



TikTok as a Reflection of Liquid Society: Immediacy and Digital Consumption in the Aftermath of the Pandemic

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Abstract. This research analyzes TikTok as a paradigmatic expression of liquid society in the aftermath of the pandemic. In this regard, it seeks to examine the logic of immediate, fragmented, and affective consumption that characterizes this society. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach that triangulates two complementary sources: open-ended interviews conducted with 12 platform users aged between 18 and 25, and an observational analysis of a corpus of 1,331 comments extracted from a viral video on the platform. The theoretical framework draws on the notions of liquid modernity developed by Bauman, hypermodernity by Lipovetsky, the burnout society by Han, and snack culture by Scolari. The results show that TikTok not only facilitates brief consumption but also shapes users' discursive production. The median length of comments is nine words, one third of the corpus includes emojis, and thematic polarization is expressed in phrases of fewer than fifteen words. These findings reflect what the interviews had already identified at the declarative level, supporting the hypothesis that the platform materializes an impatient, affective, and fragmented subjectivity characteristic of liquid modernity.

Keywords: TikTok; liquid society; digital consumption; social media; comment analysis; liquid modernity.

1 INTRODUCTION

As a result of the rapid and widespread development of ICTs and social media, new cultural issues have emerged within a consumerist society shaped by immediacy, as evidenced by the intensive use of platforms such as TikTok. This platform constitutes a virtual ecosystem in which producers, consumers, and sponsors, through relationships of dependence, shape a spectacular, fast-paced, and personalized world of multimedia content ranging from entertainment to information. TikTok has become the television of contemporary society.

TikTok reflects the emerging forms and contents of contemporary society. Its influence on the digital world and on network society is undeniable; therefore, studying and analyzing the platform provides insight into its users and into the social dynamics that shape the present. This society is grounded in the ephemeral and the immediate, as evidenced by countless technological advances that, with the Internet as their central axis, have placed everything within reach. In this context, everything is expected to

happen quickly, and human beings no longer give themselves time to feel, process, or understand.

TikTok is a Chinese social network and short-video platform launched in September 2016. However, it was not until 2018 that it gained a foothold in the global market outside China. Unlike other social media platforms, TikTok is based on the sharing of short, vertically oriented videos, with maximum durations of 15 seconds, one minute, or three minutes. The success of the application lies in the free use of licensed music and audio tracks to accompany videos, which can also be edited intuitively within the application itself.

Why short videos? The answer lies in the reality of contemporary life. Society has become increasingly fast-paced and rarely pauses. This dynamic also extends to entertainment, which must now be easy to consume, striking, and ephemeral, so that it does not interrupt the continuous flow of everyday life. TikTok has thus become a reflection of an impatient and relentless society, one that moves forward without looking back.

It is important to note that TikTok is one of the most relevant communication phenomena in the post-pandemic social sphere, as it not only enables an understanding of the new dynamics of society but also helps identify emerging consumption paradigms. In this sense, the platform reflects a society that constructs its virtual realities through urgency, immediacy, consumerism, and fear of rejection. The specialized literature on this topic has documented, albeit fragmentarily, the relationship between the platform's algorithmic structure and the user's liquid subjectivity. However, no studies appear to compare what users declare about their consumption practices with what they actually produce on the platform. Against this background, this article seeks to contribute to that discussion.

This study addresses the following research question: To what extent does TikTok reflect a liquid society that is constantly changing, impatient, and ephemeral? To answer this question, the study analyzes the platform's structure and content, showing its logic of interaction as a reflection of an impatient society shaped by immediacy. Accordingly, the specific objectives are: (i) to demonstrate that TikTok's structure responds to society's need for immediate consumption; (ii) to characterize how the short-video format enables the adaptation of heterogeneous content; and (iii) to examine whether user interaction on the platform evokes impatience and immediacy.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is grounded in the contributions of various theorists and recent studies on social media consumption, network society, and engagement with TikTok, a key platform within the digital ecosystem in recent years. The development of the Internet and the emergence of Web 2.0 opened new possibilities for online connection, which were perceived from the outset as a new global infrastructure, comparable to water pipes or electricity cables and analogous to the network itself [1]. These new information technologies began to transform the world, as well as how people connect and interact with one another. Indeed, as Castells states, "the Internet is the future. It is the

present. The Internet is a medium for everything, which interacts with society as a whole and, despite being so recent, does so in its societal form” (Castells, 2001, p. 1).

The Internet transformed the economic landscape by reshaping the global economy and enabling hypertextuality, multimediality, and interactivity to emerge within these new spaces. Samper, for example, argues that social structures are shaped not only by emotional and material dimensions but also by the circulation of information and the exchange of knowledge. As a result, these structures take multiple forms, including formal and informal networks, spaces of sociability, kinship relations, and other social configurations [2].

With these new configurations of the digital world and the transfer of mass-consumption structures into the digital sphere, social media came to reflect social behaviors across different stages in the development of digital environments. As Castells notes, the Internet “develops, but it does not change behaviors; rather, behaviors appropriate the Internet and are therefore amplified and intensified in accordance with what they already are” [3]. Social media opened an online space for social interaction and creativity, gradually permeating even the deepest layers of contemporary culture. In general terms, social media are “a group of Internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” [4].

Human beings, as consuming subjects, begin to engage in consumption within the new spaces that digital culture offers through social media. Throughout history, products, like substances, have taken different forms of consumption and use, closely tied to the spirit of each era. People consume not only to enjoy products but also to affirm their identity [5]. This is precisely the dynamic that unfolds on social media.

The consequences of this phenomenon extend beyond the digital architecture of platforms. The idea that society “becomes technological” refers not only to its movement into online spaces but also to the profound impact of coded structures on the nature of human connections, creations, and interactions [1]. Social media evolve alongside society and its modes of consuming popular culture. Existing platforms are refined, while new ways of consuming information continue to emerge. As Van Dijck notes, these new social platforms generate interdependence among users. The digital world and its environments have enabled the shift from consumers to prosumers, while the cultural industry is transformed and democratized through the dynamics of popularity that emerge on social media, giving rise to an empty and individualized collective identity.

TikTok reflects the way contemporary society is configured: consumerist and fast-paced. From a philosophical perspective, consumption reshapes consciousness, social meaning, and the banalization of time use. As a result of the social confinement caused by the pandemic, the use of time has undergone a new configuration. Consequently, social media continue to capture users’ attention and willingness to engage, whether as spaces for distraction, work, or new forms of connection with others [6].

The pandemic accelerated the development of digital platforms such as TikTok and intensified their use among users. It also gave digital spaces a renewed meaning, reshaping how they are understood, consumed, and used for interaction by prosumers. TikTok “enhances users’ creative capacity by providing them with tools that allow them to become short-video creators, through which they can tell stories and construct

narratives with music and images” [7]. The platform enables both the creation and consumption of short videos, whose original format limited content to no more than 60 seconds. For this reason, the most common forms of content produced on TikTok include challenges, dances, short stories, and videos on a wide range of topics.

Communication on social media generates a new social and economic field in which new professions linked to digital communication emerge. At the same time, ordinary citizens produce content and move beyond the role of mere consumers, gaining the capacity to disseminate their messages quickly and on a massive scale. With a single click, a message can circulate across the network, reach different parts of the world, and become part of a digital narrative that enters the collective imaginary of emerging social media platforms such as TikTok, where it takes shape through recognizable discourses. TikTok has popularized short videos as a format that can be shared, commented on, and consumed by users from different cultures around the world. Consumption is shaped by popular cultural identity and by the products that attract the interest of the global market. The most frequently addressed topics include clothing, language, fashion, consumption, and the culture of love, with beauty and entertainment serving as the main axes of instant and rapid consumption [8].

The platform helps many users find a global stage for public exposure. More than almost any other form of expression, cultural content, whether text, music, or video, generates opinions about what people like or dislike, what they desire or reject, and what captures their interest or fails to do so. Although shared tastes and desires can be used to strengthen bonds and reveal group affinities, they also provide valuable information about social trends and consumption preferences [1].

This scenario opens a new debate and reveals the emergence of a new language shaped by TikTok, as well as new forms of storytelling that involve a digital strategy focused on strengthening content. This differs from television programs produced for the big screen, indicating that traditional formats are being left behind as a new multi-platform scenario is reinvented [7]. In microeconomic terms, utility is “a measure of a person’s satisfaction when consuming a good or service” [9]. The new forms of convergence currently taking shape result from these social interactions and emerge in consumers’ thinking, as they construct a new mythology from fragments of information drawn from the media flow. This information becomes a resource that reshapes the meaning of everyday life and of the digital environment in which society now exists [7]. The popular consumption of culture on TikTok, along with users’ content choices, also shapes their identities. At a deeper level, the economy and the superstructure determine what is consumed and what is not. However, the creation of new spaces in which users can generate content also opens the possibility of divergence.

Communication, understood in Bauman’s terms as a ubiquitous and liquid entity, is shaped by this context in both its journalistic and advertising dimensions. TikTok develops audiovisual and three-dimensional identities, as reflected in its logo, which draws inspiration from stereoscopy and an aesthetic based on the anaglyph. These forms of identity may also function as transmedia entities [10]. For the actors involved, the network represents an opportunity to pursue empowerment, freedom, and other counter hegemonic elements that challenge transformations of power. At the same time,

however, the vast “worldwide web” has become, for renowned organizations and the most powerful states, an instrument of surveillance and global control [11].

The contemporary subject is adjusted, modified, and transformed within an economic, social, political, and cultural structure shaped by the digital sphere. This has allowed millions of users to be absorbed by a capitalist machinery that, paradoxically, also offers the possibility of escape [11]. Technology has enabled individuals to create content through their own codes, spaces, and sociocultural contexts, and to disseminate it massively, rapidly, and immediately. It is important to emphasize that production within these spaces has a cultural orientation that moves away from an elitist conception of culture and aligns more closely with Martín-Barbero’s approach to popular culture. In this sense, a digital narrative is constructed that contributes to historical memory through the collective imaginary, that is, a discourse that is easily recognized through its sociocultural content. From this perspective, cyberspace is controlled by hegemonic structures of domination, and the subject is absorbed and suspended in time as culture and society are transformed by this hegemonic power. In this way, the virtual business model emerges through the transfer of reality outside the network onto the Internet, gradually revealing a society driven by the urgency of consumption and the rapid acquisition of information [11].

Within the logic of immediacy, it is essential to turn to Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of liquid modernity, according to which contemporary bonds, identities, and forms of consumption are characterized by volatility, fragmentation, and a readiness to be replaced without delay. In this sense, TikTok can be read as a paradigmatically liquid device, as it offers ephemeral relationships with content, identities that are constructed and discarded within seconds, and social bonds sustained by brief forms of gratification [12]. Along the same lines, Lipovetsky and Charles describe hypermodernity as an age of urgency, excess, and emotional consumption, in which the subject demands immediate, personalized, and constantly renewed experiences [13]. TikTok’s design, based on infinite scrolling, algorithmic recommendations, and fifteen-second microformats, precisely materializes this hyperconsumerist logic, in which novelty becomes the primary source of pleasure.

The preceding discussion is further deepened by Byung-Chul Han, who argues that contemporary citizens live in a burnout society and within a digital swarm, where the overabundance of stimuli dissolves the capacity for sustained attention and replaces collective discourse with a fragmented noise of individual voices [14, 15]. From the arguments developed in this article, the difficulty of remaining engaged with a long video, the sensation of endless scrolling, and the recognition of an almost compulsive form of consumption can be understood as symptoms of hyperstimulation. In this regard, Carlos Scolari’s concepts of hypermediation and snack culture describe the narrative and communicational logic of platforms such as TikTok, which present short, intertextual, hypermediated narratives designed to circulate rapidly across different devices [16, 17]. This leads to the understanding that TikTok is not merely a social network that contributes to the intellectual impoverishment of society, but rather one of the most fully developed expressions of a snack based communicative ecology.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research follows a convergent mixed-methods triangulation design, in which the qualitative and quantitative components are developed in a complementary manner and their results are integrated during the interpretation stage. This design enables the same phenomenon to be examined from different sources and perspectives, allowing the findings to be compared and convergences, complementarities, or discrepancies in the data to be identified [18, 19].

Furthermore, the research combines an interpretive qualitative component with a descriptive quantitative component, drawing on two complementary sources of evidence. The first consists of open-ended interviews with TikTok users, which provide access to the declarative level, that is, to the perceptions and explanations participants offer regarding their own forms of consumption. The second consists of an observational analysis of a corpus of comments extracted from the platform, through which the discursive manifestations produced in a specific digital environment are examined. Computer-mediated discourse analysis provides a framework for examining the linguistic, pragmatic, and interactional patterns present in communication within digital spaces [20].

In this sense, the convergence of both sources enables the participants' self-reported discourse to be compared with the patterns of communication and participation observed on TikTok. However, since the observed comments do not come from the same users who took part in the interviews, the comparison is made at the level of aggregate findings rather than as an individual correspondence between what was declared and what was produced.

At the declarative level, a semi-structured interview consisting of six open-ended questions was conducted with 12 TikTok users aged between 18 and 25. By eliciting responses in the participants' own words, open-ended questions enable the exploration of their perceptions, experiences, and evaluations without restricting them in advance to closed categories [21].

Participants were recruited through purposive, non-probabilistic sampling, selecting individuals who could provide information relevant to the study's objectives. Purposive sampling is used in qualitative and mixed-methods research to identify information-rich cases directly related to the phenomenon under investigation [21, 22]. In this study, the aim was to ensure a degree of heterogeneity in both the intensity of TikTok use and patterns of platform consumption.

The instrument was designed based on the study's theoretical axes, considering content structure, time of use, search processes, synthesis capacity, audiovisual design, and effective use of the platform. The responses were then organized, systematized, and thematically coded through a process that involved identifying units of meaning, generating codes, and grouping recurrent patterns. Thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative datasets [23, 24].

Although the interview sample is small ($n = 12$), the results are exploratory and illustrative in scope. Therefore, they do not seek statistical generalization to the broader population of young TikTok users, but rather a contextualized understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the selected participants.

At the observational level, the study examined a corpus of 1,331 comments extracted from a TikTok video focused on the relationship between employers and employees. The video was posted by the content creator account *Mentoría de Éxito*, and the analysis sought to complement and contrast the findings from the interviews. Comments published on digital platforms can be analyzed as forms of computer-mediated discourse, as they contain linguistic, emotional, interactional, and multimodal expressions linked to the reception and social appropriation of content [20].

The data were extracted using the public service *ExportComments.com*, and the full dataset was included in the analysis. No filters were applied by language, length, or author. This selection preserved the heterogeneity of the corpus and allowed the analysis to include developed verbal messages, brief responses, emojis, and other forms of nonverbal reaction. It is important to note that emojis themselves perform pragmatic and socioemotional functions in digital communication.

Descriptive quantitative metrics were calculated for the corpus, including comment length measured by word count, the presence of emojis, laughter and applause markers, and explicit linguistic markers. A thematic analysis assisted by regular expressions was also conducted. Regular expressions were used as tools for the preliminary search and classification of words, sequences, emojis, and discursive markers, but not as substitutes for qualitative interpretation. Combining computational procedures with contextual reading helps identify recurrent patterns while avoiding the automatic interpretation of term frequency as equivalent to discursive meaning.

4 RESEARCH RESULTS

The general objective of this study was to analyze the structure and content of the TikTok platform, showing its logic of interaction as a reflection of an impatient society shaped by immediacy. To this end, open-ended interviews were conducted with 12 participants, who were asked about the use, design, and operation of TikTok. The declarative findings from the interviews were complemented by an observational analysis of a sample of 1,331 comments extracted from a viral TikTok video, allowing a comparison between what users say about the platform and what they produce on it.

When asked about the platform's structure and content consumption, the 12 interviewees agreed that the arrangement of options, the simplicity of the interface, and the presence of an algorithm that quickly learns their preferences make content accessible with almost no effort. In this regard, two interviewees highlighted the platform's rapid access routes and the immediate association between personal tastes and algorithmic recommendations. One participant emphasized the platform's value as a marketing tool, particularly because of creators' ability to mobilize audiences; two others underscored the algorithm's adaptation to the user; and four described the format as one designed to capture the viewer's attention. These findings suggest that TikTok's structure not only facilitates consumption but also induces it.

In relation to time spent on the platform and users' willingness to watch longer videos, the interviews reveal considerable heterogeneity in consumption habits, yet they also show a common pattern in which sustained attention remains the exception rather

than the rule. Four participants reported using the platform for approximately one hour per day, two for more than ten minutes per day, four for more than five hours daily, and two for more than six hours per day, especially at night. As for videos longer than one and a half minutes, seven interviewees stated that they watched them in full when the content was interesting or informative, while the remaining five abandoned them midway because they preferred short videos lasting no more than 20 seconds. These findings suggest that users' patience is conditioned by the immediate value of the content.

The third aspect concerns the speed with which users find content they enjoy. All participants stated that the time required to find content of interest is minimal, ranging from immediate access to a maximum of two minutes. Participants emphasized the speed of the platform, its capacity to encourage prolonged use, its ability to recognize their preferences, and the role of personalized search filters. Overall, the algorithm reduces search time to almost zero, thereby reinforcing the logic of instant gratification.

The fourth aspect concerns the synthesis of information in short formats. The responses reveal mixed views. All 12 interviewees considered that the platform offers suitable tools for condensing information. One participant highlighted the possibility of working with videos of varying duration; two valued the way the format engages multiple senses and uses colloquial language that facilitates retention; and two others emphasized the ease of use of the application. However, four participants identified several challenges involved in synthesis, including the need for prior research, the volume of information to be condensed, and the difficulty of conveying valuable content within the limits of a short video. These findings indicate that the tension between brevity and depth shapes the user experience.

Regarding the appeal of TikTok's design and interface, nine of the 12 interviewees valued the application's visual design, describing it as entertaining, dynamic, intuitive, easy to use, and effective in identifying user preferences. Six interviewees specifically highlighted the speed of the algorithm and the comments section as attractive features, while two emphasized the simplicity of navigating the platform. However, two participants criticized the format, describing it as problematic because of its endless scrolling logic. One interviewee also stated that the design could be improved, although no specific changes were suggested.

Finally, the interviews show that entertainment is the primary, but not exclusive, use of TikTok. Eleven of the 12 interviewees reported using the platform for recreational purposes, including comedy, short horror videos, trends, and brief tutorials. Six also use it to access informational or academic content, while two reported using it professionally to create branded content and monitor trends. Overall, TikTok functions as a multifunctional space in which entertainment remains central, alongside informational, educational, and commercial uses.

Taken together, these findings suggest that TikTok functions as a platform calibrated to an impatient subjectivity. Its algorithmic architecture reduces search time to a minimum, its short video format requires content to be synthesized, and its interface encourages continuous scrolling, a feature that some users recognize as addictive.

4.1 Observational Analysis

To triangulate the interview findings with a corpus of interactions actually produced on the platform, a sample of 1,331 comments was examined. These comments were extracted from a viral TikTok video focused on the relationship between employers and employees and posted by the content creator account *Mentoría de Éxito*. The corpus is not intended to represent the platform as a whole, but rather to illustrate, through observational data, how the features described by the interviewees at the declarative level are expressed in practice, including brevity, immediacy, affective reaction, and fragmented judgment. The quantitative findings are summarized in Table 1 and illustrated in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

As shown in Table 1, the median comment length is nine words, while the mean is 11.8 words. Overall, 35.8% of the messages contain no more than five words, and 66.3% remain below fifteen words. Only 3.7% of the corpus reaches or exceeds thirty-one words. Public conversation about a substantive issue, which in other formats would require argumentation, is resolved on TikTok through short phrases that function as judgments or instant expressions of agreement, such as “harsh but true,” “totally agree,” and “that’s how it is”.

As shown in Table 1, 34% of the comments include at least one emoji, and 10.7% consist exclusively of emojis or other non-alphabetic signs. Written laughter, such as “jaja,” and applause function as micro-responses that replace argumentation. In other words, the user reacts rather than debates. This finding confirms, through observable practice, what the interviews had already suggested at the level of self-perception, namely that the logic of instant gratification also shapes the viewer’s discursive production.

Figure 3 highlights polarization in fragmented form. Although brief, the comments display opposing substantive positions. On the one hand, 14.2% appeal to training and education as a counterargument to the video’s message, with expressions such as “no one is born knowing” and “my boss taught me.” On the other hand, 15.6% fall at the opposite pole, referring to dismissal, resignation, or termination of the employment relationship. The controversy does not develop through extended threads; instead, it appears in brief flashes of opinion. Liquid society not only consumes quickly; it also argues quickly or, more precisely, dispenses with argumentation altogether.

Table 1. Quantitative characterization of the corpus of analyzed comments (n = 1,331).

Dimension	Category	N	%
Word length	≤ 5	477	35.8
	6–15	406	30.5
	16–30	399	30.0
	≥ 31	49	3.7
Nonverbal markers	Contains at least one emoji	452	34.0
	Composed only of emojis	143	10.7
	Laughter markers (jaja, jeje)	34	2.6
	Applause	21	1.6
Discursive agreement	Explicit markers of agreement	109	8.2
Thematic axes	Training / education	189	14.2
	Dismissal / resignation	208	15.6
	Blaming the employee	128	9.6
	Blaming the employer	91	6.8
	Personal experience	165	12.4

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

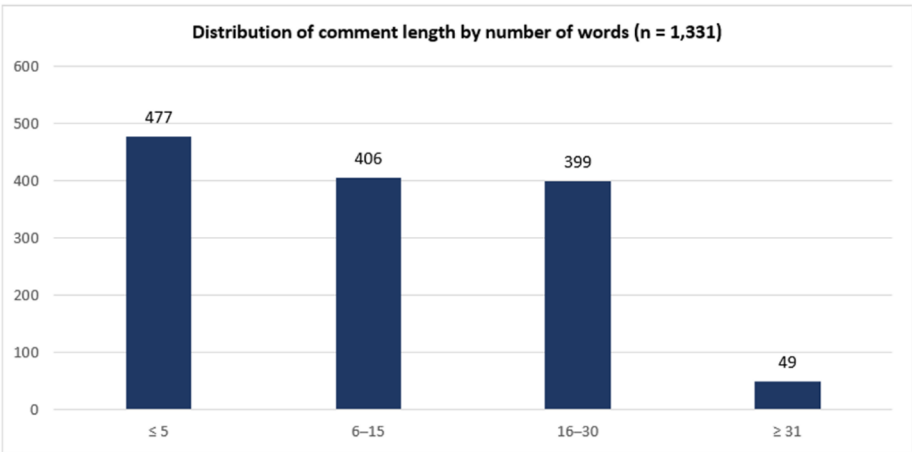


Figure 1. Distribution of coomment length by word count (n = 1,331).

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

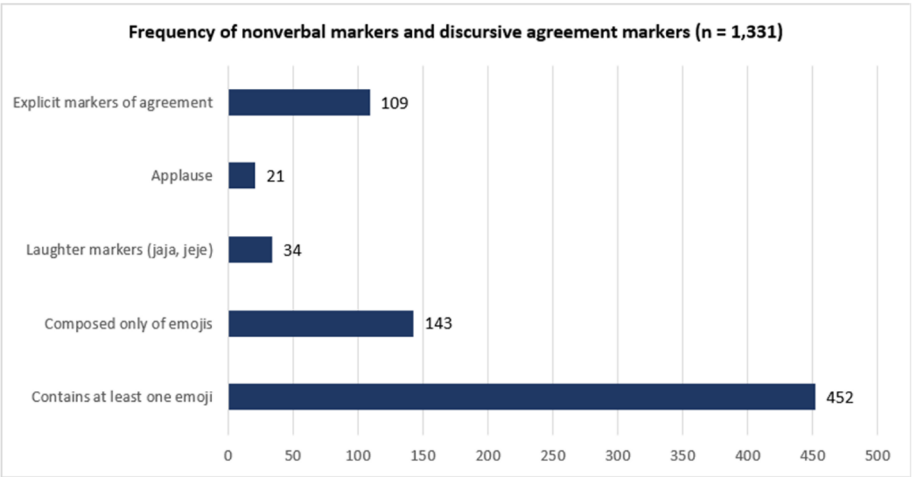


Figure 2. Frequency of nonverbal markers and discursive agreement markers in the corpus.

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

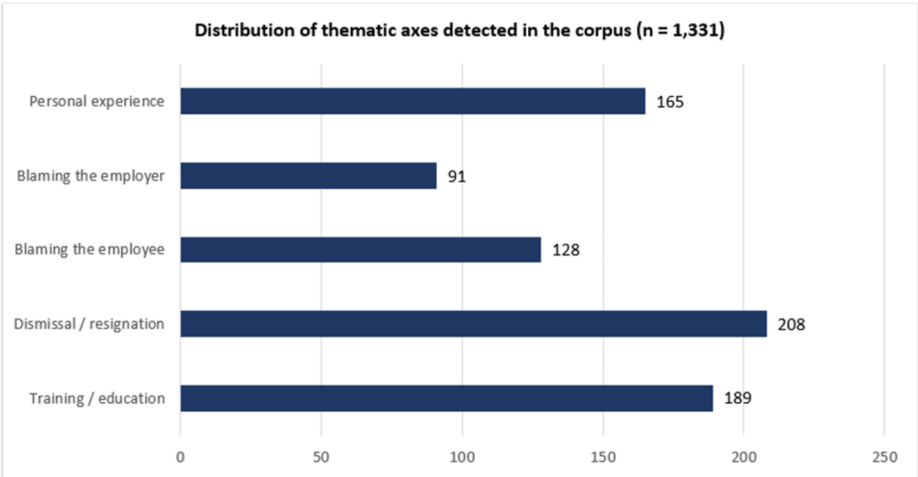


Figure 3. Distribution of the thematic axes detected in the corpus.

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

5 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are directly connected to the theoretical framework. Bauman's notion of liquid modernity, defined by volatile bonds, constantly shifting identities, and ephemeral forms of consumption, is reflected in the data [12]. All interviewees acknowledged that TikTok reduces search time to almost zero, while the corpus of comments shows that users' responses are also reduced to fragments of fewer than fifteen words. On TikTok, the logic of liquid modernity is therefore not limited to the consumption of others' content; it also shapes how users produce their own discourse.

Lipovetsky's interpretation of hypermodernity as an age of urgency and emotional consumption is reflected in the largely positive assessment of the platform's design reported by the interviewees, with nine out of twelve participants valuing this aspect, as well as in the presence of affective markers in the corpus, where 34% of the comments included at least one emoji [13]. Han's diagnosis of the burnout society and the digital swarm appears in a productive tension [14, 15]. This is particularly evident in the interviews, where users described infinite scrolling as ridiculous or addictive and acknowledged the difficulty of stopping, a pattern that, in Han's terms, can be understood as a symptom of hyperstimulation. The platform both captivates and exhausts.

Scolari's concept of snack culture is also useful for integrating both sources of evidence, as it describes brief, intertextual narratives designed for rapid circulation [17]. The platform's architecture, through microformats and algorithmic recommendations, and users' responses, expressed through brief judgments, emojis, and fragmented polarization, follow the same communicative logic. As Medranda-Morales and Sakihama-Miyashiro observe, the combination of textual brevity, intensive use of emojis, and standardized affective formulas configures a low-friction expressive environment that facilitates mass participation and the rapid, scalable circulation of emotions, a pattern that is consistent with the findings reported in this study [25]. However, the limitations of the study must also be acknowledged. On the one hand, the interview sample was exploratory ($n = 12$) and does not allow for statistical generalization. On the other hand, the corpus of comments was drawn from a single video and therefore also reflects the thematic specificities of that content, particularly labor relations and business mentoring. Future research could expand the corpus to include videos from different genres, incorporate network analysis to map interaction structures, and triangulate the findings with real usage data provided by the platform.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The study suggests that, for most users, TikTok functions as a clear expression of an algorithmic logic geared toward consumption, supported by its ease of use and the continuous presentation of short videos. The platform satisfies users' consumption needs through its recommendation algorithm and simple interaction tools, while also fostering forms of impatience associated with the immediate availability of personalized content.

The short-video format primarily encourages the consumption of entertainment content, which helps explain TikTok's high level of acceptance and daily use. At the same time, the complementary analysis of 1,331 TikTok comments corroborates the findings at the observational level. The median message length is nine words, 66.3% of the comments do not exceed fifteen words, and one third of the corpus relies on emojis. Brevity and instant gratification characterize not only consumption but also users' discursive production, confirming in practice the hypothesis of liquid society that guided the research.

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