



Immediacy, Predatory Data, and Cruel Optimism: Explaining Persistent Engagement on Short-Form Video Platforms

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Abstract. This article examines why users often find it difficult to disengage from short-form video platforms such as TikTok, even when they are aware of the negative effects of prolonged use. Rather than treating this persistent attachment as merely a problem of individual self-control, the article understands it as a structural outcome of contemporary platform environments. Drawing on Anna Kornbluh's concept of immediacy, Anita Say Chan's notion of predatory data, and Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism, the article argues that these platforms sustain continued use through the interaction of temporal compression, data extraction, and affective attachment. Features such as autoplay, infinite scrolling, and looped content capture users within an intensified present and reduce opportunities for conscious reflection. At the same time, everyday actions, including scrolling, pausing, and interacting, are transformed into behavioural data that can be used to personalise content and optimise platform engagement. Finally, users remain attached to these platforms because they repeatedly offer small promises of pleasure, relaxation, connection, or future satisfaction, even when such promises are only partially fulfilled. By bringing these three concepts together, the article shows that excessive platform use should not be understood only as addiction or weak self-control, but as the result of a digital system that actively organises attention, extracts value, and sustains desire. This analysis contributes to digital sociology and critical platform studies by reframing short-form video engagement as a socially, technologically, and affectively structured condition.

Keywords: short-form video platforms; digital sociology; attention economy; immediacy; predatory data; cruel optimism

1 Introduction

In recent years, short-form video platforms such as TikTok have become a central part of everyday life, yet many users find it difficult to disengage from their content streams. This raises an important question: why are these platforms so difficult to leave, even when users are aware of their negative effects? This phenomenon is

increasingly visible in daily routines, where short moments of intended use often turn into extended periods of continuous scrolling.

This essay will analyse this issue through three key concepts: Kornbluh's notion of "immediacy" ^[4], Chan's concept of "predatory data" ^[2], and Berlant's theory of "cruel optimism" ^[1]. Through the use of these concepts, this essay argues that users' continuous engagement is not simply a matter of personal choice, but is produced through a combination of temporal restructuring, data extraction, and affective attachment. More specifically, short-form video platforms first capture users by compressing time and reshaping perception, then transform user behaviour into economic value through algorithmic systems, and finally maintain user engagement through emotional attachments that are difficult to abandon. Together, these mechanisms form a self-reinforcing structure that keeps users in a continuous loop of attention and consumption, making disengagement increasingly difficult over time.

Short-form video platforms such as TikTok are structured around continuous content streams, where users can endlessly scroll through short videos. Features such as autoplay and infinite scrolling significantly reduce the need for active decision-making. As Park and Jung (2024, pp. 3–4) ^[5] suggest, these design features lower the psychological threshold of content selection, allowing users to enter a more passive and immersive mode of consumption. In this sense, the platform is not simply offering content, but actively shaping how users interact with it. This issue matters not only because of time consumption, but also because it reshapes users' perception and behaviour. Many users experience a loss of time awareness, often realising they have spent much longer on the platform than intended. This suggests that the platform environment subtly alters users' sense of control over their own actions. At the same time, platforms collect detailed behavioural data from user interactions, which is then used to personalise content and further increase engagement. Moreover, this form of engagement is closely connected to emotional and psychological effects. Qin et al. (2022, pp. 2–3) ^[6] show that TikTok addiction is closely associated with users' immersive experiences, particularly states of enjoyment, concentration, and time distortion, which encourage prolonged engagement with the platform. Therefore, the difficulty of leaving these platforms is not only an individual issue, but also reflects broader structural dynamics in digital media environments, where design, data, and affect interact.

This perspective also treats platform design as an active force rather than a neutral container. Features such as autoplay, infinite scroll, and algorithmic recommendation do not simply facilitate access to content; they reorganise the conditions under which engagement occurs. The rhythm of content delivery, the reduction of pauses between videos, and the constant adjustment of recommendations shape how users perceive time, attention, and satisfaction. The following sections examine how this reorganisation operates through three interrelated mechanisms: the compression of time, the extraction of behavioural data, and the maintenance of affective attachment.

2 The Mechanisms of Persistent Engagement

The first way to understand this issue is through Kornbluh's concept of "immediacy". She argues that immediacy compresses time into an intensified present, where everything feels urgent and continuous: "a hurry-hurry that compresses time into a tingling present" (Kornbluh, 2023, p. 6) ^[4]. In this "compressed present", users are constantly fixed within an endlessly updating stream of content, making it difficult to form a coherent sense of past or future. As a result, attention becomes locked into a narrow temporal frame. This temporal structure is not only perceptual, but is also reinforced by platform design. Park and Jung (2024, p. 4) ^[5] further note that features such as autoplay and infinite scrolling reduce the need for conscious choice, enabling users to slide into continuous consumption with minimal reflection. This shows that immediacy is not only experienced, but also engineered.

At the same time, this temporal compression is closely linked to the structure of content itself. Kornbluh suggests that streaming logic is materialised through stylistic features such as front-facing camera, spatial expansion, and "eternal looping" (2023, p. 20) ^[4]. Among these, "eternal looping" corresponds directly to the looped playback and infinite scroll of these platforms, which keeps users attached at a sensory level. In addition, she observes that platforms are "drowned in content", and their visual and narrative forms anticipate the continuous flow of streams (2023, p. 8) ^[4], producing what can be understood as an algorithmic cascade.

Furthermore, immediacy reshapes spatial experience. As Kornbluh notes, it creates the sense that "the world is at your fingertips" (2023, p. 6) ^[4]. While this suggests openness and accessibility, it also encloses users within a curated, algorithmically filtered environment. This creates a paradox where users feel free, but are actually guided. At a deeper level, immediacy depends on the reduction of mediation. Kornbluh (2023, p. 5) ^[4] argues that contemporary cultural forms increasingly rely on directness and immersion, "short-circuiting" interpretation so that content can be immediately understood. This results in highly fragmented and affective content, which reduces the space for critical reflection and makes it easier for users to remain within the stream.

This temporal condition also prepares the ground for data extraction. When users are kept within a compressed and continuous present, their interactions become more frequent, immediate, and less reflective. Small movements within the interface, such as watching for a few seconds longer, skipping a video, returning to a similar theme, or engaging with a particular emotional tone, become meaningful for the platform. In this sense, immediacy does not only shape users' experience of time; it also increases the behavioural traces that can be collected and analysed. By keeping users within a fast-moving stream, the platform creates more opportunities for observation, prediction, and adjustment. Immediacy and datafication are therefore mutually reinforcing mechanisms within the same system of engagement.

The second concept, "predatory data", explains how platforms transform user engagement into economic value. Chan defines it as "the habitual use of data and research methods that exploits the vulnerable and abuses power through datafication and prediction operations" (Chan, 2025, p. 5) ^[2]. On these platforms, every

action—such as scrolling, pausing, or interacting—is converted into data and used to predict future behaviour, creating a continuous cycle of reinforcement. In this sense, user activity is not only participation, but also production.

This process can be understood as a feedback loop. Tohätan (2023, p. 230)^[7] notes that, under the regime of immediacy, digital platforms from Netscape to TikTok accelerate the transmission of messages and images, streamlining capital circulation to the extent that mediating labour is rendered increasingly unnecessary. In this vacuum of mediation, the system uses predatory data to transform user actions into the very logic that governs the platform. Thus, user engagement is continuously captured and reinvested as a resource to sustain the system's own reproduction. Importantly, this system is not neutral. Chan emphasises that continuous monitoring and profiling are not accidental outcomes, but essential features of profit-driven knowledge systems that require the instrumentalisation of large populations (2025, p. 3)^[2]. This means that tracking user behaviour is central to platform operation, rather than a secondary effect.

Moreover, this process is embedded in interface design. Heitmayer (2025, p. 21)^[3] argues that social media platforms function as “mediating attention structures” that record, store, and make visible the attention users expend, transforming fleeting flow attention into accumulated, calcified attention that can be exchanged for money and reputation. As a result, users are drawn deeper into the platform without fully realising how their actions are being shaped. Through these mechanisms, users are not only consumers, but also become sources of data production, whose attention and behaviour are continuously extracted and monetised. This reinforces the difficulty of leaving, as the system is designed to keep users engaged.

Finally, Berlant's concept of “cruel optimism” helps explain why users remain attached to these platforms. She describes it as “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (Berlant, 2006, p. 21)^[1], meaning that people remain attached to something that cannot fully fulfil its promises. In the context of short-form video platforms, users are not simply consuming content, but are attached to a set of promises, such as relaxation, connection, and the expectation that the next video might be better. This creates a form of fragmented pleasure, where each moment offers temporary satisfaction but does not lead to lasting fulfilment.

These dynamics find empirical backing in the work of Qin et al. (2022)^[6], who suggest that continued engagement is sustained by immersive experiences that capture attention and prolong use, even when such engagement does not necessarily lead to long-term satisfaction. This reinforces the difficulty of leaving, as the system continuously converts user engagement into further conditions for its own reproduction. More importantly, this attachment is difficult to break. As Berlant (2006, p. 22)^[1] notes, “people never willingly abandon a libidinal position”, which helps explain why users continue to engage even when they recognise the negative effects. In addition, the act of scrolling itself becomes part of everyday life, providing a sense of rhythm and continuity. Furthermore, this attachment can gradually undermine users' ability to flourish. The vitality and stimulation provided by constant content flow can, over time, weaken attention and time control. In this sense, users are

not simply choosing to stay, but are held within an affective structure that continually delays satisfaction while sustaining engagement.

3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the difficulty of leaving short-form video platforms is not simply a matter of individual choice, but is shaped by a complex interaction of temporal, technological, and affective mechanisms. Through immediacy, platforms capture attention by compressing time and reducing reflection. Through predatory data, they transform this attention into economic value through continuous monitoring and prediction. Through cruel optimism, they maintain user attachment by offering promises that cannot be fully realised.

The value of combining these concepts lies in showing that persistent engagement is not produced by one single cause. It emerges from the alignment of interface design, algorithmic calculation, and affective expectation. This helps explain why solutions based only on individual discipline, such as simply deciding to spend less time online, often feel difficult to sustain in practice. Users may recognise the costs of prolonged scrolling, but the platform environment continually reorganises the conditions of attention and satisfaction. The problem is therefore not only that users choose to remain online, but that the platform repeatedly makes continued engagement feel immediate, rewarding, and difficult to interrupt.

Importantly, these mechanisms do not operate separately, but reinforce one another in a continuous process: immediacy keeps users engaged in the present, which enables the constant extraction of data, while cruel optimism ensures that users remain emotionally attached to the platform despite its negative effects. Together, these processes create a self-reinforcing system that keeps users engaged in an ongoing cycle of consumption. This analysis shows that user behaviour cannot be understood in isolation, but must be seen in relation to the structures that shape it. Thus, rather than viewing excessive platform use as a problem of individual self-control, it is more accurately understood as the outcome of a system that actively organises attention, extracts value, and sustains attachment. Ultimately, this points to a broader condition in which digital platforms do not merely respond to user preferences, but systemically shape the conditions under which attention, behaviour, and desire are formed.

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