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Algorithms, Aesthetics, and Agency : An exploration into the performance of the self amongst young women on TikTok

Academic Essays

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the self is performed on TikTok. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok - a social media app at the forefront of youth-culture - burst onto the screens of millions of users. On the hilarious, inventive, frustrating and saddening ForYou Page (FYP), short-style videos play one after the other. I will discuss the performance of the self under digital conditions using Goffman's (1959) foundational work on the presentation of self. I follow Mahmood's (2005) definition of agency to explain how TikTok affords its users certain freedoms. However, this sense of agency is complicated by strict standards of beauty which are propagated on TikTok via trends and aesthetics and ultimately, made valuable through likes.

keywords: TikTok, performance of self, aesthetics, trends, likes, agency

One of my participants, Chloe, is a doctor who also works as an Instagram and TikTok influencer (Roberts 2016). Influencers typically have many followers on at least one social media platform and frequently post selfie videos (Nouri 2018). I asked Chloe how she maintains her online aesthetic. She replied:

Generally it's like, neutral colours, neutral backgrounds [she hesitates] – steering away from like brights and harsh prints and that kind of thing. Erm… yeah. Those are probably the main things. And then when I actually film it, I'm using a ring light at the moment just cause its actually really dark here, now, but I'll try and use a ring light, make sure I'm filming in day time just so it looks really bright and airy.

When I conducted this interview, Chloe was working as an emergency doctor on a COVID ward in Australia. She was sad because she had not visited her home in England for around two and a half years. She was tired of receiving sexist comments on her Instagram posts and she was tired of

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talking about COVID. She was tired and it was nighttime for her when we spoke. The ring light – a large, circular LED light – is a staple piece of equipment for any influencer. It illuminates the face, making it flatteringly bright for filming. It seemed incongruous to me that she had set it up for our casual interview, especially as I was just lit by the overhead lights of my kitchen. I felt like I had turned up to a party in my pyjamas when everyone else was in heels. The ring light's halo-shaped luminescence shone not a salvific light-in-the-darkness type of illumination, but a clinical, abrupt, and obvious brightness, like when you open your laptop at 1AM to reply to an email you forgot about earlier. I found her use of a ring light in this circumstance disconcerting. Why had she felt the need to present herself in this immaculate fashion for our interview? Was I incorrectly prepared?

Though "vividly actual" (Coleman 2011:13), our engagement took place on Zoom, a digital platform. It was therefore perfectly apposite that my participant was lit with a ring light and was consciously stylised. The meeting took place digitally, and was thus an extension of her digital self-presentation, one which is archetypically, aesthetically crafted. The fact that the interview was cast on a digital stage meant that it would have been jarring for her to appear without one.

Owned by Bytedance, TikTok is a video-sharing social media app that was created in China in 2016 under the name Douyin. Short-style videos of up to three minutes long are presented on the 'For You Page' (FYP), where videos play one after the other. During the pandemic, TikTok sprung forth into the foreground of our 'social' lives (Kennedy, 2020). It allowed people to maintain connections when in-person socialising was banned (Cordos and Bolboaca 2021). Downloaded over 315 million times during lockdown (TikTok's Rapid Growth Shows the Potency of Video 2021), it is no coincidence that all of my interviewees began their TikTok journey during this time. (1) Indeed, TikTok and the pandemic remain inextricably linked. The term 'viral' was a linguistic marker for both cases of mayhem: while the COVID-19 'virus' carried disruptive and negative connotations, going 'viral' simultaneously celebrated and coveted on the app. This ironic linguistic link felt especially poignant during lockdown, when both words had exponential use.

In this essay, I will discuss how female actors/influencers contribute to their own online self-presentation (Goffman 1959; Bhandari and Bimo 2020) through the performance of trends and aesthetics (Elias et al. 2017). The ring light was Chloe's way of maintaining her immaculate TikTok/Instagram aesthetic. This encapsulates what is fascinating to me about performances of the self on a digital stage: my participant was speaking with authenticity and generosity about her tiredness and social media pressure, whilst maintaining her visual aesthetic. The authentic self, which was revealed in the interview via her dialogue, was obscured by the shadow of the ring light. In the glow of the light, then, stood the synthetic self: "the self(ie)" (Burns 2015:1716). Burns (2015) uses this term to conceptualise the implicit link between the selfie and the self, raising important questions about agency,

(1) see Fitzgibbon, 2021 for further information on how COVID-19 increased the prevalence of start-up companies.

authenticity and identity (Abidin 2016).

Following our conversation, I saw that Chloe had uploaded something onto her 'story' on Instagram, because of the multicoloured ring that had appeared around it. 'Stories' allow creators to upload content which will disappear after 24 hours. Once a 'story' is viewed, the multicolours fade to grey. On social media the new quickly turns into the old; once the audience has seen the content, it is used, consumed and laid to rest amongst other "transient" pixels (Handyside and Ringrose 2015:348). The rapid rate of consumption and production on social media aligns with the ethos of expansionism under capitalism in which temporality is key (Stein 2018).

In the story, Chloe briefly explained our conversation and relayed the basic premise of my thesis. She looked composed and beautiful, tilting her phone camera just above eye height, whilst inserting text over the video in a neutral-pink font shade. Being involved in her "ephemeral journalism" (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2019), I couldn't help but feel flattered. I wondered why. Why did she incorporate me on her story? Why was I flattered that she did? But then I realised - of course -this was the magnetic pull of social media, this was the "mana of mass society" (Mazzarella 2017:3) – that invisible energy which "connects the macro-forms of ritual, publicity, and display with the micro-dimensions of experience." My participant was updating her followers – a central, structural role of an influencer – and I experienced excitement because of her digital status and credibility. My participant had incorporated *me* into her digital world! My thesis, our conversation, was given validation through its presentation to her followers. Our conversation had morphed from the private to the public, the qualitative to quantitative.

Being woven into her digital world reified my position as a researcher carrying out ethnography virtually; whilst my research was real and tangible, it was digitally mediated, creating messy boundaries of authenticity (Miller and Horst 2012). Something I had conceived of privately now sat proudly on the digital stage, when it had not yet rehearsed the choreography, it did not yet know the lines! My work was "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966). The ability of social media to present alternate realities and disassociate from physical actualities (Betancourt 2016) transformed my thesis: whilst sounding intelligent, it was still in its very early stages. This highlights the performative nature of participation on TikTok which will be discussed throughout this essay.

I feel lucky to have undertaken my ethnography virtually because it was so interesting. Weaving through "digitality" (Negroponte 1995), I engaged with kind and inspirational women such as Chloe on Zoom and through direct messages. I was able to whizz in and out of Instagram profiles, contacting whoever I wanted and viewing posts from years ago. I could then, with a swipe of the finger, swish into TikTok, buy myself a bracelet and go on a virtual tour of the best bars in Edinburgh (the algorithm knows me well), all whilst remaining physically in the real world: this was a time-travelling, supersonic ethnography!

POV: You're the main character

The POV (Point of View) trend encapsulates what content creation on TikTok is all about (Haskins 2019). POV's can cover a

Figure 1: Source Pinterest [https://pin.it/uyTPTKa]

Figure 2: Source Pinterest [https://pin.it/2f9tw4X]

range of topics, from conspiracy theory storytelling to porn, from inane comedy to travel montages. The creator of the video orchestrates a “situation that unfolds in real-time, where the viewer feels like they're right there in the room, watching as it happens” (Imagor 2021).

As an example, if I were to make a POV video about writing this essay, I would set up my phone against my laptop screen, and face the camera towards me. I would film myself typing furiously and sipping scalding hot coffee. I would then caption the video, “POV: you’re my laptop and I’m stressed”. In this scenario, you, the viewer are given the absurd role of being my laptop screen. The comic disruption of the first-person narrative is engaging, can be hilarious and is now a classic meme format.

“Humour is what happens when we're told the truth quicker and more directly than we're used to.” (Saunders 2007). Perhaps my POV video is more than an attempt at humour. Perhaps the disturbance of human/object relations speaks to the nature of the laboured self under neoliberalism: “At the heart of capitalism is the illusion that people are like things… and things are like people” (Gates 1989:799).

A sub-category of the POV genre which garners many views and Likes are “POV: you’re the main character” videos. In such videos, the content creator might film a montage of themselves completing a Pilates workout and writing affirmations in a journal. Being a “main character” is about showing TikTok that you are the protagonist. Similarly, “POV: you’re becoming THAT girl” is an equally popular genre which follows a similar narrative. They entail content creators displaying their journey of self-success.. ‘Becoming THAT girl’ involves showing your audience the very best version of yourself (Bullingham 2013).

I searched ‘becoming THAT girl’ on

Pinterest and am now armed with 35 ways I can "kick the snooze habit" (laundry, podcast, essential oils), seven ways I can be attractive (messy bun, smiling) and 99 habits that will make me a smarter woman (recycle, chess). Thank goodness I researched it! This rampant personal refurbishment speaks to the nature of late-capitalism in which the self is quantified, measured and improved upon constantly (Strathern, 1996).

A subsequent feature of "becoming THAT girl" or being "the main character" is a generic aesthetic, which induces the viewer to not only *do* better, but to *look* better too. The aesthetic is romantic and whimsical: impossibly beautiful friends having a spontaneous time (Fig. 1); a girl swishing her skirt in a meadow (Fig. 2). It is an 'inspirational' aesthetic which onlookers yearn for and aim to emulate on their own. There are many digital avenues one can venture down to get their fix of aesthetic inspiration. For example, you can follow along with famous YouTuber, NikkieTutorials in her eighteen minute video, "Full Face Of VIRAL TikTok Makeup Trends!", or look at FreddieMyLove's video, "Trying out TIK TOK aesthetic styles!" You can also change your relationship with food and restrict your eating habits, as one respondent told me, showing how the digital can quickly transmute into material and embodied effects.

The POV trend enables content creators to become the author, narrator, protagonist and actor who perform (Goffman 1959) to their "imagined audience" (Marwick 2010). "Main character" videos require great usage of "'I' narratives" (Reed 2005:226): videos about becoming the main character are hyper-individualistic showcases in which the creator is elevated above TikTok's endless stream of videos and images. Through performing trends, the curation of one's own aesthetics affords users visibility in the whirlpool of images and Others on TikTok (Goodwin et al. 2016).

Is it too far-fetched to wonder if TikTok has bestowed its users with god-like powers of creation, making them feel omnipotent and omnipresent? Instead of godly creations made imago dei, the content creator crafts imago self. As one famous TikToker said, if you are good-looking or talented, you too can become "a TikTok god" (Lorenz 2020 in Boffone 2021:29)…

Regardless, the narration and presentation of oneself online gives users a sense (Flanagin 2010) of elevation whereby they can perform a brilliant digital version of themselves online (Dijck 2015; Horst 2009). I italicise 'sense' because our "perception[s]" are subjective (Flanagin 2010:185). It becomes pertinent to ask: is the agency propagated by "main character" trends real? As one respondent synthesised, "social media enhances one's need to try and be the perfect girl". Crucially, the "perfect" girl aesthetic is easy to identify and copy: it is repetitive, generic and chronic.

Statistically, posts that follow trends are more likely to be successful (TikTok Community, New studies quantify TikTok's growing impact on culture and music), catering to the audience's appetite for the familiar (Ritzer 2019). Trends allow users to signal to others that they conform to TikTok's ideals of accomplishment, beauty and success. They also allow users to go viral, thus gaining financial security or income, but this comes at the cost of their uniqueness.

Uniqueness, human difference, is lost as users are pushed into a mould, literally monetising homogeneity. Horst

(2009:99) explains that "individuals exist in alignment with highly socialised media[s] of expression"; the way users present their self-identity is bound with moral codes. Trends are harnessed by users to fit neatly within TikTok's idealised standards of beauty and success. TikTok gives users the tools to perform a self which will be monetarily and socially productive through trends. That said, the cost of these social benefits are outweighed by the negative impacts of self-commodification and I will explore these in the next section.

The Quantified Self(ie)

In this section, I explore the commodification and quantification of the selfie video on TikTok. The networked selfie (Kuntsman 2017) is a commodity, used to gain monetary value by the creator of the selfie, but it ultimately facilitates the "disciplining [of] the individual" (Reichardt and Schobar 2020:8) and economically bolsters the company (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013).

The quantification of the self via mobile apps which track steps, heart rates, sleep and menstrual cycles are firmly embedded within the digital tapestry of our everyday lives (Reichardt and Schobar 2020) - we rely on them to quantify our success, to be the most productive and efficient versions of ourselves (Strathern 1996), to become "THAT girl". In the pinnacle of self-quantification, people use TikTok, another tracking device, to showcase and manage their success. This success is visually quantifiable (how thin is the actor), and numerically quantifiable (how many Likes does she have?).

"[T]he mobilisation of selfies by citizens should be understood as a new techno-social practice that is embedded not only in new forms of agency, but also in new forms of governance and violence." (Kuntsman, 2017; 15)

All digital presentations of the "branded self" exist under late capitalism, in which the selfie is "a commodity to which financial and other kinds of value can be assigned" (Roberts 2016:3). The commodification of the laboured self is symptomatic of late capitalism, where one must "[bring] oneself to market" (David 2007:10).

For the purpose of this essay and its focus on digital navigation of the self, I will follow Gerlitz's and Helmond's (2013:1349) idea of the 'Like economy'. Liking a post on Facebook does not just indicate an agreeable exclamation, condensed into a quantifiable cluster of pixels and data, but it sets off a chain reaction, whereby potential new Likes are attracted (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013). Likes are economically valuable for Facebook "because they produce valuable user data that can enter multiple relations of exchange and are set up to multiply themselves" (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013:1360).

On TikTok, users with 10,000 followers and 100,000 views over 30 consecutive days are eligible for TikTok's content creator fund (Mauran 2021) - a $200 million support for budding content creators (Pappas, Introducing the $200M TikTok Creator Fund). Consequently, each user supplies data to TikTok in what Srnicek (2017:24) explains as "network effects": the more users who contribute data to the platform, the more useful and valuable that social media platform becomes (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013). Importantly, the accumulation of users and thus data - which is a key marker of capital (Srnicek 2017) - gives companies such as

TikTok the knowledge and funding to refine their algorithm, sharpen their advertisements and keep their users' attention (Srnieck 2017; Wu 2017). In other words, the self-aggrandizing of its users fuels the exponential growth of the self-aggrandizing platform. Therefore, it serves TikTok as a company to have users creating content. Equally, it serves users to create content for the personal accumulation of monetary and social value (Ross 2019) in what is a highly lucrative, reciprocal, value-attracting exchange relationship.

On weblogs (blogs), a blogger is "held to be the prototype or entity depicted in the digital text"; indeed, weblogs are "indexes of self" (Reed 2005:227). The text incorporated within blogs becomes the blogger. Extending this logic within the "main character"/"THAT girl" framework, the aesthetic of the content creator is the content creator. In his work on value, Engelke (2018:129) establishes how "[F]orms of modern commodity trading try to remove the person" from the exchange. With the establishment of unifying, conformist trends which essentialises actors into aesthetic categories, Engelke's assertion is only too true.

On TikTok, the self(ie) is brought to market: a digital version of yourself, a beautiful, hilarious and brilliant version of yourself. The 'true you' is hidden behind the smokescreen of filters and beauty enhancing digital tools (Elias et al. 2017). The self as performed on TikTok's marketplace is highly engineered and has considerable implications on the laboured self (Hochschild 1983).

The Labour of Aesthetics

In the previous section, I illuminated the prevalence of aesthetics in users'self-performance. Following Elias et al. (2017), I use a 'labour of aesthetics' discourse to understand actions required by everyday users to mirror the beauty of famous TikTokers, who have contributed to and benefitted from the conflation of beauty with success (aesthetic capital) (Sarpila et al. 2020:2). The processes of aesthetic labour are wide ranging, often invisible and never complete (Elias et al. 2017; Cherry 2016; Braun 2017). Labours of aesthetics are performed by users to maintain a successful digital profile and to ensure they can participate within social media's "visual economy" (Ross 2019:364). Ultimately, the labour of aesthetics transmutes into "aesthetic entrepreneurship" (Elias et al., 2017; 33), in which "neoliberal capitalist imperatives" (Banet-Weiser, 2019; 266) of self-quantification and measurement are implemented (Strathern, 1996).

The labour required to maintain online aesthetics encompasses the careful curation of one's digital profile. Whether deciding which aesthetic style you should choose, "strategically choosing images to upload" (Goodwin et al., 2016; 5), or posting at peak time to maximise the number of Likes you can acquire (Ross, 2019), the maintenance of one's aesthetics requires content creators to "constantly and recursively monitor their own self-representations" (Goodwin et al., 2016; 4). The term "monitor" successfully conceptualises the labour done by Chloe, my interlocutor, for whom a pastel, bright, airy aesthetic was a crucial aspect of her profile. She decorates her flat with peonies (baby pink) and a mirror. Reflections of beauty are contained within her physical environment and captured in her TikTok/Instagram profile.

In order to emulate TikTok's beauty standards, users undergo digital altera-

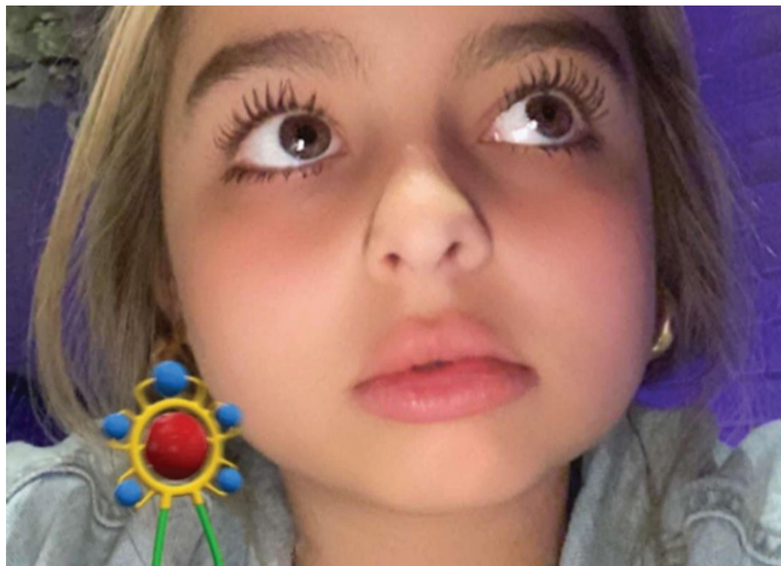

Figure 3. Addison Rae using the 'baby filter'

tions via beauty apps (Elias and Gill 2017) or filters.. Addison Rae (Fig. 5) has a particular affinity with the 'baby filter' on Snapchat, where the filter makes you look like a young child (Fig. 6). A Pinterest board was created to compile and showcase these filtered images.

The Pinterest board both normalises and glamorises Rae's self-infantilisation (Zhang, 2021). The 'baby filter' contorts the face into age-obscurity, representing vast digitally mediated appearance alteration. This technology uses advanced facial recognition technology, thus "normali[sing] biometrics and automated image manipulation" (Rettberg 2017:94). I was unsurprised when 44% of my respondents said they needed to change their appearance before posting a TikTok. Luckily, "[T]he management of ones face and voice" (Goffman 1956:211) has never been easier (Elias and Gill 2017). Ordinary TikTok users can contort their expression into a nose scrunch, whiten their teeth or use the 'baby filter', just like Addison Rae. The appearance of "aesthetic capital" (Sarpila et al. 2020:2) is orchestrated by illusionary tools afforded by TikTok.

The modification of content towards a specific beauty type is entrenched and therefore goes much further than just impacting what users see, it impacts how users see. Elias and Gill (2018:74) use "'nano surveillance'" to explain the chronic scrutiny that women place on their own and each other's bodies. One respondent told me, "[t]here is an expectation that you will always see the perfect image on TikTok, especially for women". She expects to see a beauty ideal and prepares herself for the wounds inflicted by visual comparison. In this way, the surveillance of others morphs into the surveillance of the self whereby users contort themselves via restrictive eating or using beauty tools to emulate what they have observed of others.

Similarly, my interlocutor, Chloe regularly posted updates onto her 'story',

keeping followers constantly updated. This extends what Elias and Gill (2018; 65) term “360° surveillance”; all-encompassing scrutiny of women by tabloids, articles and paparazzi. Chloe self-publishes in accordance to the affordances that social networking sites offer her: Instagram's ‘story’ feature and TikTok’s inbuilt beauty enhancing tools. Through multiple avenues of self-publication, they give followers a 360° insight into their lives. The performance of the self is, once again, influenced by TikTok. Agency, the "capacity for action” (Mahmood 2005:18), is impeded as users are held captive by unattainable ideals of beauty but at the same time, it is also exercised, through the advertising and branding of oneself.

That being said, Horst (2009) explores how the manufactured curation of one’s digital profile on Facebook is paramount in defining young people’s self-presentation. Though synthetic in its engineering, there are authentic motives of visibility, connection and friendship behind the presentation of the self (Horst 2009). Selfies are “claims made by ordinary citizens via the use of their own networked self-portraits” (Kuntsman 2017:14). Following Mahmood’s (2005) assertion that agency is the capacity for action, the “aesthetic entrepreneurship” (Elias et al. 2017:33) done to maintain aesthetics and ultimately bolster the success of the profile is evidence of action being taken, albeit under TikTok’s reign.

Ultimately, TikTok allows its users to be agentive if they perform under certain constraints, which, as I have aimed to illustrate, are aesthetics and trends. This essay has illustrated that TikTok does enable its users to perform a self, but it is exactly that: a performance. Simply put, “[t]echnical characteristics that enhance individuals’ agency… also present the potential for centralized control” (Flanagin 2010:190). Here, Flanagin (2010:191) synthesises that the same technical tools which affords users agency, creativity and connectedness, are also used to surveil, “exploit” and “violate” (Zuboff, 2019). Content creators are able to perform freely on TikTok, so their action of creating videos is their agency (Mahmood 2005). On the other hand, this action serves TikTok as a capitalist corporation, whereby the sale of the selfie video is tantamount to an acquisition of followers and Likes. Additionally, the management of ones own aesthetic performance highlights TikTok’s location within neoliberal governmentality (Kipnis 2008).

Social media is complicit in “amplifying economic, political and cultural grievances” (Zhuravskaya 2020:416). TikTok videos further elucidate an already concrete link between beauty and success. Filters and beauty apps propagate the ceaseless surveillance and quantification of the female body and ultimately trap users into conformity and “discipline” (Reichardt and Schobar 2020:8) via desperate aesthetic monitoring and overreaching. My fieldwork highlighted truly saddening accounts of women whose lives are consumed by an unshakable feeling of inadequacy.

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