



# Understanding TikTok Usage: Communication Strategy of ByteDance Based on the Background of New Media

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**Abstract.** This research provides a wide framework for understanding how young people use TikTok to make meanings. Evaluation of user motivations and interactions, as well as the TikTok platform's ability to facilitate these activities, was conducted using both walkthrough techniques and unstructured interviews. The research indicated that although escapism and mood enhancement are the primary motivations for using social media, expressing the hidden self and connecting with friends are secondary causes. According to the study's findings, TikTok, a platform that celebrates real-life human experiences, inspires creativity in its users by providing user interfaces that are intuitive, easy to use, and straightforward, as well as editing tools that are feature-rich and user-friendly. This study will begin with a discussion of TikTok's historical context and the theoretical framework. The next section clarifies the study's research subjects and used techniques. The study's findings will be presented in the following sequence: TikTok technical walkthrough, TikTok intended use case, and interview results. The most significant findings will be selected and presented in the following section to answer the three research questions this study gave. In addition, findings and practical ramifications will be presented at the conclusion to explain the meanings and values of this research.

**Keywords:** TikTok Usage · ByteDance · Communication Strategy

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background and Theory

Douyin, the Chinese equivalent of the global app TikTok, is quickly becoming one of China's most popular participatory short-video platforms. TikTok is a social networking platform for sharing videos owned and operated by ByteDance [1]. According to the service website, TikTok aims to encourage users' creative expression and "provide

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pleasure” [2]. The extensive emphasis on algorithmic generation and dissemination of media is one of the most notable elements for making short videos on this platform. It is also one of the most important features [1]. Media creation and dissemination outside social networks are shaped by algorithms and data in this newly emerging structure [1]. The development of such a system involves merging user-generated material with content developed by professionals, which ultimately results in audience participation in creating content for commercial use.

It is a common platform for user-generated content (UGC), in which users, rather than the organization, are responsible for generating information. The application may be accessed through mobile phones and allows users to generate short videos in increments ranging from three to fifteen seconds or three to sixty seconds [3]. TikTok users may engage with the app in several ways, including producing videos, viewing, sharing, and commenting on the videos made by other users. Memes, the remixing and reinterpretation of catchphrases, tales, and songs, as well as other formulaic characteristics, were commonly employed to communicate user’s beliefs and culture, akin to the meme practice that Ryan Miller described in other social media platforms [3]. Therefore, users can steadily obtain more followers or popularity from the community due to their regular creation of video content, which can be accessed on the site. Thus, the importance of this study lies in the fact that it offers a basic road map to understanding how young people generate meanings while using the popular short-video platform TikTok.

The app’s social and community aspects provide users with simple ways to communicate with those they follow. It is plausible to assume that audience interaction is not only straightforward but also entertaining [2]. This is true regardless of whether it is a new challenge, a duet feature, or the standard comment response with a video attached. TikTok was launched to the public for the first time in 2017, and it rapidly rose to become one of the most downloaded programs worldwide [2]. Sixty percent of the active TikTok users in the United States are between the ages of 16 and 24 [4]. Users in the United States use the TikTok app an average of eight times daily for 46 min [5]. Therefore, this app’s social aspects make it easy for its users to exchange information and videos and participate in other creative challenges.

Regarding economic aspects, TikTok’s revenue has exploded over the last several years. It earned \$4.6 billion in 2021, a 142 percent increase from the previous year’s revenue [6]. TikTok was later able to merge 80 million American users into its network [3]. Then, TikTok’s popularity skyrocketed, and in 2019 and 2020, it became the app with the most downloads. TikTok was the ninth most downloaded app of the 2010s, despite not being accessible to the public until 2017. It seems to pose a real challenge to Facebook’s stranglehold on social networking in Western nations.

## 1.2 Literature Review

TikTok has only been up for three years, yet there has already been a remarkable amount of academic study conducted on the platform. User experience Researchers such as Qiyang Zhou looked at how TikTok users interacted with the app’s user interface [7]. Zhou discovered that TikTok users are more willing to create and upload content on TikTok than on other platforms. They are more likely to copy, repeat, and imitate content produced by others, which may be influenced by the intended design functions of TikTok

[7]. According to [9], these results were the product of Zhou's investigation of the creative practice of users, which included content analysis, interviews, and regression analysis.

The communication-related study that Simsek et al. conducted on the app musical.ly was integrated with TikTok when it was purchased by Bytedance in 2017 and then merged. They evaluated the content produced by female adolescents concerning the motives and aspirations of microcelebrities [7]. In addition, the researchers discovered that the teenage girls who participated in the study cared about the appearance, status, and importance of the social networks to which they belonged [8]. These females generated and refined material based on what was acceptable and standard for face, status, and worth.

Previous scholars have examined TikTok and communicated their findings to the academic community. Zhang et al. found that short-form video apps influenced the anxiety associated with social interaction and positive social sentiments [9]. In addition, Kumar and Prabha's findings suggest that excessive TikTok usage in the future will be driven by narcissism and insecurity [10]. These are just two examples of the many academics who have examined the issue of TikTok addiction [7]. On the other hand, these studies emphasized the kinds of personal features and characteristics of users that make them susceptible to TikTok [7]. They did not consider the design of the platform's interface, which may be a factor in the development of addiction.

### 1.3 Research Gap

The bulk of these researchers was primarily concerned with TikTok addiction. This research, in turn, will examine the influence of technology, namely user interface, on the development of addiction concerns among users. Zhou's conclusions about the user interface of TikTok are rather comprehensive; yet, in her research using the design technique, Zhou did not analyze and explain the deeper basic motivations behind user's behaviors [7]. In addition, the research will explore the impact that technology, and particularly the user interface, plays in the emergence of addiction problems among users.

### 1.4 Research Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study was derived from three separate pieces of communication-related literature. These theories focus on the "uses and pleasure models," "ritual perspective," and "social molding" of technology, respectively. The study employs the first to identify certain satisfactions or motives of users with the items that they consume. The research framework was expanded to incorporate the "ritual perspective" of communication, which broadened the study's focus from people's motivations to their interactions on TikTok. The researchers incorporated the concept of "social shaping" of technology as the last step in their quest to comprehend how technology mediates user motives.

#### Research Questions

1. Why do people use TikTok in the first place?
2. How does TikTok mediate between its users' creative practices?

### 3. How can people communicate with one another on TikTok?

#### Research Objectives

1. To investigate why people use TikTok
2. To explore how TikTok is a mediator between its users' creative practices.
3. To find out how people communicate with one another on TikTok.

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Textual Analysis and Walkthrough Method

As stated before, the affordances and capacities of the technology have the power to alter users' motivation and shape their creative practices. To get the research off to a strong start, it is necessary to "walk through" the platform architecture, concentrating on its major features and capabilities. Thus, the first site to be studied is TikTok, the real application. The research also used walkthrough methodologies to identify its design processes and embedded cultural references to comprehend how it influences the motivations and experiences of its users [11]. Two phases comprised the walkthrough technique presented by [11]. First, online research was conducted regarding the TikTok "environment of expected use," which refers to how app designers anticipate its users will behave, and second, a "technical walkthrough" of several key features of TikTok was conducted [11]. The textual analysis determined the focus, perceptions, and viewpoints that TikTok meant to express. Examining these three facets of TikTok let the research uncover the app developer's expectations about the creative practices of its users.

### 2.2 Interviews

This study section investigated why people embrace TikTok and how they utilize it. This was done by conducting unstructured interviews. Some research recruitment approaches were publicizing the study in classes and using snowball sampling. During the interview, the researchers paid close attention to the training on Social Behavior research offered by the Institutional Review Board. Before conducting the interviews with the subjects, the researchers had the participants initial a participant permission form they had written themselves. The researchers obtained the participants' agreement before recording the discussion for data collection.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 The Comparison of the Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies Used by TikTok in China and the United States

TikTok is an effective social network for penetrating foreign markets. The transcultural adaptation of their communication techniques is based mostly on their website's content, product marketing, and algorithm [12]. TikTok includes UGC (user-generated content)

in both its China and international editions, and it employs the Meme theory to aid in its marketing and growth. Chinese and American TikTok users are encouraged to produce short films by copying and pasting content from other accounts [12]. Replicators, or the original video content, are often amusing, simple to duplicate, and of good quality. Certain video content has the potential to become viral in a very short period if it is duplicated and distributed widely enough [12]. This strategy minimizes the barrier to content transmission and increases the likelihood of users staying engaged with the platform.

The qualities of popular content in China and the United States are not necessarily the same. Therefore, it is not sufficient to simply convert the Chinese content operation model to the American one [12]. In this way, it employs a localization strategy in the United States to enhance its marketing. TikTok, for example, utilizes a talent internationalization strategy by recruiting a varied pool of people with expertise in various countries and a comprehensive grasp of the local culture [12]. TikTok could efficiently enter new markets while simultaneously developing and advertising more culturally-relevant material in the United States.

### **3.2 Walkthrough - Environment of Anticipated Use**

Starting with this section, the researchers will provide the findings of their inquiry. Assessing the TikTok environment of intended use provides users with a better understanding of TikTok as a commercial entity, which will aid future research into how and to what extent it influences user behavior.

#### **ByteDance Vision**

The homepage and the app store descriptions of the official TikTok website are going to be discussed in this part. This section aims to understand better how TikTok will be used, who will use it, and what other ideas are communicated by the app [7]. Because the homepage of the official website is often straightforward and to-the-point, researchers have been able to decipher the traits or aspects of TikTok that the designers identified as crucial data pieces. The TikTok logo is shown in the top-left corner of the page and serves as a point of connection for all of the sensations and experiences that users have with the website. The TikTok logo is an iconic sign in and of itself, implying that the form of the symbol physically reflects the message it communicates. These colors are the ones that the researchers saw at a party at night. The logo conveys that users will have a fun and exciting musical experience using TikTok.

#### **TikTok Store Descriptions**

In contrast to the homepage of the official website, the description section of app stores provides a greater range for developers to elaborate on the essential features and capabilities of their creations, which, in turn, increases the likelihood that users would download the app in question. The research analysis may be seen below, based on the app descriptions.

*Watching an Infinite Stream of TikTok Videos and Finding New Inspiration*

TikTok videos align with the company's aim of delivering user pleasure. Aligned with this mission, TikTok videos are meant to be brief, mood-boosting, and personal [7]. This design ultimately encourages users to spend much time viewing endless videos. TikTok has a wide range of video types, from comedy, gaming, do-it-yourself, food, sports, memes, and pets to oddly satisfying, ASMR, and everything in between [7]. These categories include almost every kind of video that is enjoyable to watch online.

*Becoming a Creative Within the Context of the Global Video Community*

Since TikTok is a platform for user-generated content, it is well aware of the significance of encouraging users to create innovative content consistently. Thus, the company has developed various functionalities that enable creators to express themselves in a “wild and free” manner.

TikTok is a platform that enables people to express their creativity while enjoying entertaining or humorous videos. This app's ideal users are those who like to amuse themselves and others by expressing themselves creatively [7]. The app store descriptions emphasize that this program may be used to make videos instead of just watching them [7]. The homepage of the official website indicates that it is a video-viewing application. This suggests that TikTok is constructing a loop in which site users may enjoy material produced by other users and vice versa [12]. This cycle may be seen as a win-win for all concerned parties.

### 3.3 TikTok Operating Models

#### **Marketing**

Advertising is the main emphasis of TikTok's financial model, comparable to the overwhelming majority of user-generated content sites. TikTok can help its clients discover their perfect consumers since it has the data of billions of users at its disposal. Moreover, by imitating the presentation styles of its users' material, TikTok can develop adverts for its clients' items that are more authentic and, consequently, more likely to enhance the audience's buying tendency [13]. According to the official web page addressing privacy issues, TikTok gathers the vast majority of the data generated by its users on the network. This data is TikTok's main and most valuable resource for attracting firms from all around the globe.

#### **Technical Walkthrough**

Many technical TikTok facts were unearthed throughout the investigation and will be described utilizing the walkthrough method. The material will provide directions for creating and sharing videos on TikTok and exit the site if a user wishes to discontinue using it. Rather than only offering a technical overview, some essential roles and elements will be examined and evaluated from a cultural standpoint.

*Profile*

The profile of the button's developer is shown within the button's circle. When users click the button, they are forwarded to the user's channel, where all user's videos are

stored. The “following” button on the creator’s channel may be accessed more quickly by clicking the little red + button located underneath the profile.

### *Likes*

The “likes” button, which functions similarly to those found on other social media platforms, enables users to communicate their satisfaction with the site’s articles. On TikTok, users merely need to double-tap anywhere on the screen to conduct the “like” action, a straightforward and uncomplicated motion that even the slowest users find easy to complete. Whenever a user performs a double-tap, a large, animated red heart will emerge on the screen to represent the user’s good thoughts towards the content.

## **3.4 Interview Findings**

The results presented in the preceding walkthrough illustrate how the company envisioned its products and the roles they were meant to serve. The research explored users’ perceptions, emotions, and responses to the platform through interviews. This animation is what the study considers to be the entry of TikTok, and it only lasts for half a second. After clicking the TikTok symbol on the homepage of smartphones, the screen became black with the TikTok emblem, and the word “TikTok” appeared in the center. Three of the nine individuals surveyed do not identify the motion of the entryway with any cultural items [7]. According to the participant’s perspective, the dark backdrop casts a shadow over the brilliant light. On the other hand, it was revealed that some of the other individuals had animated cultural emblems. Some study respondents stated that the TikTok logo represents the program’s dynamic character, shown by the users’ frequent dancing while using the service.

## **4 Discussion**

In this part, relevant findings from the research will be picked and explored to address the three research questions posed by this study.

### **4.1 Why Do People Use TikTok in the First Place?**

#### **Eliminate Boredom**

During the interviews with a number of the participants, the vast majority of them disclosed that boredom is one of the most common mental states they experienced before deciding to open TikTok. According to psychological theory, boredom is a negative mental state that reflects an inner contradiction between anticipated optimum and real experiences [14]. There are two forms of boredom [14]: leisure boredom, which is the belief that accessible leisure activities are insufficient to meet ideal arousal demands, and boredom, which is perceived as a negative mental state in the psychological field [14].

### **Boosting Disposition**

After respondents downloaded TikTok for the first time, they experienced emotions of stress, loss, exhaustion, and anxiety; but, when they closed the app, they recovered sentiments of optimism, rejuvenation, amusement, and readiness [7]. The talks in the research demonstrated that TikTok shifted people's emotions from primarily negative to predominantly positive. By implementing community standards, TikTok encourages its users to create humorous and upbeat content while prohibiting anything violent or hateful [7]. This was mentioned in the TikTok vision section of the previous TikTok walkthrough. It does not matter how down people felt before they visited TikTok; after seeing a wide variety of happy and creative material, it is difficult for them not to feel at least a little bit better.

## **4.2 How Does TikTok Operate as a Mediator Between Its Users' Creative Practices?**

### **Authenticity and Innovation**

TikTok's video-editing capabilities enable its users in a variety of ways the production of short videos that are authentic and unconventional. TikTok allows users to record original sound and alter current soundtracks to create their own; this enables users to express their opinions in real life while playing around to emphasize the amusing message. The invention makes it difficult for a third party to compromise another user's account. Users are often prompted to provide their email address or cellphone number when establishing an account.

### **Addiction**

Recent news stories about TikTok worry about the app's addictive potential for adolescents and young adults. According to Reuters, data shows that sixty percent of TikTok's active users are between the ages of 16 and 24 [5]. These users initiate the application's launch process eight times daily, using the app for forty-six minutes [5]. Many studies suggest that an individual's mental health may suffer if they spend excessive time online.

## **4.3 How Can People Communicate With One Another on TikTok?**

### **Interaction Between Peers**

As seen by the design of its user interface, which contains buttons for likes, comments, direct chat, and shared content, TikTok puts a premium on contact. However, most of the study's participants rarely like comments and texts on TikTok because they view them as extra work that they are too lazy to do. A few times, they interacted in these ways when stimulated by content that was well-made and appealing or contrary to their beliefs. On the other hand, sharing is used more often nowadays. All interviewees wanted to show their real-life friends interesting videos they had seen on TikTok. Users were able to include TikTok video criticism into their day-to-day conversations with their in-person acquaintances because of the functionality of the third platform sharing tool.

### **Microfamous Individuals and Influencers**

On TikTok, this category comprises the microcelebrities or influencers, who are content providers that have amassed a significant number of followers, often in the range



of 50,000 or above. The tour and the interviews led to the discovery that consumers followed microcelebrities or influencers that are more relevant to their life and have ideals comparable to their own. Users that follow the content of their favorite TikTok stars watch not only the content of those stars but also produce material that is very similar and inspired by it. Although the degree to which users imitate their videos can vary, the culture of TikTok encourages them to be open to various interpretations and think creatively outside the box. Consequently, users tend to imitate simply the gestures, motions, or spirit of the video, but the attire, backdrop, and number of participants may be altered according to the user's preferences.

#### **4.4 Implication**

The implications of this research's conclusions are many. The study observed that individuals who claimed to misuse TikTok were frustrated and confused to a certain degree. To ease this addiction issue, users should seek help from the relevant professionals instead of delaying and withdrawing. However, to prevent people from getting hooked to TikTok, the company must include special aspects that occasionally remove users from the app's immersive experience. TikTok has value and may positively influence the lives of its users, although it may be addictive. By engaging in this amusing and creative version of reality, users can relieve stress, express their innermost ideas, and recognize the positive elements of their lives. Lastly, users of TikTok should take prudence about the information they disclose and their activities. This is because TikTok regularly collects user data and uses it for its purposes.

### **5 Conclusion**

This study aims to develop a fundamental comprehension of the users of the rapidly growing app TikTok. Examination of the capabilities and social ramifications of TikTok, as well as the motives and interactions of its users, was conducted using walk-through techniques and unstructured interviews. To better comprehend how TikTok is used, three study questions were formulated. The researchers performed interviews with TikTok users from a wide range of demographics to provide an answer to the study topic. According to the study's findings, real-world considerations may motivate users to spend time on the TikTok platform. For instance, when individuals feel bored and want something that may cheer them up, they will log in to TikTok and obtain intriguing videos that will re-energize them. This is because TikTok is always updating its library with new content. Everyone who was reached for an interview expressed a desire to share interesting videos they had seen on TikTok with their actual friends. The individuals questioned said that they did not mind sharing these products on third-party platforms if some of their friends did not have TikTok, regardless of the location of their friends. The research discovered that TikTok encourages users to exaggerate and alter their real-life experiences dramatically and amusingly using a walkthrough technique. It was found that users can easily lose track of time when playing TikTok, and, therefore, the researchers suggested that TikTok should be designed in a way that makes it simpler for users to monitor the amount of time they spend using the application. Because it

is so easy for users to lose track of time when playing TikTok, this recommendation was developed in response to this observation. In the final question, the researchers used interviews and an analysis of the text on TikTok to investigate how users interact with the platform. It was seen as a method of building and sustaining the TikTok creative universe via the use of likes, comments, shares, and video production. This study also found that celebrities and content providers influence their following. The survey revealed that influencers have many followers and occasionally utilize their power for financial advantage. Furthermore, the research found that TikTok users who follow these influencers prefer to imitate their patterns and participate in the challenges they create.

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