

Special section: TikTok Methodologies

Guest editors: Crystal Abidin and Jin Lee

Editor's note: This special section builds upon the thread of Cultural Science research established by previous editors. It focuses on exploring new research methods that are both enabled and influenced by emerging technologies, which are altering the patterns of distributed agency among human and non-human entities. The papers presented here have undergone peer review, as indicated at the end of each article. This review process was completed prior to the journal's transition to the new open peer review system.

Introduction to TikTok Methodologies

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Abstract: This editorial introduces the collection of papers in the *Cultural Science Journal* Special Section on 'TikTok Methodologies'. Based on a Symposium of the same name that was hosted by the TikTok Cultures Research Network in July 2021, this collection includes three journal articles outlining the practice, praxis, and pragmatics of conducting research on and about TikTok, and a research commentary reflecting on the challenges in conceptualizing and operationalizing a TikTok project. The editorial opens by reflecting on some recent trends in TikTok scholarship, and closes with a brief introduction to the Special Section.



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Introduction

The field of digital media research is rapidly expanding to include innovative and exciting TikTok research. As one of the most widely used digital short video platforms around the world, TikTok is a key social arena to study global youth culture, creativity, professionalization, and activism. This Special Issue emerges from a Symposium entitled 'TikTok Methodologies' that took place in July 2021, sponsored by the TikTok Cultures Research Network (TCRN), and hosted by Prof Crystal Abidin, Prof Patrik Wikström, and Dr D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, and is co-edited by TCRN core team members Prof Crystal Abidin and Dr Jin Lee. This event was a critical forum for discussion on TikTok research frameworks and methodologies from emerging voices in the field. Contributions from this Special Issue present some core frameworks, schema, and ideas for the systematic study of TikTok cultures via a variety of methods. Sessions were recorded and can be viewed at <https://tiktokcultures.com/tiktok-methodologies/>.

Trends in TikTok scholarship

More thematic collections of TikTok research are gradually becoming available in peer-reviewed journals, including the first of Special Issues focused on research perspectives (Zeng et al., 2021), TikTok and other short video apps as global communication (Ha 2022), Cultures of TikTok in the Asia Pacific (Abidin, et al., 2023), TikTok and social movements (Lee & Abidin, 2023), TikTok and the platformisation from China (Lin & de Kloet 2023), and TikTok and children (Lee et al., 2025), as well as an edited book on TikTok cultures in the US (Boffone 2022).

The first wave of scholarship detailing approaches to studying TikTok focused heavily on COVID-19 communication (i.e. Li et al., 2021; Sidorenko-Bautista et al., 2020), adolescent and youth cultures (i.e. Literat, 2021; Savic, 2021), and educational applications for short video (i.e. Khlaif & Salha, 2021; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Tirocchi, 2021). Methods employed have included cross-platform analysis comparing TikTok with other digital media platforms (Eghtesadi & Florea, 2020), qualitative interviews with users (De Leyn et al., 2021), content analysis of videos (Zeng, Schäfer, & Allgaier, 2021), and emergent digital methods such as digital ethnography (Abidin, 2021), and the app walkthrough method (Kaye, Chen & Zeng, 2021).

As many recent journal articles explore TikTok outside the fields of media and communication studies (i.e. Herrick et al., 2020; Haenlein et al., 2020; Neyaz et al., 2020), and still others coming from non-Social Science disciplines including public health (i.e. Arias, 2021; Basch et al., 2020; Khlaif & Salha, 2021) and physical sciences (i.e. Lemonick, 2020; Hayes et al., 2020) further discipline-specific research is needed to develop reliable methodological approaches. Indeed, there is a growing discussion on methodologies for studying TikTok, especially in relation to how the platform serves as a new place for cultural, social, economic, and political interactions among various actors. These include examining TikTok as a complex space for LGBTQ+ communities (Duguay, 2023), addressing the need to critically reflect on researchers' ethical stance and positionality shaped and mobilised via researchers' interactions with the platform and users (Newton & Southerton, 2023; Zhao, 2023), and exploring technical approaches to analyze the multimodal short-form content on the platform—ranging from musical elements to tempo—to capture its diverse dimensions (Vera et al., 2024). Considering the trajectories of TikTok research thus far, this Special Issue takes into focus the key issues and consideration in qualitative and socio-cultural approaches to studying TikTok.

This Special Issue

Following this introduction, this collection features three journal articles and one commentary. We begin with a commentary in D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, Clare Southerton, and Wei Wang's 'Commentary & Reflections from the TikTok Methodologies Discussion Forum'. As early career scholars who were among the first wave of researchers to study TikTok, the authors reflect on the Symposium and discussions with over two hundred attendees, mapping out the core themes of the day and offering areas for future research based on queries in the forum. The dialogue focuses on conceptualizing a TikTok project, operationalizing a TikTok project, considerations of ethical practices and guidelines, and the importance of socio-cultural contexts for strategizing situationally appropriate methods and solutions for accessing and studying TikTok cultures in a more comprehensive manner. We continue with Jorge Vázquez-Herrero, María-Cruz Negreira-Rey, and Daniel Klug 'Key Concepts and Research Methods to Analyze TikTok Journalism', where the authors offer some parameters and objects of potential study specific to the topic of TikTok journalism. They propose a mixed methodological approach and introduce in phases ways that scholars may approach the evolution of journalism logics as entangled with social media logics on TikTok. Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú and Daniela Jaramillo-Dent's '(Re)coding TikTok: The Memetic Interactivity Codebook for content analysis' look into the memetic structures of TikTok, as cultivated by its affordances, and introduce the Memetic Interactivity Codebook (MIC) as a flexible method for studying the visual, audio, and sharing grammars on TikTok. Their schema offers researchers a range of affordance functions that can be studied in detail, and a map for the various in-routes into a systematic content analysis of TikTok contents. Crystal Abidin and Jin Lee's 'Being bound in a fieldsite: Cross-cultural methodological notes on doing digital ethnography on TikTok in Australia and South Korea' pivots to digital ethnography as a method for investigating TikTok, using the case studies of comparative research between two countries of distinctive socio-cultural contexts. The authors offer some empirical heuristics for researchers to develop their own digital ethnographic guide and schema, including considerations for cultural nuance, contingencies, and other blindspots, especially in relation to the platform's regionally distinct algorithm environments. Finally, we close

We hope you enjoy this collection of papers.

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