>51</sup>. On the other hand, just being on the For You Page is more relaxing. It's a way to discover content that I wouldn't have looked for, and sometimes I stumble upon something surprising that becomes a new interest. Both approaches have their place in my TikTok routine. The active search is more rewarding when I have a clear goal, while passive browsing is perfect for when I just want to relax and be entertained. It's a balance between directed learning and casual discovery, both of which enrich my experience on the platform.

I: Can you recall a time when you deliberately searched for content outside your usual recommendations? What motivated you to do so?

C: About two years ago, my algorithm automatically changed entirely and started showing me only videos that weren't interesting to me. This shift was frustrating because the content no longer aligned with my interests. After some initial annoyance, I decided to "manually" fix the problem by searching and interacting with content that was more aligned with my preferences. I started by searching for videos related to my usual interests, like specific artists, films, or makeup techniques, and then actively engaged with them by liking, saving, or bookmarking<sup>52</sup>. Over time, this helped realign the algorithm with my true interests, and I was able to enjoy my feed again. This experience taught me that while the algorithm is powerful, it's also adaptable, and with a little effort, I can steer it back to content that I genuinely care about.

I: Describe how you engage with content on TikTok. Do you mainly like, share, comment, or follow creators?

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<sup>51</sup> Targeted Content Search

<sup>52</sup> Content Diversification

C: **Primarily, I like and share through direct messages; I rarely also share on other social networks such as Instagram and Twitter.** I'm more selective when it comes to commenting or following creators. For a creator to earn a follow, they usually need to consistently produce content that resonates deeply with me. As for sharing on other social networks, it happens occasionally, but only if I find something that I think is particularly noteworthy or if it connects with a different audience, like my followers on Instagram or Twitter<sup>53</sup>. This way, I keep my engagement focused and meaningful, ensuring that my interactions reflect my genuine interests<sup>54</sup>.

I: How do you think TikTok's algorithm influences your perception of society and cultural norms?

C: I think the app actually exposes me to certain content that more or less belongs to what I like, so often my worldview isn't necessarily influenced by the app. **However, it can happen that it changes my mind on some topics.** I might come across a video that presents a different perspective on an issue I hadn't considered before, which can lead me to rethink my stance or at least appreciate a different viewpoint<sup>55</sup>. But yeah for the most part, the algorithm tends to reinforce my existing beliefs and interests by showing me content that aligns with them.

I: In your experience, how does TikTok balance between personalizing content and introducing diverse viewpoints? Can you give examples?

C: **I think the algorithm is quite consistent; it doesn't show me ideals that do not belong to me**<sup>56</sup>. For example, if I'm interested in a particular genre of music or a specific style of makeup, the algorithm will mostly show me content related to those interests. It rarely pushes content that challenges my views or presents entirely new ideas.

I: To what extent do you believe TikTok's algorithm understands your interests and preferences? Can you identify any biases in the content it recommends to you?

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<sup>53</sup> Content Engagement

<sup>54</sup> Interest Related Content

<sup>55</sup> New Perspective Exposure

<sup>56</sup> Selective Exposure

C: **Certainly! I don't have the eye to recognize when I'm a "victim" of bias, but when I take an overall look at how I use the app, I realize that everything is too perfect, too tailored for me<sup>57</sup>. It's almost as if the algorithm knows me better than I know myself<sup>58</sup>.** This realization makes me think about how much of my experience on TikTok is shaped by the algorithm's decisions rather than my own choices. The content that appears on my feed feels incredibly relevant, but at the same time, it's so well-curated that it almost seems artificial.

I: Have you ever intentionally diversified the types of content you consume on TikTok? What led you to do this?

C: **Yes, when I'm particularly interested in a multimedia product or a phenomenon, I try to interact with the videos so that I can see more of them in my feed.** For instance, if I'm really into a new TV series or a cultural phenomenon, I'll start engaging with related content to ensure that more of it appears in my feed<sup>59</sup>.

I: So you've taken steps before to "adjust" your algorithm by interacting with specific content. Could you walk me through how you decide which content could help realign your feed to your interests??

C: When I notice that the content I'm being shown no longer reflects my interests, I start actively searching for topics that I'm more passionate about. **For example, if I become interested in a new TV series, it's like the algorithm fixates on it and only shows me content related to that series.** While this can be enjoyable, it can also become a bit repetitive, so I tend to search for videos that are a bit different, like cooking, another TV series, or a makeup technique<sup>60</sup>. I search for those terms and interact with those videos by liking or commenting to let the algorithm know that I want to see more varied content. It's a bit like giving a new direction to the compass of my preferences.

I: Can you share any specific experiences where TikTok has significantly broadened your perspective or introduced you to a new interest area?

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<sup>57</sup> Tailored Content

<sup>58</sup> Identity Validation

<sup>59</sup> Content Reinforcement

<sup>60</sup> Content Echo Chamber

C: **The only thing that comes to mind is that I've watched films or series recommended on the app, but nothing too significant**<sup>61</sup>. While TikTok has introduced me to some new films or TV series that I might not have discovered otherwise, these experiences haven't had a profound impact on me. They've added to my list of entertainment options, but they haven't dramatically changed my perspective or introduced me to entirely new areas of interest.

I: How do TikTok's content curation and recommendation impact your identity expression or discovery on the platform?

C: **I am often influenced, especially when it comes to fashion. I see content creators who are not afraid to "dare" with clothes, so I feel quite inspired by them to dare myself. The way content creators on TikTok experiment with fashion has definitely impacted my own sense of style**<sup>62</sup>. Seeing others confidently express themselves through their clothing choices has encouraged me to be bolder and more adventurous in my own wardrobe. It's not just about following trends, but about finding inspiration in the way others use fashion to express their identity.

I: TikTok collects data to personalize content recommendations. How comfortable are you with this personalization?

C: **I am very much in favor**<sup>63</sup>. I see the personalization of content as a positive feature because it makes my experience on the platform better. By collecting data on my preferences and behaviors, TikTok can tailor my feed to show me content that I'm more likely to enjoy.

I: How do you describe your overall experience with TikTok in terms of content diversity and exposure to different perspectives?

C: **I'm very comfortable with the app. I like that my algorithm already knows what might interest me; it makes me feel in my comfort zone. That's kind of what I look for**

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<sup>61</sup> New Interests Exposure

<sup>62</sup> Identity Influence

<sup>63</sup> Positive Personalization Perception

since I use the app as a source of entertainment and to relax after a working day<sup>64</sup>.

The fact that the content is tailored to my interests means I can quickly find videos that align with my tastes, which is exactly what I want after a long day. **So I don't see why we should change it. Personally, I don't want material that doesn't align with my ideals. I would end up not opening the app anymore<sup>65</sup>.** This comfort is important to me because it allows me to unwind without being confronted by content that would stress me out or conflict with my values.

I: What changes, if any, would you like to see in how TikTok operates to enhance user experience or content diversity?

C: **I wouldn't make any.** I think TikTok is functioning well as it is, at least for my needs. The balance between personalized content and the occasional introduction of new ideas works perfectly for me. I'm satisfied with the way the algorithm tailors the content to my interests, and I wouldn't want to disrupt that by introducing too much content that doesn't align with my preferences. For now, I'm happy with the experience TikTok provides, and I don't see any need for significant changes.

I: Is there anything else about your experience with TikTok's algorithm, content recommendations, or community interactions that you think is important to share?

C: **No.** I feel like we've covered all the key aspects of my experience with TikTok. Overall, I'm content with how I use the platform and how it caters to my interests. The algorithm, while not perfect, does a good job of keeping me engaged and entertained. I'm happy with my TikTok experience as it stands and don't feel there's anything else to add.

I: Thank you so much for your time and your answers. I deeply appreciate your help.

C: Thank you! It was actually really interesting and kinda makes me think about how I use the app.

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<sup>64</sup> Comfort Zone Maintenance

<sup>65</sup> Selective Content Exposure

## D.

- 27
- Male
- PhD in Psychology and Cognitive Science

I: Hello, D! First of all thank you so much for your time and for helping me out on this project. Let's start! Can you tell me about your experience with TikTok? How long have you been using it, and how frequently?

D: I've been on TikTok for about three years now, ever since the pandemic hit. I usually scroll through it before bed, and sometimes even when I'm watching a movie. It's become part of my nightly routine<sup>66</sup>. But I did use it more during the pandemic. Now I have a job, so I don't really have the time to be on the app. I might use it on the bus, for example, or while waiting for the bus, as it makes the time go by. But other than that I also try to minimize it as much when I'm home, as I realized it does make me lose a lot of time and it does feel like

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<sup>66</sup> Usage Frequency

I: What kind of content do you typically engage with on TikTok? Can you give examples and explain why?

D: I love watching videos from psychologists, like TherapyJeff, or like animal clips, concert videos, especially Taylor Swift ones, and comedy sketches. These videos keep me entertained and it's always thing that I really enjoy.

I: Could you walk me through the ways you come across new content on TikTok?

D: I mostly just scroll through the For You Page. I rarely look for anything specific and don't really pay attention to who I follow. Sometimes, I use keywords to find a video I saw before or click on trending audios<sup>67</sup>.

I: When you come across content in your recommendations, how do you decide if you engage with it?

D: Most of the times my FYP just shows me what I like, and yeah... I just like the videos sometimes. There's not much of a thinking process behind my actions on the app, if I like the content then I'll put like.

I: How do you decide what content to view on TikTok? Please describe your process for discovering new content.

D: I don't really decide on what to view. TikTok is really good at showing me things that are in my interest, so I just scroll through the FYP for hours. The app really knows what I like.

I: Have there been instances where you've sought out content that isn't typically recommended to you? What prompted that search?

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<sup>67</sup> Passive Content Consumption

D: No, not really. I think the only time I search things up was because I was talking to a few friends about a specific video that went viral and looked for it<sup>68</sup>. But never actually used the search bar to find content different to what I'm shown.

I: Okay, thank you. And could you describe how you engage with content on TikTok. Do you mainly like, share, comment, or follow creators?

D: I mostly like videos and share them with my friends. I rarely repost, although recently I realized that I've unconsciously reposted some things, but that was probably while I was falling asleep<sup>69</sup>. Mmm... I don't really comment. And sometimes I mark videos as "not interested" if they're not my thing, which has been happening a bit since my fyp is showing me loads of videos from an Italian designer that I really don't like.

I: In your experience, how does TikTok balance between personalizing content and introducing diverse viewpoints? Can you give examples?

D: Nothing comes to my mind, to be honest. Sorry! It's just my feed is a mix of funny and stupid videos and things that reflect my interests, so I wouldn't say it shows me things that would challenge my assumptions, if that makes sense<sup>70</sup>. Only thing that comes to my mind is when I was shown quite a few videos of someone who was transitioning from female to male, which was obviously something new for me, so I guess a new viewpoint? But I wasn't that interested in the whole thing, I think the app didn't target me correctly and I just put 'not interested' on those videos.

I: It's okay, no pressure to answer all of the questions... Moving on, how accurately do you feel the content recommended to you on TikTok matches your interests and preferences? Have you noticed any patterns or trends in the recommendations you receive?

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<sup>68</sup> Minimal Active Search

<sup>69</sup> Selective Engagement

<sup>70</sup> Limited New Perspective Exposure

D: The recommendations are pretty spot-on. Sometimes it's almost too accurate, like when I talked about a breakup with a friend and then started seeing breakup videos. It's more about user patterns than me personally<sup>71</sup>.

I: Could you share your experiences with exploring different types of content on TikTok? What motivates you to explore new content areas?

D: TikTok used to show me more varied content, but now it feels repetitive. I realise though that I'm always on my fyp, and never actually look for things<sup>72</sup>. So, I guess you get what you give.

I: What role, if any, has TikTok played in the way you express your identity or explore new aspects of yourself?

D: Honestly, I treat TikTok more like a TV than a social network. I'm a pretty passive user. I open the app, scroll through the FYP, and let the algorithm decide what I see<sup>73</sup>. I don't really participate in challenges or follow trends actively. Instead, I just enjoy the content that comes to me. For example, I might binge-watch a series of concert clips or funny animal videos, just like I would with a TV show. It's a way to unwind and pass the time, whether I'm at home or commuting. I do share videos with friends if something really stands out, but I don't engage much beyond that.

I: TikTok collects data to personalize content recommendations. How comfortable are you with this personalization?

D: It's a bit scary how accurate it is. Like, the other day I was speaking to my best friend who had broken up the day before we met and we opened tiktok and one of the first videos that the app showed was about this girl who had just been broken up for the same specific reason as my best friend. It was funny but also a bit creepy, not going to lie.

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<sup>71</sup> Algorithm Accuracy

<sup>72</sup> Content Echo Chamber

<sup>73</sup> TV-Like Consumption

But I don't think the algorithm is based on me specifically, but on what people who like my same things do. Like, I don't think it's tailored on ME, but more on a category in which I belong. I look at it this way as it's less creepy...

I: How would you characterize your experience on TikTok regarding the variety of content and perspectives you encounter?

D: *My feed has become more repetitive over time. It used to be more diverse, but now it sticks to a few main themes, but I guess that has to do with me just viewing my fyp and limiting myself to it.*

I: What changes, if any, would you like to see in how TikTok operates to enhance user experience or content diversity?

D: *Maybe I wouldn't mind seeing more customization options for the feed, like being able to reset or adjust my preferences to keep the content fresh and varied.*

I: Are there any aspects of TikTok you think could be improved to better meet users' needs or interests? Please feel free to share any thoughts on enhancing user experience or content variety.

D: Making certain features, like live videos, clearer and more functional would be great. Sometimes I get the most random lives on my feed, and I have no idea where they come from. My feed is super accurate, but the lives are so strange. I realized some of them are even sexually explicit or like, yeah, random, like a group of people in the Philippines praying. I don't get it, and wouldn't mind understanding why these videos are suggested to me.

## **E1**

- 25
- Female
- Executive Assistant

**I:** Can you tell me about your experience with TikTok? How long have you been using it, and how frequently?

**E:** I began using tiktok right during covid. Initiatially i did not want to download it, but as I saw more people using it, and having fun with it I decided to also jump in on it. I have to say that its a platform that i go on daily.

**I:** What kind of content do you typically engage with on TikTok? Can you give examples and explain why?

**E:** Foodtok! All kinds of videos on recipes, taste tests, supermarket hauls.

**I:** Could you walk me through the ways you come across new content on TikTok?

**E:** I never tend to search content up, whenever i scroll through my for you page its where I find most of the new content<sup>74</sup>.

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<sup>74</sup> Content Consumption without Searching

**I:** So essentially you tend to just enjoy your fyp, correct?

**E:** Yeah, **it puts me sort of in a trance state<sup>75</sup>**, I'm hypnotized by what I'm shown and get caught up so much that I don't feel the need to do anything else. Just enjoy the videos and skip to the next ones.

**I:** Interesting, thank you. When you come across content in your recommendations, how do you decide if you engage with it?

**E:** I don't typically engage with it

**I:** Do you deliberately search for content outside of your feed? Can you give examples and explain why?

**E:** **No, I like what I'm shown<sup>76</sup>**.

**I:** Can you recall a time when you deliberately searched for content outside your usual recommendations? What motivated you to do so?

**E:** **The only times I use it is to look up songs, therefore I might type in the search bar something I remember<sup>77</sup>**. But I hardly do.

**I:** Describe how you engage with content on TikTok. Do you mainly like, share, comment, or follow creators?

**E:** **Like share and save<sup>78</sup>**.

**I:** So, basically, you engage with content by liking, sharing, and saving. Do you feel these interactions contribute to shaping your feed, or do you think TikTok's algorithm plays a more significant role?

**E:** **Oh the way I interact with videos by liking, sharing, and saving has to have some impact on what I see<sup>79</sup>**. But let's be real, the TikTok algorithm is the main thing. It picks up on the

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<sup>75</sup> Feeling Hypnotized

<sup>76</sup> Efficiency in Content Search

<sup>77</sup> Minimal Active Search

<sup>78</sup> Selective Engagement

<sup>79</sup> Content Engagement

tinest things I show interest in and just runs with it. It's kind of wild how it can almost predict what I want to watch before I even know I want to watch it. So, yeah, I do my part with the likes and stuff, but I feel like it's the algorithm that picks my feed.

**I:** So, you strongly believe in the algorithm. How do you think TikTok's algorithm influences your perception of society and cultural norms?

**E:** I'm not sure it does influence my perception on norms.

**I:** In your experience, how does TikTok balance between personalizing content and introducing diverse viewpoints? Can you give examples?

**E:** I think the only type of balancing it does is between content that I already like<sup>80</sup>. It's never something that does not belong to what I like or potentially like. Therefore, It's hard for me to be exposed to things that don't belong to my world.

**I:** To what extent do you believe TikTok's algorithm understands your interests and preferences? Can you identify any biases in the content it recommends to you?

**E:** It's incredible. The app knows me better than I know myself<sup>81</sup>.

**I:** Oh wow, great. And have you ever intentionally diversified the types of content you consume on TikTok? What led you to do this?

**E:** If my friends send me videos, that leads to having new content<sup>82</sup>.

**I:** Can you share any specific experiences where TikTok has significantly broadened your perspective or introduced you to a new interest area?

**E:** It never really broadened my perspective<sup>83</sup>, but I do try out new recipes that appear on my fyp.

**I:** How do TikTok's content curation and recommendation impact your identity expression or discovery on the platform?

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<sup>80</sup> Interest Related Content

<sup>81</sup> Algorithm Accuracy

<sup>82</sup> Engagement Growth

<sup>83</sup> Lack of Viewpoint Diversity

**E:** It's a nice platform to do **research for like food, locations, fashion or makeup tips**<sup>84</sup>. Even movies and tv series, so it taught me new things.

**I:** Changing the subject... TikTok collects data to personalize content recommendations. How comfortable are you with this personalization?

**E:** I'm not so comfortable

**I:** Given your discomfort with the data personalization aspect of TikTok, do you think a more transparent system explaining why certain contents are recommended might affect your willingness to explore more diverse content?

**E:** Yeah, you know, the whole data thing does kinda bug me. I mean, if TikTok could show me why they're throwing certain videos at me, I might be more down to check out stuff I wouldn't usually watch. It's like, if I know why it's suggesting something different, I might give it a chance, especially if there's a good reason behind it. Transparency could definitely be a game-changer.

**I:** How do you describe your overall experience with TikTok in terms of content diversity and exposure to different perspectives?

**E:** To be honest, **I don't really have much experience regarding content diversity and exposure to different perspectives. But I like it that way**<sup>85</sup>.

**I:** What changes, if any, would you like to see in how TikTok operates to enhance user experience or content diversity?

**E:** **I enjoy my experience on the app, I feel like it's my safe place. I feel understood by other people, creating a strong sense of belonging, so I personally wouldn't focus too much on content diversity**<sup>86</sup>. But then again, if I understood why the app would show me some different content, I don't think I would dislike it that much... but yeah, not sure. I like it the way it is.

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<sup>84</sup> Targeted Content Search

<sup>85</sup> Selective Content Exposure

<sup>86</sup> Comfort Zone Maintenance

**I:** Is there anything else about your experience with TikTok's algorithm, content recommendations, or community interactions that you think is important to share?

**E:** Not really.

**I:** Well, thank you so much for your time!

**E:** Of course, thank you! And good luck!

## **E2**

- 29
- Female
- Researched in Communication

**I:** Hello! So first of all, thank you so much, E2., for taking the time to participate in this interview. Your insights are incredibly valuable to my Master's dissertation, and I truly appreciate your willingness to share your experiences and thoughts on TikTok. As a researcher in communication, your perspective is especially important, and I'm eager to delve into how TikTok's algorithms and content impact both your professional research and personal life.

**E2:** Of course, it's my pleasure! I'm very curious to what you're about to ask me

**I:** Great. So, should we get started?

**E2:** sure!

**I:** okay, then... mmm...can you tell me about your experience with TikTok? How long have you been using it and how frequently?

**E2:** **I started using TikTok in December 2019 primarily for my thesis research.** At that time, Tiktok was exploding. It was when everyone started joining, right before covid and I was looking for the right platform to analyze that was relevant to my academic work. Initially, my engagement was purely academic, but as I continued to use the app, it quickly

became part of my daily routine. **Especially with the onset of the pandemic**, TikTok evolved from just a research tool into a source of entertainment and a way to stay connected during a time of global uncertainty. **Currently, I use it throughout the day, but with a self-imposed limit of an hour and a half to manage my screen time<sup>87</sup>**. This limit helps me strike a balance between staying informed and entertained without letting the app take over my day. The evolution of my TikTok usage from a research focus to a blend of academic and personal engagement reflects the platform's versatility and its growing influence on my daily life.

I: What kind of content do you typically engage with on TikTok? Can you give examples and explain why?

E2: **My TikTok feed is quite diverse**. This diversity is partly a reflection of my varied interests and partly due to the algorithm's ability to pick up on my browsing habits. I find myself gravitating towards a mix of content that keeps my experience on the platform both entertaining and informative. **I enjoy watching clips from concerts, cooking and animal videos, and outfit inspirations**. These categories align with different aspects of my personality – music and concerts cater to my love for live performances, cooking videos inspire me in the kitchen, animal videos bring a sense of joy and relaxation, and outfit inspirations feed my interest in fashion. **I'm not particularly choosy but I find myself sharing videos more than liking them**. Sharing allows me to connect with friends and colleagues. **I rarely ever use the dislike button though<sup>88</sup>**. I prefer to let the algorithm learn from the content I engage with rather than actively signal what I don't like. This approach keeps my feed varied and engaging without focusing too much on the negative.

I: Could you walk me through the ways you come across new content on TikTok?

E2: **Mostly new content finds me either through algorithmic recommendations based on my previous interactions or through videos shared by friends**. The TikTok algorithm is quite intuitive, and over time, it has become incredible at predicting what types of content will catch my attention. This means that even without actively searching, I'm constantly

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<sup>87</sup> Usage Frequency

<sup>88</sup> Content Engagement

exposed to fresh and relevant content that aligns with my interests. **This method has introduced me to new niches and varied content that I wouldn't have found on my own**<sup>89</sup>.

I: When you come across content in your recommendations, how do you decide if you engage with it?

E2: **It's all about the vibe for me.** My engagement is often guided by an instinctive reaction to the content. If a video immediately resonates with my mood or interests, I'm more likely to interact with it. **If a video is humorous, aesthetically pleasing, or particularly resonant with my interests, I'll engage with it.** These factors create a connection that compels me to watch the video fully, share it, or sometimes even save it for later. **I'm led by my instincts and interests at the moment**<sup>90</sup>. This spontaneous approach allows me to enjoy a wide range of content without overthinking my interactions. It's a way to keep my experience on TikTok light and enjoyable, driven by what catches my eye in the moment rather than a calculated decision to engage.

I: How do you decide what content to view on TikTok? Please describe your process for discovering new content.

E2: **I rarely actively search for new content outside the recommendations served to me**<sup>91</sup>. The strength of TikTok's algorithm is that it often delivers content that I find intriguing without the need for active searching. **The "For You" page is my go-to as it usually aligns with my interests thanks to TikTok's algorithm**<sup>92</sup>. **My engagement with the app is more about exploration within the confines of what's suggested to me**<sup>93</sup>. This doesn't mean that I'm not open to new experiences; rather, **I trust the algorithm to introduce me to content that is both relevant and surprising**<sup>94</sup>.

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<sup>89</sup> Algorithmic Influence

<sup>90</sup> Content Engagement

<sup>91</sup> Passive Content Consumption

<sup>92</sup> Algorithm Accuracy

<sup>93</sup> Selective Engagement

<sup>94</sup> Algorithm Accuracy

I: Have there been instances where you've sought out content that isn't typically recommended to you? What prompted that search?

E2: **Yes, I've occasionally ventured out of my usual content bubble driven by curiosity about popular figures like Jojo Siwa and Charli D'Amelio<sup>95</sup>.** These figures represent significant cultural phenomena, and understanding their influence is part of my broader interest in media and communication and my research. **However, I'm cautious not to let these explorations heavily influence my feed.** I'm aware that interacting too much with content outside my usual preferences could shift the algorithm and change the overall tone of my feed.

I: Describe how you engage with content on TikTok. Do you mainly like, share, comment, or follow creators?

E2: **I primarily browse content and share videos that catch my interest<sup>96</sup>.** This method of engagement suits my preference for passive consumption rather than active participation. **I rarely comment or use the like feature as much as I used to.** Over time, my interaction style has shifted to one that prioritizes browsing and sharing over direct engagement like commenting or liking. **My interaction is more passive, focusing on consumption rather than active engagement or content creation<sup>97</sup>.**

I: In what ways, if any, does TikTok's content affect your understanding of society and cultural norms?

E2: **While my interaction with TikTok is primarily for entertainment and research purposes,** the platform has a subtle way of influencing my understanding of broader societal trends. **The platform has inadvertently provided insights into various societal norms and cultural trends.** By exposing me to a wide range of content, from cooking and animal videos to concert clips and outfit inspirations, TikTok has given me a window into what

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<sup>95</sup> Exploratory Search

<sup>96</sup> Selective Engagement

<sup>97</sup> Passive Content Consumption

resonates with people globally. **TikTok has broadened my perspective on what interests people globally and the different ways individuals express themselves**<sup>98</sup>.

I: In your experience, how does TikTok balance between personalizing content and introducing diverse viewpoints? Can you give examples?

E2: **TikTok excels at tailoring content to my interests, though this sometimes results in an echo chamber effect.** While I appreciate how well the algorithm understands my preferences, I'm also aware that this focus can create a somewhat narrow view of the world. **My feed becomes intensely focused on specific interests like concerts, which can limit exposure to diverse viewpoints**<sup>99</sup>. For example, if I engage heavily with content about a particular hobby or interest, the algorithm will continue to push similar content, sometimes at the expense of introducing new or different perspectives.

I: How accurately do you feel the content recommended to you on TikTok matches your interests and preferences? Have you noticed any patterns or trends in the recommendations you receive?

E2: **Generally, the content TikTok recommends aligns well with my interests**<sup>100</sup>. The algorithm has become highly attuned to my preferences, accurately predicting what I might enjoy based on my past interactions. **The platform is adept at picking up on my viewing habits, though it can sometimes overdo it by pushing too much of the same content**<sup>101</sup>.

I: Could you share your experiences with exploring different types of content on TikTok? What motivates you to explore new content areas?

E2: Tiktoks's recommendations usually guide my explorations, **but there are times when I proactively search for new content.** For example, I might start exploring content related to a new hobby or a viral topic that I've seen popping up in other social media spaces<sup>102</sup>. **My explorations are guided by algorithmic suggestions and the occasional proactive search**

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<sup>98</sup> Content Diversification

<sup>99</sup> Content Echo Chamber

<sup>100</sup> Algorithm Accuracy

<sup>101</sup> Content Repetition

<sup>102</sup> Targeted Content Search

**out of interest in trending topics or personalities**<sup>103</sup>. I find that these explorations add richness to my TikTok experience by introducing me to new communities and perspectives that I wouldn't encounter through my usual browsing habits. Even though my main interactions are shaped by the algorithm, these occasional deep dives into new content areas help keep my experience fresh and engaging.

I: What role, if any, has TikTok played in the way you express your identity or explore new aspects of yourself?

E2: Honestly, I've been using TikTok as a tool for entertainment and academic research rather than a platform for expressing or exploring my identity. **My use of the platform is primarily passive**<sup>104</sup>, focusing on content consumption rather than creation or self-expression. But I do recognize that the diversity of content I consume has, in a way, an indirect influence on how I perceive myself and the world. **I feel like the privacy of my profile and with the few videos I posted being limited to my friends has sort of a more introspective engagement with the platform**<sup>105</sup>.

I: TikTok collects data to personalize content recommendations. How comfortable are you with this personalization?

E2: **I'm quite comfortable with the personalization aspect of TikTok. It's fascinating, albeit a bit surprising at times, how the app can reflect interests I haven't explicitly shared**<sup>106</sup>. This level of personalization has led to a more relevant and enjoyable browsing experience for me, so I view it positively.

I: Great! Thank you so much for your insights and your time!

E2: Of course! Good luck!

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<sup>103</sup> New Perspectives Exposure

<sup>104</sup> Passive Content Consumption

<sup>105</sup> Algorithmic Influence

<sup>106</sup> Unconscious Interest Reflection

## **R.**

- Female
- 25
- Account Executive

**I:** Hello, R! Thank you so much for participating on this research. Ready to start?

**R:** Yes, let's go.

**I:** Okay! Can you tell me about your experience with TikTok? How long have you been using it, and how frequently?

**R:** To be honest, first I was really skeptical about TikTok. I thought it's only about imitating dances, and just forced funny videos. So, for a long time I refused to download it. But I think after Covid, I gave it a go and since then I'm basically a daily user<sup>107</sup>.

**I:** What kind of content do you typically engage with on TikTok? Can you give examples and explain why?

**R:** What I really like about TikTok actually, against my initial perception of it, everyone can find content they like. Literally everyone. I mostly follow cooking videos, true crime stories, recommendations in cities (restaurants, places to visit etc.), psychological videos, and of course just simple relatable or funny contents.

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<sup>107</sup> Usage Frequency

**I:** Could you walk me through the ways you come across new content on TikTok?

**R:** I think sometimes even if I don't search for it, new trends and really liked videos are coming up for me<sup>108</sup>. So, while I can have my usual liked contents, I think on a weekly basis I can find new contents.

**I:** When you come across content in your recommendations, how do you decide if you engage with it?

**R:** I always watch the first couple seconds and if I'm not interested, I just scroll.

**I:** Do you deliberately search for content outside of your feed? Can you give examples and explain why?

**R:** Yes, as I said earlier I mainly use the search option when I have a specific recipe in my I want to try it, or for instance I'm going abroad and I want to check recommendations for it<sup>109</sup>.

**I:** When you're looking for recommendations for trips, like restaurants or sightseeing, how often does TikTok influence your final decisions? Have you ever followed TikTok suggestions and been pleasantly surprised or disappointed?

**R:** Actually, TikTok has a pretty big say in my plans, especially when I'm traveling. Like this one time, I was heading to Rome, and I found this cozy little pizza place on TikTok, and it wasn't super popular or anything, kinda hidden but the video sold it to me—the vibe, the pizza, it all just looked great. It was very traditional. So I went, and let me tell you, it did not disappoint. It was just as charming as the TikTok showed. But the opposite also happened. There was this one restaurant that got hyped up a lot in videos, and when I tried it, it was not great and especially too touristy. I didn't particularly enjoyed it.

**I:** Reflecting on your experiences with both the café and the restaurant you visited, how has this influenced your trust in TikTok's recommendations for places? Would you say you rely on TikTok more for discovering hidden gems rather than popular spots?

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<sup>108</sup> Passive Content Consumption

<sup>109</sup> Targeted Content Search

**R:** Those little adventures—they've definitely shaped how much I trust TikTok now. It's kind of wild how the app can nail my tastes. I mean, it's gotten to a point where I'll see a place or a dish pop up on my feed and I think, 'Yeah, TikTok gets me.'<sup>110</sup> It's like the app's tuned into my preferences so well that I feel pretty confident going with its suggestions, whether it's for a cool new bistro or just a quirky snack to try. So it's less about chasing what's trending and more about trusting TikTok to know what I'll enjoy. It's pretty cool how it can be so spot on with what I like; it feels personalized, you know? That's why I keep coming back for more.

**I:** So, essentially you trust TikTok, it “gets you” for many things. Whereas for “serious” issues, like what's happening in the world with wars or important social topics, do you trust it?

**R:** Trust is a big word, especially when it comes to serious stuff, right? I mean, TikTok is spot on when it comes to what I'll find entertaining or what I'll enjoy eating, but with the heavy stuff—like global events or major social issues—I take it with a grain of salt<sup>111</sup>. It's great for getting a snapshot or seeing what people are saying, but I know it's just one piece of the puzzle. For the full picture, I'll check out news outlets or read in-depth articles. So, yeah, I trust TikTok for the little things, the personal touches, but for the big, world-changing stuff, I feel it's important to cross-reference and make sure I'm getting the complete story.

**I:** Can you recall a time when you deliberately searched for content outside your usual recommendations? What motivated you to do so?

**R:** Yes, as previously said, mainly for recipes, and recommendations of restaurants, sight-seeing things etc<sup>112</sup>.

**I:** Describe how you engage with content on TikTok. Do you mainly like, share, comment, or follow creators?

**R:** I mostly save videos and follow creators. Also, in general I just check the For You page, where I get all the contents<sup>113</sup>. Also, sometimes when I'm watching a TikTok in the bottom

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<sup>110</sup> Algorithm Accuracy

<sup>111</sup> Selective Trust

<sup>112</sup> Targeted Content Search

<sup>113</sup> Selective Engagement

of the video, there's a suggestion to search this or that concept related to the content of the video. Sometimes I click on it, if I don't really understand what they talk about, or I'm interested in more videos. In plus, when I have something specific in mind, especially when I'm looking for recommended restaurants, or specific recipes, I search for it<sup>114</sup>.

**I:** How do you think TikTok's algorithm influences your perception of society and cultural norms?

**R:** I feel like it influences my perception of society. Often, I'm exposed to content that belongs to certain categories, like, let's say, feminism but it's so much more extreme than my basic knowledge on the topic, so I learn, and it broadens my perception<sup>115</sup>.

**I:** In your experience, how does TikTok balance between personalizing content and introducing diverse viewpoints? Can you give examples?

**R:** My algorithm is a bit repetitive, so I'm not sure if it introduces diverse viewpoints. For instance, I like true crime videos or cooking videos, so I get a lot of those<sup>116</sup>. But I don't mind, I like them, and the video itself is always different although it is in the same category. But yeah, the category of the content is always the same.

**I:** You previously said, "It's great for getting a snapshot or seeing what people are saying, but I know it's just one piece of the puzzle". To what extent do you believe TikTok's algorithm understands your interests, ideals, and preferences? Can you identify any biases in the content it recommends to you?

**R:** Yes, I identify biases in my content. All my videos are things I like, it understands perfectly what I'm into. However, it never exposes me to things I don't enjoy. That's why I tend to not use it for "serious" matters, as I said before. I know I'm probably going to get just one side of the story and I don't want that<sup>117</sup>.

**I:** Have you ever intentionally diversified the types of content you consume on TikTok? What led you to do this?

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<sup>114</sup> Exploratory Search

<sup>115</sup> New Perspective Exposure

<sup>116</sup> Content Echo Chamber

<sup>117</sup> Bias Reinforcement Concern

**R:** No, I think I stick to the ones I like.

**I:** Can you share any specific experiences where TikTok has significantly broadened your perspective or introduced you to a new interest area?

**R:** As mentioned before, it never really exposed me to content that is outside my field of interest, but it has deepened my knowledge regarding certain topics that I already believed in, like feminism and so on<sup>118</sup>.

**I:** How do TikTok's content curation and recommendation impact your identity expression or discovery on the platform?

**R:** I think it impacts on what I believe, not necessarily my identity expression or discovery<sup>119</sup>.

**I:** TikTok collects data to personalize content recommendations. How comfortable are you with this personalization?

**R:** I'm okay with it, that's why my algorithm is good and I'm getting good content<sup>120</sup>.

**I:** How do you describe your overall experience with TikTok in terms of content diversity and exposure to different perspectives?

**R:** I think on my For You Page I have the chance to see more wider type of contents, however, I'm happy that the algorithm somehow take care of it and doesn't give videos that are not at all related to my interests<sup>121</sup>.

**I:** What changes, if any, would you like to see in how TikTok operates to enhance user experience or content diversity?

**R:** I'm not sure.

**I:** Is there anything else about your experience with TikTok's algorithm, content recommendations, or community interactions that you think is important to share?

**R:** No.

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<sup>118</sup> Knowledge Deepening

<sup>119</sup> Belief Reinforcement

<sup>120</sup> Privacy Awareness with Acceptance

<sup>121</sup> Selective Content Exposure

I: Well, thank you so much, R., for your time! I really appreciate it!

R: Thank you! That was really interesting. Good luck on your research!

## I.

- 20
- Female
- Law student.

### Introduction

I: Thank you so much, I., for taking the time to participate in this interview. Your insights are incredibly valuable to my Master's dissertation, and I truly appreciate your willingness to share your experiences and thoughts on TikTok. As a law student, your perspective is particularly interesting, and I'm eager to explore how TikTok's algorithms and content impact your daily life and possibly your studies. Your contributions will provide a crucial understanding of how younger users interact with and perceive this platform. So, ready to start?

I: Yes!

I: Okay. Can you tell me about your experience with TikTok? How long have you been using it and how frequently?

I: **My experience with TikTok until now has been quite fun.** I initially downloaded the app in 2021, primarily out of curiosity and because many of my friends were already using it. Since then, it has become a part of my weekly routine, although I wouldn't say it

dominates my daily life. **I use it three or four times a week<sup>122</sup>**. When I do open the app, it's usually when I have some free time or need a break from studying.

I: What kind of content do you typically engage with on TikTok? Can you give examples and explain why?

I: **Mostly recipes but also funny videos**. I've always had an interest in cooking, so I naturally gravitate towards content that gives me new ideas for meals or techniques I haven't tried before. TikTok's short format is perfect for quick, digestible recipe ideas that I can save and try out later. Besides that, I enjoy a good laugh, so funny videos are always a hit. **Recently on my feed, there are a lot of videos about pregnancy and weddings**. This probably reflects the content I've been lingering on lately, or maybe it's because people around my age are starting to think about these life events more seriously. **It really depends on what I think about during the day**. If I've been discussing a particular topic with friends or it's something that's been on my mind, it often shows up in my feed. TikTok seems to pick up on these cues and tailors the content accordingly.

I: Could you walk me through the ways you come across new content on TikTok?

I: **I just know there's a few creators that I like so I just look for them to see their new videos**. I've developed a bit of a routine when it comes to TikTok. There are a handful of creators whose content I consistently enjoy, so I make it a point to check in on their latest videos. Their updates provide a reliable source of entertainment or inspiration. **My friends also send me a lot of videos; most of them are funny videos, but they also send me content that I might like based on what I'm interested in, like recipes, fashion, or TV series<sup>123</sup>**. This way, TikTok becomes a shared experience, where we can laugh about the same videos or discuss the content that resonates with us. **In general, most of the time my feed shows me videos that align with what I like to watch<sup>124</sup>**. It's comforting to see that the algorithm gets my tastes right most of the time, and it helps me relax knowing that when I open the app, I'll see things I enjoy.

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<sup>122</sup> Usage Frequency

<sup>123</sup> Content Engagement

<sup>124</sup> Algorithm Accuracy

I: When you come across content in your recommendations, how do you decide if you engage with it?

I: **Most of the time, it takes me a few seconds to realize if I'm interested in what I'm watching, so if I'm not engaged, I just scroll down.** I think this immediate decision-making process is common among TikTok users. The content is so fast-paced that you quickly learn to filter out what doesn't grab your attention. **If a video doesn't catch my eye within the first few seconds, I don't hesitate to move on**<sup>125</sup>. This way, I maximize my time on the app by focusing only on what truly interests me. It's a sort of mental shortcut that helps me navigate through the sea of content without getting bogged down by things that don't resonate with me.

I: Do you deliberately search for content outside of your feed? Can you give examples and explain why?

I: **It depends. Sometimes it happens that I want to see content about something that's going on, like some gossip or videos about the fashion week.** **While I mostly rely on the feed TikTok curates for me**<sup>126</sup>, **there are times when I take a more proactive approach. If there's a particular event or trend that I'm curious about, such as the latest celebrity gossip or highlights from fashion week, I'll search for related content**<sup>127</sup>. These searches are usually driven by a specific interest or a conversation I've had recently, and they help me stay informed about topics that might not appear in my regular feed.

I: Can you recall a time when you deliberately searched for content outside your usual recommendations? What motivated you to do so?

I: **A few days ago, I looked for an Italian guy who is a monologist. I looked for his videos because he's going to perform in a theater in my hometown, and I was undecided about whether to buy a ticket for the show or not**<sup>128</sup>. This was a situation where TikTok became more than just entertainment – it was a tool to help me make a decision. I wasn't familiar with this performer, so I turned to TikTok to get a sense of his style and content. The short

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<sup>125</sup> Selective Engagement

<sup>126</sup> Content Consumption without Searching

<sup>127</sup> Targeted Content Search

<sup>128</sup> Targeted Content Search

clips I found gave me a good idea of what to expect, which ultimately helped me decide whether or not to attend the show.

I: You looked up videos of a monologist to help decide whether to buy a ticket to their show. How often do you turn to TikTok for help making decisions like this?

I: **I have to admit it happens quite often!** TikTok has become a quick and easy way to get a feel for something before committing to it. Whether it's deciding on a show to attend, a new restaurant to try, or even a product I'm thinking of buying, TikTok's short, user-generated reviews and previews are incredibly helpful. **I don't normally look up things if not for an event to see if it's worth the money. I like to see what the event is all about before spending the money<sup>129</sup>.** This method saves me from potential disappointment and helps me feel more confident in my decisions. It's like having a mini review session in a matter of seconds, which is really convenient when you're trying to make a quick decision.

I: Since you find TikTok useful for getting a feel of events before investing in them, have you ever been surprised by an event or a show that you attended based on a TikTok video? How did the experience compare to your expectations set by the TikTok preview?

I: **Actually, yeah, TikTok's become kind of like my go-to for a quick review before I commit to anything.** I've come to rely on these short, user-generated videos for a realistic preview of what I'm getting into. Whether it's a show, a new restaurant, or even a workout class, I find these quick clips super helpful. **It's like getting a sneak peek so I know what I'm getting into. Saves me both time and money.** There have been instances where the actual experience was either better or different from what I expected based on TikTok, but overall, these previews help manage my expectations. It's reassuring to have a sense of what to expect, and it definitely influences my decisions.

I: Describe how you engage with content on TikTok. Do you mainly like, share, comment, or follow creators?

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<sup>129</sup> Algorithmic Influence

I: **I mostly share and like; sometimes I save content, but there are just a few creators that I follow. I never leave comments<sup>130</sup>.** My engagement with TikTok is more about enjoying and sharing content rather than actively contributing to the platform. **I don't consider myself to be an active user, to be honest<sup>131</sup>.** I think of myself more as an observer – I like to watch and appreciate content, but I don't feel the need to participate by commenting or posting.

I: Please explain more regarding your position as a “non-active user.”

I: Well, I consider myself to be an active user on other platforms. Like Instagram, for example. I post stories and posts on there to share with my friends. On Instagram, I feel more comfortable sharing parts of my life, whether it's through photos, stories, or posts. It's a platform where I feel more connected with my friends and followers. **Whereas on TikTok, I feel as if I'm a “ghost”? Does it make sense? Like I'm liking things and sharing sometimes, but I don't post, nor do I feel the need to do so.** TikTok, for me, is more about consuming content than creating it. I enjoy the anonymity it offers – I can watch and interact with videos without feeling the pressure to contribute. **I like my anonymity the way it is<sup>132</sup>.** This approach allows me to enjoy the content without the need for visibility or recognition.

I: You mentioned a preference for anonymity on TikTok and being more active on platforms like Instagram. Can you share what drives your decision to engage differently across these platforms? Is it something about TikTok's environment or the content itself that influences this choice?

I: **On Instagram, I feel like it's more personal, like I'm sharing bits of my day with friends. But on TikTok, it feels like everyone's performing, and I'm just there in the audience.** The culture on TikTok seems to be more about performance and entertainment, where users are often creating content with the intention of reaching a broad audience. **I'm cool with watching, reacting, and occasionally sharing stuff with my close friends. Posting on TikTok? That's just not me.** I enjoy being a passive participant, where I can enjoy the content without feeling the pressure to produce it. **I like being in my little corner**

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<sup>130</sup> Content Engagement

<sup>131</sup> Passive Content Consumption

<sup>132</sup> Passive Content Consumption

**where I can enjoy content without the pressure of having a 'presence.'**<sup>133</sup> TikTok allows me to consume content in a way that feels more relaxed and less demanding. **I also have a feeling that you can easily become viral on the app with the power of the algorithm, and I'm not sure I would like that.** The potential for sudden visibility on TikTok, driven by its powerful algorithm, is something I'm cautious about. I prefer to stay in the background, enjoying the content without the possibility of unintended fame.

I: Okay, next question... How do you think TikTok's algorithm influences your perception of society and cultural norms?

I: **I just think it strengthens my ideas on important topics which involve societal and cultural norms.** The algorithm tends to show me content that aligns with my existing beliefs and values, which can reinforce my opinions on various issues. **Most of the videos about societal norms just tend to make my ideas stronger. Instead of challenging my views, the content I see on TikTok often validates them, which makes me feel more confident in my perspectives.**<sup>134</sup> While this can be reassuring, I'm aware that it might also limit my exposure to different viewpoints.

I: In your experience, how does TikTok balance between personalizing content and introducing diverse viewpoints? Can you give examples?

I: **I don't think it balances it.** From my experience, TikTok tends to prioritize content that matches my interests and beliefs, rather than exposing me to a wide range of perspectives. **The algorithm seems to focus on showing me more of what I like, which can create a kind of echo chamber**<sup>135</sup>. This means that while I'm constantly engaged with content that resonates with me, I'm not necessarily seeing diverse or challenging viewpoints that could broaden my understanding of certain issues.

I: To what extent do you believe TikTok's algorithm understands your interests and preferences? Can you identify any biases in the content it recommends to you?

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<sup>133</sup> Private Engagement

<sup>134</sup> Identity Validation

<sup>135</sup> Content Repetition

I: **Yes, there's biases. I don't get content that doesn't match my passions – only content that I like and that reinforces my ideas**<sup>136</sup>. The algorithm seems to have a strong grasp of what I'm interested in, which results in a feed that is highly customized to my tastes. However, this customization comes with the downside of reinforcing existing biases, as I'm rarely exposed to content that challenges my views or introduces me to new ideas.

I: Have you ever intentionally diversified the types of content you consume on TikTok? What led you to do this?

I: Nope, I never did that, but just because I never had a reason to do it.

I: Can you share any specific experiences where TikTok has significantly broadened your perspective or introduced you to a new interest area?

I: **I don't think it ever happened.** While TikTok has introduced me to new recipes, funny videos, and trending topics, I wouldn't say that it has dramatically broadened my perspective or led me to develop new interests<sup>137</sup>. The content I engage with tends to reinforce my existing tastes and preferences, rather than pushing me in new directions.

I: How do TikTok's content curation and recommendation impact your identity expression or discovery on the platform?

I: I am not sure it influences my identity expression/discovery.

I: TikTok collects data to personalize content recommendations. How comfortable are you with this personalization?

I: I'm a little bit scared about this feature, but until now, it was pretty accurate.

I: How do you describe your overall experience with TikTok in terms of content diversity and exposure to different perspectives?

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<sup>136</sup> Confirmation Bias

<sup>137</sup> Limited New Perspective Exposure

I: **I get different content, but it's all content that I'm into. So in terms of content diversity or different perspectives, I don't think it offers much<sup>138</sup>.** My TikTok feed provides a variety of content, but it all falls within the scope of my existing interests. While this makes for an enjoyable browsing experience, it doesn't necessarily expose me to new or diverse perspectives. The content I see is well-aligned with my preferences, which means I'm not often challenged or introduced to different viewpoints.

I: What changes, if any, would you like to see in how TikTok operates to enhance user experience or content diversity?

I: **I would say I would like to see different content, but then again my fyp is so customized to my own liking that I don't see the point of requiring content that just doesn't match with who I am<sup>139</sup>.** While the idea of seeing more diverse content is appealing, I also recognize that my current feed is perfectly tailored to my tastes. **I don't want to open the app and see football, for example. I don't care about it, therefore I don't want it.** I appreciate that TikTok respects my preferences and shows me content that I'm genuinely interested in. For this reason, I'm not sure I would welcome a significant change in the algorithm that would introduce content I have no interest in.

I: Even though you prefer content that matches your interests, is there a type of content you wish TikTok would introduce to your feed to challenge your perspectives or simply add variety?

I: **Not really. I get why shaking things up could be good for some people, but for me, if I'm chilling on TikTok, I just want to see the stuff I like<sup>140</sup>.** When I'm using TikTok, I'm looking to relax and enjoy content that I know I'll like. **If I wanted to be challenged, I'd be joining a debate club, not scrolling through my feed.** For me, TikTok is about unwinding, not pushing myself to explore new ideas. I'm content with the variety I currently have in my feed, and I don't feel the need to seek out content that would disrupt that.

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<sup>138</sup> Selective Content Exposure

<sup>139</sup> Comfort Zone Maintenance

<sup>140</sup> Interest Related Content

I: Is there anything else about your experience with TikTok's algorithm, content recommendations, or community interactions that you think is important to share?

I: **No.** I feel like we've covered all the main points about my experience with TikTok. Overall, I'm satisfied with how the platform works for me, and I don't have any additional thoughts or concerns to share at this time.

I: Great! Thanks for your time.

I: Of course, thank you!

**S.**

- 28 years old
- Female
- Social media specialist.

**I:** Hello! First of all, I appreciate you taking your time and participating in this interview. So, Can you tell me about your experience with TikTok? How long have you been using it, and how frequently?

**S:** My pleasure! So... I signed up during the pandemic in 2020 and have been using it moderately since then. **I'd say that my time on the platform has increased in the last six months<sup>141</sup>.**

**I:** What kind of content do you typically engage with on TikTok? Can you give examples and explain why?

**S:** I'm really into cooking videos—there's this one account, @gabbriette, she's amazing. I also enjoy watching vlogs, outfit videos, and definitely marketing-related content because of my job. It's a mix that keeps me both entertained and informed.

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<sup>141</sup> Usage Frequency

**I:** Given your interest in marketing-related content, how do you feel the marketing strategies on TikTok differ from those on other platforms, and what can other social media specialists learn from this?

**S:** Well, I feel TikTok has an original approach. For example, I feel like when I'm watching videos, they often have the same audio, which is often trending in that moment. And after watching one, two, three and more videos with the sound in the timeframe of, like, an hour? I just have it in my mind and it's hard to stop thinking about it. So, I just look it up on Spotify. So, it's not a direct approach from music labels, I guess, but it's a sneaky way of promoting artists.

**I:** That's interesting. Do you think music labels plan something like this or do you think it can happen also casually?

**S:** No, I guess both can happen. Sometimes the latest single from an A-list popstar is trending, so I guess that can be considered planned. On the other times, snippets of songs from unknown artists become viral and these songs might not even be on streaming platforms. So I think sometimes it can be "natural" and not necessarily planned.

**I:** Could you walk me through the ways you come across new content on TikTok?

**S:** **Honestly, I'm quite passive about it<sup>142</sup>. I use the search bar if something specific comes to mind, but I don't go out of my way to find new content<sup>143</sup>.** I tend to let TikTok's algorithms do their thing and bring content to me, which is pretty much how I use other social media too.

**I:** You mentioned that you let TikTok's algorithms bring content to you. How do you think this passive approach affects your exposure to new ideas or trends compared to actively searching for content?

**S:** It's kind of a double-edged sword, really. On the one hand, the algorithm saves me time by serving up what it thinks I'll like based on my past interactions, which is super convenient. But then, I might be missing out on a whole world of ideas or trends that could inspire me in ways I haven't imagined. Actively searching for content probably would broaden my

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<sup>142</sup> Passive Content Consumption

<sup>143</sup> Targeted Content Search

horizons more, but it's a trade-off between discovery and the efficiency of curated content. That's why even though I usually take a more passive approach<sup>144</sup>, I do make an effort sometimes to step out of my comfort zone and look for something new, especially when I hear about a trend elsewhere or need something specific for work<sup>145</sup>.

I: When you come across content in your recommendations, how do you decide if you engage with it?

S: I'll give the video a chance, watch the first few seconds, and see if it grabs me. Sometimes, even if it seems like something I'd normally like, it's just not what I'm in the mood for at that moment, so I might scroll past it.

I: How do you decide what content to view on TikTok? Please describe your process for discovering new content.

S: As mentioned I mostly use my “fyp”, and more times than not it's content that matches my interests<sup>146</sup>. But sometimes I go on the search bar, especially when I'm on the hunt for something specific, like new recipes or when I need help with software<sup>147</sup>. For instance, if I'm trying to figure out how to use a new feature in Figma for work, I'll go straight to TikTok to find tutorials.

I: Can you recall a time when you deliberately searched for content outside your usual recommendations? What motivated you to do so?

S: Oh, yes. Always marketing oriented, but there was this one time I really wanted to get to grips with a particular Figma feature for a project I was working on. I ended up finding this whole community on TikTok that shares tips and tricks. It was super helpful. But also, recently, a coffee that was viral on tiktok during the pandemic came to my mind, and I searched how to do it.

I: Describe how you engage with content on TikTok. Do you mainly like, share, comment, or follow creators?

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<sup>144</sup> Passive Content Consumption

<sup>145</sup> Exploratory Search

<sup>146</sup> Interest-Based Content Reflection

<sup>147</sup> Targeted Content Search

S: I'm more of a liker and a follower<sup>148</sup>. When I find something I really love, I hit like, and if it's something special, I'll save it to a group so I can go back to it. And if I'm consistently impressed by someone's content, I'll hit follow. It's my way of curating my feed and supporting creators.

I: How do you think TikTok's algorithm influences your perception of society and cultural norms?

S: I feel like TikTok's algorithm creates a sort of echo chamber by showing me content that aligns with my interests and the cultural norms I'm already familiar with<sup>149</sup>. It's great for finding content that resonates with me, but I do wonder what I'm missing out on and how that might be shaping my view of society in a more narrow way.

I: In your experience, how does TikTok balance between personalizing content and introducing diverse viewpoints? Can you give examples?

S: To be honest, I don't have much diversity on my "fyp"<sup>150</sup>. My feed is mostly the same, showing me things I'm into, like marketing or food.

I: To what extent do you believe TikTok's algorithm understands your interests and preferences? Can you identify any biases in the content it recommends to you?

S: The algorithm gets it right most of the time with my core interests like marketing and cooking. But there's a bias towards keeping me within those lines, rarely challenging me with different viewpoints or topics. I'm aware of it, so I take the initiative to look beyond what's served up to me<sup>151</sup>.

I: Nice, and have you ever intentionally diversified the types of content you consume on TikTok? What led you to do this?

S: No, I haven't. My usage has been quite focused on my personal and professional interests. I haven't really felt the need to step outside of that space yet.

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<sup>148</sup> Minimal Active Search

<sup>149</sup> Content Echo Chamber

<sup>150</sup> Content Echo Chamber

<sup>151</sup> New Point of Views

I: Can you share any specific experiences where TikTok has significantly broadened your perspective or introduced you to a new interest area?

S: Actually, TikTok has been quite influential for me. I stumbled upon a video about sustainable living that caught my attention. It was fascinating and led me down a rabbit hole of environmental content. It's not something I initially sought out, but now I'm genuinely considering how to incorporate sustainable practices into both my personal life and marketing strategies.

I: How do TikTok's content curation and recommendation impact your identity expression or discovery on the platform?

S: Well, the platform does a good job of reflecting the interests I've shown. It kind of reaffirms my identity related to my professional life in digital marketing, but I've noticed it also gradually shapes my interactions<sup>152</sup>. Because of the content I'm served, I find myself drawn to certain communities, like the tech and design spaces on TikTok, which have become a part of my digital identity.

I: TikTok collects data to personalize content recommendations. How comfortable are you with this personalization?

S: I'm quite comfortable. At the end of the day, that's what all social media platforms do.

I: How do you describe your overall experience with TikTok in terms of content diversity and exposure to different perspectives?

S: My experience has been somewhat mixed. There's certainly a wide range of content available, but I find that I have to make a conscious effort to find it. The algorithm tends to show me a loop of similar content. It's great for when I want to see more of what I already like, but it doesn't naturally lead me to different perspectives<sup>153</sup>.

I: What changes, if any, would you like to see in how TikTok operates to enhance user experience or content diversity?

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<sup>152</sup> Identity Validation

<sup>153</sup> Content Repetition

S: I think there could be a feature that allows users to 'shuffle' their feed and introduce a random element to break the monotony. It could be a way to encourage diversity in our content consumption without us having to seek it out actively.

I: Is there anything else about your experience with TikTok's algorithm, content recommendations, or community interactions that you think is important to share?

S: Yes, while the algorithm does a good job at tailoring the content to my tastes, I believe there's a lot of potential for TikTok to become a platform that not only entertains but also educates and informs. Strengthening community interactions and recommendations that cut across different user groups could enrich the TikTok experience even further.

I: That's a great suggestion! Thank you for this interview.

S: Thank you!

## M1.

- 29
- Female
- HR.

I: Thank you so much, M1., for taking the time to participate in this interview. Your insights are incredibly valuable to my Master's dissertation, and I truly appreciate your willingness to share your experiences and thoughts on TikTok. As someone working in Human Resources, your perspective offers a unique view of how social media platforms like TikTok intersect with professional interests and personal life. Your contributions will provide crucial understanding into how professionals like yourself navigate this digital landscape. Ready?

M1: yes!

I: Can you tell me about your experience with TikTok? How long have you been using it and how frequently?

M1: **I've been on TikTok for over three years now.** It all started as a casual thing, but over time, it has become a significant part of my daily routine. Initially, I joined out of curiosity, seeing what the buzz was about, but now it's something I engage with regularly. **I'm pretty hooked, I guess – I check it daily, usually for about half an hour or so.** That's just enough time to catch up on trending content and see what's new without it taking over my entire day. **It's become a way to unwind, like how some people might watch a quick episode of a**

TV show. It's interesting how it has seamlessly integrated into my routine, offering both entertainment and a bit of learning<sup>154</sup>.

I: What kind of content do you typically engage with on TikTok? Can you give examples and explain why?

M1: **Well, I don't really 'engage' in the sense of commenting or posting, but I consume a lot of content.** <sup>155</sup>My interaction with TikTok is more about absorbing what's there rather than actively participating<sup>156</sup>. **I'm into a mix of things – like I'll watch Reddit stories, LGBT and feminism topics, stuff about international relations, and DIY projects. Oh, and funny videos are always a must for me.** These categories reflect my diverse interests. Reddit stories provide a range of human experiences and dilemmas that are often relatable and thought-provoking. LGBT and feminism topics resonate with my values and beliefs, while content on international relations keeps me informed about global issues, which is important both personally and professionally. DIY projects, on the other hand, offer a creative outlet and inspiration for home improvement. And, of course, funny videos are there for when I need a good laugh – they're a great way to lighten the mood after a long day.

I: Could you walk me through the ways you come across new content on TikTok?

M1: **I pretty much go with the flow of the algorithm<sup>157</sup> – it has its own rhythm, and I like the surprise element of not knowing what's going to pop up next.** There's something exciting about the unpredictability of what might appear on my feed. **I don't actively search; I let the content find me.** This passive approach to discovering content is quite different from how I engage with other media.<sup>158</sup> **My usage of the app is quite like how I used to watch TV (I don't anymore). I would just watch what the channels offered and kind of passively stay there for a few hours<sup>159</sup>.** The big difference now is that **TikTok, unlike TV, has a higher chance of showing me content I enjoy.** The algorithm is more

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<sup>154</sup> Usage Frequency

<sup>155</sup> Content Consumption without Searching

<sup>156</sup> Passive Content Consumption

<sup>157</sup> Content Consumption without Searching

<sup>158</sup> Passive Content Consumption

<sup>159</sup> TV Like Consumption

personalized, making it a more efficient and enjoyable way to consume content.<sup>160</sup> It's like having a TV channel tailored just for me, which keeps me coming back to see what's next.

I: Can you describe any differences in your experience of consuming content on TikTok compared to traditional TV? How has this influenced your expectations for entertainment or information gathering, if at all?

M1: **It's interesting when I think about it. With TV, I was used to just zoning out to whatever was on, but TikTok's different.** TikTok has changed my expectations for entertainment. **It's like TV that knows what I like<sup>161</sup>, so my expectations for what I consider entertaining have evolved.** Now, I find myself less patient with content that doesn't immediately grab my attention because I know there's something more suited to my interests just a swipe away. This immediacy and customization have also influenced how I gather information. **I feel like I find myself less tolerant of content that doesn't immediately grab my attention because I know there's something more perfect for me on my phone. It's the same with information – I used to flip through channels or wait for the news, but now I expect to learn about world events or new trends without that wait.** TikTok has made entertainment and learning much more immediate and personalized for me. This has set a new standard for how I consume media, where I expect to find exactly what I want quickly and without much effort.

I: When you come across content in your recommendations, how do you decide if you engage with it?

M1: **I'll keep watching if it matches my interests. I'm here for entertainment or to learn something new, so if it doesn't click right away, I'll scroll past<sup>162</sup>.** My engagement is very instinctive – if the content doesn't resonate within the first few seconds, I don't hesitate to move on. **And if something rubs me the wrong way or it's just not my thing, I'm not shy about telling TikTok I'm not interested<sup>163</sup>.** I'm quite deliberate in shaping my feed. By actively indicating what I'm not interested in, I help the algorithm better tailor the content

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<sup>160</sup> Algorithm Accuracy

<sup>161</sup> Algorithm Accuracy

<sup>162</sup> Content Engagement

<sup>163</sup> Selective Engagement

to my preferences. This way, I make sure that my time on TikTok is spent watching things that I find either enjoyable or informative<sup>164</sup>.

I: Do you deliberately search for content outside of your feed? Can you give examples and explain why?

M1: **It's not common, but I do go on the search when I need something specific<sup>165</sup>.**

Usually, I let the algorithm do its thing, but there are times when I'm looking for something in particular. **Like sometimes I'm in the mood to try a new recipe<sup>166</sup>. It's quicker to find them on TikTok than to read through a blog post.** TikTok's format is perfect for this because the videos are concise and visually guided, which makes them easier to follow than a long, written recipe. It's about efficiency – I can see the entire process in under a minute, which is much more appealing when I'm pressed for time or just want a quick idea for dinner.

I: Can you recall a time when you deliberately searched for content outside your usual recommendations? What motivated you to do so?

M1: **Yeah, like with recipes. TikTok's perfect for that.** When I'm in the mood for something specific, like a new dish to try, TikTok is my go-to. **It's just visual, straightforward, no fluff. I wanted to make a new dish and didn't want to sift through loads of text, so I looked it up and got a bunch of videos that showed me exactly what to do.** This approach is all about getting straight to the point – no long introductions, just the content I need. It's this kind of practicality that keeps me coming back to TikTok whenever I'm searching for quick and useful information.

I: Describe how you engage with content on TikTok. Do you mainly like, share, comment, or follow creators?

M1: **I put like when something really resonates with me or if I find it super informative or entertaining<sup>167</sup>.** My likes are a way of bookmarking content that stands out to me, whether it's because it made me laugh, taught me something new, or aligned with my

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<sup>164</sup> Comfort Zone Maintenance

<sup>165</sup> Targeted Content Search

<sup>166</sup> Targeted Content Search

<sup>167</sup> Routine Engagement

interests. **As for sharing, I do that less often, but when I stumble upon something funny or particularly insightful, I'll send it to my friends.** Sharing is more selective for me; I only send videos that I think my friends will genuinely appreciate<sup>168</sup>. **It's like my way of saying, "Hey, check this out, it's worth our time."** This is how I keep my social interactions on TikTok meaningful, ensuring that what I share has value to those I'm sending it to.

I: How do you think TikTok's algorithm influences your perception of society and cultural norms?

M1: **As someone in HR, I'm hyper-aware of the bubble effect. TikTok often reflects the 'trendy' aspects of culture but not always the full spectrum**<sup>169</sup>. In my role, I'm particularly sensitive to how media can shape perceptions, and TikTok is no exception. **While I get glimpses into various subcultures and norms, I know it's a curated view based on what the algorithm thinks I want to see.** The platform tends to show me the most popular or trending aspects of culture, which can give a skewed version of reality. **It's like a mirror showing a beautified version of society, not always the complete picture.**<sup>170</sup>This selective exposure can lead to a narrow understanding of broader societal issues. It's something I have to be conscious of, especially when considering how these perceptions might influence my professional environment and decision-making.

I: You mentioned before that TikTok's algorithm tailors content to your interests much more than traditional TV. How do you think this personalized curation influences your perception of popular culture and current trends?

M1: **It's kind of reshaped the way I see what's 'in' right now.** TikTok's immediacy and the way it highlights what's trending has certainly influenced how I perceive popular culture. **On TV, you're stuck with whatever's scheduled, but TikTok throws at me what's trending right this second and what I'm most likely to enjoy**<sup>171</sup>. This gives me a sense of being more in touch with current trends, sometimes more so than people who don't use the

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<sup>168</sup> Private Engagement

<sup>169</sup> Content Echo Chamber

<sup>170</sup> Selective Content Exposure

<sup>171</sup> Interest-Based Content Reflection

platform. **I realize I'm definitely more aware of what's happening in pop culture compared to maybe people outside of the platform.** This heightened awareness can be both an advantage and a challenge, especially in social situations where I might have to explain trends or cultural references that others aren't familiar with. **Socializing with friends that are not on TikTok makes me realize that, which is kind of strange because I end up having to explain things to them all the time.** It's an interesting dynamic, where TikTok users are almost in a separate cultural bubble, more in tune with certain trends and less with others that might be prominent outside the platform.

I: You spoke about the 'beautified version of society' reflected on TikTok. Can you elaborate on how this curated view affects your expectations or understanding of cultural trends?

M1: **It's a bit like living in a well-decorated bubble.** TikTok's content can sometimes make life seem more glamorous or exciting than it really is. **You get to see the most polished, fun parts of life, which can be uplifting but also a bit misleading<sup>172</sup>.** This can create unrealistic expectations about what life should look like, making the ordinary seem dull by comparison. **This beautified view of society on TikTok makes everything seem more vibrant and livelier.** It's a double-edged sword – while it's enjoyable to watch, it can also lead to a skewed understanding of reality. **It can raise your expectations for your own life, maybe a little unrealistically at times.** As for cultural trends, **it sort of amplifies the flashier ones while the quieter, maybe deeper, cultural shifts might not get as much airtime.** This selective amplification means that certain trends become overrepresented while others are underexplored. **It's easy to start thinking that what you see on TikTok is all there is, which obviously isn't the case<sup>173</sup>.** I try to remain aware of this to maintain a balanced perspective, especially in my work, where understanding the full scope of cultural shifts is crucial.

I: In your experience, how does TikTok balance between personalizing content and introducing diverse viewpoints? Can you give examples?

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<sup>172</sup> Content Echo Chamber

<sup>173</sup> Selective Content Exposure

M1: **It's a bit of a hit or miss.** Sometimes the algorithm does a great job of introducing me to new ideas or perspectives, but other times, it feels like I'm stuck in a loop. **I've noticed that once I interact with certain types of content, like leadership development or team-building exercises, I see more of the same**<sup>174</sup>. This consistency can be helpful when I'm looking to dive deeper into a topic, but it also means I'm missing out on a broader range of content. **It's good for consistency but not great for diversity**<sup>175</sup>. Every now and then, TikTok throws in something unexpected, like a video from a completely different industry or a social issue I hadn't considered. **Occasionally, TikTok throws in a curveball – like content from a different industry or a social issue I hadn't considered**<sup>176</sup> – **which I appreciate.** These moments are refreshing because they break the cycle and remind me that there's a lot more out there than what I usually engage with.

I: To what extent do you believe TikTok's algorithm understands your interests and preferences? Can you identify any biases in the content it recommends to you?

M1: **It's fairly accurate with professional interests but seems to miss out on my personal ones like my love for indie music or travel**<sup>177</sup>. The algorithm does a good job of picking up on the content I interact with most, which tends to be work-related. **There's a clear bias towards what I engage with most – work-related content**<sup>178</sup>. This is great for professional development, but it sometimes means that other interests, like my passion for indie music or travel, are underrepresented in my feed. **But I'm more than my job, and it'd be refreshing to see the algorithm recognize that.** I wish the algorithm could offer a more balanced mix that reflects all facets of my identity, not just the parts I engage with the most<sup>179</sup>.

I: Have you ever intentionally diversified the types of content you consume on TikTok? What led you to do this?

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<sup>174</sup> Content Repetition

<sup>175</sup> Lack of Viewpoint Diversity

<sup>176</sup> Limited New Perspective Exposure

<sup>177</sup> Selective Content Exposure

<sup>178</sup> Interest Based Content Reflection

<sup>179</sup> Need for Content Variety

M1: **Yes, I realized I was in an echo chamber and made a conscious effort to search for and engage with different content like mental health or art<sup>180</sup>.** There came a point where I noticed my feed was becoming too narrow, showing me the same types of content over and over<sup>181</sup>. **I wanted to grow personally, not just professionally, and TikTok has resources for that if you look for them.** By actively searching for content related to mental health, art, or other topics outside my usual interests, I was able to break out of the echo chamber<sup>182</sup>. This deliberate effort to diversify my feed has helped me discover new areas of interest and has contributed to my personal growth.

I: Can you share any specific experiences where TikTok has significantly broadened your perspective or introduced you to a new interest area?

M1: **Discovering the DIY home decor community was a game-changer. I stumbled upon a video one day, and it completely opened up a new world for me. It started with a random video that popped up, and suddenly I was exploring interior design<sup>183</sup>.** This was something I hadn't paid much attention to before, but TikTok made it accessible and interesting. Before I knew it, I was following creators who specialize in DIY projects, learning new techniques, and even trying out some projects on my own. This experience broadened my perspective on what I could do with my living space and sparked a new hobby that I continue to enjoy.

I: How do TikTok's content curation and recommendation impact your identity expression or discovery on the platform?

M1: **In a way, it reaffirms the parts of my identity that I express most often, like my career<sup>184</sup>.** TikTok tends to highlight the aspects of myself that I already engage with the most. **Yet sometimes I feel it overshadows other facets, like my hobbies.** While it's great to have content that resonates with my professional life, I sometimes feel that other interests, like my love for indie music or travel, don't get as much attention. **It's a dynamic relationship – as I discover and engage with new content, I find new ways to express**

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<sup>180</sup> Content Echo Chamber

<sup>181</sup> Content Repetition

<sup>182</sup> Exploratory Search

<sup>183</sup> New Skill Development & New Points Of View

<sup>184</sup> Identity Validation

**and understand myself, which is pretty exciting**<sup>185</sup>. This ongoing interaction with the platform helps me explore and express different parts of my identity, even if some aspects are more prominent than others.

I: TikTok collects data to personalize content recommendations. How comfortable are you with this personalization?

M1: **Well, I've come to terms with the fact that data collection is just part of using any social platform these days**<sup>186</sup>. It's something that comes with the territory of being active online. **So I suppose I'm resigned to it—there's a trade-off between enjoying personalized content and giving up a bit of privacy**<sup>187</sup>. I understand that in exchange for a more personalized experience, I'm sharing some of my data with the platform. **But I do try to stay informed and manage my settings to maintain some control over what I share**. This way, I can enjoy the benefits of personalized content while still keeping an eye on my privacy.

I: How do you describe your overall experience with TikTok in terms of content diversity and exposure to different perspectives?

M1: **Yeah, as previously mentioned, TikTok doesn't seem to offer many varieties on my "FYP"**<sup>188</sup>. The algorithm tends to stick to what it knows I like, which means I don't see as much variety as I might want. **Therefore, I would like to be exposed a bit more to something that doesn't belong to my world**<sup>189</sup>. It would be refreshing to see content that's outside of my usual interests, something that could introduce me to new perspectives or areas of knowledge.

I: What changes, if any, would you like to see in how TikTok operates to enhance user experience or content diversity?

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<sup>185</sup> Identity Consciousness

<sup>186</sup> Privacy Awareness with Acceptance

<sup>187</sup> Resigned Privacy Acceptance

<sup>188</sup> Lack of Viewpoint Diversity

<sup>189</sup> Content Diversification Desire

M1: Sometimes it feels like the algorithm is a bit of a mystery – I'd like to know more about why certain content is shown to me and how I can influence it. **I guess playing with liking certain things can influence my FYP, but I still feel like I get 1% and maybe not even that of content on the platform.** Even though I try to engage with different types of content, it still feels like I'm only scratching the surface of what TikTok has to offer. Greater transparency and control would help users like me explore more of the platform's diversity.

I: Is there anything else about your experience with TikTok's algorithm, content recommendations, or community interactions that you think is important to share?

M1: **No.** I think we've covered everything. Overall, I'm satisfied with my experience on TikTok, but there's always room for improvement, especially when it comes to content diversity and understanding how the algorithm works.

## F.

- 23
- Male
- Biology Student

**I:** First of all, thank you for joining and helping me out on this research. Can you tell me about your experience with TikTok? How long have you been using it, and how frequently?

**F:** My pleasure! Ehm, I started using TikTok about a year and a half ago. I check it daily, usually in the evenings for around 45 minutes<sup>190</sup>.

**I:** What kind of content do you typically engage with on TikTok? Can you give examples and explain why?

**F:** I engage mostly with anime clips and fan-made content. They resonate with my what I like, like One Piece or The Legend of Korra. I love seeing different interpretations of my favorite shows<sup>191</sup>.

**I:** How do you usually find new content on TikTok? Can you provide examples and reasons?

**F:** New content comes up on my 'For You' page<sup>192</sup>, and sometimes I'll check out hashtags from anime I'm following.

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<sup>190</sup> Usage Frequency

<sup>191</sup> Identity Validation

<sup>192</sup> Algorithmic Influence

**I:** When you come across content in your recommendations, how do you decide if you engage with it?

**F:** If a video seems to relate to the anime I follow, or something else that I like, or has an interesting thumbnail, I'll watch it<sup>193</sup>. I trust the recommendations to be relevant

**I:** Do you deliberately search for content outside of your feed? Can you give examples and explain why?

**F:** Occasionally, I'll search for specific anime trailers or reviews<sup>194</sup>. It's only when I'm looking for something new to watch..

**I:** Can you recall a time when you deliberately searched for content outside your usual recommendations? What motivated you to do so?

**F:** I remember looking up cosplay tutorials for Romics<sup>195</sup>, a convention here in Rome. It was a specific interest at that moment.

**I:** Describe how you engage with content on TikTok. Do you mainly like, share, comment, or follow creators?

**F:** I mainly just 'like' videos. If I really enjoy a creator's content, I might follow them for more<sup>196</sup>.

**I:** How do you think TikTok's algorithm influences your perception of society and cultural norms?

**F:** The algorithm shows me what's popular in the anime community, not necessarily broader society.

**I:** In your experience, how does TikTok balance between personalizing content and introducing diverse viewpoints? Can you give examples?

**F:** TikTok does a fair job. It shows me a lot of anime content, or even manga content but I occasionally see unrelated, yet interesting videos.

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<sup>193</sup> Selective Engagement

<sup>194</sup> Targeted Content Search

<sup>195</sup> Targeted Content Search

<sup>196</sup> Selective Engagement

**I:** To what extent do you believe TikTok's algorithm understands your interests and preferences? Can you identify any biases in the content it recommends to you?

**F:** It's quite accurate with my interests. I haven't noticed any biases – it seems to just reflect my engagement

**I:** Have you ever intentionally diversified the types of content you consume on TikTok? What led you to do this?

**F:** No, I haven't. I like my fyp.

**I:** Can you share any specific experiences where TikTok has significantly broadened your perspective or introduced you to a new interest area?

**F:** I found people who share my same interests, which has been super cool as I've discovered new shows through them<sup>197</sup>.

**I:** How do TikTok's content curation and recommendation impact your identity expression or discovery on the platform?

**F:** The platform doesn't really impact my identity. I use it for entertainment purposes, not self-discovery.

**I:** You said that TikTok does not impact your identity and is more for entertainment. However, has any content ever resonated with you on a personal level, perhaps reflecting your values or interests beyond anime?

**F:** Well, sometimes I get hit with these travel videos, especially the ones in Japan, and it feels like I'm right there. It's kinda wild because it connects with this dream of mine to actually visit those places<sup>198</sup>. So while I'm there just to unwind, TikTok has this sneaky way of dropping in stuff that's got more to do with me than just what show I'm into. It's pretty cool when that happens.

**I:** TikTok collects data to personalize content recommendations. How comfortable are you with this personalization?

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<sup>197</sup> New Points of Views

<sup>198</sup> Identity Validation

**F:** I'm comfortable with it. I appreciate the personalization; it makes the content more relevant to me.

**I:** How do you describe your overall experience with TikTok in terms of content diversity and exposure to different perspectives?

**F:** It's been great! I've been exposed to a lot of new anime content and found a community that shares my interests.

**I:** What changes, if any, would you like to see in how TikTok operates to enhance user experience or content diversity?

**F:** I'd appreciate more features to help me discover a broader range of content, like unique hobbies, different cultures, or even niche music scenes. While I enjoy anime, I'm also curious about other topics and it would be great if TikTok could facilitate that exploration.

**I:** While you haven't intentionally diversified your TikTok content consumption, you expressed curiosity about other topics. What would prompt you to explore content outside of your established interests?

**F:** Yeah,, I'm usually all about anime on TikTok, but I got curious about live streaming platforms and ended up discovering some Twitch content creators through TikTok. It started with a clip from a streamer who was also into anime, and from there, I found myself exploring more of their content on Twitch. I guess what prompts me to look beyond my usual interests is seeing someone passionate about their niche. And if they've got a good vibe or offer something that can add to my usual interests or my studies, even better. So now, I'm following a couple of Twitch streamers, and it's cool to see the live interaction and get a different type of content and community engagement."

**I:** Is there anything else about your experience with TikTok's algorithm, content recommendations, or community interactions that you think is important to share?

**F:** People often critique algorithms, but I think they're quite beneficial. They streamline my experience and connect me with content I love.

**I:** Great! Thank you for your time, F!

## **M2.**

- 26
- Female
- Strategic Insight Researcher in pharmaceutical field

**Interviewer (I):** Can you tell me about your experience with TikTok? How long have you been using it, and how frequently?

**M2:** I downloaded TikTok in 2021 for a university project, and it kind of became an addiction. I'm on it every day without fail—it's become a part of my daily routine<sup>199</sup>.

**I:** What kind of content do you typically engage with on TikTok? Can you give examples and explain why?

**M2:** I love watching videos with animals because I'm an animal lover. Travel content satisfies my curiosity, and I adore luxury hotels and houses; that lifestyle just draws me in. I also watch haul content because I'm curious about people's tastes, and I can't resist a bit of dissing and gossip, I guess you could say I love a bit of "trashy" content.

**I:** Regarding the 'trashy' content that you find appealing, have you ever had concerns about the impact this type of content may have on your views or on TikTok's broader user base?

**M2:** I guess you can say that the 'trashy' content, it's a bit like junk food for the brain. Fun in the moment, sure, but not exactly enriching. And if everyone's watching it, what does that mean for our collective tastes or the values we're spreading? It's a laugh, but yeah, there's a part of me that's a little wary about what it's doing to the overall conversation and culture on

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<sup>199</sup> Usage Frequency

the platform. Also, because there are quite young people on the platform. But, considering the specificity of the algorithm, I don't think they get shown the same content as me, right? Also, when you think about it, it's not that different from traditional TV, right? There's always been a market for less serious, more sensational content. It catches your eye, gives you a chuckle or something to talk about with friends. I guess TikTok is just the new-age version of channel surfing, where you end up watching things that are a bit out there. At the end of the day, we choose what to watch, so it's on us too. We can't put all the blame on the platform when it's just mirroring what we've shown an appetite for.

**I:** Regarding this, “Also, because there are quite young people on the platform. But, considering the specificity of the algorithm, I don't think they get shown the same content as me, right?” could you explain a bit more?

**M2:** Yeah, I just think the algorithm is quite specific when it comes to interest and likes, so for example I get a type of content that you probably won't ever get. It's like, people know TikTok as “the dancing app” yet I have never ever seen people dancing on my feed. Yet, I know it was and probably still is a big thing, as influencers like Charli D'Amelio came out through TikTok. So yeah, that's why I'm not TOO concerned on young people being on the platform. Sure, there could be “wrong” or inappropriate content, but what are the chances of them getting exposed to it unless they look for it?

**I:** Okay, thank you. And how do you usually find new content on TikTok? Can you provide examples and explain why?

**M2:** I tend to stick to the 'For You Page' recommendations<sup>200</sup>, but I also like to dive into the 'hot topics' section occasionally. And when something catches my interest, I'll use hashtags to discover more about it<sup>201</sup>.

**I:** When you come across content in your recommendations, how do you decide if you engage with it?

**M2:** I tend to skip videos that are spoken, too long, or too slow. I like content that gets straight to the point.

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<sup>200</sup> Passive Content Consumption

<sup>201</sup> Exploratory Search

**I:** Have there been instances where you've sought out content that isn't typically recommended to you? What prompted that search?

**M2:** Yes, I do look for content outside my feed, especially when I'm curious about something new or when I feel like I need to shake things up a bit, depending on my mood<sup>202</sup>.

**I:** Can you recall a time when you deliberately searched for content outside your usual recommendations? What motivated you to do so?

**M2:** For sure. Like when I'm planning to visit a new place, I'll search for it on TikTok to get a quick and comprehensive review<sup>203</sup>, which helps me decide if it's worth visiting.

**I:** Describe how you engage with content on TikTok. Do you mainly like, share, comment, or follow creators?

**M2:** I'm quite active with liking, pinning, and sharing content. I comment or follow creators less frequently though<sup>204</sup>.

**I:** How do you think TikTok's algorithm influences your perception of society and cultural norms?

**M2:** I think the algorithm is often closed off and repetitive. It shows me a tiny part of a world that is based on what I like and know<sup>205</sup>. I'm sure that it does mess up with my perception, making me think that what I see and believe in is accepted by the whole world, when it probably isn't.

**I:** In your experience, how does TikTok balance between personalizing content and introducing diverse viewpoints? Can you give examples?

**M2:** I'm not sure it balances between the two. Considering my own fyp, I mostly just see things that I like or could like.<sup>206</sup> For example, if I search for a city I want to go to, like

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<sup>202</sup> Exploratory Search

<sup>203</sup> Targeted Content Search

<sup>204</sup> Content Engagement

<sup>205</sup> Content Repetition

<sup>206</sup> Limited New Perspective Exposure

Vienna, it will show me all Vienna related videos, from what do to in the city to where to eat.

**I:** Since you've identified the content as sometimes “repetitive”, could you describe what kind of 'different' content you'd like to see more of, and how do you think TikTok could better curate that variety for you?

**M2:** Well, I'm not sure exactly. *I guess more variety maybe? For instance, most of the grwm videos are white girls from clearly a high-up social class, so I wonder what I'm missing out since I never get any sort of diversity?*<sup>207</sup>

**I:** Given your interest in seeing more diverse content, especially from different socio-economic backgrounds, how would you like TikTok to incorporate this into your daily feed? And what steps do you think the platform could take to ensure a wider representation in the content it recommends?

**M2:** *I think TikTok should definitely work on diversifying the algorithm a bit more. It'd be refreshing to see 'get ready with me' videos from all kinds of people, not just one demographic*<sup>208</sup>. Maybe they could tweak the algorithm to introduce content from creators in different parts of the world, or with varied backgrounds—something that's not just based on my past likes but also on broader trends. It's about finding a balance, I suppose. I'd like to see the day-to-day of someone who doesn't live a life of luxury, how they make do with what they have, their tips and hacks. It could really open up my world and maybe everyone else's too, right?

**I:** To what extent do you believe TikTok's algorithm understands your interests and preferences? Can you identify any biases in the content it recommends to you?

**M2:** *I think it understands them quite well. It covers most of my interests, even the niche ones. I don't look too much into it*<sup>209</sup>, as I primarily use my TikTok for entertainment and not “serious” issues, *but yeah I do believe algorithms are a bit biased*<sup>210</sup>.

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<sup>207</sup> Lack of Viewpoint Diversity

<sup>208</sup> Content Diversification Desire

<sup>209</sup> Identity Validation

<sup>210</sup> Confirmation Bias

**I:** Have you ever intentionally diversified the types of content you consume on TikTok? What led you to do this?

**M2:** As previously mentioned, the 'For You Page' can be repetitive, just full of fit checks or 'get ready with me' videos, which can get tiresome<sup>211</sup>. When that happens, I go looking for something different, usually in the trending section, to switch things up and hopefully influence what the algorithm shows me<sup>212</sup>.

**I:** Can you share any specific experiences where TikTok has significantly broadened your perspective or introduced you to a new interest area?

**M2:** Well, my fyp showed me not too long ago a few videos about punch needle, and I thought it was really cute. I enjoyed it to the point that I bought a kit, however I tried it once and wasn't any good at it so just left it, at least for now<sup>213</sup>.

**I:** How do TikTok's content curation and recommendation impact your identity expression or discovery on the platform?

**M2:** I have to admit it has influenced me quite a bit. Especially, for example with recommendations for travelling, like restaurants but even places in general. Also I see things, like shoes that maybe I would've never thought were nice, but sometimes the repeated content does work on me<sup>214</sup>. There was a pair of Dr. Martens that I thought were a bit ugly, but now I'm even thinking of buying. So yeah, it is quite impactful.

**I:** TikTok collects data to personalize content recommendations. How comfortable are you with this personalization?

**M2:** I have to admit, I'm not too keen on it. I value my privacy a lot, so the idea that my data is being used to tailor content does make me a bit uncomfortable.

**I:** How do you describe your overall experience with TikTok in terms of content diversity and exposure to different perspectives?

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<sup>211</sup> Need for Content Variety

<sup>212</sup> Content Diversification

<sup>213</sup> New Skill Development

<sup>214</sup> New Point of Views

**M2:** I don't think it exposes me much to other perspectives. The few times it did it was never for serious matters, so I can't really comment on it much<sup>215</sup>.

**I:** What changes, if any, would you like to see in how TikTok operates to enhance user experience or content diversity?

**M2:** I'm not sure to be honest. I'm quite comfortable with what I have.

**I:** Is there anything else about your experience with TikTok's algorithm, content recommendations, or community interactions that you think is important to share?

**M2:** I think sometimes they totally nail it, and I stumble upon these awesome creators that I'd never find by myself. But then, there are times when it just feels like the same old stuff, one after the other and it can get pretty boring. Maybe the algorithm can start showing things that are a bit less specific interest wise.

**I:** Great! Thank you so much for taking the time and helping me out on this research. Much appreciated!

**M2:** Thank you, Alice!

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<sup>215</sup> Lack of Viewpoint Diversity

