

# A Case Study of How Sharing TikToks Creates Social Meaning Among Viewers

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Abstract

As a TikTok user, I wanted to shed light on how the app is more than just dance videos. It is a place where different interest-based communities thrive. Specifically, I wanted to investigate the invisible participation on the app, or users who do not post themselves but still interact with the communities present. In this piece, I conduct a case study of how users share videos amongst their strong-tie relationships, as defined by Howard Rheingold, as well as investigating how TikTok Videos mediate interaction. Through tracking videos shared amongst three of my friends and myself for four days, I found that TikToks act as a social interface among strong-tie relationships, reaffirming relationship dynamics and shaping communication amongst sharers. By using comments made by us about the videos and by interviewing my friends at the end of the tracking period about their experiences with TikTok, I reached my conclusions.

## A Tiktok Crash Course

Before I downloaded TikTok, I thought it was just an app for people to post dance videos. At the beginning of 2020, however, one of my friends downloaded the app and began sharing TikTok videos, colloquially known as TikToks, with me. She showed me that the app was more than just the TikTok dances I had heard of and after some resistance, I downloaded the app.

I quickly found myself sucked into the app. It wasn't at all what I had expected. The TikTok algorithm rapidly figured out what content I wanted to see, based on the videos I had previously liked. As of writing this, my For You Page (FYP, the main feed where TikTok shows videos specifically curated to a user) is full of content specific to my niche interests. Some communities I come across often on my feed are BrickTok (satisfying bricklaying videos), WitchTok

(a community of online witches), and alt/gay TikTok. In the later community, the dance videos everyone expects of TikTok are referred to as “straight TikTok videos.” These TikTok communities are made up of users with similar FYPs as me, meaning that they have interacted with similar videos. As a result, the TikTok algorithm shows similar content to members of these communities. Additionally, these are interest-driven communities defined by Howard Rheingold in his book *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online* as being “created by people who had not previously known each other but use digital media to find each other, hang out, and share the products of their mutual interest” (118). Rather than being formed by people who already know each other, TikTok communities are formed by users who share similar interests. There are no requirements to becoming a part of a TikTok community; like enough videos from creators in a community and you will find yourself receiving similar content via the algorithm.

These TikTok communities bear similarity to communities that have materialized around various social and cultural identities on other social media platforms. For example, in *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, André Brock, Jr. describes Black Twitter as “Twitter’s mediation of Black cultural identity, expressed through digital practices and informed by cultural discourses about Black everyday life” (80-81). Similarly to how Twitter has become a place for Black culture, TikTok is a place for all sorts of cultures. However, TikTok differs from Twitter in that all content seen on a user’s FYP is decided by the TikTok algorithm. Although viral TikToks are more likely to come up on a user’s FYP, there is no way to retweet a TikTok, so the probability of a viral Black TikTok coming up on a non-Black user’s feed is less likely than on Twitter. The TikTok algorithm is a major player in a user’s experience.

In my time on TikTok, I’ve learned that it’s a place for people of all kinds to come on the app and post about whatever they’re thinking. They can be part of a specific community, join trends, make POVs, tell stories from their life, share their art, or pretty much anything else you can think of. Essentially, the only constraint on TikTok is that the videos must be one minute or less; anything else, however, is free reign. While there are viral videos on TikTok, they tend to be specific to certain communities. The sounds people use in their TikToks are also community, although they are somewhat more widespread. A TikTok community will latch onto a specific sound and create a trend for it. For example, one widespread trend was posting a video with a flashing light filter while the song “Bulletproof” by La Roux played in the background. The text on the screen told users what makes them “bulletproof”—such as trauma they experienced, or something about them that was unconventional. Filters can also inspire trends. Currently, there are multiple TikToks going around using the time warp scan filter, such as making oneself shorter or taller, making one’s hair shorter or longer, and manipulating one’s body to be bigger or smaller.

While there are a variety of trends to examine, I found myself curious

about trends among the less visible users of TikTok: those who consume content but do not post themselves. With all the different communities on TikTok, I wanted to look into those who may consider themselves part of the community without actively contributing to it. After all, a community needs creators but it also needs people to consume the content being created. Rheingold discusses the importance of this sort of participation, writing “even if their form of participation consists of ranting on their blogs, bloggers need publics to read, comment, and link to them” (112). TikToks, similarly are meant to be viewed, liked, and shared. The participatory culture of the app only makes sense if there are people doing those things. It is those people engaging in this lightweight form of participation who I chose to study (Rheingold 119).

### Digital Ethnography Methodology

To study how people choose to share TikToks among the communities they are in, I decided to do a case study of myself and three friends:

- E, the friend who had convinced me to download TikTok
- L, a friend who never had a TikTok account prior to the beginning of this research
- M, a friend who has no desire to download the app but enjoys the TikToks I send them

By having people with a variety of experience levels participate in my research, I hoped to capture the overarching trends of TikTok's invisible participants. I structured my research similarly to danah boyd's digital ethnography, “Making Sense of Teen Life: Strategies for Capturing Ethnographic Data in a Networked Era,” where she conducted multi-sited fieldwork for her ethnographic study of mediated interaction (84). For a period of four days, I tracked all the TikToks my friends and I sent each other, as well as the times shared and the main topic of each video. The sharing all took place between me and each friend individually. We used the same platforms that we would use to share TikToks with each other: E direct messaged me through the TikTok app; L texted me TikToks, as that was what she used to do before they had the app. I sent M TikToks through Snapchat, as that was our primary mode of communication. I also kept track of any commentary my friends made, as well as any message I sent in response. Additionally, after the four-day period of data collection, I interviewed each friend to get their perspective on how they use TikTok, how they share videos, and how they interact with TikToks that have been shared with them, before finally asking what their thoughts on the TikTok algorithm were.

I used a semi-structured interview style to allow my friends to express what they found important and to let me gauge what they thought about TikTok as a whole. As boyd mentions in her own ethnography, “I cannot get a deep

understanding of mediated practices with-out engaging with people face-to-face” (83). Though my version of face-to-face took place over video chat, I was still able to gain insight into my friends’ interactions with TikTok.

### What I Found

As it is easier to share a TikTok within the app than it is to use an external platform, E is the one I sent the most TikToks to throughout my data collection. Additionally, upon interviewing her, I found that I am also the one she sends the most TikToks to. Despite her having other friends she shares videos with directly in the app, she stated in her interview that she is conscious of how many TikToks others share with her, and she tries to not overshare with those who only send her one or two.

I found this same awareness with L. We were exchanging TikToks via text, as that was the platform I’d been sending videos to L on, before she had the app. However, even after downloading the app, we continued to share over text instead of directly in the app. When I asked her in our interview why this was, she said it was because I never asked to add her.

Something that differed between E and L was the interactions we had beyond sending the TikTok. As we were sending fewer TikToks between us, and texting rather than directly messaging in the TikTok app, I found myself actually responding and commenting on many of the TikToks L sent me. With E, though, I would maybe bring one up if we were hanging out in person, but typically I wouldn’t comment via direct message in the app. With having to sometimes go through up to 40 TikToks at a time, it just would not be feasible to comment on each one. Conversely, with L conversations about the videos were easier to have due to the text platform we used.

A similar situation was true with M. As I was sending her TikToks via Snapchat, it was easy for us to have conversations about the videos. Sometimes it was just a few words, but other times an entire conversation would spark. In this way, my friends and I were able to use TikTok to have larger conversations beyond just: “Hey, look at this video.” While we may not have talked about every TikTok, E and I used the TikToks as conversation on their own, sending each other TikToks we knew the other would relate to or with information we wanted them to hear.

As L was new to TikTok, I found myself recommending communities she may be interested in, such as BookTok. But L stated that she had seen some BookTok videos on her feed and wasn’t sure she wanted to get into them. She had seen some BookTok-adjacent videos alluding to drama happening in the community, and that was not something she was interested in. As we talked about the drama on TikTok, she also mentioned seeing videos on the sexualization of minors and glorification of eating disorders on the app.

E discussed TikTok drama in her interview as well, specifically about

putting minors like Claudia Conway (daughter of Kellyanne Conway, counselor to former president Donald Trump) and Charli D'Amelio (a dancer who has the most followers on the app at over 90 million) on a pedestal, thereby putting pressure on them to not do anything seen as controversial. E also mentioned the glorification of manic episodes in those with bipolar disorder. However, she also discussed an instance of someone who was experiencing bipolar disorder who then had a TikTok live where they talked to their audience about what they were considering doing. This allowed them to come up with less dangerous solutions to their problem, as the audience mediated their actions.

### What This Means

From the data I collected, I noticed a relation to Rheingold's discussion of strong- and weak-tie relationships in social networks, as the strength of a tie is "a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time of the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (206). Essentially, the more intimate a relationship, the stronger the tie. E was consciously aware of how many TikToks she was sending her friends in relation to how many they sent in return. She was careful not to disobey unspoken social norms and avoided sending TikToks disproportionate to the strength of the tie she had with the recipient, adhering to the reciprocity aspect of her ties. As E and I have a strong-tie relationship, we were both comfortable sending each other many TikToks, as we knew the other would reciprocate. For L, this adherence to relationship ties can be seen in the platform we used to exchange TikToks. Rather than possibly overstepping our tie and adding me on TikTok, L continued to text me the videos despite me never stating I didn't want them to add me.

This extra layer of interaction that I found with E and L directly relates to Adriana de Souza e Silva and Jordan Firth's concept of social interface as found in *Mobile Interfaces in Public Spaces: Locational Privacy, Control, and Urban Sociability*. They argue that with an interface such as TikTok, information is not just relayed or mediated, but rather the app plays "a critical role in shaping interactions and creating meaning" (2). By sharing TikToks, we were not only conveying the information present in the videos themselves, but also demonstrating our relationships with each other. There was an extra layer of communication each time a video was shared, with TikTok acting as a social interface "fram[ing] everyday sociality" (4). With each TikTok we sent, we were reaffirming the relationship ties between us.

I also found that in sharing TikToks, I was able to have conversations with my friends about topics like the glorification of mental illness and the sexualization of minors on the app. Even though it would obviously be best if these practices were not occurring at all, it is interesting that by sharing these TikToks, my friends and I had in-depth conversations on these topics. With

TikTok acting as a mediator and a representation of serious real-world problems, we were able to discuss issues we came across on our FYP, in addition to just sharing videos that made us laugh.

There are so many subcultures present on TikTok. Even the casual user who does not post, can be involved in these communities. I see this as similar to how Brock discusses the “number of non-Black and people of color Twitter users who have been ‘invited to the cookout,’ so to speak,” (81), TikTok viewers are invited into the culture of different communities through viewing their content, creating weak-tie relationships between viewers and creators. Using TikToks as a conversation mediator, even if no conversation is had, allows users to reaffirm strong-tie relationships, as well as acknowledging shared identities by sending a video they know the other will relate to. The TikTok app is not just for funny videos and dance trends; it is a social interface which frames our everyday social interactions.

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