

Short-form Video Platforms and Participatory Culture: A Literature Review of TikTok's Impact on Digital Engagement

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Abstract. The rise of short video apps has greatly changed the way people consume and participate in digital media. In this paper, we explore how TikTok is reshaping the participatory culture of the digital age. Based on a literature review of academic studies published from 2018 to 2025, this research reviews how participatory culture has evolved from its earlier Web 2.0 context to a new form of algorithmic mobile participation. The research uses systematic literature analysis methodology to explore peer-reviewed articles, academic monographs, and empirical studies on TikTok, short video, and participatory culture theory. The research findings show that TikTok is a new stage of evolution of participatory culture. Technical affordances of algorithms, easy creation tools, and democratized virality all mediate the participatory culture in a new way. These technical affordances make unprecedented levels of participation in creative activities possible, but also bring about many issues related to algorithmic mediation, agency of creators, and authenticity. This literature review helps reader understand how technical affordances of contemporary digital platforms change the ways of participation in digital culture, and what new patterns of digital cultural production are emerging.

Keywords: TikTok, Short-form Video, Participatory Culture, Digital Engagement, Algorithm Culture

1. Introduction

The pace at which digital media platforms have been evolving has significantly impacted the way users produce, share and consume content in networked spaces. Participatory culture, a framework widely popularized by Henry Jenkins, defines cultural environments where people feel welcome to contribute to and benefit from culture, support for creating and sharing one's own works is easily available, there are informal opportunities for mentorship and members of the culture feel that their contribution matters [1]. Short-form video is a type of video content that is generally less than sixty seconds in length and is designed for quick production and mobile consumption [2]. Algorithmic curation is an approach to automated content distribution where the visibility of a piece of content is determined by the user's engagement, viewing history and other platform-specific factors [3]. These terms provide the theoretical background for the discussion on the impact of TikTok.

The research background for this paper originated from the rise of the social media phenomenon TikTok after its international launch in 2018. In an incredibly short period of time, the app

transformed from a music video app into a global phenomenon used by over one billion people across the world [1]. This came hand in hand with the shift in social media consumption from traditional text-heavy platforms and desktop computers to more mobile-first, video-heavy experiences [2]. The popularity of the platform accelerated the shift from community-based content recommendation models to algorithmic recommendations, changing the way users encounter content across all platforms. Unlike earlier social media platforms which recommended content based on social graph connections, the “For You Page” algorithm of TikTok recommends content based on engagement signals, providing equal opportunities for visibility for creators, regardless of their follower size [4].

Theoretically, the frameworks around participatory culture which were developed during the Web 2.0 era need to be rethought in the face of algorithm-driven platforms which completely transform creators’ relationships with their audience. Practically, researching the cultural impact of TikTok gives insight into new patterns of digital participation, especially among young people, as they represent the main user base of the platform. Although the cultural impact of TikTok is widely recognized, there has been relatively less academic literature specifically contributing to the theory of participatory culture, in comparison to platforms like YouTube or Instagram. This literature review seeks to address this gap by compiling English-language academic research published between 2018 and 2025 which focuses on the specific affordances of TikTok for creative production, community building and cultural participation.

The significance of this research lies in its potential applications for both theoretical knowledge about changing participatory practices and practical applications for digital media literacy, content creation and platform design.

2. Theoretical foundation: participatory culture in digital contexts

2.1. Jenkins' participatory culture framework

Henry Jenkins' key writings on participatory culture provided a foundational conceptualisation of what it meant to participate with digital media in networked spaces. Jenkins defined participatory culture using five key characteristics: relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement; strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others; informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices; members' feeling that their contributions matter; and members' feeling that they are part of something larger than themselves [1]. These five characteristics arose out of his ethnographic studies of fan communities, online forums and early social media platforms where ordinary users actively participated in the creation of content rather than passively consuming media products. In this sense, Jenkins' original framing of participatory culture marked a distinct break from mass media models of one-way communication and audience consumption, instead positioning participation as a distributed form of creativity, knowledge-making and cultural production that was peer-to-peer and collective in nature.

In related work, Jenkins and his colleagues extended participatory culture theory to study networked publics - new technological platforms and social formations that enable new kinds of learning, creativity and civic engagement among young people [5]. In this work, he and his colleagues stressed the importance of studying participation not as a form of creative expression per se, but as a set of social practices that are shaped by particular technological affordances and cultural conditions. Early applications of Jenkins' participatory culture framework to online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter provided valuable insights into user-generated content phenomena, viral media circulation and online community formation. However, these earlier

applications of participatory culture theory developed in the desktop-computing context where community-driven discovery mechanisms were the dominant technical affordance. Many of the questions that remain open relate to the extent to which these theoretical frameworks can be applied to algorithm-mediated platforms, and whether they can be extended to the mobile-first context where community-driven discovery mechanisms are not the only possibility.

2.2. Evolution of participation in mobile-first platforms

The rise of mobile-first digital platforms presented an opportunity to re-conceptualise participatory culture theory in the context of new technical affordances and user practices. Burgess and Green's foundational analysis of YouTube provided important insights into how platform-based vernacular creativity could be understood in the context of digital media participation [6]. In particular, their work highlighted how the architecture of platforms shaped participatory practices through particular design features, platform policies and algorithmic mechanisms. Related work on the creative impact of social media provided similar insights into how the affordances of social media platforms shaped the nature and scope of user participation, ranging from simple social consumption to more complex cultural production.

In her early 2012 assessment of social media platforms, Van Dijck defined platform logic as follows: “technical architectures embody values and priorities that shape and constrain user behaviour and cultural practices” [7]. The notion was an insightful one, for it alerted us to the fact that the technical architecture of algorithmic platforms would shape user behaviour and cultural practices in a distinctly different way than community-driven content discovery platforms. The rise of algorithmic recommendation over community-based discovery was a sea change in how users are exposed to content and can build audiences. Previous platforms, especially Myspace, though users were encouraged to build social networks that would drive exposure to their content, there was far more social connection than platform-driven connection. In contrast, as David Szoke has argued elsewhere, the TikTok platform uses a sophisticated recommendation system that considers engagement signals, content features and user behaviour to assemble a user’s feed.

3. TikTok's platform architecture and cultural features

3.1. Technical affordances enabling participation

TikTok's technical architecture is cleverly designed, both lowering the barrier to entry for creation and supporting complex creative expressions. Interestingly, TikTok has taken a different path from the beginning—it does not guide users to follow friends during registration, nor does it encourage bringing real-world social circles to the platform. In fact, TikTok deliberately downplays the function of establishing connections by following specific users, which is completely different from the approach of other social platforms that rely on the number of followers to determine the scope of content dissemination [4]. Other platforms mainly rely on the number of followers to determine the scope of content dissemination, but TikTok's "FOR YOU PAGE" algorithm is different—it pushes content based on predicted user interests, rather than relying on existing social relationships. This means that even novice creators can become overnight sensations and spread virally. This algorithm mechanism gives various different voices and perspectives the opportunity to be displayed, and also provides unique exposure opportunities for diverse voices and opinions, which of course also sparks discussions about algorithmic transparency and creator autonomy. The platform's content creation tools reflect a carefully designed philosophy, aiming to lower the technical barrier to entry for

participation. TikTok's built-in video editing functions, rich audio material library, visual effects filters, and augmented reality tools allow users to create exquisite content without external editing software or advanced technical skills [2]. The study documented how TikTok users developed “algorithmic folk theories” (an informal understanding of how the platform system works) to guide their creative strategies and interactive practices [8]. Participants’ statements indicated that they believed the algorithm knew their interests and was therefore able to identify them personally and select specific videos to recommend based on how they used the app. The concept of folk theories has been applied to various digital environments to understand user behavior and their perception of online platform experiences. These user-generated theories suggest that creators are not passively accepting algorithmic arrangements but actively participating in the algorithmic system. This shows that even in an algorithm-dominated environment, creators can still maintain a certain degree of autonomy. Interestingly, these folk theories can also be used to “counter” algorithms. For example, by influencing user behavior through online hashtag campaigns, thereby revealing and resisting possible changes to the platform. This phenomenon fully demonstrates the dynamic game relationship between users and the algorithmic system [8].

3.2. Cultural practices and community formation

In addition to its technical availability, TikTok has also cultivated unique cultural practices and community formation models, which not only reflect the continuity of the early participatory cultural models but also their differences from them. Research on TikTok influencer culture has documented the emergence of micro-celebrity practices that adapt to short video formats and algorithm-mediated exposure [9]. This platform focuses on trend challenges, hashtag communities and audio-based content creation, and has built a participatory framework where users can participate in shared cultural references and collective creative projects. Within this framework, platform design facilitates meme propagation. In this context, platform design promotes the spread of memes. By altering the share icon's color and shape, TikTok greatly encourages users to share content. With so many sharing possibilities, TikTok videos reach a wider audience and achieve hitherto unheard-of levels of video and cultural transmission. Additionally, because noises and effects in videos are clearly labeled and directly linked to material on the platform, creating videos on TikTok promotes copying and replication. This makes this content a crucial tool for user-generated films and promoting imitation since it helps construct the categories required for cultural occurrences to become internet memes. However, because of TikTok's digital elements, it was also common for users to interact only through the usage of effects/songs or involvement with a content/visual genre. Since videos are the primary means of communication on TikTok, we contend that user identity in relation to the replication of content/visuals/effects/sounds begins to form through the memetic processes inherent to engaging with and creating these videos—choosing interest areas, liking/sharing videos, bookmarking sounds and effects, creating video iterations, replicating challenges, and extending videos through duets [4].

4. Participatory culture manifestations on TikTok

TikTok focuses on making audio-based material and working together to make things, which is in line with today's remix culture. Research examined the motives behind TikTok content creation and identified self-expression, social connection, entertainment, and creative experimentation as the primary factors driving engagement [10]. The symbols and video editing tools on TikTok show how the platform's design makes it easy for people to communicate with each other. The icons for follow,

like, comment, and share are on the right side of the screen, which is where they are on most social networking sites. On the other hand, when a user watches or interacts with the video multiple times, the share indicator changes from a white arrow to a green message button. This means that certain parts of the video (content, music, effects) are resonating with the viewer and encouraging them to share it. Changing the color and shape of the share icon rapidly draws the user's attention to the idea of sharing the video. TikTok lets you share videos through SMS, private messages, and email, in addition to share them directly on Snapchat. The platform's "sound" feature is another way to encourage users to copy and imitate each other. All TikTok videos have sound, from music to movie and TV show dialogue. The "For You" feed emphasizes these audio components through dual visual cues: a rotating vinyl disc graphic positioned on the right margin, accompanied by ascending musical notation, while the audio title scrolls along the lower portion of the interface. This sound component is the only animated part of TikTok's video interface, thus it naturally captures viewers' attention. Choosing any audio indicator takes viewers to a page that shows all the content that uses that audio track. This feature connects viewers with a group of creators who have used and changed the same audio in their own work [4]. Users can get templates for applying effects, which encourages people from different cultures to get involved.

5. Conclusion

This literature review explores the unique positioning of TikTok—inheriting the participatory cultural traditions of early digital media while achieving innovative breakthroughs in several aspects. In terms of tradition, TikTok indeed retains the core characteristics of participatory culture. The platform significantly lowers the barrier to creative expression, provides rich digital interactive features, and promotes informal knowledge transfer among users. These are all important elements of participatory culture. TikTok's innovation lies in its unique operating mechanism. Its algorithmic recommendation system can accurately match content with audiences; its mobile-first design philosophy makes the user experience smoother; and the dominance of short videos has changed the way content is expressed. These innovative elements necessitate corresponding expansion and adjustments to existing theoretical frameworks. Notably, features such as remixing culture, sound-based content creation, and collaborative production can lower the barrier to creative collaboration. Furthermore, TikTok's button design promotes a higher level of user digital engagement.

While existing research has made significant progress in understanding platform usability, user motivation, and cultural practices, significant research gaps remain. First, the methodological challenges of obtaining complete platform data severely restrict the development of large-scale quantitative analysis, especially in the study of interaction patterns and algorithmic effects. Secondly, longitudinal studies tracking sustained user engagement remain scarce, resulting in a lack of in-depth discussion on key issues such as creator retention, community stability, and the long-term impact of digital literacy. Furthermore, combining algorithmic research with participatory culture theory requires further theoretical breakthroughs to fully explain how automated systems regulate cultural production and social interaction. This review also has two significant shortcomings: first, it lacks empirical data on the participatory cultural economy dimension of TikTok, particularly creator monetization models and the platform's impact on the traditional media industry; second, the discussion of ethical issues is not in-depth enough, especially key issues such as user privacy protection and the capitalization of platform content.

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