

The Journalistic Courage to Be Ugly: Architecture and Affordances of TikTok

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Abstract

TikTok's unique architecture and resulting affordances as a video-centric social media platform shape how journalistic content is produced. When dealing with TikTok's architecture, a key focus is the platform's strong emphasis on algorithmic curation, particularly highlighted by the pivotal role of the *For You Page*. This chapter will describe the affordances emerging from user interactions with this architecture, particularly its distinct aesthetics and genres. For instance, it will be outlined how TikTok's video editing features have contributed to specific platform aesthetics, which require a certain *courage to be ugly*. Moreover, the chapter will elucidate the platform's vernaculars, which can often be characterized as comedic and emotional, but also explanatory and documentary. The contribution aims to offer a comprehensive overview of TikTok's architecture and its resulting affordances, thereby laying a foundational basis for further investigation into journalistic content on the platform.

Keywords

architecture; affordances; algorithmic curation; aesthetics

Introduction

With over 1.5 billion monthly users worldwide (Iqbal, 2024), TikTok is one of the most popular social media platforms today and has gained particular prominence as a *virtual playground*—particularly for young audiences—across the globe (Bresnick, 2019).

Key factors contributing to TikTok's popularity are its unique characteristics, distinguishing it from more *conventional* platforms like Facebook, X/Twitter, or Instagram. Where the old Twitter offered a purely chronological feed, TikTok's user experience is driven by its ubiquitous algorithm. While Facebook and X/Twitter allow linking to external sites, TikTok operates as a largely *closed system* that nudges users to remain within the app. And where Instagram has traditionally been defined by polished, still imagery, TikTok thrives on rough, fast-cut, and even *ugly* videos. As Zulli and Zulli (2022, p. 1872) succinctly put it: "TikTok is unlike any other social media platform."

In this chapter, we provide a systematic overview of TikTok's characteristics that are particularly relevant for journalistic content. We focus on the platform's key architectural elements and corresponding affordances to structure our discussion. By *architecture*, we refer to TikTok's structural design and features, such as its algorithm, interactive buttons, and supported media formats—e.g., videos and images—(Bossetta, 2018). While these architectural features

provide the foundation for user interaction, it is ultimately the perception of platform features that guides user behavior and warrants investigation. We therefore focus on *affordances*: the perceived actual—e.g., algorithmic curation,—and imagined—e.g., aesthetics, style—properties of the platform that enable and constrain user behavior (Ronzhyn et al., 2023).

For the purpose of this chapter, we analyze five specific affordances. First, we apply the set of journalistically relevant affordances proposed by Hase et al. (2023) to TikTok: degree of algorithmic curation, interactivity, hypertextuality, and visuality. Second, we extend this framework to include communicative forms—encompassing TikTok’s unique aesthetics, styles, and platform-specific languages—which are particularly nuanced and impactful on TikTok (see Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

In the following sections, we describe these affordances in detail, linking them to TikTok’s architectural features. To conclude, we briefly discuss the implications of these affordances for journalism practice and propose directions for future research.

From Algorithmic Curation to Aesthetics: Key Affordances of TikTok

Algorithmic Curation

Central to any platform experience is the content presented to users and the procedures through which it is selected. In this context, the affordance of *algorithmic curation* refers to the extent to which the content users encounter is determined by algorithmic selection (Hase et al., 2023; Thorson & Wells, 2016).

TikTok’s architecture is characterized by a high degree of algorithmic curation, widely recognized as one of the platform’s core distinguishing features (e.g., Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Schellewald, 2023). Unlike other platforms, TikTok does not provide a purely chronological feed. Even the Friends Tab—available to some users and displaying content from friends and followed accounts—is algorithmically curated¹. Usage primarily revolves around the so-called *For You Page* (FYP), the platform’s default broadcast feed, which begins playing videos immediately upon opening the app. The FYP provides an endless stream of content, described as an “algorithmized self” (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022, p. 5)—that is, content curated based on users’ preferences. While the inner workings of TikTok’s algorithm remain largely opaque, the platform has disclosed that it personalizes content using various metrics, including user interactions (e.g., likes and shares), video information (e.g., captions and sounds), and device or account settings (e.g., language preference and location) (TikTok, 2019a).

The centrality of algorithmic curation leads users to place the algorithm at the core of their TikTok experience, actively engaging in practices to *train* it rather than following specific accounts or visiting their pages. Beyond viewing and interacting with preferred content (see below), these training practices include searching for specific keywords or optimizing the timing and location of app use to maintain a constant flow of algorithmic input (Schellewald, 2023; Siles et al., 2022). Research indicates that many users perceive TikTok’s algorithm as highly efficient and effective, transforming the platform into an entertaining and often passively used *escape site* once they feel the algorithm has aligned with their preferences (Schellewald, 2023).

This primacy of the algorithm over interpersonal following distinguishes TikTok from *traditional* social network sites like Facebook, where engagement primarily centers on content posted by friends and maintaining social relationships. In contrast, TikTok is characterized by

¹ Information about the Friends Tab was retrieved from the official TikTok support page on March 3, 2024, available at <https://support.tiktok.com/en/using-tiktok/exploring-videos/friends-tab>.

what Zulli and Zulli (2022) term *imitation publics*—networks shaped by the replication of memes, styles, and languages. As a result, TikTok connects users to content rather than to other users. Affiliation and connection arise through specific communicative forms (see below), not through interpersonal relationships or shared experiences.

Interactivity

The buttons for interacting with posts—such as likes, comments, and shares—are essential features of any platform, as they “make it liv[e]able” (Gibson, 2015, p. 71). These interaction features shape how users express meaning and engage with content (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). *Interactivity*, in this context, refers to the modes and intensity of active user engagement with posts (Hase et al., 2022, see also Hermida & Mellado, 2020).

Like other social media platforms, TikTok provides various buttons for active engagement with posts: like (heart icon), comment (speech bubble icon), share (forward-pointing arrow icon), and save (bookmark icon). These buttons are located on the bottom-right corner of videos, which play full-screen in the app version. TikTok’s design has ambivalent implications for the prominence of these features. On the one hand, the buttons are constantly visible while users watch a video, removing the need to scroll down to interact, as is common on platforms like Instagram or Facebook, where buttons are located below posts. On the other hand, their relatively small size and plain design make them less noticeable amidst TikTok’s highly dynamic and visually engaging content (Guinaudeau et al., 2022).

Accordingly, findings on the modes and intensity of interactivity on TikTok are mixed. Some studies highlight a vibrant—though not always positive—interaction culture, particularly in the comment section (e.g., Armin et al., 2024; Cheng & Li, 2024). Others emphasize TikTok’s characteristic “intrapersonal engagement” (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020, p. 3), where users primarily interact with two entities: the algorithm, which curates content based on their preferences, and their own self-representations. Unlike traditional social network sites that focus on managing identities through social interactions with friends or followers, TikTok encourages users to engage (1) with the algorithm, and (2) with their own content: content creation is incentivized by a centrally placed *record* button and minimal barriers for editing videos (see below). This results in a self-focused experience, emphasizing personal identity-building over interpersonal connection.

Consequently, cross-user interactions like sharing or commenting are secondary on TikTok, and usage often involves passive viewing or active posting rather than active interaction with posts or other users (Guinaudeau et al., 2022). Furthermore, interaction cues such as likes and saves are frequently used beyond their intended purpose, serving as tools to signal preferences to the algorithm. Once the algorithm is trained to align with user interests, this strategic form of interactivity often diminishes (Schellewald, 2023). This mode of interactivity has even led some scholars to argue that “TikTok is television, not social media” (Faltese et al., 2023, p.1).

Hypertextuality

The third affordance proposed by Hase et al. (2023) is *hypertextuality*—users’ ability to access linked information outside the platform through hyperlink features. This affordance holds particular relevance for journalism, as it shapes whether outlets adopt a branding strategy, which focuses on engaging new (often younger) audiences directly on the platform, or a conversion strategy, which aims to drive traffic to the outlets’ own website and acquire new subscribers (Anter, 2024; Sehl et al., 2021).

Similar to Instagram, TikTok does not allow hyperlinks directly in posts or captions. Instead, links are restricted to the account bio on the profile page². Accessing these links requires a counterintuitive series of steps: users must scroll to the top of a video, click on the account name, locate the link, and then click on it—all while avoiding distractions from other content on the feed or the respective account. As a result, leaving the app demands high motivation and focused effort. This low level of hypertextuality reinforces the centrality of TikTok's FYP for the user experience. Scrolling through the FYP remains the most time-efficient and convenient way for users to encounter relevant content, further discouraging them from navigating away from the platform.

Visuality and Communicative Forms

While most current social media platforms are characterized by some degree of multimodality—the combination of sound, image, and text (Geise & Baden, 2015)—the balance between textual, visual, and audiovisual content varies across platforms. To account for these differences, Hase et al. (2023) introduce *visuality* as their final affordance, defined as users' ability to produce and consume content in image or video formats.

On TikTok, “the visual and audio elements are where all the fun is” (Cheng & Li, 2024, p. 203). In particular, three elements shape TikTok's high (audio-)visuality (Guinaudeau et al., 2022; Zulli & Zulli, 2022):

1. *Televisual medium.* While TikTok introduced photo posts some years ago (TikTok, 2019b)—resembling Instagram's slide posts—it remains predominantly a televisual platform, dominated by dynamic, audiovisual content. The FYP features primarily vertical short videos that loop upon completion. Although TikTok allows videos up to 10 minutes when recorded within the app or up to 60 minutes when uploaded³ (TikTok, n.d.-c), most videos are far shorter, typically ranging from 5 to 60 seconds (Zulli et al., 2024). Consequently, most publications on TikTok do not even mention the possibility of longer run times. This brevity likely reflects user habits, such as using the app as a gap-filler during idle moments, as well as the FYP's endless stream, which continuously entices users with the prospect of discovering even more engaging content.
2. *Mobile-first interface.* TikTok's architecture prioritizes mobile use. The app includes a native video recorder that allows users to create content directly with their smartphone (selfie-)cameras, eliminating the need for external tools. This design minimizes barriers to video creation, encouraging users to post content immediately, regardless of their location or available resources. A particularly popular format is the video blog (*vlog*), where creators interact directly with the camera, often featuring their bedroom as the backdrop (Guinaudeau et al., 2022). Reinforcing this person-centered visuality, research suggests that vertically oriented, face-fronted videos enhance immersion, social presence, and entertainment value (e.g., Wang, 2020).
3. *Extensive editing features:* TikTok offers a wide array of in-app editing tools, enabling users to personalize their videos. These tools include filters, text overlays, stickers, emojis, and sound effects (e.g., music or audio clips from movies or political/cultural movements). Additionally, users can combine videos through features like stitches—inserting sequences from another TikTok video—or duets, which display two videos side by side in a split-screen format. As a result, TikTok videos often consist of multiple layers, with the original recording serving as a foundation for a variety of added visual, auditive, and textual elements.

² Information retrieved from the official TikTok support page on March 3, 2024, available at <https://support.tiktok.com/en/getting-started/setting-up-your-profile/linking-another-social-media-account>

³ Information retrieved from the official TikTok support page on March 3, 2024, available at <https://support.tiktok.com/en/using-tiktok/creating-videos/camera-tools>

Through user appropriation of these features, TikTok's televisual, mobile-first visuality and popular editing tools foster a culture where humor and play are central (Schellewald, 2021). To understand this phenomenon, it is essential to look beyond a platform's visual features and media formats—and their resulting degree of visuality—and consider its *communicative forms*: the platform-specific languages, memes, trends, and aesthetic styles shaped by user interaction with TikTok's visual architecture (Schellewald, 2021). The following section outlines some of TikTok's most characteristic communicative forms.

TikTok is generally characterized by a humorous, light-hearted *tone*, facilitated by editing tools like unusual filters, as well as duets and stitches, which are often used for parody or mocking other users. The platform's language tends to be informal and spontaneous, reflecting the nature of mobile recording (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023).

TikTok's *memetic character* further sets it apart, with a rapid turnover of trending formats, sounds, and sketches. As Zulli and Zulli (2022) argue, TikTok fosters this *memetic competition* through several design choices. For instance, as a successor of Musical.ly, TikTok is “embedded in practices of remixing and repurposing music,” including creating dance challenges or lip-syncing (Rogers & Giorgi, 2023, p. 80). The app prominently highlights sounds used in videos and algorithmically promotes content using the same sounds, grouping them on dedicated pages. Likewise, effects are displayed and easily saved as favorites. Thus, TikTok encourages imitation and replication of specific video content, contributing to its wider transmission and cultural significance (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Further, TikTok's memetic character is often associated with an “internet ugly” *aesthetic*—quick, rough, and unsophisticated production styles (Douglas, 2014, p. 315). Videos are typically fast-cut and emphasize authenticity and relatability over highly polished visuals. The platform's low technical barriers and encouragement of person-centered storytelling, often using the smartphone's selfie camera, promote normality and spontaneity (Abidin, 2020; Kennedy, 2020). This stands in contrast to the *stylized aesthetics* (formerly) associated with other predominantly visual platforms such as Instagram (Hermida & Mellado, 2020).

However, TikTok's algorithmically driven imitation and replication mean that no single communicative form dominates the platform. Instead, subcultures develop their own aesthetics for identity-building. For example, the *cottagecore movement*, a subculture idealizing rural life and promoting a return to nature, embraces soft colors and carefully crafted, idealized visuals, contrasting with the rough, humorous content prevalent elsewhere on the platform (Suriyapong, 2024).

Users also appropriate TikTok's communicative forms for political expression and critique, since the platform's combination of humor, juxtaposition, and visual creativity enables them to express and process emotions effectively (Brown et al., 2022). For example, duets are used to mock political opponents (Hautea et al., 2021; Schoon & Bosch, 2023). Likewise, the iconic Point of View (POV) meme—videos in which creators perform sketches to immerse viewers in specific scenarios, described through a textual overlay starting with “POV: [description]”—has become a tool for critiquing societal realities (Trillò, 2024).

Like the other affordances, TikTok's visuality and communicative forms create specific opportunities and challenges for journalistic content. We will discuss these implications in the final section.

Discussion

Responding to TikTok's rising popularity, especially among young audiences, news media worldwide have turned to the platform to explore new ways of reaching younger demographics (Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024; Newman, 2022).

To systematically understand (journalistic) content production and user interaction with (journalistic) content on social media, it is essential to move beyond treating platforms as a *monolithic bloc* and instead identify the specific properties that shape each platform's character. This chapter therefore examined TikTok's unique architecture (i.e., structure and design features) and affordances (i.e., perceived actual, and imagined properties).

Given TikTok's complex and dynamic nature, a complete description of its characteristics is beyond the scope of this chapter—and perhaps any chapter. Affordances, as relational concepts, arise from the interplay between evolving platform features and user behavior, meaning they may shift over time. If we were to rewrite this chapter in the future, we might describe these affordances somewhat differently. However, the overarching set of affordances would likely remain the same, as they are sufficiently variable and flexible to accommodate different empirical observations. To conclude this chapter, we summarize the affordances discussed and briefly reflect on their implications for journalism practice and research.

First and foremost, TikTok is defined by a high degree of algorithmic curation, with usage centered on the algorithmically curated *For You Page* (FYP). Consequently, training the algorithm and crafting an “algorithmized self” (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022, p. 5) on the FYP are central user practices. In contrast to traditional platforms structured around user-to-user interactions (*social graph*), TikTok represents a shift to a *content graph*, where identity-building occurs primarily through interaction with content rather than interpersonal networks.

From a journalistic perspective, this dominance of algorithmic curation makes visibility on users' FYP the central benchmark for success, as opposed to cultivating a loyal followership. As a result, editorial decision-making likely prioritizes creating attention-grabbing platform-native content that aligns with TikTok's communicative forms (e.g., humorous sketches, lip-syncing videos). Indeed, research indicates that journalists favor topics resonating with younger audiences and often produce lighter, non-news content to match TikTok's humorous, lighthearted tone (e.g., Klug & Autenrieth, 2022; Newman, 2022). Additionally, the platform's network structure makes audience targeting unpredictable, probably prompting journalists to select a broader range of topics than on other platforms and to experiment more with the content they publish.

Next, interactivity—modes and intensity of interaction with content—takes different shapes on TikTok than on other platforms. While familiar interaction buttons such as likes and comments are present, users often treat interaction instrumentally, using these tools to train the algorithm rather than to communicate meaning. This behavior likely contributes to a generally passive interaction culture.

However, findings on the modes and intensity of interactivity on TikTok are mixed, and this ambiguity extends to journalistic content. Although interactive features like mentions or calls for participation are rare, journalistic posts on TikTok tend to generate more comments than on other platforms (Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024). Likewise, one qualitative content analysis found that journalists and community managers actively seek interaction in the comment section and foster a dialogue around the video (Bolz, 2023). Future research could further explore how journalists leverage comment sections and interpret TikTok's interactive features. It is also plausible that editorial decisions prioritize *back-stage* metrics such as watch-through rates over *front-stage* metrics like likes and comments, as the former may better reflect authentic audience engagement.

Similar to Instagram, TikTok has a low hypertextuality. Hyperlinks are restricted to account bios, requiring users to take multiple steps—scrolling to the top, clicking the profile, and locating the link—to access external content. This cumbersome process discourages navigation outside the platform, reinforcing TikTok’s status as a closed system that prioritizes on-platform engagement.

For journalistic outlets, this underscores the need to achieve success directly on the platform, particularly on the FYP. On-site strategies to drive traffic to external websites and convert users into subscribers are largely impractical. While outlets often include website links in their account bios, their content typically reflects an off-site strategy, where stories are fully told on the platform, with an emphasis on branding and entertainment rather than driving users elsewhere (e.g., Hase et al., 2023; Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022).

Our final affordances address what may be the first association many readers have with TikTok: an app that immediately begins playing humorous, aurally, and visually rich videos upon opening. TikTok is best described as a platform characterized by high audiovisuality and multifaceted communicative forms—platform-specific memes, languages, and aesthetics that emerge through users’ interactions with its visual and editing features. While subcultural variations exist, TikTok broadly fosters humorous, informal language, authentic, rough aesthetics, and a continuous stream of memes and trends driven by algorithmically promoted visual and auditory content.

Adapting to these affordances—such as through creator-centered storytelling and textual elements—has been linked to better video performance on TikTok (e.g., Cheng & Li, 2024; Ling et al., 2022). Correspondingly, research on journalistic content shows that newsrooms often appropriate these communicative forms by employing host-centered storytelling, memes, humor, and participation in trending formats (e.g., Bolz, 2023; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Aesthetically, journalists frequently employ GIFs, emojis, and green-screen backgrounds (Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024).

However, research also highlights the limitations in journalists’ willingness and ability to fully embrace TikTok’s language and aesthetics—which may even afford a *courage to be ugly*. For example, newsrooms often repurpose existing content with only minor adaptations (Newman, 2022), and legacy outlets, in particular, remain cautious about incorporating humor into their TikTok content (Zulli et al., 2024). This hesitation may contribute to news content’s relatively lower algorithmic promotion on the platform compared to other types of content (Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2023).

Taken together, these affordances highlight that successfully adopting TikTok demands substantial adaptation and experimentation within the newsroom. Unlike other platforms where slight modifications to existing content often suffice, TikTok requires resource-intensive strategies, including investments in video production, time, and personnel. Additionally, especially the need to align with algorithmic curation and platform-specific communicative forms can (re)ignite tensions between journalistic standards and social media logics. Building on research exploring how journalists manage these conflicts on conventional platforms (e.g., Lischka, 2021; Walters, 2021), future studies could examine how balancing strategies are implemented or adapted for TikTok.

While TikTok is often portrayed as a *funny dancing app*, its communicative forms extend far beyond entertainment. Users have appropriated the platform’s visual and interactive features to engage in political discourse and social criticism. This duality underscores the ambivalent nature of TikTok’s affordances for journalism: they pose challenges to balancing journalistic values while simultaneously creating opportunities to reach specific publics where serious journalistic content can resonate.

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