

Special section: TikTok Methodologies

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Commentary & Reflections from the TikTok Methodologies Discussion Forum

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Abstract: As methodologies for studying TikTok continue to develop, deliberation among research communities can offer valuable insights to incorporate different approaches and iterate on emerging research designs. In July 2021, the TikTok Cultures Research Network held a public research forum on TikTok methodologies that was attended by over two-hundred researchers and members of the public from around the world. The discussion-based event featured two panels and a vibrant open question and answer session that highlighted many of the complex issues that TikTok researchers are facing. In this short piece, the two discussion moderators and one of the event's organisers reflect on some of the unanswered questions from our forum. Topics that were brought up by researchers in the audience included ethical considerations to protect research participants, particularly younger TikTok users, as well for researchers, particularly when studying problematic or extreme content. Audience members raised technical questions about how to collect and store large quantities of video data or extract and analyse qualitative elements such as video text or hashtags. Audience members also raised questions about how to avoid biases when studying a platform that caters experiences to users' individual cultural preferences.



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Introduction

The TikTok Cultures Research Network held its third virtual event ‘TikTok Methodologies’ in July 2021. The event, which was held virtually as a Zoom Webinar, brought together the authors of this special issue from five countries around the world to share insights from their previous TikTok research. More than two-hundred attendees, including researchers, students, and members of the public, joined to hear the panellists’ discussion and participate with their own questions. The preceding articles in this special issue have presented paper-length elaborations on some of the key points, themes, and methodologies panellists shared at the event. To close this special issue we, the two discussion section moderators and one of the three event organisers, share reflections and commentary from the virtual event around which this special issue is based.

The event was divided into two 45-minute panel discussions, each consisting of three TikTok researchers and one moderator. The organisers selected two broad themes for each panel discussion. The first panel, ‘Conceptualising a TikTok Project’, focused on unpacking why researchers would choose TikTok as an object or site of study, what kinds of research questions would be relevant for TikTok research, and how to choose appropriate methods for studying TikTok. The second panel, ‘Operationalising a TikTok Project’, focused on epistemological and methodological issues such as how to identify constructs, how to triangulate results from mixed-methods, such as interviews and content analysis, or systematically employ novel digital methods, such as the app walkthrough method.

In the following two sections, each panel moderator reflects on their approach to facilitating discussion and the key takeaways from their respective sessions. In the third section, one of the event organisers reflects on directions for future research suggested by attendees during the Q&A sessions with commentary from panellists.

Session 01 – Conceptualising a TikTok Project

In the first session, discussions were focused on how to conceptualise TikTok research projects. This process can be approached from the following dimensions. First, as with new media research, how to conceptualise a project on TikTok urges the researcher(s) to engage meaningfully with a particular theoretical framework, which highlights the continuities between TikTok and other new media platforms. Panellist Adriana Amaral, with a focus on race, class, gender, and subcultures, shared with us her research on hashtags used by women who were dating men in jail. As she explained these women blended ‘TikTok language, and dances and Brazilian culture, and mixing with relationships with different media and songs... and other important [demographic] markers like gender, age, etc.’ The intersection of identity politics of cultural practices on TikTok is exemplary of how TikTok could be a rich ground for scholars from a variety of disciplines. As with other digital platforms, TikTok constitutes an important site to explore how platform design shapes user behaviour and users understand the platform, as proposed by our panellist Diana Zulli, remarking that ‘lots of platforms are starting to look like each other, you see this consolidation of platform design because they’re all trying to steal affordances from each other, but users are still interacting and engaging with these platforms in very specific ways, they understand them as having utility in different ways.’ Understanding these distinctions relies on a practice-approach to digital platforms, which also encourages researchers to delve into the uniqueness of TikTok when conceptualizing research projects.

The second point discussed at the panel was how to understand the differences between TikTok and other digital video platforms, which responds to an essential question of why TikTok itself could be a meaningful research site? A classical answer would be Marshall McLuhan's (1964) argument of 'the medium is the message.' It supports studies of 'new' forms of media in an undebatable sense. From a practice-based perspective, the advent of 'new' media dovetails with the emergence of 'new' human practices, instead of just migrating existing interactions onto 'new' platforms. For example, panellist Milovan Savic captures mediated parent-child relationships in the family context. In this case, new media become an integral part of the interactive dynamics between parents and their kids. As Savic explained, 'there is a lot of moral panic around young peoples' use [of social media], especially the younger demographics, or the *younger*-young people [who] are usually perceived as being in danger and consequently in need of protection by adults... this is why we need to reorganize the way we approach [social media research] and give an active role to young people to figure out what they are actually doing on social media.' The spectrum of family communication practices to be studies are substantially and profoundly changed by 'new' media.

Third, on the basis of the above-mentioned two points, another dimension that attracted the panellists' and audience's attention at the panel was how to conceptualise the methods of TikTok studies. The walkthrough method appears as a thought-provoking approach. As Light, Burgess, and Duguay (2018) state, 'apps pose new methodological challenges for sociocultural digital media research' (p. 881). They describe the walkthrough method which involves 'establishing an app's environment of expected use by identifying and describing its vision, operating model and modes of governance' (p. 881). This method enables researchers to investigate users' appropriation of and resistance to digital platforms, including TikTok. Based on the walkthrough method, Savic has developed 'social media tours' to incorporate user practices to a larger extent, which also elicited much interest from the audience. With 'social media tours,' the subjectivity of research participants can be leveraged to guide the researcher(s) through the platform. Savic noted that 'when you do an interview, you are asking people to recall things from memory. For [social media tours], participants are not recalling their experiences from memory, but they are actually narrating what they are doing. As a result, certain things come up that probably would be forgotten otherwise.' Further, in Savic's projects, TikTok users at a relatively young age mobilise their schemas of media usage, which generates a dialectical process of participant-researcher interaction.

Session 02 – Operationalising a TikTok Project

In the second session, focused on the practicalities of operationalising a TikTok project, the different epistemological perspectives of the researchers on the panel gave us a diverse range of perspectives. The issue of avoiding bias was an excellent entry point to discussing some of these differences, through the lens of one the key challenges of the platform for conducting research. TikTok is a platform that emphasises its ability to know the user, by recommending content for them using a proprietary recommendation algorithm. As such, content a researcher may collect on the app could be influenced by a range of factors including their location, the language on their device, information collected about the user from the device, browsing habits and a range of other sources of information. Analysing content from TikTok, then, must always involve an awareness of the extent to which the specific location of the data collection has informed what has been found. Especially for researchers working within positivist frameworks, seeking to remove bias and capture an objective sample from the app, the personalisation on the app can present a problem that must be managed through a number of technical practices, such as creating new accounts for data collection. To

address potential biases while studying journalism on TikTok, panellist Jorge Vázquez-Herrero and his colleagues, 'didn't identify the content itself, we identified users of interest for our study... and analysed what they published and how they interacted with their audiences.' Vázquez-Herrero acknowledged that certain biases could never be fully overcome but highlighted additional steps for mitigation, 'to evaluate scientifically what happens on the platform, we must take into account that any decision to watch or not watch a video, to give a like or share it, is influencing the content and recommendations given by the app. A challenge that arises would be to simulate behavior with a certain pattern and see what happens. But it's still very difficult because the algorithm is a black box.'

Qualitative researchers, however, drawing from a subjectivist epistemology, were less inclined to see personalisation as something that could ever be overcome to produce 'clean' or objective data. Rather, personalisation was one of the many ways in which TikTok data was filtered both by the platform, and by the researcher's subjective perspective – highlighting the importance of reflexivity in research practice. As panellist Jin Lee reminded, 'when you study TikTok or newly emerging social media apps, take into account how you are involved in the research, rather than just presenting your data as 'this is what I've done, this is very objective.' You are already filtered and your content is being filtered... having that in mind when designing a methodology is a key thing to consider as we expand our research on TikTok.'

In contrast to the issue of algorithmic personalisation and bias, qualitative and quantitative perspectives were largely aligned on the challenges of negotiating research ethics, in the sense that there was agreement on the lack of any one simple solution. TikTok presents a range of practical problems that researchers must negotiate. For example, it is often difficult and impractical to obtain consent from participants involved in research – whether that be qualitative studies such as participant observation or quantitative studies aggregating data from the app. Researchers must also balance concerns surrounding participant data anonymity with the need to adequately describe content in research findings. Additionally, researchers may wish to credit creators, rather than strip them of ownership of their creations in research findings. However, different empirical contexts warrant different approaches. Our panellists reflected on the specific approaches they have taken, and the lack of concrete solutions, favouring contextual ethical approaches to TikTok research rather than overarching principles. Jin Lee pointed out that much attention is paid to protecting those individuals using social media. While this is clearly important and necessary, additional ethical consideration is needed for the people collecting the data and doing the research. 'For example, when you study very malicious content for social justice research then you might end up being trolled...' Lee cautioned, 'after you publish your data and research... how do you protect yourself? There is no fixed absolute answer, research ethics is a process to navigate, but you have to pose these questions as a researcher, as a user, and as a person in society.' She also described practical strategies that focused on the researcher such as fabrication, ethically transfiguring searchable detail in data to protect privacy of users and ensure the safety of researchers (Markham, 2012).

In discussing the challenges of operationalising TikTok research, our panellists and audience discussion also reflected on unwieldy nature of the platform, especially with regard to its organising structure. While hashtags have been used as a unit of measurement to access trends and emerging communities on the platform, there may also be an opportunity with TikTok to expand our repertoire to trace sounds and audio-memes, duets, stitches, visual effects and less tangible or coherent subcultures. Alternatively, instead of using short videos as the unit of analysis, panellist Xu Chen suggested to take advantage of methods such as the app walkthrough that 'do not directly engage with the content on these platforms but reveal the cultural discourses and social and-technological mechanisms... this is based on your research questions. Our research questions were more about

theory building so our method allowed us to critically engage with the platform itself without looking so much at the content.’ Especially given the central role these elements play on the app, developing systematic approaches to analyse them may offer rich insights into TikTok’s rapidly shifting platform cultures.

Discussion

In both sessions, audience members posed questions that took advantage of the opportunity to engage in dialog with TikTok researchers. In the first session, in addition to exploring the distinctions between TikTok research and other short video platforms, audience members asked panellists to reflect on the nuances of researching multimodal short videos. Abidin and Kaye (2021) highlight the ways modalities on TikTok are layered together to form one cohesive artefact, which can also be separated into its constitutive parts for discrete analysis. TikTok research that focuses on sounds and music, for example, might isolate the ways in which audio can be used as a form of mimetic communication alongside filters, editing techniques, or trend templates.

In the second session, panellists had an opportunity to reflect on their own approaches to conducting ethical TikTok research, but some unanswered questions probed deeper into specific ethical considerations, such as when to name users and when to anonymise. Research ethics requirements vary by region and institution, but some resources offer conceptual guidance. The Association of Internet Researchers (2012), for example, published an open-access treatise on internet research ethics that poses a litany of questions for researchers to consider critically when designing their research. Most relevant to TikTok research are considerations surrounding the context and expectations of participants. For example, at what point is a social media post reasonably considered to be public? Does posting something online justifiably mean users are willing participants in scholarly research? How can researchers respect the autonomy and right to privacy of subjects? These questions are important for all researchers, but research standards and practices set forth in nascent TikTok research projects may set precedents for future researchers or research students studying TikTok.

Reflecting on the discussions in both sections we offer the following guidelines for ethical TikTok research. Sharing videos on TikTok should not be considered a justifiable basis for including names, users names, or images in scholarly research. Videos can be removed. To respect users’ autonomy and privacy researchers should seek informed consent from TikTokers whose videos are to be included in scholarly research. If obtaining consent is not possible, researchers should judge videos on a case-by-case basis. Videos that have been featured in news media articles, were posted by verified creators, or have view counts in the millions should be considered separately from videos with smaller view counts or posted by creators with comparatively smaller followings. Opinions on what constitutes a justifiably large or unjustifiably small following will vary; researchers should use their best judgement and cite previous studies to support their decision. Whenever including videos or screenshots, researchers should err on the side of caution to avoid displaying re-identifiable features such as locations or faces, particularly when seeking to use videos without the consent of video creators.

Another important area related to research ethics raised by audience members in the first session asked panellists to assess risks involved with studying younger users. Respecting the privacy of younger online users which is not only imperative best-practices for conducting research but also a statutory requirement in many jurisdictions (e.g., COPPA, GDPR). In addition to asking about privacy, an audience member asked panellists about issues of copyright when publishing articles that include

TikTok videos. Researchers working in the U.S. or publishing research via U.S.-based outlets could lean on the Fair Use Exception to copyright that permits copyrighted material to be reused for educational purposes provided it is unavoidable, uses the smallest amount of material possible, is demonstrably not-for-profit, and if the publishing outlet deems the use to be permissible. Even where deemed to be permissible, however, researchers must also grapple with the ethical considerations of including videos that may depict usernames, real names, or images of individuals with or without obtaining informed consent. This, of course, raises problematic issues of U.S. centrality that neglects to consider additional considerations that may apply elsewhere in the Global North or throughout the Global South.

On the practical front, audience members asked about specific genres and cultural contexts related to TikTok research. Audience members in the second session were eager to glean insights from panellist Jorge Vázquez-Herrero on conducting TikTok journalism research. One audience member pointed to important future directions for journalistic TikTok research, asking panellists if and how they intended to study the spread of mis/dis-information on the platform. An audience member joining from India asked panellists for advice about accessing TikTok following the ban on the platform enacted in India in 2020. While the panellists could speak to their own cultural expertise (China, Korea, & Spain), there are some additional options for doing research on TikTok in contexts where the platform itself is unavailable that were not mentioned during the event. Technical solutions could include using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to change one's location or downloading application mirror files available outside of the main app stores (e.g., Apple App Store, Google Play Store, Tencent App Store). Collaborative solutions could involve working with researchers outside of countries where TikTok is banned who can collect data. At the same time, researchers in India and Pakistan (where TikTok is still currently banned in late-2021) can provide valuable context to study how users moved beyond the TikTok ban, what other competing short video platforms have filled the gap, and what the historical legacy of TikTok will be in those areas if the bans indeed remain permanent.

Conclusion

This forum provided an opportunity for researchers from around the world to come together and share their approaches, note the challenges they have experienced, and highlight areas for future work in TikTok cultures research. As scholars continue to develop and innovate methods for studying TikTok and other short video platforms, they should strive to engage with existing theoretical bodies that solidify the important contributions of TikTok research. Researchers must also be sensitive to the ethical concerns associated with studying TikTok, such as subjectivity, bias, and privacy to pitfalls or poor precedents. Many of the unanswered audience questions from the event are addressed by the six panellists in their contributions to this special issue. There are also opportunities to hold similar critical forums on TikTok methodologies in the future that uncover new approaches and issues that may arise as the field continues to grow.

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