

PLATFORMED CULTURAL PRODUCTION: CONSTRAINTS AND CREATIVITY
IN MEMETIC PRACTICES ON TIKTOK AND INSTAGRAM

AN ABSTRACT

SUBMITTED ON THE TWENTY THIRD DAY OF MARCH 2025

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF CITY, CULTURE, AND COMMUNITY: SOCIOLOGY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

OF TULANE UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE

OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms do not merely enable creative participation; they actively structure it through technical affordances, governance mechanisms, and cultural frameworks. Rather than treating platforms as neutral hosts for digital culture, platform studies has extensively examined their infrastructural control, while meme studies has focused on participatory culture and creative agency. This dissertation brings these fields into conversation, demonstrating that memetic creativity is shaped not just by user engagement but by platform architectures that constrain, enable, and structure cultural production. Through a three-paper analysis of TikTok and Instagram, I develop the concept of structured participation to explain how memes emerge, evolve, and circulate within platformed environments.

This dissertation examines memetic practices—the creation, circulation, and transformation of memes—as a lens for understanding the structure/agency dynamic in platformed cultural production. While memes are often framed as expressions of participatory culture, this study demonstrates that their evolution is fundamentally shaped by platform-specific conditions, user negotiation strategies, and structured adaptation processes as content migrates across digital environments.

This investigation unfolds through three interrelated studies. The first study examines how TikTok and Instagram construct distinct conditions for cultural production, demonstrating that despite technical convergence, these platforms cultivate fundamentally different creative ecosystems through their approaches to creativity, authenticity, community, and discovery. The second study introduces "memetic negotiation" to explain how users develop platform vernaculars that transform constraints

into creative resources. These vernaculars emerge as users navigate dialectical tensions between individual expression and collective belonging, authenticity and performance, and innovation and convention. The third study proposes the "Three-Step Model of Memetic Translation," demonstrating that cross-platform content adaptation follows structured pathways of structural adjustment, semiotic recalibration, and cultural integration.

By theorizing memes as structured participation, this dissertation challenges both deterministic models of platform control and celebratory accounts of participatory culture. It contributes to platform studies, digital culture research, and cultural sociology, offering a framework for analyzing how platforms shape not just what circulates but the very conditions under which creative expression becomes possible, meaningful, and sustainable in an increasingly platformed media landscape.

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A DISSERTATION

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2022, Instagram users demanded: “Make Instagram Instagram Again.” (James and Ellis 2022) Their complaint was simple: Instagram had pivoted toward algorithmic video feeds, prioritizing TikTok-style content, and users wanted back the platform they knew—photo-sharing with friends. When Kylie Jenner and Kim Kardashian amplified the message (Sato 2022), Instagram scrambled to respond, publicly rolling back some of its changes (Newton 2022).

At first glance, this controversy appeared to be about nostalgia. But at its core, it reflected a much deeper struggle: how platform infrastructures shape creative participation. Instagram’s changes were not just aesthetic but structural, reshaping visibility, recommendation, and engagement through economic and algorithmic shifts. Users were not simply reacting to a content change but to a transformation in the governance of creativity itself—one that determined what content was seen, prioritized, and rewarded.

This tension between platform constraints and user adaptation is central to this dissertation and has deep historical roots. Early meme culture thrived in relatively unstructured digital spaces, from Usenet forums to early image boards like 4chan and Something Awful (Phillips 2016), where content circulated with minimal algorithmic intervention. In these environments, memes developed as a form of vernacular creativity shaped by community norms rather than platform policies. As social media consolidated in what Burgess and Green (2018) describe as the “platform era”, memes transitioned from subcultural artifacts to mainstream cultural tools embedded within highly structured, commercially driven platforms. This shift was not merely about audience

expansion—it was an infrastructural transformation. Once organic, user-driven formats became increasingly shaped by algorithmic curation and content moderation (Gillespie 2018) and by monetization frameworks (Zuboff 2019).

Today, as platforms increasingly replicate one another's features—with TikTok's short-form video model mirrored across Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and Snapchat Spotlight—the persistence of distinct creative cultures suggests that platforms are more than neutral conduits for content. Despite their technical similarities, they remain structuring forces, shaping participation through governance mechanisms, affordances, and public positioning. By tracing memetic practices across these converging yet culturally distinct platforms, this dissertation examines how digital creativity is conditioned by platforms, even in an era of increasing technical homogenization.

Memes offer a particularly revealing site of analysis because they are not simply artifacts but structured, iterative practices. Their spread depends not only on user creativity but also on platform affordances, governance mechanisms, and algorithmic filtering. Because memes are both participatory and constrained by platform structures, they make visible the underlying forces that shape platformed creativity. Examining memetic *practices*—the ways memes are created, transformed, and sustained—provides insight into how platforms shape user agency and condition creative participation.

To systematically analyze these dynamics, this dissertation examines memetic production across three interrelated levels. First, it considers platform infrastructures—how governance mechanisms, affordances, and public positioning structure creative participation. Second, it examines user practices—how individuals and communities engage with platform constraints, whether by adapting affordances, working within

restrictions, or pushing against platform logics. Third, it traces cross-platform circulation, following memes as they migrate between TikTok and Instagram, revealing how platform-specific conditions shape their transformation, meaning, and sustainability.

Despite their ubiquity, memes remain undertheorized as structured participation. Platform studies has extensively examined platformization (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022), affordances (Bucher and Helmond 2018; Davis 2020), and algorithmic governance (van Dijck 2013; Gillespie 2010, 2018), yet has rarely engaged with memes as an analytical object, focusing instead on how platforms govern digital environments. Meme studies, meanwhile, has examined memes as participatory culture (Milner 2016; Shifman 2013), political discourse (Denisova 2019; Phillips and Milner 2017), and structured genres (Wiggins and Bowers 2015) but has paid less attention to how platforms shape memetic culture, often treating memes as user-driven expressions rather than structurally conditioned digital participation.

By bringing together meme studies' focus on participatory culture and platform studies' focus on structural constraint, this dissertation offers a fuller understanding of digital creativity. It does so by drawing on sociology's engagement with the structure/agency problem—the tension between institutional constraints and human creativity. Platforms, like social institutions, structure behavior in powerful ways, but users continuously push back, modify, and redefine these constraints in practice.

This study captures how we spend most of our time: online, often engaging with the platforms under analysis here. TikTok and Instagram are not merely apps; they are critical spaces shaping how cultural production unfolds, how identities are formed, and how meaning is collectively negotiated. Understanding how these platforms structure

participation is crucial because these processes determine not only what content gains visibility but also whose voices and creative practices are legitimized, amplified, or constrained. By theorizing memes as structured participation rather than simply user-generated content, this dissertation illuminates the layered governance mechanisms through which a handful of dominant platforms increasingly define the conditions of digital cultural production. At stake is our ability to recognize—and perhaps even resist—the subtle ways that technological infrastructures shape creative agency and the possibilities for cultural expression. By examining these dynamics closely, this dissertation clarifies what it means to participate creatively—and critically—in a platform-mediated world.

THE EVOLUTION OF MEME STUDIES

The study of memes has undergone a fundamental rupture, shifting from an early emphasis on replication and transmission to a recognition of memes as structured digital participation. This transformation was not merely an expansion of prior frameworks but a necessary break from the overly deterministic, decontextualized models of early memetics. Rooted in evolutionary theory, memetics failed to account for human agency, cultural meaning, and the structural conditions that shape memetic circulation. As a result, meme studies pivoted from biological metaphors to sociocultural frameworks, eventually acknowledging that memes are not just viral artifacts but embedded, negotiated practices shaped by platform infrastructures.

The term ‘meme’ originated in evolutionary biology as Dawkins (1976) introduced it as a “unit of cultural transmission”, suggesting that memes, like genes, spread by competing for survival in human minds. This model was later extended by

Blackmore (2000), who framed memes as self-replicating entities that move autonomously through culture via individuals as passive ‘meme machines’. While a compelling analogy, memetics ultimately treated cultural transmission as fairly automatic, neglecting the role of interpretation, modification, and contestation. By emphasizing fidelity, fecundity, and longevity as the primary mechanisms of meme survival, memetics ignored the sociotechnical conditions that govern cultural production.

By the early 2000s, the memetics framework had largely stalled. Scholars increasingly rejected the viral model of cultural transmission, arguing instead that memes function as participatory cultural artifacts shaped by user agency and collective meaning-making. Limor Shifman (2013) played a pivotal role in this transition, redefining memes as clusters of digital content that evolve through user modification and remixing rather than discrete, self-replicating units. This perspective moved beyond replication fidelity to emphasize variation, reinterpretation, and communal authorship. Rather than treating memes as isolated cultural artifacts, this shift foregrounded the collective nature of meme-making, where circulation depends on social relevance, intertextuality, and shared norms.

Scholars such as Knobel and Lankshear (2007) and Milner (2016) extended this perspective, positioning memes within participatory culture. Meme-making was understood as a form of vernacular creativity, a practice of community engagement where users signal belonging, construct identity, and play with cultural references. Phillips and Milner (2017) highlighted how memes serve as discursive sites where meaning is contested, layered, and reinterpreted, often blurring the lines between irony

and sincerity. This participatory turn was a necessary corrective to memetics' determinism, yet it introduced its own limitations.

Beyond Western contexts, scholars have documented how memes function in diverse cultural and political environments. An Xiao Mina's (2019) work on memeology examines how internet memes operate as a form of networked political expression across global contexts, particularly in China, where creative circumvention of censorship shapes memetic evolution. This perspective challenges universalist assumptions about meme circulation by highlighting how political contexts fundamentally alter memetic practices and meanings.

Much of this research implicitly treated platforms as neutral carriers of culture rather than as structuring forces. Meme studies continued to focus on humor, identity, and networked creativity, paying less attention to the infrastructures that shape memetic production. This assumption—that participatory culture functions independently of platform constraints—has been increasingly challenged. Galip (2024) critiques what she terms the “Dawkins to Shifman pipeline,” arguing that meme studies has not fully reckoned with platformization. Instead of a seamless transition from biological to participatory models, the field now faces a theoretical bottleneck: an implicit assumption that meme circulation is driven primarily by users rather than by the algorithmic, economic, and governance structures of platforms.

More recent scholarship has sought to address this gap by positioning memes as structured cultural participation shaped by platform infrastructures. Wiggins and Bowers (2015) argue that memes should be understood not just as artifacts but as genres of digital communication governed by conventions and platform affordances. Milner (2016)

emphasizes memes as practices of meaning-making that are inseparable from the communicative environments in which they circulate. These perspectives point toward a necessary synthesis: memes are both participatory and structured by platform logics, requiring an approach that accounts for user agency and infrastructural constraint simultaneously.

This dissertation builds on that synthesis, arguing that memetic practices are structured by platform conditions and should be studied as negotiated participation within digital infrastructures. While participatory culture remains central to meme production, platform affordances, governance mechanisms, and algorithmic curation shape the possibilities for creative engagement. This shift moves beyond the artifact vs. genre vs. practice framework to analyze memetic production as embedded within platformed cultural production. This reconceptualization sets the stage for the next sections, which outline the key conceptual challenges in studying memes and the methodological approach this dissertation takes in bridging meme studies with platform studies.

CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES OF STUDYING MEMES

The study of memes presents persistent conceptual challenges, largely because memes exist at the intersection of user agency and platform governance. Unlike fixed media artifacts, memes are iterative, continuously evolving, and highly dependent on the infrastructures through which they circulate. Their classification remains contested, their spread is often misattributed to organic virality, and their meaning is fundamentally unstable. These challenges demand an approach that moves beyond static definitions, instead treating memetic practices as structured participation shaped by both social and technical constraints.

One of the longest-standing challenges in meme studies concerns classification (Rogers and Giorgi 2024). Scholars have debated whether memes should be analyzed as artifacts, genres, or practices. Early approaches treated memes as artifacts (Shifman 2013), discrete media objects that could be cataloged and grouped and analyzed like traditional cultural texts. While useful for studying specific meme formats, this perspective struggles to account for the relational, adaptive, and iterative nature of memetic participation. Other scholars have framed memes as genres, identifying recurring formats, conventions, and remixing patterns that guide participation (Wiggins 2020; Wiggins and Bowers 2015). While this genre approach highlights structural continuity, it risks abstracting memes from the platforms that shape their production, circulation, and visibility. More recent work has defined memes as practices (Milner 2016), emphasizing how meme-making is a form of structured participation shaped by platform affordances and governance mechanisms. This dissertation builds on the practice approach, while arguing that memetic participation is not just socially negotiated but also infrastructurally conditioned. While memes remain artifacts that circulate and genres with recognizable conventions, their significance lies in how users engage with them under platform-imposed constraints. This dissertation advances the practice framework by showing that meme-making is both participatory and governed.

A second challenge concerns the limitations of virality as an explanatory model. Early meme studies often relied on contagion metaphors, treating meme circulation as an organic process driven by participatory culture. However, this view neglects the role of platform infrastructures in determining visibility, engagement, and circulation. Galip (2024) critiques the overemphasis on virality, arguing that memetic translation is a more

useful framework—one that accounts for how memes adapt to platform-specific constraints as they migrate across digital environments. Rather than assuming memes spread naturally, this dissertation examines how platforms condition engagement without relying on engagement metrics as a framework.

A final challenge is meaning instability. Unlike traditional media texts, memes are polysemic, remixable, and highly dependent on context (Phillips and Milner 2017). The same meme can carry different, even contradictory, meanings depending on where it circulates and how it is modified. Platform effects further amplify this instability—what thrives on TikTok may fail on Instagram due to differences in format, engagement structures, and audience expectations.

These conceptual tensions underscore the need to integrate meme studies with platform studies. By shifting attention from memes as content to memetic participation as structured engagement, this dissertation provides a framework for understanding how digital culture is shaped not just by users but by the technical, economic, and governance systems that structure online participation.

BRIDGING MEME STUDIES AND PLATFORM STUDIES

Meme studies and platform studies have developed along parallel but largely disconnected trajectories. Meme studies has examined participatory culture, networked creativity, and digital discourse, yet it has often treated platforms as neutral spaces rather than as structuring forces. Platform studies, by contrast, has extensively analyzed affordances, governance, and algorithmic control but has rarely taken memes seriously as an object of inquiry. This dissertation bridges these fields by developing a dual theoretical framework that treats memes not just as cultural expressions but as structured

participation—forms of engagement shaped by both user agency and platform infrastructures.

The cultural model, informed by symbolic interactionism (c.f. Blumer 1969; Mead 1934), cultural production theory (c.f. Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1993), and participatory culture research, foregrounds meaning, creativity, and social interaction. Memes function as interactional symbols (c.f. Goffman 1959) that allow users to present identity and engage in social rituals, while also operating as digital folk culture (Burgess 2007)—expressions of vernacular creativity embedded in communities. Participatory culture theories further highlight how memes serve as collaborative cultural production, though this dissertation extends beyond early celebratory accounts by addressing unequal participation, platform visibility, and labor conditions that structure memetic engagement.

The structural model, drawing from Science and Technology Studies (STS), Actor-Network Theory (ANT), and platform governance research, emphasizes how memes are conditioned by technological, economic, and institutional constraints. From an STS perspective, platforms are not passive carriers of culture but actors that co-construct participation through affordances and governance mechanisms (Winner 1980). ANT extends this view by treating platforms, algorithms, and meme formats as sociotechnical actants (Latour 2005), shaping what circulates and how participation unfolds. Additionally, political economy perspectives reveal how monetization structures and engagement incentives influence what kinds of memetic creativity are sustained, adapted, or suppressed. This structural model is enriched by considering how platform governance operates differently across global contexts. Jack Linchuan Qiu's (2016) analysis of working-class network society foregrounds the material infrastructures of digital culture,

revealing how the production and consumption of digital media rely on racialized labor, systemic coercion, and compulsive user engagement. Rather than viewing platforms as disembodied governance systems, this perspective situates them within the broader political economy of digital capitalism. Similarly, Kaye et al.'s (2022) research shows how platform governance in China interacts with state regulation and cultural norms to create distinctive conditions for digital participation. These perspectives reveal that structured participation is context-dependent, shaped by infrastructural power, state policy, and global labor regimes.

By integrating these models, this dissertation reframes three unresolved challenges in meme studies. First, it moves beyond the artifacts/genres/practices debate, positioning memes as structured participation shaped by platform constraints and governance structures. Second, it critiques virality as an outdated model, instead emphasizing that meme circulation is structured by technical affordances, governance mechanisms, and visibility hierarchies. Third, it expands the study of meaning instability, demonstrating how platform dynamics and ranking systems actively shape memetic interpretation across digital spaces. This sociological approach avoids deterministic models, providing a more precise framework for understanding how memes function within platformized cultural production. The next section operationalizes this model, outlining the dissertation's methodological approach across three interrelated levels of analysis.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This dissertation operationalizes the cultural and structural models by examining memetic participation across three interrelated levels: platform structures, user practices,

and cross-platform circulation. These sites of analysis allow for an empirical investigation of how memes function not just as creative expressions but as structured participation—shaped by affordances, governance mechanisms, and economic incentives. By analyzing memetic participation across macro (platform structure), meso (user negotiation), and micro (cross-platform transformation) levels, this study ensures that neither technical constraints nor cultural adaptation is analyzed in isolation while developing a multi-scalar approach to memetic cultural production.

The first site, analyzing platform structures and cultural production, is guided by the structural model, focusing on how governance mechanisms, affordances, and platform-driven discursive framing shape participation. This level, presented in Chapter Two, examines how TikTok and Instagram construct different conditions for memetic creativity, treating platforms as active infrastructures that regulate participation through design, moderation, and economic imperatives. While both platforms share fundamental features—algorithmic feeds, participatory remix tools, and monetization incentives—their governance structures and technical constraints differ in ways that meaningfully shape memetic production. This section investigates how these structural forces enable, constrain, and direct cultural participation.

The second site, analyzing memetic practices and user negotiation, is informed by the cultural model, foregrounding user agency, creative adaptation, and participatory meaning-making. This level, presented in Chapter Three, examines how individuals and communities navigate, reinforce, or subvert platform constraints, treating memes as interactional symbols and digital folk culture, where creative choices reflect both platform affordances and subcultural logics. This section captures how users develop

platform vernaculars within platform structures, illustrating the tensions between creative participation and infrastructural constraint.

The third site, examining cross-platform circulation, integrates both cultural and structural models to analyze how memetic participation is shaped by both user creativity and infrastructural constraints. This final level, presented in Chapter Four, examines how memes shift in form, meaning, and circulation when migrating between TikTok and Instagram, revealing how platform-specific affordances necessitate different creative and strategic adjustments. Rather than assuming meme circulation is organic, this dissertation positions it as a process structured by platform logics rather than driven by user behavior alone.

Together, these sites offer a comprehensive model for understanding memetic participation as structured participation, integrating user creativity with infrastructural constraint. This methodological approach provides a framework for analyzing how digital culture emerges at the intersection of structure and agency—how platform infrastructures shape constraints, while users negotiate, resist, and adapt within these limits. By synthesizing cultural and structural perspectives, this dissertation develops a model for understanding how memes function as structured participation in platformed cultural production.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS DISSERTATION

By framing memes as structured participation, this study advances the understanding of digital culture, platform governance, and participatory media in several key ways. It demonstrates that platform infrastructures do not simply host creativity but actively shape cultural production. Even when platforms adopt similar features, they

cultivate distinct creative cultures through affordances, governance, and economic incentives. Feature convergence does not lead to cultural convergence—instead, subtle infrastructural differences shape user expectations, creative norms, and participation logics, producing divergent memetic ecosystems.

A second contribution is a theoretical framework for analyzing how structure and agency interact in memetic participation. Unlike earlier models of participatory culture, which emphasize bottom-up creativity, this approach highlights how platforms structure engagement at both visible and invisible levels—through affordances, algorithmic sorting, and moderation systems that privilege certain kinds of interaction. Memes are not just user-driven expressions but negotiated forms of engagement, shaped by governance mechanisms, economic structures, and visibility hierarchies. Conceptualizing memes as structured participation reveals the ways users work within, adapt to, and in some cases push against platform constraints to sustain creative practices. Rather than treating participation as a purely cultural phenomenon or platforms as all-powerful gatekeepers, this perspective underscores the ongoing negotiation between infrastructural conditions and participatory culture.

Beyond individual adaptation, this work situates memetic participation as a distributed, infrastructurally conditioned process. The spread and transformation of memes are not simply byproducts of cultural relevance; they are governed by the structural forces embedded in platform infrastructures. Participation operates at both the individual and collective level, with platform-specific constraints influencing not just user choices but how memes function as shared cultural resources. Tracing these

adaptations reveals the mechanisms that regulate visibility and define the very terms of digital participation.

Finally, this project positions memes as a methodological bridge for studying platform governance and affordances. Tracking how memes migrate across platforms offers a lens for analyzing how infrastructures mediate participation, constrain creativity, and produce meaning. Memes do not simply spread; they are actively reshaped by the technical and economic conditions of platforms, exposing opaque mechanisms of digital governance. This framework provides an analytical route for understanding how platforms shape culture not only through formal governance but through the everyday practices of users navigating their affordances.

CHAPTER 2: COMPARING TIKTOK AND INSTAGRAM'S SOCIOTECHNICAL ENVIRONMENTS FOR CULTURAL PRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become central spaces for and mediators of cultural production—the creation, circulation, and consumption of content that shapes our shared understandings, experiences, and cultural trends (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1993; Couldry 2012). TikTok and Instagram, operated by ByteDance and Meta respectively, stand out as two of the most influential, each with billions of monthly active users (Statista 2024). Both mobile-first, visual-centric applications offer users tools for creating and sharing user-generated content (UGC), target overlapping user groups, operate on comparable business models, and continually expand their features (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikstrom 2022; Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin 2020). Despite these apparent similarities, TikTok and Instagram have fostered distinctly different creative environments with particular cultures of expression, engagement, and self-presentation.

This paper investigates how TikTok and Instagram discursively and materially shape the conditions for cultural production through their specific configurations of public positioning and marketing, governance structures, and platform architecture and app design. While users co-produce these environments through their practices, understanding the platform-level forces is crucial. Despite their surface-level similarities, these platforms cultivate distinct platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al. 2015) —unique modes of expression and interaction shaped by their respective features and designs, policies, and community norms. As contemporary platforms increasingly evolve toward what has been called ‘everything apps’ (Peters 2023; van der Vlist et al. 2024) via continually expanding their scope and features, examining the particularities of their

strategies and implementations becomes crucial to understanding their nuanced impact on user creativity and expression.

Through a comparative analysis of platform documents, public discourse, and app walkthroughs, I identify four key concepts—authenticity, creativity, community, and discovery—that emerge as central to understanding the differences between TikTok and Instagram. While seemingly universal themes, each platform implicitly defines and operationalizes these concepts differently, shaping the conditions for cultural production. Much like Gillespie's (2018) characterization of platform policies as 'the scars of past conflicts', these seemingly universal concepts bear the marks of each platform's unique history and strategic choices. By examining how TikTok and Instagram differentially construct and maintain these concepts, I aim to illuminate the specific mechanisms by which they shape distinct platform cultures and practices.

Ultimately, this study seeks to develop a framework for examining how platforms with similar features and user bases can nevertheless foster distinct creative cultures that lead to distinct approaches to cultural production. This provides a model for conducting in-depth, cross-platform analyses that account for the mutual shaping of platforms and social practices. In doing so, I contribute to ongoing discussions in platform studies (van Dijck, Poell, and Waal 2018a; Gillespie 2018; Nieborg and Poell 2018; Poell et al. 2022) and cultural production theory (Duffy 2017; Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy 2018), while highlighting the importance of attending to the specificities of individual platforms in understanding their role in the contemporary media landscape. By deepening our understanding of how these powerful platforms create distinct cultural ecosystems, this research lays the groundwork for future analyses of how these differences play out in user

practices and cultural trends and the broader implications for platform-mediated cultural production.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Shaping Power of Platforms

To understand how TikTok and Instagram shape cultural production in unique ways, it is crucial to examine the dynamics through which social media platforms gain and exert influence over the culture – its production, circulation, and consumption.

Engaging with platform studies and sociological literature, I examine the power of platforms at three levels: the macro-level co-evolution of platforms and users, the micro-level mechanisms for platform control, and the consequences for cultural production.

This study draws on two main theoretical perspectives. First, it adopts a structural lens, drawing from Science and Technology Studies (STS), which examines the co-constructive relationship between technology and society, recognizing that technological artifacts are shaped by social, political, and economic factors while also influencing those very factors (Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch 2012 [1987]; Latour 1987). Additionally, it draws from Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which acknowledges the intertwined relationships between human and non-human elements in sociotechnical systems, treating both as equally important actors in shaping these systems (Callon 1984; Latour 2005). Second, it employs a cultural perspective, examining how individuals construct and negotiate meanings through social interaction (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934) and how cultural production is shaped within structures and intermediaries (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1993). TikTok and Instagram are understood as dynamic assemblages where

expectations, policies, features, and cultural norms interact to shape user expectations and participation.

I take Poell et al.'s (2022:5) definition of platforms as “data infrastructures that facilitate, aggregate, monetize, and govern interactions between end-users and content and service providers” because rather than centering the user experience or high-minded corporate framing, it focuses on platform structures and outcomes. Ultimately, social media platforms function as mediators of social interaction and cultural production and are in an ongoing, co-constructive relationship with their users. van Dijck et al. (2018a) extend this by arguing that ours is a “platform society”, meaning that not only are online platforms inextricably tied to sociality, but they also produce sociality and social structures (Couldry and Hepp 2016).

At a macro level, platforms can be understood as complex systems that combine technology, social practices, and cultural norms (Gillespie 2015; Nieborg and Poell 2018). These systems co-evolve with users, cultural trends, economic models, and the broader societal context. In what has been called ‘platformization’ (Helmond 2015), platforms restructure the social web around their economic imperatives and technical infrastructures, in turn shaping user practices and cultural norms. This co-evolution is not a neutral process but is shaped by the interests and power dynamics of various stakeholders, including platform owners, advertisers, and policymakers (van Dijck 2013; Gillespie 2010).

Their decisions reshape societal structures and practices via platformization based in their actual (Bucher and Helmond 2018) and imagined (Nagy and Neff 2015) functions and designs. User practices in turn influence platform evolution (Bucher 2012; Burgess

and Green 2018; Duffy 2017; Poell et al. 2022), generating an ongoing co-constructive loop that is familiar to STS scholars (Bijker et al. 2012 [1987]; Latour 1987). These platform-mediated interactions give rise to emergent cultural norms and expectations, shaping how users communicate, present themselves, and participate in creative expression (van Dijck 2013; Gillespie 2018).

Mechanisms of Platform Shaping

Platforms also shape user practices at a more micro level in three main ways. First, they strategically construct their public image and frame their societal role through discursive outlets such as official policies, blog posts, press releases, and marketing materials (Gillespie 2010; Hoffmann, Proferes, and Zimmer 2018). These narratives often emphasize the platform's positive impact on user experience, innovation, and community well-being while downplaying the economic priorities that drive their design and governance choices (Srnicek 2017). By analyzing how TikTok and Instagram discursively position themselves in relation to cultural production, this study illuminates how platform rhetoric can shape user perceptions and expectations.

Second, governance and moderation practices represent another mechanism of platform control. Formal policies, such as terms of service and community guidelines, set the boundaries of acceptable behavior and creative expression on the platform (Gorwa 2019). These rules are enforced through a combination of algorithmic filtering (Gillespie 2018; Myers West 2018) and human labor (Roberts 2019), with moderation decisions shaping what content is allowed to circulate and what is removed (Gorwa, Binns, and Katzenbach 2020). Comparing how TikTok and Instagram's governance strategies shape

the possibilities for cultural production highlights the sometimes overlooked role of content moderation in structuring creative practices.

Platform control manifests differently across global contexts. As Jian Lin (2019) demonstrates in his analysis of Chinese digital labor platforms, governance mechanisms are shaped not only by corporate imperatives but by complex interactions with state regulation, cultural norms, and domestic market conditions. This comparative approach reminds us that even global platforms like TikTok operate under varied regulatory and cultural regimes that influence their governance strategies and user experiences.

Finally, platforms shape cultural production through their technical architectures and design choices. Features like algorithms, interfaces, and data structures create ‘affordances’ that encourage certain behaviors and constrain others (Bucher and Helmond 2018; Davis 2020). Algorithmic curation systems like TikTok’s For You Feed or Instagram’s Explore page have a particularly powerful influence on what content gains visibility and how cultural trends emerge (Gillespie 2014; Pasquale 2016). However, users are not passive recipients of these structures; they actively navigate, manipulate, and resist them in creative ways (Bishop 2019; O’Meara 2019). Examining how TikTok and Instagram’s technical architectures shape user behavior and cultural production in different ways contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between platform affordances and user agency.

To understand these mechanisms, scholars have primarily examined platform control through three lenses: algorithmic governance and content moderation (e.g. Bucher 2012, 2018; Gillespie 2014; Roberts 2019), platform affordances and user behavior (e.g. Bucher and Helmond 2018; Zulli and Zulli 2022), and the emergence of platform-specific

vernaculars (e.g. Abidin 2021; Gibbs et al. 2015). Hutchinson (2021) adds to this body of work by framing platforms as digital intermediaries—entities that not only connect content creators with audiences but also actively shape those connections through algorithmic infrastructure, policy decisions, and monetization logics. This notion of digital intermediation sharpens our understanding of platform control by highlighting the ways platforms curate and regulate access, visibility, and value in cultural ecosystems. While these approaches have yielded valuable insights, they often focus on individual platforms in isolation.

This study builds on and extends these perspectives by offering a comparative analysis of TikTok and Instagram. By examining how these platforms differentially employ mechanisms of control, this research illuminates the complex relationship between platform architectures and cultural production. This approach addresses the need for more comparative, granular analyses of how specific platform features and discourses shape cultural production differently and enables further analysis of cultural production situated in these platform environments.

Platforms and the Sociology of Cultural Production

The micro-level mechanisms of platform shaping have significant consequences for cultural production, as they create unique environments that structure how users navigate identity, community, and creative expression. Platforms function as cultural intermediaries (Wright 2005) that mediate between the production and consumption of culture and actively shape how culture is created and experienced. By shaping the norms, expectations, and opportunities for creativity and self-expression, platforms influence the social fields (Bourdieu 1992) – areas of social life with their own rules, practices, and

forms of capital (i.e., valued social resources) – in which cultural production occurs.

While platform structures and mechanisms constrain user behavior in certain ways, users also maintain agency to resist, subvert, and reimagine these constraints, demonstrating the dynamic interplay between structure and agency central to structuration theory (Giddens 1983). This tension between structure and agency is key to understanding how cultural production unfolds on platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

Given this tension between structure and agency, Griswold's (2012) 'cultural diamond' model offers another useful framework for understanding platforms' role in shaping and being shaped by cultural production. The cultural diamond highlights the relationships between four elements: creators, cultural objects, receivers, and the social world. In the context of social media platforms, users take on the roles of both creators and receivers, engaging with platform-specific cultural objects that are shaped by and in turn shape the platform's social world. Applying the cultural diamond perspective to the study of TikTok and Instagram directs our attention to how these platforms mediate the relationships between creators, content, audiences, and broader cultural contexts, offering a holistic view of their influence.

One fundamental way in which platforms shape cultural production is by structuring the possibilities for identity expression and self-presentation. As users navigate platforms, they engage in a form of impression management (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013; Goffman 1959; Gran 2025; Hogan 2010) aimed at controlling how others perceive them, shaped by the platform's design and the broader attention economy where platforms are competing for users' engagement (Abidin 2018; Citton 2017). The imperative to craft an authentic yet strategically appealing online persona creates a

tension that users must navigate by drawing on their cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1992) – intangible resources such as knowledge, skills, and status.

Platforms also shape cultural production by structuring the possibilities for creativity, community-building, and content visibility. As users engage with platform features and interact, they develop new creative practices, genres, and vernaculars specific to each platform's affordances and user culture (Abidin 2021; Gibbs et al. 2015). At the same time, the algorithms and metrics that govern content visibility and popularity have a powerful influence on what types of creative expression gain traction and shape cultural trends (Cotter 2019; Poell et al. 2022).

Ultimately, the consequences of platform shaping for cultural production emerge through complex negotiations of power and agency between platforms, users, and the broader sociocultural contexts in which they are embedded. By taking a comparative approach to studying TikTok and Instagram as sociotechnical environments, this study advances a holistic and nuanced perspective on the relationship between platforms and cultural production. This approach allows us to examine how seemingly similar platforms can foster distinct creative cultures and practices, challenging monolithic conceptions of social media's impact on cultural production.

Therefore, I ask:

RQ1: How do the public positioning, formal policy frameworks, embedded cultural assumptions, and technical architectures within the sociotechnical environments of TikTok and Instagram differentially shape platforms' conditions for cultural production?

By addressing this question, this study contributes to our understanding of the complex dynamics of platform-mediated cultural production, illuminating how platform-specific discourses and structures can lead to different creative outcomes and expressions

and building on the two landmark book-length platform overviews of TikTok (Kaye et al. 2022) and Instagram (Leaver et al. 2020). It offers a unique contribution through (1) a timely comparative analysis of both platforms, revealing how their distinct sociotechnical environments differentially shape cultural production; (2) an up-to-date examination of these rapidly evolving platforms in 2025; and (3) a specific focus on cultural production, providing insights into how platform affordances and cultures may facilitate and constrain creative expression.

METHODS

Research Design

This project employs a comparative, multi-method approach, using a convergent-parallel design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017) that integrates qualitative strands at both data collection and interpretive stages, to examine how TikTok and Instagram differentially shape the conditions for cultural production. The research design combines qualitative discourse analysis of platform documents and public communications with a systematic walkthrough (Duguay and Gold-Apel 2023; Light, Burgesss, and Duguay 2018) of the platforms' user interfaces and features.

These methods work in tandem to reveal not only what platforms say about themselves but also how their technical architecture enables and constrains cultural practices. Following Light et al. (2018), the walkthrough component attends to the app's "environment of expected use," emphasizing how each platform's vision, governance model, and design logics shape expected user behavior and interpretation (see also van Dijck 2013).

The three-stage design includes (1) discourse analysis of platform documents, including community guidelines, privacy policies, terms of service, homepages, news articles, blog posts, YouTube videos, and advertisements; (2) a walkthrough of the platforms' user interfaces and features; and (3) integration of findings to create sociotechnical profiles – comprehensive descriptions of how platforms function as integrated social and technological systems to shape user experiences and cultural production.

The selected data sources—governance documents, public statements, marketing materials, and platform interfaces—each contribute uniquely to understanding how TikTok and Instagram shape the conditions for cultural production. Governance documents, such as community guidelines, privacy policies, and terms of service, represent the platforms' formal communication of rules, policies, and expectations. Following Venturini et al. (2018), these are treated as digital inscriptions—socio-technical artifacts that reflect the infrastructure and institutional aims of the platforms as much as their formal regulatory claims. These documents not only limit legal liability and ensure regulatory compliance but also subtly shape user behavior by setting clear boundaries for acceptable actions. In contrast, public statements and marketing efforts allow the platforms to craft their public image more creatively and flexibly. These communications engage with broader cultural conversations, signaling the platforms' values, priorities, and positioning.

They also set expectations for user experiences, highlighting features and success stories that align with the platforms' intended visions. While governance documents and public communications provide insights into the platforms' intended culture and image,

the walkthrough data offers a complementary perspective by revealing how these intentions are materialized in the platforms' interfaces and functionalities. This approach is grounded in communicative practice rather than platform isolation (Lomborg and Mortensen 2017), situating user interaction within the context of cross-media routines and expectations. By systematically documenting and analyzing the features, affordances, and user flows of TikTok and Instagram, the walkthrough method uncovers how platform design and architecture shape user behavior and cultural production in practice.

Together, these diverse data sources paint a holistic picture of how platforms govern cultural production through a complex interplay of formal rules, informal norms, and design choices. The combination of discursive analysis and interface walkthrough enables the study to situate TikTok and Instagram within the broader contexts they operate in and unpack the ways in which they enable and constrain cultural expression.

Data Collection and Sampling

Data was collected from TikTok and Instagram's community guidelines, privacy policies, terms of service, homepages, news articles, blog posts, YouTube channels, and advertisements. Collection methods included web scraping via the Wayback Machine, keyword searches in Nexis Uni and Google Alerts, and manual collection. The data span from 2010 (Instagram's launch) to 2024, with TikTok data starting from 2018 when ByteDance acquired Musical.ly. More details about these data and sampling strategies can be found in Table 1.

Sampling combined intensity and stratified purposeful strategies (Patton 2014; Miles and Huberman 1994). Intensity sampling selected information-rich cases that exemplified clear articulations of platform values, design shifts, or policy changes.

Stratified purposeful sampling ensured temporal and categorical variation across document types and platform lifespans. Sampling was refined iteratively as new document patterns and data gaps emerged, consistent with best practices in qualitative design.

Sampling techniques varied by data type. For governance documents, the Wayback Machine has frequently captured snapshots of relevant pages containing these documents and they are typically marked by the platform with the date of last update. I manually used a binary search approach to sort through the entire corpus of snapshots and identify when new versions were introduced. By manually reviewing Wayback Machine snapshots of homepages, I determined that homepages were rarely modified and so I used the Wayback Machine API to capture two snapshots per month for each platform's homepage and then manually reviewed these to identify when new versions were introduced. YouTube channels and company blogs were also sampled comprehensively via API access and Selenium scraping, respectively, while advertisements were manually collected as comprehensively as possible via ad databases and Google Images. Details about data collection techniques for public statements in news and tech press can be found in Appendix A; these data were filtered for redundancy and purposively sampled for relevance to platform cultures and cultural production.

Source	Volume and Dates	Data Collection
Community Guidelines	TikTok: 8 (8/2018, 11/2018, 1/2020, 8/2020, 12/2020, 3/2022, 10/2022, 3/2023) Instagram: 12 (3/2013, 12/2013,	Wayback Machine

	3/2014, 1/2015, 8/2015, 12/2015, 3/2019, 10/2019, 2/2020, 1/2021, 8/2021, 2/2024)	
Privacy Policy	TikTok: 10 (8/2018, 1/2019, 2/2019, 1/2020, 12/2020, 6/2021, 1/2023, 3/2023, 5/2023, 1/2024) Instagram: 9 (1/2012, 12/2012, 1/2013, 9/2016, 1/2022, 7/2022, 1/2023, 6/2023, 12/2023)	Wayback Machine
Terms of Service	TikTok: 5 (8/2018, 2/2019, 5/2023, 7/2023, 11/2023) Instagram: 7 (1/2012, 10/2012, 1/2013, 4/2018, 12/2020, 1/2022, 7/2022)	Wayback Machine
Homepages	TikTok: 5 (8/2018, 4/2019, 10/2019, 11/2020, 3/2023) Instagram: 15 (1/2012, 4/2012, 5/2012, 2/2013, 7/2013, 1/2015, 6/2015, 10/2015, 11/2015, 6/2016, 10/2017, 1/2018, 2/2019, 4/2020, 2/2024)	Python: collected two screenshots per month via Wayback Machine API and manually identified when updates happened
Statements in News Articles	TikTok: 1390 articles filtered to 281 unique statements Instagram: 679 articles filtered to 205 unique statements	Targeted search terms via Nexis Uni and ongoing Google Alerts Monitoring. <i>Details about search strings and the collection process in Appendix A.</i>
Statements in Tech Press	TikTok: 238 results purposively sampled to 5 Instagram: 277 articles purposively sampled to 15	Python: targeted Google results for specific publications via Google Custom Search API (e.g., TechCrunch, The Verge, Wired, Vox/Recode, Mashable, ArsTechnica,

		etc). Purposively sampled for most relevant and least redundant. <i>Details about search strings and the collection process in Appendix A.</i>
YouTube Channel	TikTok: 316 videos from 8/2/2018 to 4/2/2024 Instagram: 40 videos from 11/25/2019 to 4/2/2024	Python via Google API and <i>pytube</i> package and Whisper API for transcription
Company Blog	TikTok: 395 posts from 11/11/2018 to 4/2/24 Instagram: 316 posts from 10/6/2010 to 4/2/24	Python: Selenium-based script to scrape all links then save each link as HTML files
Advertisements	TikTok: 80 videos and 37 static (undated) Instagram: 25 videos and 5 static (undated)	Manual collection via iSpot, AdForum, and Google Images

Table 1: Data Sources and Sampling*Data Analysis*

A structured qualitative media analysis approach (Altheide and Schneider 2012) was employed to analyze the collected data. For each data type, a protocol (Appendix B) was developed to systematically interrogate the documents and identify key themes, discourses, and structural characteristics related to platform governance, cultural norms, and user expectations. The protocols included 13 guiding questions (Appendix C) focusing on key messages, recurring patterns, and broader contexts.

Coding was conducted through multiple iterative rounds following an inductive–deductive hybrid approach (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). Open, axial, and selective coding phases were modeled on grounded theory procedures (Strauss and Corbin 1998), while Saldaña’s (2021) first- and second-cycle coding heuristics guided the development and refinement of themes. Reflexive thematic techniques (Braun and Clarke 2006) were incorporated to enhance interpretive depth and attend to vernacular variation across platforms. Constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was used to examine similarities and differences between the two platforms, while memo writing (Charmaz 2006, 2008) supported the iterative development of theoretical insights. Coding and theme development continued until analytic saturation. Building on the discourse analysis findings, I conducted a systematic walkthrough of TikTok and Instagram's user interfaces and features. Based on Light et al.'s (2018) methodology, this process involved comprehensively exploring and documenting every interaction possibility within the apps. The walkthrough examined content consumption and production features, response and remix-style interactions, comments, direct messages, settings menus, and onboarding and account deletion processes and documented these with notes and screenshots.

The walkthrough was conducted through the lens of the four key themes identified in the discourse analysis and each platform's vision, operating model, and governance approach. This method allowed for examining how the discursively constructed themes were supported, challenged, or complicated by the material experience of using the apps.

Integration

The integration process was iterative and reflexive, leading to progressively refined sociotechnical profiles of each platform via a three-step process. First, the key themes and narratives identified through the discourse analysis were used to guide and structure the walkthrough analysis, providing a framework for interpreting the significance of different design choices and features. Second, the walkthrough data was used to interrogate and refine the insights gained from the discourse analysis, looking for areas of alignment, tension, or contradiction. This abductive synthesis followed the logic of Tavory and Timmermans (2014), where theoretical development and empirical data are recursively integrated to produce novel conceptual insights. Finally, the two sets of findings were synthesized into a set of "sociotechnical profiles" for each platform, which captured the complex interplay between their discursive and material characteristics and the implications for cultural production. This multi-method approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how TikTok and Instagram differentially shape the conditions for cultural production, addressing the study's central research question.

FINDINGS

Inductive analysis revealed four central, interconnected themes that emerged as crucial for understanding the distinct sociotechnical environments of TikTok and Instagram: authenticity, creativity, community, and discovery. These themes surfaced repeatedly across data sources and analytical approaches, suggesting their centrality to how these platforms shape cultural production. As I iteratively integrated strands of analysis, clear differences in their constructions and operationalizations began to crystallize. The prominence of these themes and the striking differences in how TikTok

and Instagram engaged with them suggest their critical importance for understanding how these platforms distinctly shape conditions for cultural production. An overview of these findings can be found in Table 2.

These four themes are not only inductive findings from the data but also analytically rich categories that have been extensively discussed in platform studies and digital media research. Each term—**authenticity**, **creativity**, **community**, and **discovery**—has a scholarly lineage that shapes how it is understood and operationalized in platform environments. Authenticity, for instance, has been theorized as both a strategic performance (Marwick 2013; Gaden and Dumitrica 2015) and a curated aesthetic (Abidin 2017). Creativity is often framed in terms of participatory “vernacular creativity” (Burgess 2007), but is also constrained by platform formats and algorithms (Shifman 2014). Community has shifted from place-based or identity-based collectives to “networked publics” (boyd 2010) and “networked individualism” (Wellman 2001), where shared practices like memes and hashtags substitute for long-term group affiliation. Discovery, increasingly governed by opaque algorithms, has been critiqued as a form of algorithmic intermediation (Napoli 2019; Bishop 2021), shaping what becomes visible, viral, or ignored. While these terms are sometimes invoked casually in platform branding and user discourse, this analysis treats them as structured sociotechnical constructs—actively built and mediated through platform design, governance, and user practice.

	TikTok	Instagram
Authenticity	Unfiltered, trend-driven, and joyful. It emphasizes	Carefully curated and socially rooted expression of self,

	participatory expression and spontaneity, valuing content that captures the moment over polished or aesthetically consistent expression.	emphasizing polished presentation, a sense of personal growth over time, and balancing realness with aspiration.
Creativity	Accessible, participatory, and transformative process built on trends and remix culture, blurring the lines between creators and consumers.	Process encompassing artistic expression, personal identity development, and professional or business-oriented endeavors, presenting itself as a toolkit that makes creativity accessible while fostering connections and opportunities.
Community	Participatory, trend-driven, and globally culturally interconnected space where belonging is achieved through shared action and content creation.	Network of personal connections and shared passions, where users can deepen relationships with friends and family, discover interest-based groups, and connect with businesses and creators that ostensibly align with their values and aspirations.
Discovery	Ongoing, serendipitous, and algorithm-driven journey that exposes users to a wide range of new and unexpected content, creators, and niche communities based on their interests and engagement patterns.	Personalized, interest-driven experience that helps users find and engage with content, creators, and communities that deepen their existing passions and aspirations.

Table 2: Platform Summaries

The following comparative analysis examines how these themes are not just expressed by users, but constructed and incentivized by platforms through their rhetoric, governance, and design. Grouping the themes in pairs—authenticity and creativity, then community and discovery—allows for a more nuanced exploration of how these interrelated concepts manifest and interact within each platform's context. By considering these themes in tandem, we can better understand how TikTok and Instagram's platform-level differences shape the kinds of content, interactions, and creative energies that emerge.

I begin this comparative analysis by examining the relationship between authenticity and creativity. While both platforms emphasize the importance of authentic self-expression and creative empowerment, they construct these concepts in strikingly different ways. As we will see, TikTok and Instagram's contrasting approaches to authenticity and creativity have profound implications for the kinds of identities, content, and creative labor that emerge on each platform.

Constructing the Self: Authenticity and Creativity

Authenticity and creativity are deeply intertwined in how users navigate self-expression and cultural production on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. The pursuit of authentic self-presentation is often closely tied to the drive to share one's creative abilities and outputs. Yet the specific norms, aesthetics, and expectations that shape what it means to be 'authentic' and 'creative' can vary significantly between platforms. By examining how TikTok and Instagram construct and incentivize particular forms of

authenticity and creativity, we can gain insights into the distinct pressures and possibilities for identity formation and creative labor.

While prior research has traced strategic authenticity and vernacular creativity across influencer cultures (Marwick 2013; Abidin 2017; Burgess 2007), this analysis extends these insights by comparing how platform architecture and corporate discourse institutionalize divergent logics of performance, remix, and visibility. Rather than treating authenticity or creativity as user-led styles, I show how each platform constructs normative templates that shape what kinds of creative labor and self-expression are seen as legible and valuable

The performance of authenticity on platforms.

Authenticity can be understood as the degree of congruence between an individual's inner experiences and their external presentations (Erickson 1995; Goffman 1959)¹. On social media platforms, users navigate a complex interplay between their genuine selves and the curated, performative identities they present to their audiences (Deuze 2012). TikTok and Instagram's distinct approaches to authenticity shape how users negotiate this tension, influencing the norms and practices of self-expression on each platform.

TikTok's construction of authenticity centers on unfiltered, trend-driven, and joyful self-expression. This ethos is consistently reinforced through the platform's features, policies, and messaging. In interviews, TikTok CEO Shou Chew emphasizes the

¹ In this study, I invoke the term in its colloquial and platformed usage—as a rhetorical and affective register through which platforms frame desirable forms of expression and through which users negotiate visibility, relatability, and credibility. However, the concept of authenticity has been widely critiqued across cultural sociology and media studies. Scholars have shown that authenticity is not a fixed essence but a historically contingent, socially constructed ideal often mobilized for strategic or ideological purposes (cf. Trilling 1972; Guignon 2004; Banet-Weiser 2012; Grazian 2003; Peterson 2005; Enli 2015).

value of spontaneous, organic content that captures the "feelings of the cultural zeitgeist," underscoring the importance of authenticity by stating, "If you try to make [content] very polished or very refined, it's not going to be that organic" (Thomas 2024). TikTok's advertising further reinforces this vision, showcasing diverse users engaging with the app in playful, impromptu ways and framing the platform as a space for homemade, colorful, joy-filled content. The prominence of "TikTok Sparks Good" videos on their YouTube channel featuring users and phenomena with positive, unexpected real-world impact suggests a focus on authentic, genuine content that challenges stereotypes and dominant narratives.

The platform's focus on joy and positivity is deeply intertwined with its construction of authenticity. As COO Vanessa Pappas notes, "TikTok has been called the Last Sunny Spot on the Internet" (Swisher 2022), highlighting the app's emphasis on fostering a lighthearted, uplifting environment for self-expression. This commitment to joy is evident in the platform's community guidelines, which explicitly state that TikTok is "for creativity and joy," underscoring the idea that authentic expression on the app should be rooted in positivity and fun. TikTok's homepage evolution (Figure 1), from taglines like "make every second count" and "real short videos" to encouraging active participation with slogans like "Make Your Day," reflects the platform's emphasis on authentic self-expression through spontaneous content creation. Including "Originators" videos on YouTube, where creators who started specific trends explain their process, highlights the user-driven nature of 'authentic' content on TikTok.

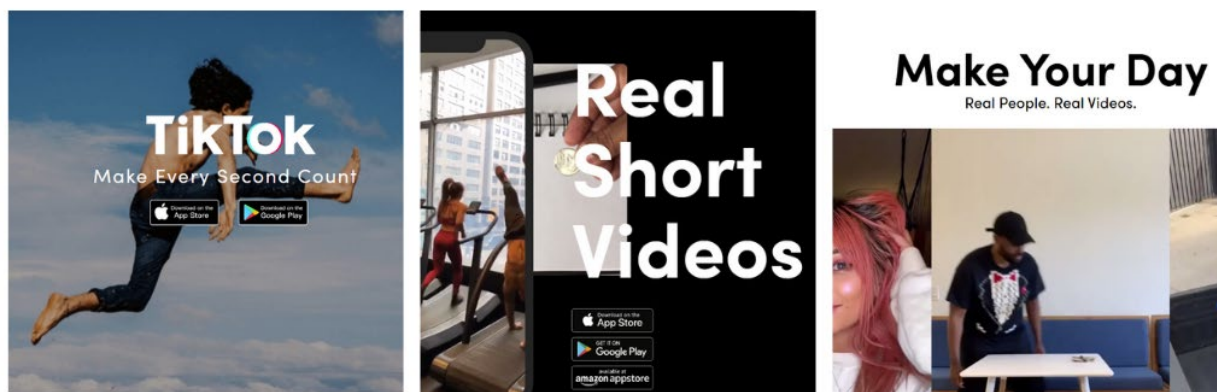


Figure 1: TikTok’s homepage in August 2018 (left), March 2019 (middle), and September 2019 (right), captured via the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine.

TikTok's interface and feature set further reinforce this raw, participatory vision of authenticity. TikTok's interface design (Figure 2) immediately presents users with the camera screen upon clicking the ‘post’ button, with the 'record' button prominently featured, encouraging spontaneous and unfiltered content creation. In contrast, Instagram's post creation flow (also in Figure 2) opens to the user's photo gallery, prioritizing curation and editing before sharing. Both allow users to switch modes from this default (see circled sections), but this is de-emphasized. Moreover, the platform's defining features, such as duets and stitches, foreground remix culture and trend engagement as core aspects of authentic expression. By making it easy and intuitive to reuse and respond to others' content, TikTok positions creative responsiveness and communal participation as integral to genuine self-expression on the app. This emphasis on spontaneity and unfiltered expression aligns with TikTok's focus on short-form content, with the default time limit of 15 seconds encouraging quick, raw reactions rather than polished productions. However, the wide range of filters and effects on the platform complicates the notion of 'unfiltered' content, suggesting that TikTok's version of

authenticity is a specific aesthetic that allows for creative manipulation and performativity.

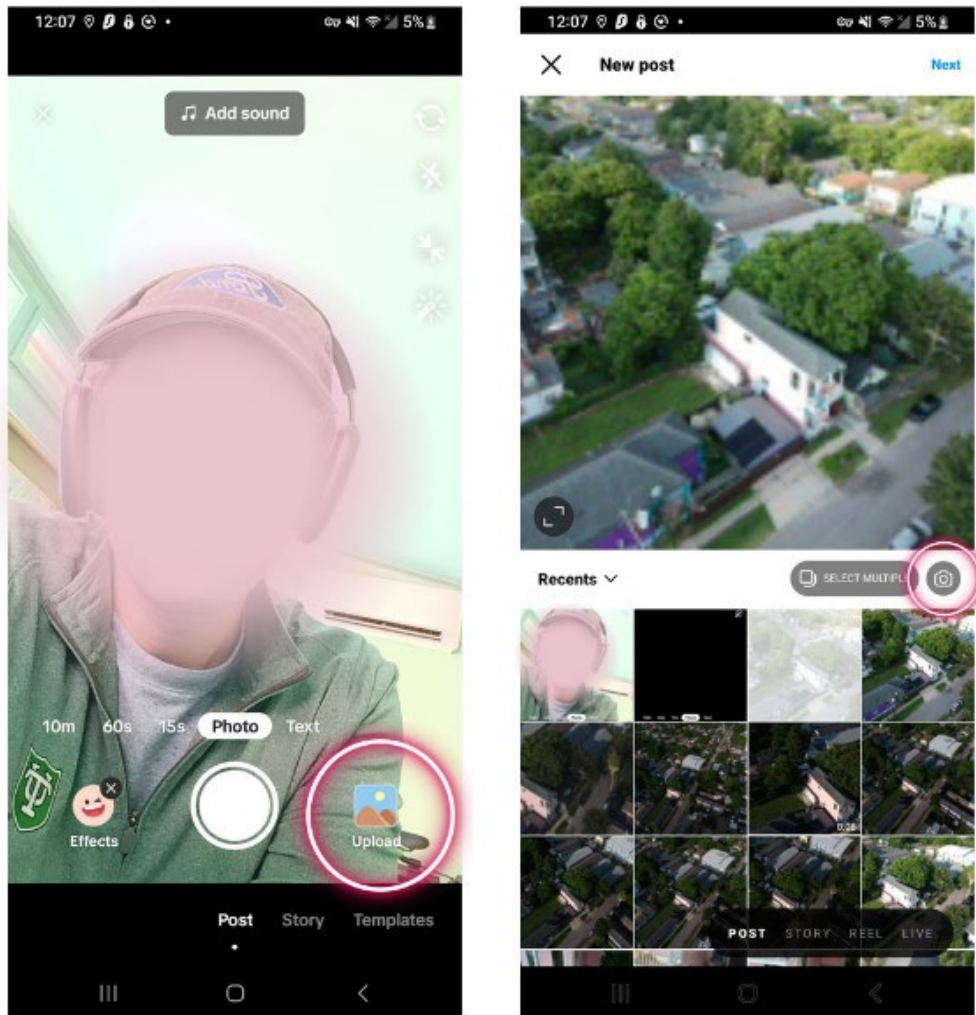


Figure 2: Screenshots depicting TikTok and Instagram’s default options upon clicking the ‘Post’ button.

On the other hand, Instagram constructs authenticity as a curated and socially rooted expression of self, balancing realness and aspiration. The platform's emphasis on visually appealing, filtered content has long shaped norms of self-presentation that privilege aesthetics and social connection (Leaver et al. 2020). Instagram's Terms of Service emphasize "personalized opportunities to create, connect, communicate, discover, and share," framing authenticity as something the platform helps users achieve

through data-driven customization. Their Privacy Policy further reinforces this data-driven approach to authenticity, detailing extensive data integration across Meta's platforms. This blurring of lines between different contexts and audiences could lead users to self-censor or feel unable to express themselves authentically for fear that unintended audiences will see their content across platforms. The evolution of Instagram's homepage (Figure 3), from focusing on sharing with friends in the earliest available version in 2012 to discovering "inspirational communities" by 2015, suggests a shift towards balancing social connection with interest-based authenticity. Instagram executives continually emphasize connecting to "the things and people you love" (Constine 2018a; Dua 2018), positioning authenticity as rooted in fostering meaningful relationships through the platform. This focus on social rootedness is evident in features like Close Friends, which allow users to share more intimate, unfiltered content with a select group of followers.

At the same time, Instagram's construction of authenticity involves a careful balance between realness and aspiration. While the platform encourages users to share genuine moments and experiences, it also fosters an environment where self-presentation is often strategically crafted to project an ideal image. Emphasizing features like comment controls and tweaks to the resharing process frames authenticity as intentional self-presentation (Friedman 2016). As more people adopt features like Stories, Instagram acknowledges that the profile has become "less and less representative of you and your life" (Sandler 2018). It has had to navigate the tension between its established aesthetic of curated perfection and the demand for more raw, unfiltered content. The platform has responded by developing tools that allow for different degrees of authenticity and

privacy, such as selecting an audience for any post type and hiding like and view counts, enabling users to tailor their self-presentation. Authentic participation on Instagram is framed as the sort of participation that serves the user's needs, with the platform aiming to ensure that time spent on the app is "meaningful and intentional" (Holt 2024).

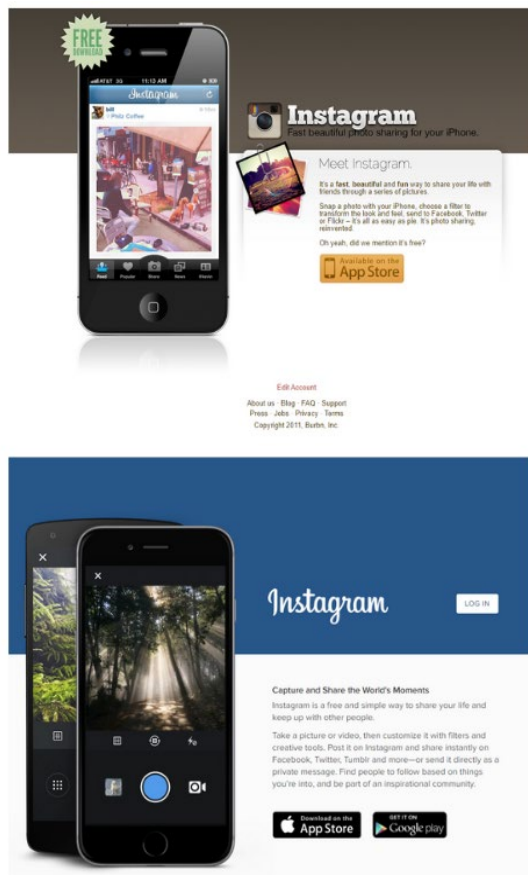


Figure 3: Instagram's homepage in January 2012 (top) and July 2015 (bottom), captured via the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine.

The politics of creative expression.

These divergent constructions of authenticity are mirrored in how each platform approaches creativity. Creativity, defined as the generation of novel and valuable ideas,

expressions, and artifacts (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1993)², takes on distinct forms and meanings within the contexts of TikTok and Instagram. These platforms' specific tools, templates, metrics, and governance structures shape the conditions for creative expression (Burgess and Green 2018), influencing the types of content that emerge and gain visibility.

TikTok positions itself as a democratizing force for creative expression, framing its tools and features as a means of unlocking users' innate creative potential. In Community Guidelines and many other documents, TikTok directly states that the platform is for "creativity and joy." The company's vision emphasizes providing users with "a canvas to create," which CEO Shou Chew describes as "really exciting with new technologies in AI that are going to help people create new things" (Chew 2023b). COO Vanessa Pappas highlights how TikTok "really does lower the barrier for entry when you think about the creation experience," noting that "your grandma could come on and create a video and use an effect and upload it to TikTok fairly seamless[ly]" (Swisher 2022). TikTok's content strategy strongly encourages and supports user creativity, as demonstrated by the prominence of words like "create," "creative," "creators," and "creativity" in their blog posts.

By making remix culture and collaborative creativity central to the user experience, TikTok constructs a vision of creativity as an accessible and participatory

² While creativity is often framed as an inherent personal trait or universal ideal, scholars have long critiqued its romanticization and its role in reproducing neoliberal values. Creativity is not just a spontaneous act of expression—it is historically constructed, culturally contingent, and often entangled with regimes of labor, value extraction, and social distinction (cf. McRobbie 2016; Mould 2018; Reckwitz 2017; Banks 2007). In platform environments, creativity is increasingly instrumentalized, measured through engagement metrics, and linked to entrepreneurial identity (Duffy 2017). In this study, I invoke "creativity" not as a universal ideal but as a theme strategically mobilized by platforms and navigated by users in contextually specific ways.

process. Features like duets and stitches are prominently integrated into the app's design, normalizing the reuse and reinterpretation of existing content as a core creative practice. TikTok's ads highlight the collaborative and participatory nature of creativity on the platform, such as one that highlights how the process of duets and replies build creative content as this collaborative chain spreads from user to user. By positioning new features and tools as ways to "unleash" creativity and "captivate the community," TikTok suggests that creativity is not just about individual expression but about inspiring and engaging others. Trend compilation videos on YouTube feature the creative ways in which users participate in and put their own spin on shared trends and challenges, highlighting the collaborative creativity on the platform. The centrality of remix culture on TikTok is further reinforced by the prevalence of hashtags like #duetthis, which actively encourage users to participate in chains of responses and re-interpretations of original content. This positions creativity as a collaborative and iterative process, where value is placed on the ability to cleverly riff on existing trends and memes rather than solely on original ideation.

Instagram's approach to creativity encompasses artistic expression, personal identity development, and professional or business-oriented endeavors. The platform's tools and features cater to a wide range of creative pursuits, from honing one's visual storytelling skills to building a personal brand or creative business. Instagram's blog posts and creator profiles often profile individuals who have leveraged the platform to launch successful artistic careers, positioning Instagram as a legitimate venue for creative growth and professional opportunities. Instagram's founders have described the platform as a place for various creative purposes, from buying ads to sharing 15-second looping videos

to creating conceptual art pieces (Kiss 2015). The platform's filters, which transform photos into "artistic memories," were developed to give users creative control over their content (Schawbel 2012)).

Moreover, Instagram frames creativity as a means of personal identity exploration and development. The "We Are in the Making" YouTube series illustrates how Instagram can help users discover and express their evolving sense of self. It ties creativity via Instagram to personal growth and self-discovery. This emphasis on creativity as a process of self-discovery and growth positions Instagram as a space where users can show off their artistic talents and actively construct their identities through creation. Instagram's ads often feature the creative tools and features available on the platform, such as customizable Stories, filters, and effects, emphasizing its role in facilitating personal expression and identity development. However, the platform's emphasis on templates, trends, and pre-built elements can also lead to a homogenization of content, potentially limiting the scope for genuinely original creative expression.

This comparative approach pushes beyond platform-agnostic accounts of influencer authenticity or participatory creativity by revealing how the infrastructural and rhetorical logics of TikTok and Instagram channel these ideals in materially divergent directions.

Implications for identity and cultural production.

The implications of these platform-constructed visions of authenticity and creativity are significant. TikTok's emphasis on unfiltered, joyful, and trend-driven content has created a fast-paced culture of participation that thrives on remix and responsiveness. The platform's features, such as duets, stitches, and its algorithmic

recommendation system incentivize users to continuously engage with and build upon the latest viral trends, fostering a creative ecosystem that values timeliness and cultural fluency over originality (Zulli and Zulli 2022). While this low-barrier, remix-friendly environment has enabled diverse and vibrant forms of creative expression, particularly among youth and marginalized communities, the pressure to keep up with fleeting trends and the platform's focus on entertainment and virality can also result in a degree of creative homogenization and the prioritization of attention-grabbing content over more nuanced or experimental forms of expression. The prominence of pre-built elements like templates and Magic Effects on TikTok, while lowering the barrier to entry for creative participation, could also foster a reliance on platform-provided assets rather than encouraging the development of original creative skills. This raises questions about the nature of creativity on the platform and whether it truly empowers users or perpetuates a form of 'micro-creativity' within predetermined constraints.

In contrast, Instagram's emphasis on curated, aesthetically pleasing, and socially rooted content has normalized a vision of creativity that is deeply entangled with personal branding and commercial imperatives. The platform's tools and culture, which privilege visual polish, adherence to popular aesthetic conventions, and the cultivation of a consistent brand identity, incentivize users to approach creative expression as a means of achieving social status and economic success (Leaver et al. 2020). Despite this emphasis on polished, professional content, Instagram's founder, Kevin Systrom, highlights the platform's role in facilitating diverse forms of creative expression, stating, 'Calling Instagram a photo-sharing app is like calling a newspaper a letter-sharing book, or a Mozart grand era symphony a series of notes. Instagram is less about the medium and

more about the network...photo sharing' misses the nuance' (Kiss 2015). While this culture has enabled the rise of a thriving influencer economy and provided new opportunities for creative professionals to showcase their work and build their businesses, it has also contributed to the professionalization of creativity on the platform, blurring the lines between authentic self-expression and strategic self-commodification (Abidin 2021). The labor and savvy required to maintain a successful presence on Instagram can make creative expression feel like a full-time job, potentially limiting the space for more organic, experimental, or non-commercial forms of creativity.

Furthermore, these divergent constructions of authenticity significantly affect identity formation and self-expression. TikTok's celebration of unfiltered, "real" content and its emphasis on raw and spontaneous creative expression can foster a sense of authenticity and relatability among users, encouraging them to embrace their quirks, vulnerabilities, and genuine selves. However, the platform's focus on joyful, positive content and its tendency to commodify authenticity through trending hashtags and challenges can also create pressure to perform a particular version of authenticity that aligns with platform norms and expectations.

On the other hand, Instagram's emphasis on curated, aspirational content and its construction of authenticity as a socially rooted and intentionally crafted performance can lead users to approach self-presentation as a strategic, branding-oriented endeavor. While this can provide opportunities for users to explore and express different facets of their identities and to connect with like-minded communities, it can also contribute to feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and the need to constantly manage one's online image (Leaver et al. 2020). The platform's granular privacy controls and audience segmentation tools,

while offering users some degree of control over their self-presentation, also reinforce the notion that authenticity is a carefully curated performance tailored to different audiences. The pressure to balance ‘realness’ with the curation of an attractive, aspirational persona can make authentic self-expression feel like a precarious and labor-intensive process.

As these platforms continue to evolve and exert a growing influence on our cultural landscape, we must remain attuned to their power to structure the terms of identity formation, community-building, and creative labor – all of which may manifest through cultural production.

Connecting the Collective: Community and Discovery

TikTok and Instagram play a significant role in structuring user experiences of community and discovery. Through their specific technological affordances, governance approaches, and cultural positioning, these platforms shape the possibilities for social connection and exposure to new ideas in distinctive ways. A comparative analysis of how TikTok and Instagram construct and facilitate community-building and content discovery offers valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of platformed sociality and its implications for cultural production.

While prior scholarship has theorized digital community in terms of networked publics (boyd 2011) and networked individualism (Wellman 2001), and critiqued platform discovery as a form of algorithmic gatekeeping (Napoli 2019), these analyses are often platform-general or user-centered. This chapter extends that work by showing how TikTok and Instagram concretely construct divergent normative infrastructures for belonging and visibility—not only through user practices, but through their affordances, policies, and interface design.

Modes of belonging and participation.

Community can be understood as the social bonds, shared norms, and collective identities that form among individuals (Durkheim 1893; Tönnies 1957 [1887]). Social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram play a significant role in mediating the formation and maintenance of communities, with their specific features and policies shaping patterns of cultural exchange and collaboration (Baym 2015; Carey 1989)³.

TikTok's approach to community centers on the idea of participatory, trend-driven spaces where belonging is achieved through shared action and content creation. The platform's community guidelines emphasize creating a "safe, trustworthy, and vibrant" environment for collective engagement, reinforced by features like duets, stitches, and hashtag challenges that encourage users to actively contribute to the cultural conversation. As one TikTok executive notes, the platform is "driven by the community" (Swisher 2022), highlighting the centrality of user participation in shaping the platform's cultural landscape. This ethos of collaborative creativity is further evidenced by the prominence of community-building initiatives like #LearnOnTikTok hashtag on X and the "It Starts on TikTok" YouTube series, which demonstrates how the platform enables unique interactions and supports micro-communities around shared interests.

Central to TikTok's community dynamics is the notion of trend-driven participation as a path to belonging rather than pre-existing social networks or curated self-presentation. TikTok's 'For You' page (Figure 4) illustrates this trend-driven

³ While community is often invoked as a positive or even utopian concept in both academic and platform discourse, it can also function as an ideological cover for labor expectations, surveillance, and exclusion (cf. van Dijck 2013; Coleman 2010; Jenkins et al. 2013). Platforms frequently use "community" rhetorically to foster a sense of belonging while offloading governance onto users or masking hierarchies of visibility and power (Gillespie 2018; Cheney-Lippold 2011). Here, I engage with community as both an affective frame and a socio-technical construction shaped by platform affordances, policies, and participation dynamics.

approach to discovery, displaying a mix of trending hashtags, popular sounds, and personalized content recommendations based on the user's viewing habits. This contrasts with Instagram's 'Suggested Posts' feature and 'Explore page' (also in Figure 4), which prioritize interest-based recommendations. This approach from TikTok aligns with their CEO's description of the app as a 'window' for users to discover new content, ideas, and communities. Moreover, Chew (2023b) characterizes TikTok as a 'bridge' that connects people, enabling them to find and engage with communities based on shared interests and cultural moments. These metaphors point to TikTok's emphasis on serendipitous discovery and participatory community formation. By making it easy for users to remix, reinterpret, and respond to popular content, the platform encourages a form of communal creativity that values cultural fluency and timely engagement over originality or polish. This emphasis on trend participation creates a shared symbolic vocabulary and a sense of insider knowledge that binds users together, even as the specific trends and challenges constantly evolve. Chew (2023a) emphasizes this content-driven community formation, noting, "People find communities, and I've heard so many stories of people who have found their communities because of the content that they're posting." This emphasis on trend-driven participation creates a distinct social field with its own forms of capital, such as cultural fluency and timeliness (Bourdieu 1992) where the ability to quickly engage with and contribute to trending challenges and memes shapes their possibilities for belonging and visibility.

However, TikTok's construction of community also reveals tensions between individual expression and collective belonging. While the platform celebrates diverse voices and niche interests, such as in YouTube videos that highlight LGBTQ creators or

spotlight Black History Month, the pressure to participate in viral trends and challenges can lead to the homogenization of content and prioritization of performative belonging over authentic self-expression. Moreover, the platform's extensive data collection and algorithmic personalization (detailed in their Privacy Policy) raise questions about the authenticity of these community experiences, as users are increasingly sorted into content-defined groups based on their engagement patterns rather than organic social connections.

In contrast, Instagram's approach to community emphasizes cultivating personal connections and interest-driven exploration within the context of a highly visual, curated platform experience. Instagram's construction of community revolves around "bringing you closer to the people and things you love" (Constine 2018b, 2020), positioning the platform as an extension of users' existing social networks and passions. This focus on strengthening bonds with friends, family, and shared interests is reinforced by features like Close Friends and the platform's emphasis on facilitating conversations and interactions around UGC (Byers 2019; Recode 2019). This positions Instagram as a mediator of existing social relationships and a facilitator of new connections around shared passions.

The notion of designed intimacy and engineered connection is central to Instagram's community model. The platform's focus on visual storytelling, combined with its interactive features and algorithmic curation (Leaver et al. 2020), creates an environment that encourages users to form affective bonds and invest emotionally in the content and interactions they encounter. This manufactured intimacy is further reinforced by the platform's emphasis on self-curation and the construction of aspirational identities,

which blur the lines between authentic self-expression and strategic self-branding. This focus on meaningful connections is articulated by CEO Adam Mosseri, who describes the platform as “a place where people spend more of their energy connecting with the people that they love and the things that they care about” (CBS 2019).

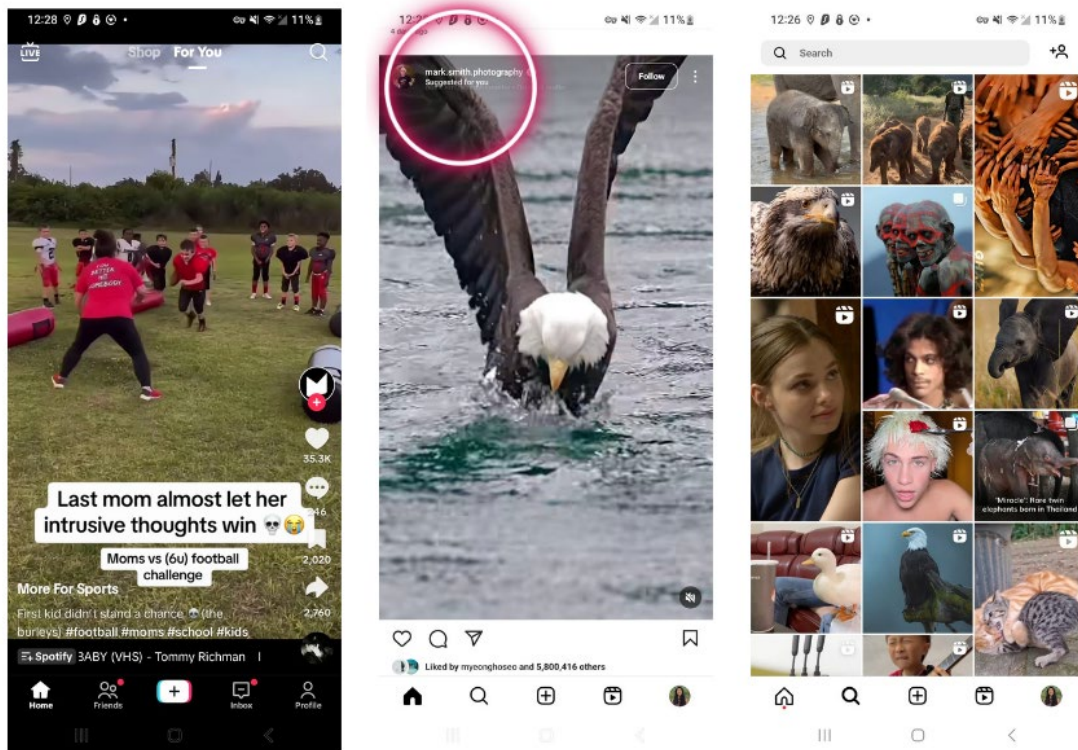


Figure 4: Screenshots depicting TikTok’s algorithmic FYP, Instagram’s within-feed “Suggested for you” posts, and Instagram’s personalized ‘Explore’ page.

However, Instagram's curated approach to community also raises questions about the authenticity and sustainability of the connections it enables. The pressure to present a polished, idealized version of oneself can lead to a form of social comparison and status-seeking that undermines genuine relationship-building. Moreover, the platform's increasing emphasis on commercial interests, such as influencer marketing and in-app

shopping, can distort the nature of emerging communities, prioritizing monetization over meaningful interaction.

The algorithmic curation of discovery.

Discovery on social media platforms is increasingly shaped by algorithmic recommendation systems, which determine the visibility and spread of content (Napoli 2016). These mechanisms of content surfacing and exploration play a crucial role in shaping users' exposure to diverse information, ideas, and perspectives, with TikTok and Instagram's distinct approaches to discovery influencing the types of cultural products that gain traction on each platform.⁴

TikTok's content discovery approach centers on serendipitous encounters with new creators and ideas through the algorithmically curated "For You" feed. The platform's emphasis on continuous scrolling and the endless stream of personalized recommendations creates a sense of immersion and surprise, encouraging users to explore a wide range of content and communities. As CEO Shou Chew (2023b) explains, "We have given the everyday person a platform to be discovered," highlighting the democratizing potential of the platform's recommendation system.

One of the critical features of TikTok's discovery model is the idea that "anyone can go viral," regardless of their follower count or prior engagement on the platform. This democratizing narrative is reinforced by the platform's algorithmic recommendation system, which surfaces content based on mostly opaque factors, including user

⁴ While platforms frame discovery as empowering and serendipitous, it is fundamentally shaped by algorithmic systems that privilege certain content forms, creator types, and engagement styles. Discovery operates as a mechanism of control as much as exposure—one that structures attention, guides participation, and encodes platform incentives (cf. Noble 2018; Bishop 2021; Bucher 2018; Cheney-Lippold 2017). Rather than treating discovery as a neutral technical process, this study understands it as a sociotechnical system that organizes visibility and cultural relevance within platform-specific logics.

preferences, content attributes, and real-time feedback. By prioritizing the "freshness" and relevance of content over the popularity of the creator, TikTok's algorithm creates the illusion of a level playing field where any user's content has the potential to be widely seen and appreciated. This algorithmic curation is powered by the extensive data collection outlined in TikTok's privacy policy, enabling highly personalized content recommendations.

However, while this algorithmic approach can surface unexpected gems and foster a sense of shared cultural moments, it also risks creating filter bubbles (Pariser 2011), where users are primarily exposed to content that reinforces their existing preferences and worldviews. Despite these concerns, CEO Shou Chew (2023a) highlights the platform's potential for facilitating diverse content discovery, stating, "I think there's a huge benefit to the world when people can discover new things. You know, people think that TikTok is all about dancing and singing, and there's nothing wrong with that, because it's super fun..but we're seeing science content, STEM content, have you about BookTok? People are learning how to cook, people are learning about science...I think there's a huge, huge opportunity here on discovery and giving the everyday person a voice". Moreover, TikTok's discovery model reflects a broader trend towards addictive, bite-sized content consumption, which aims to keep users engaged and scrolling for as long as possible (Zeng and Kaye 2022). While users have some control over their discovery experience through features like "not interested" prompts and keyword filters, the overall design of the platform privileges continuous, passive consumption over intentional exploration and curation.

In contrast, Instagram's approach to content discovery is rooted in a combination of social graph-based recommendations and personalized exploration. While ostensibly more user-controlled than TikTok's, this approach to content discovery also shapes user experiences in powerful ways. The platform's recommendation algorithms, powered by data integration across Meta's family of apps detailed in their Privacy Policy, primarily surface content that aligns with users' established interests and social connections, creating a sense of continuity and familiarity in the discovery process. As Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri explains, the platform aims to help users "be with their close friends...and be inspired by the world around them" (Recode 2019), emphasizing the value of targeted, interest-driven exploration. This focus on interest-driven discovery is further reinforced by Instagram's marketing campaigns, such as the 'Get into ____ You Love' series, which emphasizes the platform's role in connecting users with people and things they love, fostering communities around shared passions.

Central to Instagram's discovery model is interest-based exploration and the curation of personalized content feeds. By leveraging user data and engagement signals, the platform's algorithm presents users with a tailored selection of posts, stories, and reels that match their preferences and behaviors. This personalized approach to discovery is reinforced by the platform's emphasis on hashtags and UGC, which enable users to dive deeper into specific niches and communities that resonate with their interests.

However, this personalized approach to discovery also has its limitations. By prioritizing content that matches users' existing preferences and social graphs, Instagram's algorithms may limit exposure to diverse perspectives and new ideas, reinforcing echo chambers and filter bubbles. Moreover, the platform's increasing emphasis on Reels and

its promotion of trending content within the Explore page suggests a shift towards a more TikTok-like model of continuous, algorithmically curated content consumption, potentially undermining the sense of user agency and intentionality in the discovery process.

Taken together, these findings reveal how platform infrastructures and discourses do not merely host community and discovery, but actively shape their normative contours. Where TikTok foregrounds trend-driven belonging and serendipitous visibility, Instagram frames community around personal ties and structures discovery as a reflection of user identity. This comparative approach contributes to ongoing debates in platform studies by showing how community and discovery are not platform-neutral ideals, but operationalized differently through each platform's sociotechnical environment.

Implications for social connection and cultural exposure.

The distinct ways in which TikTok and Instagram structure user experiences of community and content discovery have significant consequences for the nature of social connections and the diversity of cultural exposure on these platforms. The comparative analysis reveals that while both platforms promise to connect users and expand their cultural horizons, the specific mechanisms they employ can lead to different outcomes in terms of the depth and sustainability of social ties and the breadth and serendipity of content engagement.

On TikTok, the emphasis on participatory culture and trend-driven engagement fosters a highly dynamic, iterative, and ephemeral community. While this approach enables a sense of shared experience and cultural co-creation, it also raises questions about the depth and sustainability of the connections it facilitates. Moreover, the

platform's reliance on algorithmic curation and the pressure to create viral content can lead to a narrowing of cultural exposure and homogenization of creative expression.

The focus on designed intimacy and interest-based exploration on Instagram creates a more curated and controlled environment for social interaction and content discovery. While this approach allows for cultivating niche communities and forming affective bonds, it also risks reinforcing existing preferences and limiting exposure to alternative perspectives. However, Instagram's founder, Kevin Systrom, defensively emphasizes the platform's role in connecting users with diverse interests and experiences, stating, “The idea of Instagram is that we create something that allows them to connect with their friends, and their family, and their interests, positive experiences, and I think any criticism of building that system is unfounded” (Thompson 2017). Still, the increasing commercialization of the platform and the prominence of influencer culture can distort the nature of the emerging communities and the authenticity of the connections they enable.

Ultimately, the impact of TikTok and Instagram's community and discovery mechanisms on platformed sociality and cultural exposure is shaped by the interplay between platform design, algorithmic mediation, and user agency. As these platforms continue to evolve and adapt to changing user behaviors and business imperatives, it is crucial to critically examine how they shape our sense of belonging, our exposure to new ideas, and our participation in public discourse. By understanding these platforms' distinct characteristics and limitations, we can work towards developing more inclusive, equitable, and transparent models of digital sociality that prioritize user empowerment, diversity, and meaningful social connection.

DISCUSSION

This comparative analysis of TikTok and Instagram reveals how platform-specific configurations of discourse, design, and user practices shape distinct cultures of production. On TikTok, the construction of authenticity as raw, trend-driven, and participatory, coupled with the emphasis on algorithmic discovery and community belonging, engenders a fast-paced, remixed, and meme-oriented creative ecosystem. In contrast, Instagram's framing of authenticity as curated, aspirational, and socially rooted, combined with its focus on interest-based connection and visual aesthetics, fosters a more polished, branded, and commercially-inflected cultural landscape. These findings underscore the profound influence of platform infrastructures on the conditions of cultural production, mapping how seemingly similar platforms can foster distinct vernaculars and value systems that shape user behavior and creative expression in unique ways. Moreover, the study highlights the tensions between platform rhetoric and reality, as the promise of user agency and empowerment is complicated by the algorithmic curation, commercial imperatives, and normative pressures that structure platform participation.

Prior research has extensively theorized authenticity, creativity, community, and discovery as platformed ideals negotiated through user strategies, influencer branding, and vernacular practices—particularly on TikTok and Instagram (e.g., Marwick 2013; Abidin 2017; Burgess 2007; boyd 2010; Bishop 2021; Zulli and Zulli 2022). This study builds on that body of work by shifting analytic attention from user-side negotiation to the sociotechnical infrastructures that condition those practices. By analyzing how platforms themselves define, scaffold, and incentivize these themes through discourse,

design, and governance, the analysis reveals how user expressions of authenticity or participation are not merely emergent, but shaped by underlying platform logics. This comparative lens allows for a deeper understanding of how TikTok and Instagram differentially construct the cultural parameters within which users operate.

Proposing a Framework for Comparative Platform Analysis

To advance comparative platform studies, this paper offers this approach as a framework that integrates sociotechnical platform profiling and comparative thematic analysis. The first component involves thoroughly examining platform discourse to identify core values, norms, and expectations, coupled with an in-depth analysis of platform architectures to uncover how these values and norms are materially instantiated. By integrating these discursive and architectural analyses, researchers can create holistic profiles that capture the interplay of platform rhetoric and design.

The second component identifies four key themes that shape user experience and cultural production on each platform: authenticity, creativity, community, and discovery. By comparatively analyzing how these themes are constructed, operationalized, and incentivized—both rhetorically and materially, including through their instantiation in app UI/UX—researchers can generate nuanced insights into the ways platform-specific cultures influence user behavior, normative expectations, and creative practices.

This approach contributes to a more grounded understanding of how platform infrastructures mediate cultural production—not by abstractly enabling these themes, but by shaping the specific conditions under which they are enacted, recognized, and rewarded. The value of this framework lies in its ability to provide a replicable method for conducting in-depth, qualitative comparisons of platforms. It attends to discursive and

architectural dimensions while also generating insights into the relationship between platform rhetoric, design, and user practices. By applying it to a broader range of platform contexts, future research can contribute to a more robust understanding of how platform infrastructures shape cultural expression across diverse domains and communities. While this study foregrounds platform-side dynamics, it is complementary to—and in dialogue with—existing user-focused research that traces how individuals navigate and negotiate platform norms.

Limitations and Future Directions

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, particularly its reliance on publicly available data and the researcher's positionality as a user of both platforms. These factors may shape the interpretations and analysis presented here. I have sought to mitigate these limitations through a reflexive and multi-method design that stays rooted in the data and triangulates toward conclusions. While this study provides a robust comparative analysis of TikTok and Instagram's sociotechnical environments, it primarily relies on qualitative discourse analysis and walkthrough data based on this publicly available data. Further, it is essential to recognize that the statements and quotes from platform representatives in the media may be subject to editorial selection and framing by the media outlets themselves. This potential for mediated representation should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. Future research may combine these methods with ethnographic work, content analysis of user practices, or interviews about user experiences to better understand how different communities negotiate and navigate platform infrastructures.

Moreover, by illuminating the distinct logics and mechanisms of platform-specific cultures, this study lays the groundwork for further research into how these conditions shape the content that emerges and finds success on different platforms. Armed with a deeper understanding of how platforms structure the terms of cultural production, scholars can more effectively analyze the relationship between platform affordances, user practices, and the characteristics of viral content, popular genres, and influential creators.

By revealing the specific ways in which TikTok and Instagram shape the conditions for cultural production through their construction of key concepts like authenticity, creativity, community, and discovery, the comparative analysis in this chapter illuminates the profound influence of platform infrastructures on the norms, practices, and possibilities for creative expression in the digital age. The sociotechnical framework developed in this study provides a valuable tool for future research to unpack the complex dynamics of platform power across diverse contexts, contributing to a more granular and multi-faceted understanding of the role of platforms in contemporary culture. Crucially, by rendering visible the often-opaque logics and mechanisms that structure user experiences and cultural production on these platforms, this work opens up new avenues for analyzing and interpreting user practices and cultural production situated on these platforms. In doing so, it extends existing platform studies by moving from user-centric analyses of trend negotiation and influencer tactics to an infrastructure-oriented account of how platforms produce normative environments for culture to emerge.

CHAPTER 3: MEMETIC NEGOTIATION: STRUCTURE, AGENCY, AND PLATFORM VERNACULARS ON TIKTOK AND INSTAGRAM

INTRODUCTION

Cultural production, the creation and circulation of cultural goods, practices, and meanings, has always been mediated through institutional structures and technological forms (Bourdieu 1993). Today, this mediation increasingly happens through screens, algorithms, and digital platforms that shape how culture is created, shared, and consumed (Couldry and Hepp 2016). Rather than being mere technical tools, these platforms function as cultural architectures that actively structure the possibilities for user engagement and expression (van Dijck 2013; Gillespie 2018). Digital methods scholars have shown how these platforms create unique spaces for interaction, creativity, and community formation (Marres 2012, 2017; Rogers 2013). TikTok and Instagram exemplify this dynamic—while sharing fundamental similarities in features and massive, overlapping user bases, they have developed notably different platform cultures (Kaye et al. 2022; Leaver et al. 2020). This distinctiveness, despite technical convergence, raises crucial questions about how platforms shape cultural production and why similar features can produce such different cultural environments.

As platforms increasingly share technical features and affordances (the possibilities for action that a technology enables or constrains), understanding their cultural differences requires looking beyond surface-level functionality. Chapter Two demonstrated how platforms actively construct distinct cultural environments through their specific approaches to key themes like authenticity, creativity, community, and discovery. These constructions emerge through the complex interplay of app design,

marketing, media coverage, public discourse, and platform communications, creating distinct conditions for cultural production even when technical features appear similar.

Within these conditions, memetic practices—the iterative creation and transformation of shared cultural forms—emerge as particularly revealing sites of platform engagement. Unlike individual posts or casual interactions, memetic practices represent systematic, recurring patterns of content creation that demonstrate how users learn to work within platform environments effectively. Because these practices develop collectively and get refined over time through repeated iteration, they offer unique insight into how users understand and respond to platform-specific features and constraints. Through studying memetic practices, we can observe patterns of cultural production that persist even as technical features converge across platforms.

These patterns of memetic practice raise a central question: How do users navigate and reshape these conditions through their creative practices? To answer this, I introduce the framework of **Memetic Negotiation**, drawing on Hall's (1973) insight that meaning emerges through active processes of negotiation within existing power relations and on the concept of platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al. 2015)—systematic ways users develop of "speaking" platform languages. Through this lens, I examine how users collectively navigate constitutive constraints (Juarrero 2023), the foundational characteristics that both limit and enable certain forms of expression, through their memetic practices - the iterative, collaborative processes of creating, sharing, and engaging with digital content

My analysis identifies three types of memetic vernaculars that emerge as users address key dialectical tensions: **Participatory** vernaculars that balance individual

expression with collective belonging, **Performative** vernaculars that navigate authenticity and strategic self-presentation, and **Creative** vernaculars that negotiate innovation within platform convention. These negotiations produce distinct strategies I term Calibrated Authenticity, Networked Individuality, and Constrained Creativity, showing how users work within platform constraints while maintaining creative agency. This paper thus contributes to our understanding of digital cultural production by (1) offering a framework for analyzing how users navigate platform cultures through memetic practices, (2) providing comparative analysis of these practices on TikTok and Instagram, and (3) extending cultural production theory to address the complex interplay of structure and agency in the platform era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Cultural Production to Platform Vernaculars

The emergence of social media platforms represents a fundamental shift in how cultural production is structured and mediated. Early theoretical work emphasized how institutional power and social hierarchies created distinct "rules of the game" that shaped creative expression (Bourdieu 1993), with formal gatekeepers and networks of cooperation determining what cultural goods could be produced and circulated (Becker 1982). The rise of digital media disrupted these hierarchies by enabling participatory culture (Jenkins 1992; Jenkins, Ito, and boyd 2015), where users could actively create and share content through collaborative networks. This shift marked a fundamental blurring of traditional producer-consumer roles, enabling greater user-driven innovation.

Yet platforms like TikTok and Instagram fundamentally reshape how users create and share content. Unlike previous digital environments that simply provided tools for

participation, these platforms actively structure creative possibilities through their technical features, governance systems, and cultural expectations (Poell et al. 2022). Their specific configurations of features and rules deeply influence how users can express themselves (van Dijck 2013a; van Dijck 2013b; Gillespie 2018), creating distinct environments for cultural production that persist even as technical features become increasingly similar across platforms. Platforms embed expectations about what constitutes valuable content, shaping not just how users create but what they choose to create (Plantin et al. 2018).

Within these structured environments, users develop what Gibbs et al. (2015) term "platform vernaculars"—systematic ways of "speaking" the cultural language of each platform. These vernaculars emerge as users collectively learn to navigate platform-specific features and constraints, developing shared practices that become recognizable ways of engaging within each platform's unique environment. Building on this concept, Chapter Two demonstrated how platforms shape these vernaculars through their distinct approaches to four fundamental themes: Authenticity, Community, Discovery, and Creativity. We see this in how TikTok centers authenticity on spontaneous self-expression while Instagram frames it through careful curation, or how creativity manifests as participatory remixing on TikTok versus aesthetic innovation within established conventions on Instagram.

These platform-specific constructions of core themes create distinct conditions for cultural production. They shape not just what content users create, but how they engage with platform features and with each other. For instance, TikTok's approach to community revolves around participation in shared trends and challenges, fostering

vernaculars that emphasize collective creativity. In contrast, Instagram's community model focuses on building meaningful connections through pre-existing networks, encouraging vernaculars that balance personal expression with audience expectations. These differences persist even as the platforms' technical features become increasingly similar.

Understanding how these distinct cultural environments emerge despite technical convergence requires examining how platform vernaculars develop in response to specific platform conditions. Therefore, I ask:

RQ1: How do TikTok's and Instagram's specific constructions of Authenticity, Creativity, Community, and Discovery create distinct conditions that shape memetic cultural production?

Navigating Platform Conditions

Understanding how these platform-specific constructions shape cultural production requires examining the specific mechanisms through which users navigate them while maintaining creative agency. Davis (2020) provides a crucial framework through her reconceptualization of affordances for complex sociotechnical environments. Rather than viewing affordances as simple enablers or constraints, her 'mechanisms and conditions' framework shows how platform features operate through varied forms of influence—requesting, demanding, encouraging, allowing, or refusing particular actions. These mechanisms vary in strength based on conditions like users' perception of features, their dexterity in using them, and their cultural legitimacy to do so. Affordances are dynamic, not static (Nagy and Neff 2015), with their impact shaped by users' skills, cultural context, and platform changes. Users' ability to leverage platform features effectively depends not just on technical capability but on their understanding of and legitimacy within platform-specific cultural contexts.

While affordances reveal how platforms enable action, constitutive constraints — fundamental limitations that are built into a platform's very architecture—play an equally important role in shaping cultural production. Recent scholarship has moved beyond viewing such constraints as purely restrictive, showing how they actively define the contours of cultural practice (Bucher and Helmond 2018). Users collectively develop systematic strategies for navigating these constraints and affordances, often in response to fundamental tensions within platform environments—between individual expression and collective belonging (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Bennett and Segerberg 2011; Couldry 2015; Simmel 1971; Tavory and Goodman 2009; Zerubavel and Smith 2010), authentic self-presentation and strategic performance (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013; van Dijck 2013a; Erickson 1995; Goffman 1959; Gran 2025; Hogan 2010), or creative innovation and established convention (Bourdieu 1993; Burgess 2006; Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg 2019). Following Burgess (2006), we can observe how these strategies manifest in specific forms of visual storytelling (Leaver et al. 2020) and distinctive styles of memetic communication (Milner 2016), transforming platform limitations into opportunities for cultural expression.

This collective development of navigation strategies transforms the relationship between platform structures and user practices. What begins as individual experimentation with features becomes shared cultural knowledge as users observe, adapt, and refine successful approaches. Through this process, the navigation of platform affordances and constraints becomes a form of cultural production itself, where users' creative engagement with features, algorithms, and interfaces actively shapes platform cultures (van Dijck 2013a). The resulting practices often demonstrate sophisticated

balance between conforming to platform expectations and creatively extending their possibilities (Baym 2015). Therefore, I ask:

RQ2: How do users on TikTok and Instagram navigate platform-specific affordances and constraints through their creative practices?

Memetic Practices and Platform Patterns

This study examines culturally significant memetic practices as sites where platform navigation becomes most visible. While users engage in many forms of content creation—from personal documentation to commercial content—memetic practices demonstrate particularly systematic engagement with platform affordances and constraints (Wiggins and Bowers 2015). These practices involve intentional replication and transformation of shared cultural forms (Shifman 2013), revealing how users collectively develop strategies for working within platform environments. Importantly, these vernaculars often emerge as users navigate and negotiate the platform-specific constructions of Authenticity, Community, Creativity, and Discovery, as outlined earlier. For example, performative vernaculars frequently show users strategically managing self-presentation to align with or subvert platform-specific notions of authenticity.

Not all platform activity qualifies as memetic practice under this framework. Posting personal photos, sharing status updates, or engaging in casual conversation may involve platform features but lack the systematic patterns of replication and transformation that characterize memetic practices. For example, while posting a vacation photo on Instagram uses platform affordances, creating a "starter pack" meme that deliberately employs the carousel feature to critique cultural patterns represents the kind of practice this study examines. Similarly, while casual TikTok videos may use platform

features, practices like "duet chains" that systematically leverage collaborative features to create new meaning exemplify culturally significant memetic activity.

These practices represent what de Certeau (1984) terms 'tactical' engagement with institutional structures - systematic ways users transform institutional constraints into resources for creative expression. Such tactics become particularly visible in memetic practices, where users must actively navigate platform-specific features and limitations while developing shared approaches to content creation.

These patterns of memetic adaptation extend beyond Western contexts. Gabriele de Seta's (2018) work on vernacular creativity in Chinese digital media illustrates how users develop culturally-specific 'tactics' for navigating platform constraints, creating distinctive memetic practices shaped by both technical affordances and cultural context. These non-Western examples reveal how platform vernaculars develop through interaction between global platform architectures and local cultural frameworks.

While focusing on memetic practices necessarily excludes other important forms of platform engagement, this approach allows us to examine how users collectively transform platform constraints into opportunities for creative expression. By analyzing how similar memetic practices manifest differently across platforms despite comparable technical features, we can better understand how platform-specific conditions fundamentally shape cultural production. Therefore, I ask:

RQ3: How do memetic practices exemplify users' negotiation of platform-specific forces, and what does this reveal about the influence of differential platform constructions on cultural production?

In short, I offer **Memetic Negotiation** as a framework for understanding how users develop platform vernaculars—shared cultural languages of practice—in response to the conditions they encounter within platform environments. These vernaculars emerge

through collective navigation of key dialectical tensions: between individual expression and collective belonging, between authentic self-presentation and strategic performance, and between creative innovation and platform convention. Through comparative analysis of memetic practices on TikTok and Instagram, I demonstrate how these negotiations produce distinct resolutions—what I term Networked Individuality, Calibrated Authenticity, and Constrained Creativity. These resolutions reveal how creativity emerges not despite platform constraints but through users' collective development of sophisticated strategies for working within and against platform structures. The following section outlines the fundamental platform characteristics that create conditions for these negotiations.

Platform Fundamentals

While the cultural constructions of authenticity, creativity, community, and discovery provide the thematic framework for the findings, the platform fundamentals outlined here complement that framework by adding structural and operational context. These foundational observations are not arguments based on data but establish shared terms and starting points for the analysis. The following table summarizes TikTok and Instagram's critical technical, structural, and cultural characteristics (c.f. Kaye et al. 2022; Leaver et al. 2020).

Dimension	TikTok	Instagram
Primary Function	Short-form video-sharing platform optimized for mobile use.	Visual media-sharing platform combining photos, videos, and text-based content.

Content Formats	Vertical short videos (up to 10 minutes, typically under 60 seconds).	Photos, carousels, Stories, Reels.
Discovery Mechanism	Algorithmic recommendations on the "For You Page."	Explore Page, hashtags, and follower networks.
Engagement Features	Duets, Stitches, "Use This Sound," likes, comments, shares.	Likes, comments, shares, Stories replies, hashtags.
Media Creation	In-app video editing tools with filters, effects, text overlays, audio integration.	In-app photo/video editing tools with filters, cropping, text overlays.
Social Connections	Driven by trending sounds, challenges, public participation.	Driven by followers, likes, and comments on profiles.
Feed Structure	Infinite scroll with algorithm-driven "For You Page."	Multimodal: main feed, Stories, and Explore Page.
Temporal Orientation	Ephemeral trends and short-term content cycles.	Mixed: ephemeral Stories and persistent grid posts/carousels.
Audio Integration	Central; users select sounds from a curated library.	Optional; audio accompanies videos but is secondary.
Constitutive Constraints	<p>Camera-first interface privileges spontaneity; vertical immersion fosters intimate viewing.</p> <p>Time-based constraints compress content; trend cycles create urgency.</p>	<p>Gallery-first interface privileges curation; grid layout enables portfolio coherence.</p> <p>Space-based constraints expand content; archive persistence fosters consistency.</p>

Affordances	Requesting: Trend participation, sound use. Demanding: Rapid adaptation, multimodal integration. Encouraging: Remixing, collective participation. Allowing: Creative manipulation, cultural borrowing. Refusing: Long-term permanence, external linking.	Requesting: Visual coherence, profile curation. Demanding: Aesthetic consistency, ongoing engagement. Encouraging: Narrative building, community interaction. Allowing: Storytelling, cross-platform identity. Refusing: Direct remixing, random discovery.
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Table 3: Fundamental Characteristics of TikTok and Instagram

This table will be referenced throughout the findings section as a descriptive baseline to illustrate how TikTok and Instagram’s unique affordances, constraints, and logics intersect with user practices. Together with the cultural constructions from the earlier stage of this research, these fundamentals provide the groundwork for understanding platform-specific dynamics.

METHODS

This study employs a three-stage methodological approach grounded in Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) (Altheide 1987), which embraces the reflexive and iterative nature of ethnographic inquiry rather than treating data collection and analysis as separate phases. The stages progress from digital ethnography with research personas to systematic documentation of memetic practices, and finally to multimodal analysis of how platform conditions shape these practices. Throughout, the analysis treats

content analysis as a form of fieldwork that helps delineate patterns of human action within platform environments.

Digital Ethnography

Digital ethnography emphasizes experiencing digital cultures from users' perspectives (Kozinets 2019; Pink et al. 2016), allowing observation of memetic practices as they naturally occur within these platforms through documentation of behaviors, content creation styles, and interactions. This immersive approach simulates how users encounter and navigate platform conditions, foregrounding what Christin (2020) calls algorithmic triangulation: using algorithmic feeds not just as opaque black boxes, but as productive mediators of fieldsite access and variation.. To systematically observe both platforms, I developed five distinct personas (Duguay and Gold-Apel 2023) (Table 4) representing different demographic backgrounds, interests, and engagement patterns - following Dieter et al.'s (2019) application of the concept within App Studies. These personas were not only designed to vary social markers but also to reflect differences in how users are positioned within the visibility hierarchies shaped by algorithmic systems—a dynamic Hutchinson (2019) explores through his concept of digital first personalities, where platform prominence emerges through interplay between identity, influence, and automation.

Name	Demographics	Interests	Usage Patterns	Rationale
Jamie Torres	Male, Los Angeles, 24,	Pop Culture, Memes,	Consumes content to stay	Examines negotiation of platform

	White, Creative Industry	Music, and Movies	informed and entertained about pop culture and memes.	vernaculars in mainstream media and creative expression, relevant to memetic engagement in popular culture.
Lily Nguyen	Female, Rural Midwest, 16, Vietnamese, High School Student	STEM, robotics, environmental activism, digital art	Uses social media as a learning tool and to explore diverse interests	Represents digital learning and interest-driven exploration, crucial for understanding creativity and discovery themes.
Mia Chen	Female, NYC, 22, Puerto Rican, College Student	Fashion, pop culture, social events	Keeping up with trends and events	Provides insight into practices around social curation and community dynamics, helping to analyze themes of authenticity and community.
Amara Davis	Female, Chicago, 58, Black, Retired Teacher	Social justice, family wellness, DIY crafts	Engages with social justice causes, shares wellness tips, connects with retirees and organizers	Adds perspective on social advocacy and collective cultural production, illustrating community building and collective narratives.
Darnell	Male, Austin,	Tech trends,	Uses	Highlights creative

Rodriguez	35, Hispanic, Software Developer	career development, Afro-Latino culture	platforms for professional networking, following tech trends, and engaging with cultural topics	practices around adaptation of platform affordances for career development and cultural expression.
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Table 4: Research Personas

I maintained an active presence on both platforms for each persona for six weeks between September 1 and October 27, 2024, dedicating two hours daily to each platform. To ensure consistent access and maintain separation between personas, each was used in a profile container on a dedicated Samsung A14, connected through a multihop VPN via Surfshark, and registered using individual ProtonMail accounts. This technical setup allowed me to simulate experiencing the platforms as distinct users would, encountering different content recommendations and user communities based on their simulated interests and engagement patterns.

During this immersive observation, I maintained detailed field notes documenting the types of content each persona interacted with, the specific affordances and constraints encountered, and the observable patterns in user behavior and content creation. Particular attention was paid to identifying practices that demonstrated (1) platform-specific constructions of authenticity, creativity, community, and discovery as sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1954); (2) user navigation of platform affordances and constraints; and (3) the collective development of platform vernaculars. These observations were then used to strategically select information-rich cases with strong comparative potential,

ensuring that the chosen memetic practices could effectively illustrate the dynamics of cultural production and negotiation across both platforms. The data from each persona was triangulated with data from other personas and with insights from different data sources (e.g., field notes, scraped metadata) to enhance the credibility of emerging patterns and ensure a robust understanding of user practices across various demographics.

Data Collection

The ethnographic observation revealed dozens of potential memetic practices for analysis. To ensure the analytical rigor of the project, I employed theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2006), a type of purposive sampling that aligns with the theoretical goals of the study. This involved deliberately seeking out information-rich cases (Sandelowski 1995) that capture the diversity and complexity of memetic engagement on each platform while offering strong comparative potential. Guided by my theoretical framework of memetic vernaculars and constitutive constraints and the sensitizing concepts identified in prior research, I selected five practices per platform that best exemplified how platform conditions shape cultural production while offering clear opportunities for cross-platform comparison. Rather than selecting the most popular or viral practices, I prioritized those that showed nuanced negotiation between platform structures and user creativity—practices where users demonstrated sophisticated engagement with platform features while sometimes pushing against platform-imposed limitations. This approach ensured the analysis could reveal both platform-specific patterns and broader insights about digital cultural production. ECA's iterative and reflexive nature allowed for continuous evaluation of these practices as data were gathered, ensuring that the emerging patterns were systematically compared and verified during collection and interpretation.

For each identified practice, I employed a multi-stage sampling strategy to ensure comprehensive and systematic data collection. Initial searches using platform-specific features (hashtags, sounds, filters) yielded approximately 2500 examples per practice. These larger initial samples were then reduced to 150 examples per practice using *4CAT*'s (Peeters and Hagen 2022) random sampling function. Finally, manual review eliminated duplicates, non-English content, and examples that did not clearly demonstrate the practice in question, resulting in 50-100 examples per practice suitable for in-depth analysis. As part of this manual review, I used maximum variation sampling (Patton 2014) to select content representing different facets of each memetic practice.

Data collection utilized a combination of tools to ensure systematic documentation. *Zeeschuimer* (Peeters 2024) enabled targeted scraping of videos and associated metadata, *4CAT* supported data organization and visual analysis, and *Python* scripting was used to download and archive the content itself. To create visual summaries of the selected practices, I employed *ffmpeg* for frame extraction, *ImageJ* to generate visualizations, and *Canva* to assemble figures. These tools allowed for systematic analysis of visual patterns across datasets, highlighting recurring aesthetic features and their alignment with platform-specific constraints and affordances.

Analysis and Theory Building

The analysis began with descriptive coding (Saldaña 2021), which focused on cataloging the basic characteristics of each memetic practice. This included documenting the technical elements (platform features used, video structure), visual elements (aesthetic style, composition), and interactive elements (engagement patterns, comments). This

descriptive coding provided a foundational understanding of the "building blocks" of each practice and facilitated comparison across practices and platforms.

Next, thematic coding was employed to identify patterns and themes that aligned with the sensitizing concepts —authenticity, creativity, community, and discovery. This involved examining how each practice reflected or resisted platform-specific constructions of these themes. Beyond these initial themes, the analysis also employed open and axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998) to identify emergent patterns and concepts, using a multimodal approach (Kress 2010; Kress and Leeuwen 2001) to examine how the different modes (visual, textual, auditory) interact to create meaning. Open coding involved a line-by-line analysis of each practice, generating initial codes that captured distinct aspects of the practice (e.g., "subversive humor," "emotional vulnerability," "aesthetic experimentation"). These codes were then grouped and refined through axial coding, which focused on identifying relationships between codes and developing higher-level conceptual categories. This iterative process of coding and categorization allowed for the identification of key patterns in how users navigate and negotiate platform conditions and resolved tensions that users experience, such as between trend conformity and innovation. A codebook can be found in Appendix D.

Throughout the coding process, constant comparison and reflexive memoing (Glaser and Strauss 1967) were used to refine the emerging themes and concepts. This involved comparing codes and categories within and across practices and platforms to identify similarities, differences, and relationships. This comparative analysis was crucial for understanding how platform conditions shape memetic practices and how users navigate these conditions.

Other Considerations

Ethically, this study uses only publicly available content with no identifiable private information and a preference for including only posts from users who do not have a reasonable expectation of privacy as per AoIR Ethics Guidelines (franzke et al. 2020). In selecting case examples, I prioritized public-facing, widely circulated content—especially from creators with professional or promotional profiles—and avoided content from private accounts or individuals who could be reasonably assumed to expect limited visibility. Where content raised concerns about vulnerability, searchability, or user identifiability, I paraphrased, generalized, or excluded the example. Usernames were included only when content was already widely circulated and shared in a self-promotional context Reflexivity was embedded throughout via memo-writing and triangulation to consistently reflect on potential researcher biases and validate findings through multiple methods. Finally, positionality was addressed by using diverse research personas to simulate varied user experiences, helping to mitigate the influence of my background and broaden the perspectives captured during the analysis.

FINDINGS

Through ethnographic observation and analysis of memetic practices on TikTok and Instagram, three fundamental dialectical tensions emerge as central to how users navigate platform environments. These tensions—between individual expression and collective belonging, authentic self-expression and strategic performance, and creative innovation and established convention — represent enduring challenges in social life that are intensified by platform-specific configurations of features, affordances, and constraints. These tensions are not new, but the affordances and algorithmic structures of

platforms like TikTok and Instagram intensify and reconfigure them, creating conditions that fundamentally reshape how individuals and communities interact. Understanding how users navigate these amplified tensions is crucial for grasping the evolving dynamics of cultural production in the platform era, where structure and agency continuously intersect in novel and unpredictable ways. Given this, I introduce the concept of ‘memetic negotiation’ to describe how users engage with these tensions, transforming platform constraints into opportunities for creative and cultural production.

Memetic negotiation unfolds through platform vernaculars—shared sets of practices that allow users to navigate the specific affordances and constraints of TikTok and Instagram. These vernaculars are not passive adaptations but proactive cultural strategies, transforming platform limitations into modes of collective expression. Each type shows how users transform platform constraints into possibilities for cultural expression while navigating the platforms' distinct constructions of authenticity, creativity, community, and discovery. The following sections examine each type in detail, presenting platform-specific practices as evidence of how users collectively develop these shared strategies for cultural production. An overview of the memetic practices selected for each platform can be found in Tables 5 and 6.

Dreamcore and Liminal Spaces: characterized by surreal, nostalgic, or unsettling visuals that evoke liminal spaces and dreamlike states. Content often includes distorted imagery, lo-fi aesthetics, and ambient or eerie soundtracks.

Corecore: involves compiling a series of disparate video clips—often from

<p>movies, news footage, personal videos, and other TikToks—set to emotionally resonant music. The montages aim to evoke profound emotional responses.</p>
<p>Serialized Worldbuilding: features recurring characters and narratives. This often spins up fan accounts and commentary, resulting in shared fictional universes that evolve over time.</p>
<p>Subversive Metacommentary: content that satirizes TikTok trends, influencer culture, or societal norms. Through absurdist skits, parody, and meta-commentary, they critique and subvert expectations, often highlighting the performative nature of social media.</p>
<p>Subtle Foreshadowing: takes videos of a dramatic or funny event and splices the ending or punchline throughout the recording. This technique disrupts traditional narrative structures by repeatedly inserting the climax into the buildup, creating a chaotic and humorous effect.</p>

Table 5: Selected Memetic Practices from TikTok

<p>Strategic Imperfection: aesthetically pleasing content that strategically includes candid, "imperfect" photos within carousels or photo dumps. Also, it could be like a random piece of media, photo of a screen, or something like that injected.</p>
<p>Meme Accounts and Shitpost Aesthetics: employs low-resolution images,</p>

distorted graphics, and absurd or ironic humor—collectively known as the shitpost aesthetic. Niche local accounts focus on region-specific jokes, enhancing community relevance.
Digital Art Community Practices: community-driven practices such as participating in art challenges, sharing work-in-progress posts, collaborating on artworks, and providing educational content.
Political Education through Infographics: informational content on political and social issues using visually appealing infographics, multi-slide carousels, and text-heavy stories.
Starter Packs: a meme format consisting of collages that humorously depict stereotypes, archetypes, or common experiences through a collection of images, text, or emojis.

Table 6: Selected Memetic Practices from Instagram

Participatory Vernaculars: Negotiating Individual and Collective Expression

Participatory vernaculars emerge from the collective efforts of users to create, engage with, and expand cultural narratives within the affordances and constraints of platform environments. These vernaculars reflect how individual users navigate the tension between self-expression and community belonging, using the tools and features specific to each platform to foster participation that is simultaneously personal and shared. The following sections explore how users employ participatory vernaculars on

TikTok and Instagram to negotiate their identities and relationships within these digital spaces.

Serialized worldbuilding on TikTok.

Serialized worldbuilding extends Henry Jenkins' (2006) influential concept of transmedia storytelling into TikTok's unique participatory ecosystem. Unlike traditional transmedia franchises controlled by media conglomerates, TikTok creators develop complex storylines through distributed authorship and collaborative participation, a sort of 'distributed storytelling' (Literat and Glăveanu 2018). Within an environment that privileges spontaneity and trend-driven engagement (Table 3), creators develop complex storylines that unfold across multiple accounts and videos. The practice is distinctive in how it turns apparent constraints—short video lengths, ephemeral trends, algorithmic unpredictability—into advantages for sustained narrative development. Through strategic navigation of these conditions, creators maintain individual artistic vision while fostering deep audience engagement, demonstrating how participatory vernaculars can emerge even within a platform that seems to discourage long-form storytelling.

The interconnected content across three accounts (*veronika_is_cool*, *kylerchazzz*, and *nevermindpod*) exemplifies this skilled manipulation of platform conditions. A simple scene of Kyle playing guitar while Veronika sings (Figure 5, Row 1) shows masterful deployment of TikTok's demands for multimodal integration and unscripted moments. The performance appears spontaneous, yet subtle breaks—a hidden smile, a moment of shared recognition—create deliberate spaces for audience interpretation. These moments of ambiguity—Are Kyle and Veronika actually together? Is this

performance art or reality?—are not bugs but features, transforming passive viewing into active meaning-making.

The narrative deepens through increasingly complex engagement with platform affordances. When Veronika stages an elaborate fake date (Figure 5, Row 2), her awkward interactions with the clearly paid date and poorly hidden attempts to ensure Kyle notices become carefully crafted invitations for audience participation. The New Year's kiss sequence (Figure 5, Row 3) further demonstrates how individual narrative choices create opportunities for collective emotional investment. Most fascinating is how the practice evolves into distributed storytelling, as revealed in my ethnographic notes about the "stalker" subplot:

"Eventually, this supposed fan shows up again in future videos in a creepy way – like he is stalking them, but he keeps showing up... The 'tell' here that this is all part of the universe is that if this were strictly a real tour announcement video, they would not post the one where they got interrupted, but they do – it is for a strategic storytelling reason."

The practice navigates the individual/collective tension through thoughtful manipulation of authenticity markers. Creators leverage TikTok's duet and stitch capabilities to enable fan participation (Figure 6) while maintaining narrative control. When fans compile moments of Kyle calling Veronika beautiful or creators playfully answer relationship questions ("sometimes"), these interactions maintain productive ambiguity even as audience investment deepens. Even promotional materials (advertised as "together forever") play with this tension. Fan-created content ranges from emotional "fancams" celebrating the relationship ("she fell first but he fell harder") to elaborate explanations of "the lore" for newcomers—demonstrating how deeply viewers invest in collective meaning-making while creators retain authorial agency.

Far from limiting creativity, the constraints here become the very tools that enable innovative storytelling in serialized worldbuilding. The opportunity to explore the story from multiple accounts provides followers with diverse perspectives to explore while the unpredictability of the algorithm keeps audiences engaged in the process of shared discovery. Even the time limits and demands for authenticity are transformed into narrative assets, allowing creators to craft ambiguity that draws viewers deeper into the story. Serialized worldbuilding emerges as a distinctly TikTok-native form of cultural production, a testament to how participatory vernaculars can alchemize apparent limitations into complex, collectively engaged storytelling.



Figure 5: Episodic Worldbuilding on TikTok via Veronika and Kyle

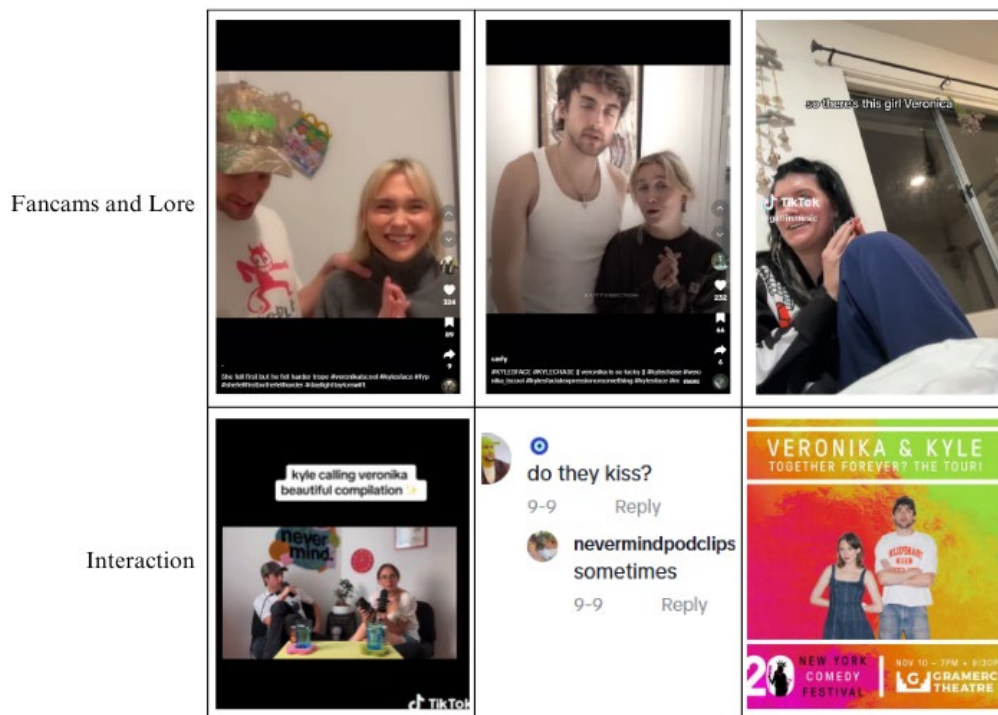


Figure 6: Worldbuilding via meta-engagement with Veronika and Kyle

Subtle foreshadowing on TikTok.

Subtle foreshadowing represents a distinctive reframing of TikTok's constitutive constraints around temporality and audio-visual integration (Table 3). While the platform's time limits and editing features might seem to privilege straightforward narratives, creators use these very conditions to develop a practice that deliberately disrupts linear storytelling. The practice requests viewer attention through strategic disruption, but this request depends heavily on creators' dexterity with timing and editing. Cultural legitimacy comes from skillful manipulation of expectations - the format encourages playful subversion while discouraging straightforward narrative. By splicing climactic moments into the buildup of their videos, creators turn TikTok's emphasis on quick engagement into an opportunity for layered narrative experiences that depend on

collective anticipation and shared cultural literacy.



Figure 7: Frame-by-frame timeline for original vs. edited versions

Figure 7⁵ demonstrates this careful manipulation of platform conditions through comparative visualization. The original version (bottom row) shows a straightforward sequence—a dog at the top of a playground slide, building to a chaotic but humorous fall. This follows the classic viral formula: build-up, tension, payoff. However, the "subtle foreshadowing" version (top row) infuses this simple sequence with narrative complexity by weaving frames of the inevitable fall throughout the buildup. The tension is not in what happens—viewers are already in on that—but in how the creator manipulates expectations. Using TikTok’s editing tools, creators blur the distinction between build-up and payoff, creating a layered narrative that makes viewers complicit in the humor.

This remixing represents a collective meaning-making that is uniquely suited to TikTok's emphasis on trend participation and algorithmic flow. As captured in my ethnographic notes: "It is all about knowing it is coming—the repetition makes you feel like you are part of the group, like you are sharing in the joke rather than just witnessing it." Creators apply this technique across content types—from reality TV moments to mundane encounters—but always maintain the core function: transforming individual

⁵ A rotated version of this figure also appears as Appendix E.

moments into shared cultural experiences through strategic narrative manipulation. Through careful editing choices—frame selection, splice timing, audio cues—creators blur the distinction between build-up and payoff, making viewers complicit in the humor. The audience knows what is coming because the creator wants them to know, changing passive viewing into active participation.

The practice addresses the individual/collective tension through immediate rather than prolonged engagement. Unlike serialized worldbuilding's extended character arcs, subtle foreshadowing generates connection through instant recognition and shared anticipation. This vernacular depends on a community that knows the punchline but eagerly awaits its unfolding; it is both collaborative and iterative, thriving on TikTok's algorithmic emphasis on remixing and repetition. Each creator's choices—when to foreshadow, which frames to splice, how often to disrupt—become forms of cultural expression that gain meaning through collective engagement. Viewers' comments, remix responses, and emotional reactions turn these individual edits into community artifacts.

We see here how temporal constraints can enable rather than restrict participatory innovation. By analyzing these videos and their presentation, we see creators actively contributing to a shared vernacular that affirms community through familiar structures while enabling creative manipulation. The result is a form of cultural production that transforms passive viewing into active participation—an invitation to understand, anticipate, and enjoy collectively. Through this practice, users skillfully develop cultural forms that could only emerge from TikTok's particular configuration of features, demonstrating how participatory vernaculars can turn technical constraints into opportunities for immediate collective experience.

Digital art community practices on Instagram.

Digital art community practices demonstrate how creators turn Instagram's emphasis on visual polish and portfolio development into opportunities for collective learning and creation. While the platform's grid layout and aesthetic demands (Table 3) might seem to privilege individual showcase over community engagement, artists leverage these conditions to develop rich practices of process-sharing and collaborative creation. Through strategic use of Reels and carousels, creators turn Instagram's emphasis on visual documentation into a participatory vernacular that balances individual artistic development with community building.

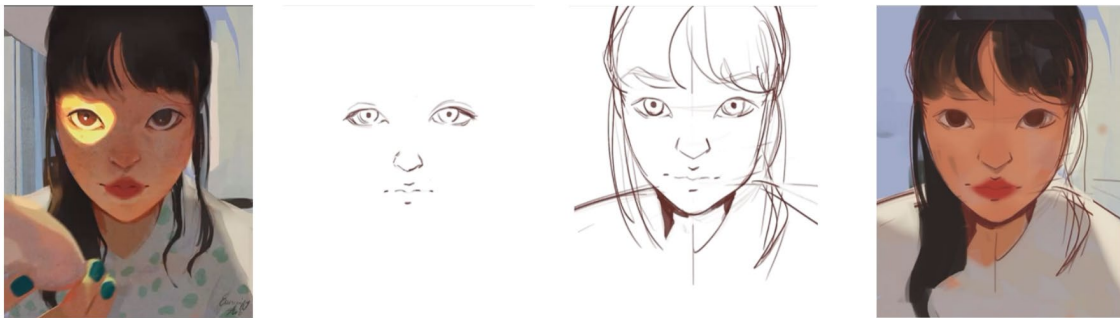


Figure 8: Timelapse showing drawing process on Instagram Reels.

The practice manifests most clearly in artists' use of Reels to showcase creative process. Figure 8 exemplifies this thoughtful engagement with platform conditions, displaying frames from a timelapse of portrait development—starting with the completed drawing and then revealing the entire creation sequence. By using Instagram's multimodal affordances, artists use individual creative acts as shared learning experiences. My ethnographic notes revealed a consistent theme of exposing imperfection deliberately, captured in one user's comment: "I love that they show everything, even the corrections they made. Makes me feel like I could get there too."

This transparency transforms Instagram's demand for aesthetic polish into an opportunity for collective skill development, as creators use technical features to bridge the gap between polished outcomes and messy processes.

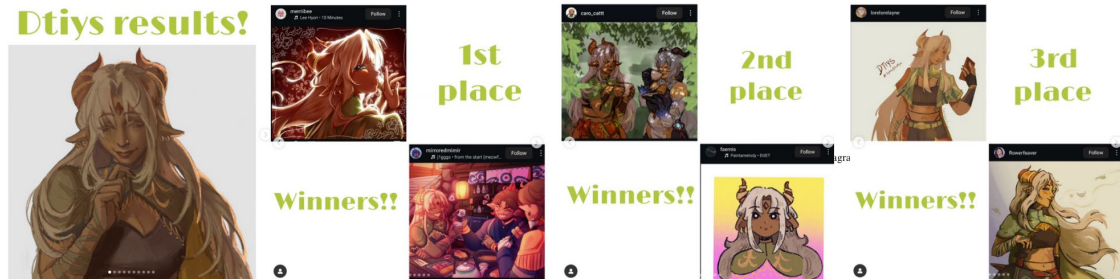


Figure 9: Carousel showing results of a 'DTIYS' contest

The "Draw This In Your Style" (DTIYS) challenges highlight how creators leverage Instagram's emphasis on visual coherence for community building. Figure 9 shows a carousel of DTIYS submissions featuring varied interpretations of an initial character, labeled with first, second, and third place. Artists create a shared reference point—the original image—as a cultural anchor for subsequent creativity. As one participant noted: "I wanted to keep the overall vibe of the original but add my own twist—it was so fun seeing how everyone else did the same!" The carousel feature enables presentation of multiple iterations, showcasing collective creativity while maintaining individual artistic voice. This structure uses Instagram's portfolio emphasis as a framework for collaborative artistic development.

The practice navigates the individual/collective tension through strategic manipulation of Instagram's visual architecture. Recognition and visibility become community resources rather than merely individual achievements. Contest winners gain exposure while contributing to an evolving artistic dialogue. The platform's persistent content format enables sustained engagement with process and technique, creating what

my notes identify as "learning portfolios" rather than only the showcases for artist skill and experience that they initially seem to be. Even Instagram's emphasis on aesthetic consistency becomes an advantage as artists develop techniques for maintaining distinctive styles while participating in collective challenges.

Often seen as limiting, Instagram's constraints around visual presentation become the fertile ground from which vibrant artistic communities grow. The platform's emphasis on polish serves as a shared standard that artists can rally around, using it as a foundation for collective skill development. The grid layout, rather than a restriction, becomes a canvas for visual dialogue and collaboration. And the demand for aesthetic consistency, far from stifling individuality, provides a framework for artists to balance personal expression with communal participation. In this way, Instagram's specific configuration of features gives rise to a unique form of community-driven cultural production through this vernacular.

Political education via infographic on Instagram.

Political education through infographics reveals how users take Instagram's emphasis on visual coherence and narrative sequencing and use it as a tool for collective action. While the platform's constraints around hyperlinking and its demands for aesthetic polish and textual succinctness (Table 3) might seem to limit activist messaging, creators develop practices that turn these apparent restrictions into advantages for movement building. This reflects what Tufekci (2017) terms networked protest and Papacharissi's (2015) affective publics, where emotional resonance and design strategy together drive engagement and civic learning. Through strategic manipulation of carousel posts and visual design, they craft a participatory vernacular that balances compelling presentation

with political mobilization and uses infographics and carousels to translate complex socio-political issues into shareable, visually compelling slides.

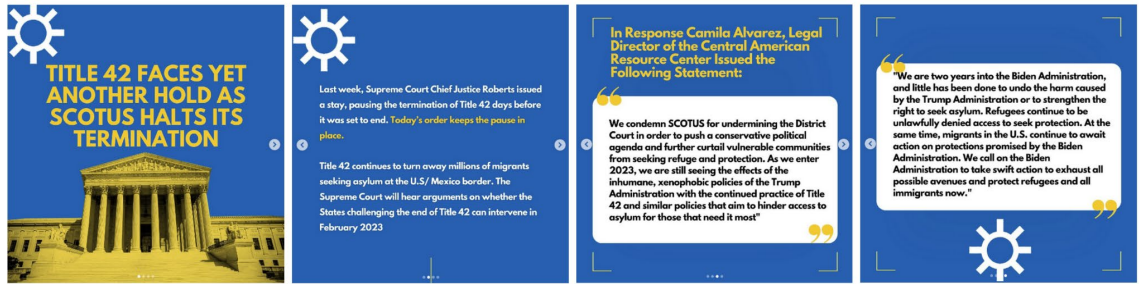


Figure 10: Carousel from Central American Resource Center sharing information about Title 42.

The Central American Resource Center's Title 42 carousel (Figure 10) uses bold typography, strategic color schemes, and visual hierarchy to maintain clarity while enabling easy sharing. These are not merely aesthetic choices—they represent the careful transformation of Instagram's demands for visual polish into tools for political communication. By breaking complex political messages into visually appealing slides, creators develop strategies for political education that work within and against platform constraints. The format demands both informational accuracy and aesthetic appeal - creators must possess dexterity in translating complex ideas into accessible visuals.

My ethnographic observations reveal how creators adapt traditional activist aesthetics to platform conditions: *"People are definitely mapping physical aesthetics onto a digital platform—flyers, posters, and protest graphics all make their way here, even with impractical features like QR codes that cannot be scanned directly from a phone."* Rather than accepting platform limitations, creators develop sophisticated workarounds—from strategic "link in bio" deployment to carefully crafted call-to-action slides that can be shared onto Stories with hyperlink buttons. These techniques turn Instagram's

constraints around external linking into opportunities for layered engagement that spans digital and physical spaces.

The practice navigates the individual/collective tension through sophisticated balancing of authenticity and authority. Posts must simultaneously convey authentic community concerns and project the credibility needed to drive collective action. From congressional office graphics declaring "Title 42 must end" to grassroots illustrations asking "How do I uninstall Zionism?", creators craft visuals that build legitimacy while maintaining emotional resonance. When commenters note "I printed these and put them up at my school—hope it helps!", they demonstrate how platform-specific vernaculars can catalyze real-world action. The practice thus resolves the tension between individual expression and collective mobilization by using Instagram's visual constraints as resources for movement building.

Thus Instagram's constraints on visual presentation and external linking, seemingly limiting to political communication, are made into unexpected assets here. The platform's insistence on aesthetic polish becomes the bedrock for crafting compelling political narratives, while the limitations of the carousel format are reimagined as opportunities for delivering systematic, bite-sized education. Even Instagram's notorious restrictions on external links are repurposed as a catalyst for developing self-contained, highly shareable political content. The result is a form of cultural production that, while attuned to the needs of diverse political causes, is uniquely adapted to the specific affordances and constraints of the Instagram platform.

Performative Vernaculars: Authenticity and Strategic Presentation

Performative vernaculars emerge as users navigate the central dialectical tension between authentic self-expression and strategic performance. These vernaculars are not simply about showing who users are; they are about performing roles that audiences find relatable, aspirational, or emotionally compelling while carefully curating the image they present. On TikTok, performative vernaculars often leverage emotional depth and shared vulnerability, creating content that feels intimate and sincere, even though strategically constructed. On Instagram, the performative strategies emphasize the calculated curation of "imperfections" to signal authenticity beneath a polished aesthetic. The following sections explore how users employ these performative vernaculars to negotiate the complex demands of visibility, sincerity, and audience expectations, revealing how these platforms' constructions of authenticity shape user behavior.

'Corecore' montages on TikTok.

Corecore on TikTok is an emotional montage practice that draws heavily on TikTok's affordance of shared audio to create layered, nostalgic, and often ironic storytelling, tapping into algorithmic demands for high emotional resonance while leveraging trending sounds for community-driven meaning-making (see Table 3). The clips that comprise these videos are rarely original; instead, they are repurposed media carefully edited together for maximum emotional resonance. This mode of emotional montage resonates with what Bhandari and Bimo (2022) call the algorithmized self—a subjectivity shaped through strategic, emotionally expressive interactions with platform infrastructures. Corecore is an opportunity for strategic juxtaposition of repurposed media, part of a performative vernacular that balances raw emotion with careful curation.

Figure 11 reveals how this practice navigates the boundaries between sincerity and irony. The "Hidden Pain" montage (top row) exemplifies intentional deployment of platform affordances, juxtaposing clips of women laughing about men's emotional stoicism with images of men in moments of deep vulnerability. By leveraging TikTok's rapid editing features and sound integration (Table 3), creators use sharp tonal shifts to underscore the dissonance between dismissive phrases like "I'm fine" and visual evidence of genuine distress. This layering of humor and pain, punctuated by platform-specific editing tropes, performs an emotional authenticity that critiques societal expectations while remaining culturally native to TikTok.

The practice demonstrates increasing sophistication through varied emotional registers. The "Smile for No Reason" montage (middle row) presents a straightforward celebration of everyday joy, while "Be the Light for Others" (bottom row) transforms mundane acts of kindness into profound moments of connection. By re-contextualizing familiar clips within consistent emotional tones, creators position happiness and care as universal experiences while maintaining the raw, unfiltered quality that TikTok privileges. These montages reveal how corecore operates as a performative vernacular—using platform affordances to craft emotional experiences that balance sincerity with strategic assembly.

Corecore navigates the authenticity/performance tension through clever manipulation of familiar media. Rather than creating original content, corecore creators tap into collective cultural memory, using shared reference points to generate emotional resonance. This strategy turns TikTok's emphasis on trending sounds and remixing into a tool for emotional expression. The platform's short-form nature forces emotional

compression, while its editing features enable sharp tonal shifts that feel both jarring and meaningful. Even the practice of repurposing familiar content becomes an advantage as creators leverage cultural literacy to enhance emotional impact.

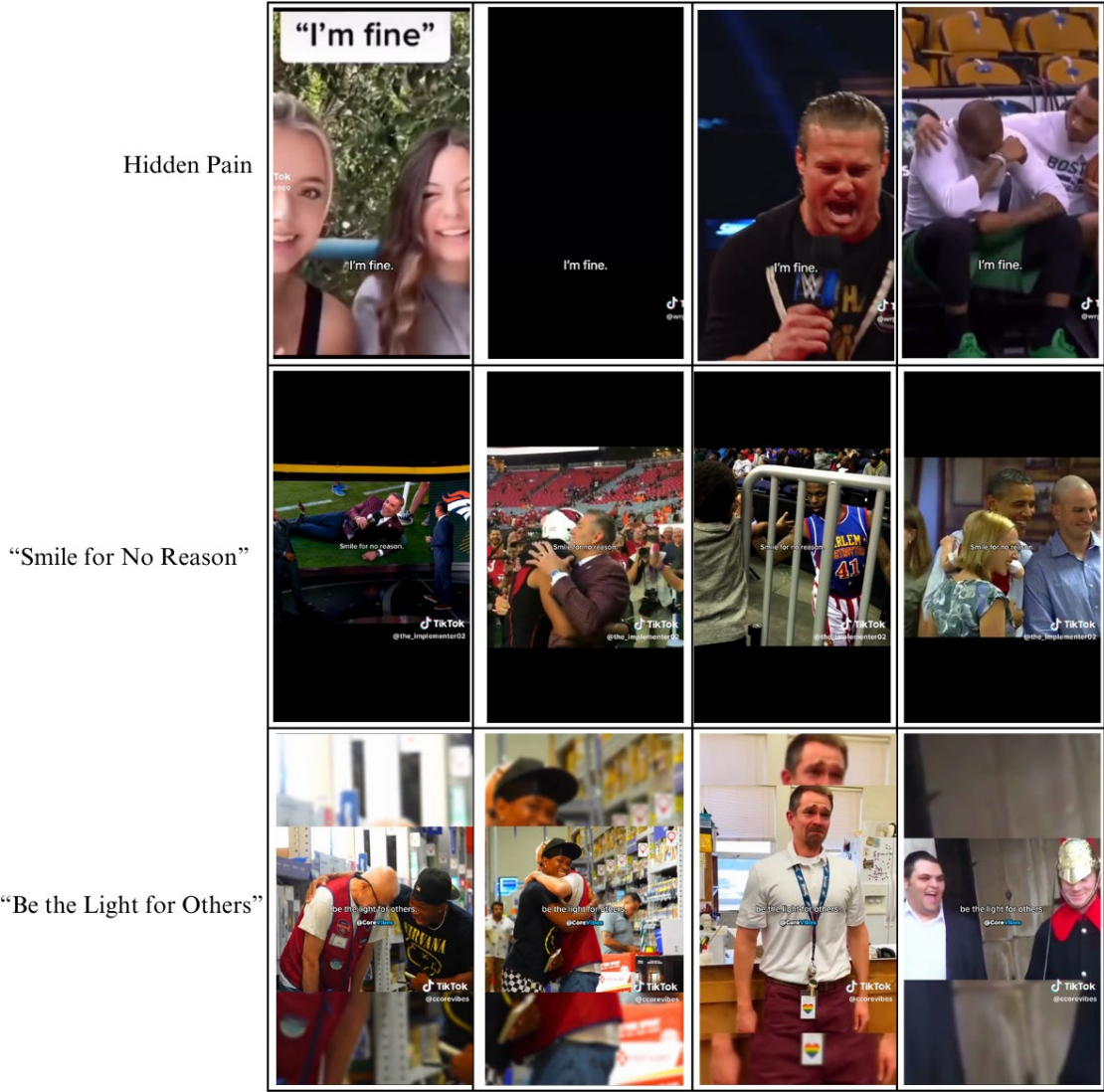


Figure 11: Various approaches to ‘Corecore’ on TikTok

The constraints TikTok imposes on video length and sound design, far from limiting emotional expression, are precisely what give corecore its profound affective

depth. The platform's emphasis on quick engagement becomes a tool for punctuating emotional beats, while the demands of multimodal integration open up possibilities for layered, multidimensional meaning-making. Corecore thus emerges as a form of performative authenticity that is uniquely native to TikTok's specific configuration, a vivid demonstration of how vernacular creativity can make technical limitations into expressive resources.

Strategic imperfection on Instagram.

Strategic imperfection on Instagram manifests through carousels and photo dumps that balance the platform's request for aesthetic consistency with moments of strategic authenticity, leveraging persistent and ephemeral formats to construct a curated-yet-imperfect visual identity. In this, we see how users transform Instagram's demands for aesthetic consistency and visual coherence (Table 3) into opportunities for calibrated authenticity. The term draws on Abidin's (2016) concept of *calibrated amateurism*—a strategic performance of imperfection by professional creators—but extends it beyond influencer contexts to capture a broader vernacular response to platform-driven authenticity constraints (see also Abidin 2023). This practice extends Marwick's (2013) concept of 'edited authenticity' by strategically deploying what Tiidenberg and Baym (2017) identify as a kind of controlled vulnerability within Instagram's specific visual architecture. While the platform's emphasis on polish and portfolio development might seem to preclude genuine expression, creators develop practices that turn these very constraints into advantages for strategic self-presentation.

Figure 12⁶ exemplifies this thoughtful navigation of platform conditions through actor Rachel Sennott's (@treaclychild) carousels. These sequences juxtapose carefully curated, aspirational imagery with intentionally imperfect elements—blurry selfies, humorous nonsequiturs, unflattering shots (highlighted by red boxes). These disruptions are not failures of curation but complicated performances of authenticity that turn Instagram's emphasis on polish into opportunities for connection. As my ethnographic notes observe: "Stepping outside of norms after demonstrating mastery of them indicates something and gives interpretation cues." By first establishing command over Instagram's aesthetic expectations, creators earn the credibility to strategically break them.

The carousel format proves crucial to this vernacular, allowing creators to layer multiple images oscillating between perfection and imperfection. Rather than simply presenting unfiltered reality, these posts acknowledge the constructed nature of Instagram personas while inviting followers into a kind of shared performance. When Sennott includes an awkward smile, evidence of acne, or bizarre non sequitur screenshot within an otherwise polished sequence, she is not just humanizing her image—she is demonstrating sophisticated understanding of how authenticity operates within Instagram's specific conditions. Cultural legitimacy requires dexterity in maintaining aesthetic standards while strategically breaking them - the format encourages calculated vulnerability while discouraging genuine disorder.

⁶ A rotated version of this figure also appears as Appendix F

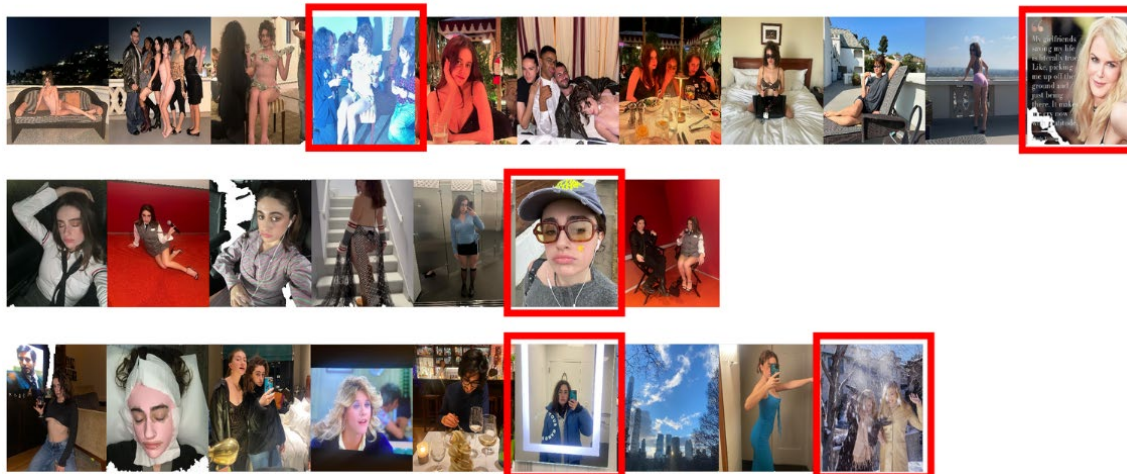


Figure 12: Strategic imperfection in Rachel Sennott's (@treaclychild) carousel posts

The practice navigates the authenticity/performance tension through careful calibration of polish and disruption. Unlike TikTok's raw emotional performances, authenticity on Instagram emerges through strategic imperfection—demonstrating mastery of platform conventions precisely to break them. An unflattering selfie amid fashion-forward images or a random meme within professional shots does not diminish glamor but works alongside it to craft a persona that is simultaneously aspirational and approachable. This strategy turns Instagram's emphasis on curation into a tool for performing relatable authenticity.

Instagram's cultural and structural constraints around visual presentation are subverted by the practice of strategic imperfection to create spaces for authentic expression. The platform's emphasis on aesthetic perfection becomes the very standard from which creators can artfully deviate, while the rigid structure of the grid layout is repurposed as a stage for crafting narrative contrast. Even Instagram's demand for consistency across posts is repurposed as a tool for calculated disruption, allowing creators to engineer "authentic" moments within curated feeds. The result is a form of

performative authenticity that could only arise within Instagram's specific ecosystem, a testament to the power of vernacular innovation to repurpose technical constraints as resources for nuanced identity work.

Creative Vernaculars: Innovation within Convention

Creative vernaculars emerge as users navigate the tension between innovation and convention. These vernaculars represent more than simple content creation; they demonstrate how users develop sophisticated practices for pushing creative boundaries while working within platform-specific constraints. On TikTok, where creativity is constructed as participatory and remixable, these vernaculars often manifest through subversive play with platform conventions, creating new meanings by manipulating familiar forms. On Instagram, where creativity is tied to aesthetic polish and personal branding, creative vernaculars emerge through the careful evolution of established formats, transforming visual constraints into opportunities for innovation. The following sections explore how users employ these creative vernaculars to negotiate the complex demands of originality and recognition, revealing how platform-specific constructions of creativity shape the possibilities for cultural production.

Subversive metacommentary on TikTok.

TikTok's encouragement of participatory remix culture and algorithmic emphasis on trending content (Table 3) create a fertile ground for the emergence of creative vernaculars that subvert platform conventions and challenge viewer expectations. Through practices such as absurdist skits, genre parodies, and self-aware metacommentary, users navigate the tension between innovation and convention, recontextualizing familiar formats as vehicles for critical reflection and creative

expression. These performances illustrate what Phillips and Milner (2017) describe as ambivalent internet culture, where irony and critique operate through deep engagement with platform norms – a creative vernacular that uses platform literacy itself as a source of innovation. The format demands cultural literacy - creators must possess deep perception of platform conventions to subvert them effectively.

Figure 13 reveals three distinct approaches to subversive play with platform conventions. The "Business Bro" parody (top row) exemplifies manipulation of TikTok's participatory affordances, with creator Harris Alterman inhabiting the trope of the overconfident motivational influencer to dispense nonsensical business advice. Rather than simply mocking the format, Alterman demonstrates perfect command of its conventions—upbeat background music, casual staging, earnest delivery—while using this mastery to expose the vacancy of influencer wisdom. The parody works precisely because it maintains technical sophistication while unraveling content expectations.

The practice demonstrates increasing complexity through varied subversive strategies. The "Did you know that...?" series (middle row) initially presents as an insider revelation about a secret basketball court in the Empire State Building, delivered with exaggerated authority before the creator breaks character to admit, "I'm a liar. Just like my father." By perfectly executing TikTok's informational video conventions before deliberately dismantling them, the creator exposes how easily platform formats can clothe fiction in credibility. Similarly, the heckler interaction video (bottom row) escalates from a standard comedy club confrontation to an absurd wrestling match, amplifying the spectacle inherent in TikTok's conflict-driven content while revealing its constructed nature.

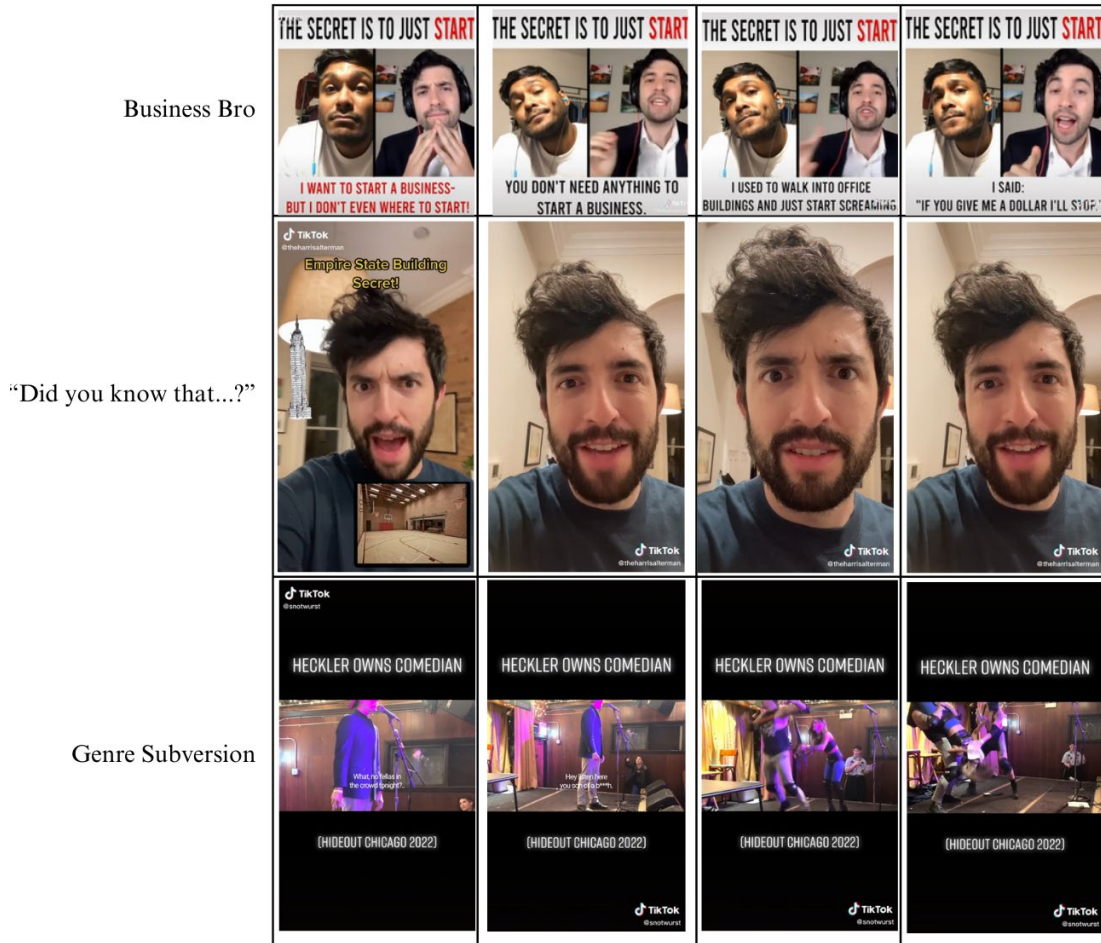


Figure 13: Three approaches to subversive metacommentary

The practice navigates the innovation/convention tension through masterful platform literacy. Creators do not simply reject trending formats but inhabit them so completely that new meanings emerge through strategic manipulation. For instance, another series from Alterman features "man on the street" style interviews that maintain all familiar conventions while having each respondent bizarrely respond to questions about their celebrity lookalike as "Susan." The format is recognizable, but the content deliberately unravels platform expectations. These practices require deep understanding of TikTok's conventions while fostering this literacy in others, taking shared knowledge of platform norms as opportunities for collective critique.

TikTok's constraints on content creation, particularly its emphasis on trending formats, become unexpected catalysts for creative innovation in the vernacular of subversive metacommentary. The very rigidity of familiar TikTok formulas becomes the foundation upon which creators build subversive play, while the algorithmic amplification of conventions is hijacked as a means of disrupting those very conventions. Even the platform's collaborative features are repurposed as tools for mounting collective critiques. Subversive humor of this style thus emerges as a distinctly TikTok-native form of creative expression, one that demonstrates the remarkable capacity of vernacular creativity to transform the limitations of a platform into resources for incisive cultural commentary.

Dreamcore and liminal spaces on TikTok.

Dreamcore and Liminal Spaces content reveals how creators turn TikTok's demands for rapid engagement and multimodal integration into tools for generating uncanny affects. While the platform's emphasis on quick recognition and trending sounds (Table 3) might seem to preclude atmospheric depth, users develop practices that turn these features into advantages for psychological disruption. Through strategic manipulation of familiar elements, they craft a creative vernacular that uses platform conventions to destabilize rather than reinforce cultural expectations.

The practice thrives on specific technical manipulation of TikTok's affordances—rapid video splicing, nostalgic filters, audio layering—to craft content that feels simultaneously immersive and elusive. Creators show scenes familiar in tone but unrecognizable in specifics: empty school hallways at night, disorienting indoor play areas, and suburban landscapes in uncanny hues. Each scene engages the tension between

cultural recognition and innovative disruption, using platform features to make the familiar strange. This aesthetic builds upon Fisher's (2012) notion of hauntology, where cultural memory and dislocated time evoke emotional estrangement, and Thacker's (2011) idea of horror as thought, using platform-native visuals to generate affective unease.

The chromatic analysis in Figure 14 reveals the collective development of what we might call a grammar of the uncanny. The concentration of certain hue frequencies shows how creators leverage familiar color patterns while introducing strategic disruptions that generate emotional resonance. Warm oranges and yellows evoke nostalgic comfort, while sudden shifts to cooler blues and violets create subtle destabilization. These are not merely individual artistic choices but collectively developed techniques for manipulating viewer affect. As particular innovations prove effective—like using compression artifacts to enhance visual uncertainty or layering environmental sounds with distorted music—they become part of a shared vocabulary that other creators adopt and refine.

The practice navigates the innovation/convention tension through a sort of negotiated uncanniness. Creators demonstrate an understanding of audience expectations, knowing precisely how to balance comforting nostalgia with unsettling disruption. A melancholy piano track might play over increasingly impossible architecture, or childhood sound effects might accompany spaces that slowly reveal their unreality. Each innovation builds on previous work as creators observe what resonates with viewers and incorporate successful techniques into their own experiments. The result is a collectively developed language for manufacturing uncanny affects within platform constraints.

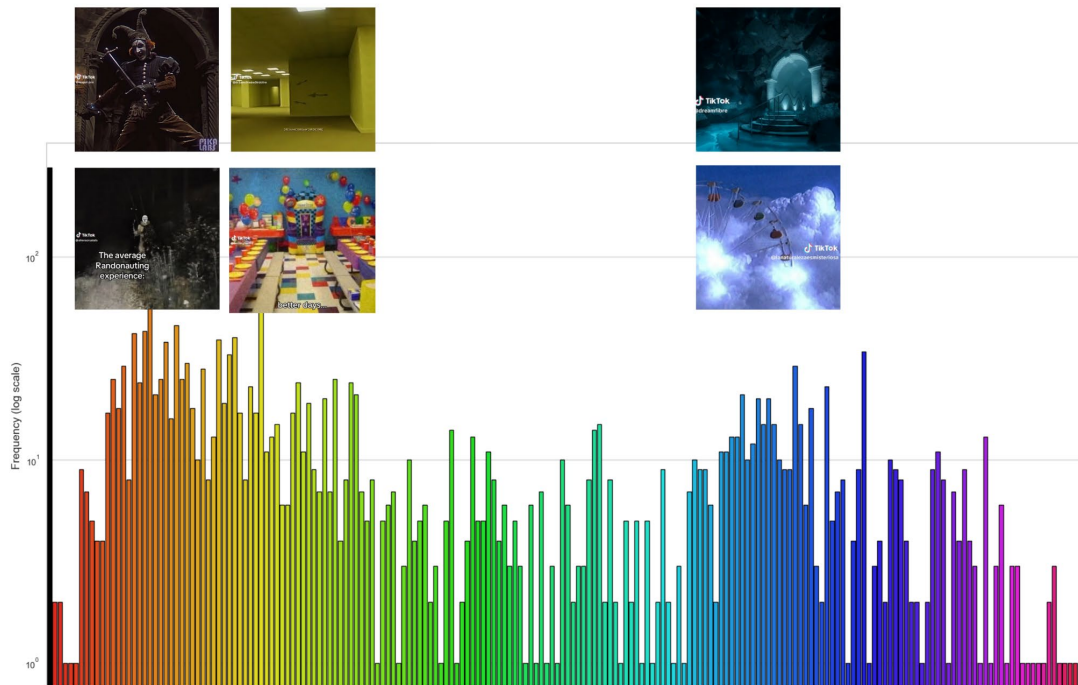


Figure 14: Median hue frequency for all frames within the Dreamcore / Liminal corpus

The constraints TikTok places on content recognition and user engagement, seemingly inimical to atmospheric storytelling, are precisely what give the dreamcore and liminal spaces vernacular its immersive psychological depth. The platform's emphasis on familiarity becomes the ground upon which creators stage strategic moments of destabilization, while the pressure for quick engagement is transformed into an opportunity for engineering jarring affective shifts. Even the mechanics of trending content are repurposed as a means of developing and iterating on shared techniques of perceptual disruption. Dreamcore thus emerges as a uniquely TikTok-native form of creative expression, one that testifies to the power of vernacular innovation to alchemize a platform's constraints into tools for profound psychological impact.

Meme accounts and shitpost aesthetics on Instagram.

Meme accounts and shitpost aesthetics on Instagram use the platform's request for high-engagement content to create an art form that leverages the affordances of niche community-building, persistent formats, and shareable carousels, creating a blend of irony, humor, and relatability that encourages interaction across follower networks (Table 3). Instagram's construction of creativity as tied to aesthetic polish and personal branding might seem to preclude more experimental forms of expression. Yet, through practices like intentionally "sloppy" memes and shitpost aesthetics, users make these apparent constraints into opportunities for creative innovation. Shitpost aesthetics on Instagram resonate with established scholarship on ironic and ambivalent forms of digital humor (Phillips and Milner 2017), highlighting similar dynamics of playful boundary-testing and irreverent platform critique. They also reflect what Douglas (2014) terms internet ugly—an aesthetic that embraces visual messiness and low-effort design to challenge dominant standards of polish. The aesthetic encourages subversion of Instagram's polish, but this encouragement depends on creators' perception of appropriate boundaries. The aesthetic encourages subversion of Instagram's polish, but this encouragement depends on creators' perception of appropriate boundaries.

Meme creators on Instagram embrace the platform's emphasis on visual aesthetics by doing the opposite: adopting low-quality, "sloppy" edits as a deliberate aesthetic choice and leveraging the tension between polish and imperfection as a medium for cultural production. Figure 15 reveals how creators strategically subvert these expectations. The Dr. Pepper meme (third panel) exemplifies manipulation of platform affordances through intentionally messy execution—visible cropping marks, distorted

colors, and mismatched text. These imperfections are not failures but carefully crafted elements that enhance meaning by challenging Instagram's emphasis on polish. Similarly, cyberia.mp3's pairing of a blurry Family Guy image with an Albert Camus quote (first panel) creates deliberate dissonance, inviting users to question the value Instagram places on highbrow content by embedding it within intentionally low-effort aesthetics.



Figure 15: Meme accounts and shitpost aesthetics

The practice demonstrates increasing sophistication through hyperlocal engagement. Accounts like ‘darkmetairiecouncil’ enhance community bonds through region-specific references intentionally opaque to outsiders. Their roof diagram featuring the "eggroll house" (second panel) uses a very minor local “landmark” for both in-joke and critique, incorporating bureaucratic language to mockingly "regulate" neighborhood

architecture. This hyperlocal approach recontextualizes Instagram's emphasis on broad appeal into opportunities for building cultural specificity.

The practice navigates the innovation/convention tension through deep platform literacy. Creators do not simply reject Instagram's aesthetic norms but demonstrate mastery precisely to subvert them. Many adopt unconventional naming conventions and numbering systems ("image 3621/9999"), signaling deep familiarity with platform governance while developing survival tactics against algorithmic suppression. Even a Maslow's Triangle parody (sixth panel) – replacing hierarchy needs with "forehead kisses from a oh shit wrong triangle" and “mistakenly” using the soil triangle rather than Maslow’s – demonstrates how creators build layered critique through deliberate misuse of established forms.

Unlike TikTok’s emphasis on participatory remix, Instagram’s meme culture uses platform constraints to develop shared techniques that turn subversion into a creative resource. These creators do not just resist Instagram’s polished norms; they use the platform’s affordances and limitations to craft an aesthetic that rewards insider knowledge, builds community, and critiques the platform itself. Through careful manipulation of platform expectations, Instagram meme accounts reveal how constraints can enable new forms of artistic expression, transforming the act of subversion into a sophisticated practice of cultural production. These emergent creative forms are not just a reaction against Instagram’s aesthetic polish—they represent a unique vernacular that could only arise from Instagram’s configuration of features, affordances, and social expectations.

Starter packs on Instagram.

Starter packs reveal how creators transform Instagram's emphasis on visual organization and portfolio coherence into tools for precise cultural observation. While the platform's rigid grid layout and aesthetic demands (Table 3) might seem to limit creative flexibility, users develop practices that turn these very constraints into advantages for nuanced social commentary. Through strategic adherence to strict visual conventions, they craft a creative vernacular that uses format stability as a foundation for innovative observation.

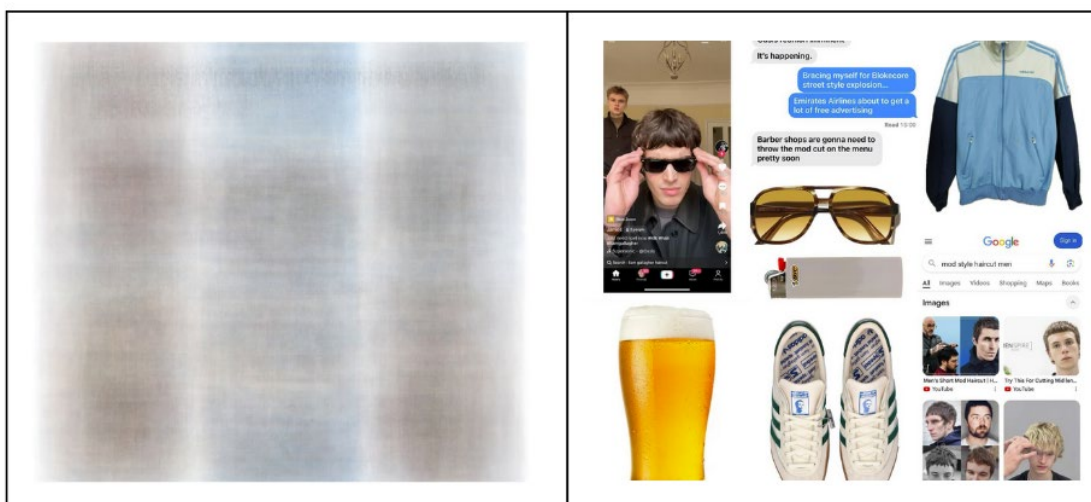


Figure 16: Composite image of 'starter pack' corpus created by average intensity projection set next to an example from @starterpacksnyc

Figure 16 demonstrates this manipulation of constraint through a fascinating duality. The composite image reveals remarkably stable formal conventions—consistent column-based layout, standardized visual elements, and characteristic placement of text and images. Yet within these rigid parameters, creators achieve innovation through increasingly precise cultural observation. Rather than broad stereotypes, we see hyper-specific phenomena like "brat summer for boys who bring their hinge dates to the same

place where they drink beers with the 'lads'"—a level of specificity that turns conventional format into creative opportunity.

The practice demonstrates evolution through collective refinement. Early starter packs documented broad cultural categories (e.g. “hipsters drinking PBR”), using Instagram's visual emphasis to capture obvious "types." Contemporary practitioners demonstrate how format stability enables rather than restricts innovation. By maintaining consistent visual architecture while pushing toward ever more precise social observation, creators use Instagram's constraints as advantages for cultural commentary. The format's predictability becomes a foundation for increasingly complex analysis.

The practice navigates the innovation/convention tension through strategic manipulation of standardized elements. The inclusion of blue iMessage bubbles exemplifies this sophistication—by evoking private conversations, creators transform Instagram's emphasis on visual documentation into opportunities for perceived intimacy. Similarly, hyper-specific cultural references tap into platform dynamics, encouraging audience engagement through tags and shares as users eagerly identify themselves within precise descriptions. This demonstrates how creators do not simply adapt to platform affordances but develop vernaculars that turn Instagram's emphasis on identity and connection into creative opportunities.

Instagram's rigid constraints around post formatting are changed into powerful resources for keen social observation in the starter pack vernacular. The platform's insistence on visual consistency becomes the bedrock for developing precise, almost scientific forms of cultural documentation, while the inflexible structure of the grid layout is reimagined as a template for mounting standardized critiques. Even Instagram's

engagement metrics are repurposed as tools for collective cultural reflection, allowing creators to gauge the resonance of their observations with the broader community. Thus, the starter pack emerges as a uniquely Instagram-native form of creative expression, demonstrating the remarkable capacity of vernacular innovation to use a platform's limitations as instruments for incisive social analysis.

DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals how users develop distinct vernaculars to navigate platform conditions, transforming technical and cultural constraints into opportunities for creative expression. Through systematic comparison of memetic practices on TikTok and Instagram, we see how similar technical features produce different cultural outcomes through collective processes of negotiation. This extends our understanding of digital cultural production by showing how creativity emerges through users' active negotiation of platform conditions rather than through simple adaptation to technical affordances.

Each type of vernacular demonstrates how platform-specific conditions shape the resolution of key tensions in digital cultural production. In doing so, the analysis synthesizes and builds on existing theoretical work, extending—but not duplicating—prior conceptualizations.

Participatory vernaculars illustrate what I term *Networked Individuality*—the capacity to maintain a recognizable creative voice while participating in collective meaning-making. This concept extends Barry Wellman's (2001) "networked individualism" yet shifts the emphasis from ego-centered social ties to the expressive strategies through which creators render themselves legible inside constantly shifting memetic flows. On TikTok, where algorithmic volatility can fragment audience-creator

connection, users convert that very unpredictability into a resource for distributed storytelling, stitching episodic plots and recurring characters across dispersed content streams. Instagram, by contrast, leverages the persistence of the grid and archive: creators refine collectively shared editing techniques, color palettes and caption rhetorics, turning curation into a site of shared craft development. Across both platforms, technical constraints therefore shape—but never fully determine—the tension between individual voice and collaborative participation.

Performative vernaculars reveal platform-specific approaches to *Calibrated Authenticity*—strategic self-presentation that balances genuine expression with platform-specific expectations. This concept extends but departs from earlier notions such as calculated authenticity (Duffy 2017), calibrated amateurism (Abidin 2017), and staged authenticity (MacCannell 1973), by emphasizing the interplay of expressive control and interface constraints in everyday memetic content. On TikTok, where rawness and immediacy are often valorized, users construct sophisticated emotional narratives through edited imperfection—strategically manipulating found footage, filters, and audio to perform a sense of spontaneity. On Instagram, where aesthetic coherence and polish dominate, users achieve authenticity through intentional deviations: blurry carousels, overexposed selfies, or awkward poses that signify “realness” within an otherwise curated feed. Rather than resisting platform norms, users selectively inhabit them to stage intimacy and emotional truthfulness. In both cases, authenticity is less a departure from platform norms than a finely tuned inhabitation of them—a learned grammar for staging emotion within the technical and social parameters of each site.

Creative vernaculars produce different manifestations of *Constrained Creativity*—innovation that emerges through, rather than despite, platform limitations. This builds on concepts like circumscribed creativity (Gans 1974; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011) but retools them for the dynamic, participatory context of social media production. TikTok’s short-form length, duet templates and in-app editing tools channel experimentation into compression, cascade and remix: creators synchronize visual punchlines and sonic drops inside strict temporal envelopes. Instagram’s comparatively rigid visual regime—grid symmetry, caption formatting and carousel sequencing—stimulates metatextual play: serial posts that loop, glitch or parody the platform’s own visual codes become critiques articulated through its affordances. Across both sites, constraint operates as scaffolding; creators exploit imposed boundaries to forge distinctive aesthetics, shared techniques and emergent genres, demonstrating that digital cultural production is structured—never simply stifled—by the architectures that host it.

The role of constraint in fostering creativity has long been recognized—from studies of artistic innovation emerging from material limitations (Stokes 2005) to examinations of how creative breakthroughs arise from navigating competing demands (Csikszentmihalyi 2013). These platform-specific resolutions demonstrate how classic tensions in cultural production manifest in digital environments – revealing how vernaculars emerge through active negotiation rather than passive adaptation, and extending Gibbs et al.’s (2015) concept of platform vernaculars to show how they develop through collective practice. Users collectively develop ways to transform platform constraints into creative resources, as individual experiments with features become shared cultural knowledge. The persistence of platform-specific patterns, even as

technical features converge, demonstrates how cultural production depends on more than available features. When platforms adopt each other's capabilities—Instagram's Reels or TikTok's extended video lengths—users adapt these features to fit existing vernaculars rather than simply adopting new practices. This extends cultural production theory by showing how creativity emerges through systematic and tactical engagement with platform constraints rather than resistance to them.

This analysis suggests two provocative implications. First, vernaculars operate as interconnected components of platform-specific cultural systems, where each type enables and constrains others' evolution based on platform conditions. Understanding these ecological relationships could reveal how platforms foster distinct cultural grammars—integrated systems of meaning-making that are more than the sum of their constituent practices. Second, increasing technical convergence may actually intensify cultural distinctiveness, as users' systematic negotiation of platform-specific conditions becomes even more central to establishing unique creative environments. These implications underscore the importance of studying platforms not only for their technical features but for the complex interplay of cultural practices that define their distinctiveness.

The focus on memetic practices as a lens for understanding these dynamics offers both advantages and limitations. While memes provide particularly clear examples of how users collectively negotiate platform conditions, supporting Shifman's (2013) emphasis on their cultural significance, they represent only one subset of platform activity. Future research might examine how other forms of content creation demonstrate similar or different patterns of negotiation. Similarly, while TikTok and Instagram offer

compelling cases for comparison due to their converging features and distinct cultures, examination of additional platforms could reveal other patterns of vernacular development. The decision not to include engagement metrics, while allowing focus on creative practices themselves, leaves questions about how audience response shapes vernacular evolution.

This study contributes to platform studies and cultural production theory in three key ways. First, it demonstrates how users develop systematic approaches to platform navigation through collective practice, extending beyond individual adaptation to show how shared creative strategies emerge. Second, it reveals how similar technical features can produce different cultural outcomes through user negotiation, helping explain persistent platform differences despite technical convergence. Third, it offers the framework of memetic negotiation for understanding how creativity emerges through rather than despite platform constraints, showing how users transform limitations into resources for cultural expression.

The findings in this chapter underscore the vital role users play in shaping platform cultures through collective creative practice. As platforms continue to evolve and converge technically, understanding how vernaculars develop and adapt reveals not just the constraints and affordances of these platforms, but the sophisticated ways users actively construct cultural meaning. The memetic negotiation framework illuminates how creativity in the platform era emerges as a collaborative process, turning structural limitations into spaces for innovation and expression.

CHAPTER 4: MEMETIC TRANSLATION: PLATFORM CONDITIONS AND CREATIVE ADAPTATION ACROSS TIKTOK AND INSTAGRAM

INTRODUCTION

In early 2025, as the U.S. government moved toward implementing the TikTok ban, a wave of speculation followed. The platform, home to millions of creators and an intricate cultural ecosystem, faced imminent removal from the American social media landscape. Public discourse quickly settled into two dominant narratives: TikTok’s core functions could either be seamlessly substituted by switching to an existing platform or they could be easily cloned by a new one.

The substitution assumption framed the problem as a simple platform switch—*“Just post on Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts instead.”* Tech publications (Malik 2025) cataloged alternatives: Reels, Shorts, Snapchat Spotlight, Lemon8, Triller, and Likee. While these articles noted differences, they shared an underlying belief that TikTok’s creative culture could transplant elsewhere with minimal disruption. Commenters on Facebook (NPR 2025) echoed this logic, with one suggesting that switching platforms was trivial (*“One station goes offline, change to another channel and move on”*).

The clone assumption took this further: if TikTok were banned, someone could just rebuild it. The idea gained traction on social media, where TikTok’s success was framed as replicable:

“There’s no way it’s that hard for US people to build a couple TikTok clones, right?” (@enggirlfriend 2025)

Some argued that ownership, not platform design, was the real issue—if a U.S. company acquired TikTok, nothing about the experience would change. One commenter summed it up: *“Oracle already manages the data—what’s the difference?”* (Daily Wire

2025). Many framed the issue as purely technical, overlooking how governance, incentives, and priorities shape platform culture. Not everyone agreed. Some users instinctively recognized that platform ownership is not just a legal or logistical concern—it fundamentally shapes platform culture. A widely shared Tweet captured this skepticism:

“Can’t wait to download Microsoft TikTok 2025. I Business Professional 365 Current Branch 2409 Plus! For Workgroups...” (@sysadafterdark 2025)

While some intuitively grasped the stakes, most public discussions overlooked a key reality: platforms do not merely host content; they shape it (van Dijck 2013; Gillespie 2018; Poell et al. 2022). Media scholars have long argued that the medium shapes the message (McLuhan 1966) and that cultural production is always embedded within technological, economic, and social constraints (Williams 1981). In platformed media environments, these forces take on new dimensions: platform architectures, governance systems, and business models actively shape how creativity is structured and circulated. These interactions are structured by affordances—not just technical features, but the ways users perceive and act upon them (Davis 2020). The same feature may function differently depending on how users interpret its possibilities or limitations. Even when two platforms offer near-identical technical features, they do not produce the same creative logics (Bucher and Helmond 2018). This study extends these insights by examining how memetic practices transform when they migrate across platforms. Rather than assuming that content moves seamlessly or remains static, it traces how platform structures shape creative adaptation—offering a model for understanding the forces that guide memetic change.

To investigate this, I focus on TikTok and Instagram—two platforms frequently compared yet meaningfully distinct. Instagram, particularly Reels, was frequently suggested as a TikTok alternative, making it an ideal case for examining cross-platform adaptation. If TikTok’s ban had forced creators to migrate, would their content remain unchanged? Would it evolve? Would it fail to take root entirely? These are not just hypothetical questions—creators already navigate a multi-platform ecosystem where their content circulates across different spaces. Yet, we lack a clear framework for understanding how and why memetic practices change when they shift.

This study systematically examines ten memetic practices that appear on both TikTok and Instagram, tracing how they transform when they migrate between these platforms. To explain these shifts, I introduce the **Three-Step Model of Memetic Translation**—three interdependent processes that structure adaptation. While presented sequentially for clarity, these processes often unfold in recursive and overlapping ways.:

1. **Structural Adjustment:** Memetic practices must be reconfigured to align with the platform’s technical features, architectural constraints, and governance mechanisms that structure creative production.
2. **Semiotic Recalibration:** As memetic practices move between platforms, their meanings evolve through user adaptation, audience engagement, and reinterpretation within new platform vernaculars.
3. **Cultural Integration:** Some translated practices successfully embed themselves into the new platform’s memetic ecosystem, while others struggle to resonate and ultimately fade away.

The TikTok ban debate was one moment in a much larger pattern: as digital culture is increasingly shaped by a handful of dominant platforms (van Dijck, Poell, and Waal 2018b; Srnicek 2016), it raises a critical question: how do memetic practices transform across platforms, and what conditions shape their adaptation, survival, and failure? This study provides a conceptual and methodological model for answering that question. Before considering how content transforms across platforms, it is necessary to consider how platforms structure creative production in ways that make such transformations necessary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Shaping Cultural Production: Platform Architectures

Discussions of a potential TikTok ban often focused on data collection, algorithmic influence, and platform control, yet they largely assumed that TikTok's functions could be seamlessly replicated on Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts. This assumption overlooks a critical fact: platforms do not just host content—they actively structure its production, circulation, and interpretation. Even creators with multi-platform presences must strategically adapt their content to fit each ecosystem's affordances, governance structures, and audience expectations (Abidin 2018; Bishop 2019). Creative production is not inherently portable; what thrives on one platform may become structurally or culturally unsustainable on another.

Digital platforms shape cultural production through affordances—the possibilities for action enabled by platform design (Davis 2020)—as well as governance mechanisms like moderation policies, algorithmic filtering, and monetization models (Gillespie 2018; Gorwa 2019). These constraints determine which creative practices thrive, adapt, or

struggle for visibility. However, affordances are not static nor universally legible; they emerge through interactions between platform structures, user behavior, and institutional constraints.

Neff et al. (2012) describe this as "technical agency"—where platforms not only provide tools but also shape how users perceive and enact them. Affordances are negotiated rather than imposed, meaning that creative adaptation depends not just on what platforms allow, but on how users interpret and repurpose constraints. Users develop folk theories (Gillespie 2014) of platform behavior, forming assumptions about algorithmic visibility, ranking mechanisms, and engagement incentives that influence adaptation strategies.

Platforms exert influence not only by enabling certain actions but by incentivizing or discouraging them. Affordances are relational, meaning their use depends on user perception, technical knowledge, and social legitimacy (Davis 2020). A feature may be technically available but only actionable for those who recognize and interpret it within a given cultural framework. Bourdieu (1993) conceptualizes this as learning the "rules of the game"—the tacit knowledge required to navigate visibility and success within structured systems. Platform vernaculars emerge from these interactions (Gershon 2010; Gibbs et al. 2015), creating distinct communicative styles shaped by affordances and governance models.

For example, TikTok's participatory remix culture fosters collaborative storytelling, trend formation, and highly iterative content modification (Kaye et al. 2022). Its algorithmically curated discovery structures user participation around engagement-driven virality, shaping the type of creativity that thrives. In contrast, Instagram's stricter

copyright policies and branding-oriented algorithmic sorting reinforce aesthetic consistency and audience curation (Leaver et al. 2020). These differences extend beyond technical affordances to governance policies that regulate content visibility.

Even when platforms offer similar tools, governance, audience norms, and algorithmic filtering shape how they are used. Constraints, by contrast, explicitly limit or prohibit actions, structuring the conditions under which affordances emerge. As a result, creators navigating multiple platforms must adapt not just their content, but their entire mode of engagement—from format and style to circulation strategies—to remain legible within each platform’s logic.

Evolving Cultural Forms: Memetic Practices

Memes do not merely replicate; they evolve through participatory remixing, structural constraints, and platform adaptation (Milner 2016; Shifman 2013). Unlike Dawkins’ (1976) static model of cultural transmission, digital memes gain meaning through social participation and platform mediation. However, memetic evolution is not purely organic—it unfolds within structured conditions imposed by platform architectures.

Memes are shaped by both bottom-up engagement (user participation) and top-down platform constraints (governance, affordances, algorithmic filtering) (Caliandro and Anselmi 2021; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). Because platforms do not merely distribute memes but actively regulate their circulation, memetic survival depends on whether a format is structurally and economically viable within a given platform ecosystem. Some meme formats stabilize and persist because they align with platform

affordances, while others fade due to algorithmic suppression, governance changes, or shifts in engagement norms.

Shifman (2013) three dimensions of meme evolution—form (structural and aesthetic characteristics), content (visual and textual elements), and stance (communicative positioning, such as irony or political messaging)—align with key aspects of memetic translation. Structural adjustment primarily concerns form, while semiotic recalibration engages both content and stance, as meaning and communicative intent shift across platforms. While some meme formats translate easily across platforms, others must be structurally adjusted or semiotically recalibrated to remain culturally legible. For example, TikTok’s participatory meme formats—such as stitched reaction videos or sound-based trends—rely heavily on interactive form, whereas Instagram favors static, highly curated meme aesthetics that emphasize stance and visual cohesion.

This dynamic reflects structuration (Giddens 1983), where digital creative practices are not simply emergent but shaped through ongoing interactions between structural constraints and user agency. Meme formats that thrive on TikTok’s remix-based, participatory culture often require reconfiguration on Instagram, where platform governance and audience expectations privilege aesthetic cohesion over iterative engagement. Memes are not just cultural artifacts; they are platformed expressions shaped by visibility incentives and engagement logics.

Mememes also function as digital folk culture—iterative, collectively produced, and embedded in participatory communities (Wiggins and Bowers 2015). However, platform architectures introduce friction into this process. While grassroots communities drive

meme emergence, platform affordances, algorithmic ranking, and governance structures ultimately filter which formats stabilize as dominant cultural forms.

Because meaning is shaped not only by cultural context but also by platform infrastructures, memetic interpretation is highly contingent on digital environments. Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model helps explain why the same meme can carry different meanings across platforms—what signals irony on TikTok may be read as sincere self-expression on Instagram. Similarly, Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia highlights how memes operate within competing discursive frameworks across platforms, requiring users to recalibrate their expression to remain legible. This process of memetic meaning shifting anticipates this study's focus on semiotic recalibration—how platform-specific constraints modulate interpretation.

Navigating Digital Circulation: Platform Ecologies

Digital platforms do not function as isolated systems but as interdependent infrastructures that evolve in response to each other's affordances and cultural logics in what Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy (2022) describe as a platform ecology. Through platformization (Helmond 2015), platforms extend their influence beyond their own boundaries, structuring content production and digital circulation (Plantin and Punathambekar 2019). Users rarely engage with a single platform in isolation; instead, they develop cross-platform strategies for visibility, engagement, and distribution (Duffy et al. 2019). However, this interdependence does not guarantee seamless migration—platforms introduce friction by competing to retain users and content within their ecosystems.

While platforms frequently adopt similar features—such as TikTok inspiring Instagram Reels or Snapchat Stories influencing Instagram—their content ecosystems remain distinct (Kaye, Chen, and Zeng 2021). Feature convergence does not eliminate cultural divergence—each platform fosters its own vernaculars and interpretive norms. As Bishop (Bishop 2019) argues, cross-platform circulation creates feedback loops where audience migration, platform responses, and evolving content strategies reinforce one another.

Users are not passive actors in this ecosystem; they actively modify their content to optimize discovery incentives and engagement visibility. Platforms act as media intermediaries (Havens 2014), structuring circulation through engagement metrics, algorithmic curation, and governance policies. In response, creators adjust their strategies—removing watermarks, shifting aesthetic styles, or altering interaction formats—to maximize visibility (Abidin 2021). Some users practice algorithmic resistance, deliberately working around constraints through metadata manipulation, content remixing, and alternative distribution techniques (Velkova and Kaun 2021).

Because creative content does not move freely across platforms, its adaptation follows structured pathways. By analyzing paired cases of memetic migration between TikTok and Instagram, this study traces how creative forms undergo structural adjustment, semiotic recalibration, and cultural integration or dissolution. This study demonstrates that cross-platform adaptation is not incidental but follows a structured, patterned process—one shaped by platform architectures, governance constraints, and user negotiation. Understanding how memetic practices evolve across digital spaces requires attention to these structured pathways—where platform architectures,

governance constraints, and user negotiation collectively determine whether content circulates, transforms, or disappears.

THE THREE-STEP MODEL OF MEMETIC TRANSLATION

Prior sections established that platform architectures do not merely host content—they actively structure its production, circulation, and interpretation. As memes and other digital creative practices move across platforms, they do not simply transfer intact but undergo systematic adaptation, shaped by differences in affordances, governance structures, and audience engagement norms. These transformations are not individually planned but emerge through a recursive process of collective negotiation—users interact with platform constraints, reinterpret meaning, and adjust content practices in response to shifting discovery mechanisms and engagement logics.

I conceptualize *memetic translation* as a digital-platform analogue to Jakobson’s (1959) notion of inter-semiotic translation: the re-encoding of meaning across sign systems. Where transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006) follows content across media forms, memetic translation tracks how practices mutate as they cross platform architectures—shaped not only by affordances but by governance, monetization models, and discovery logics that determine what becomes viable, legible, and valuable. These architectures function not as neutral containers but as “infrastructural logics” that pre-structure participation (Plantin et al. 2018). In this sense, memetic translation extends remediation theory (Bolter and Grusin 1999) by identifying three recursive dimensions—Structural Adjustment, Semiotic Recalibration, and Cultural Integration—that jointly determine whether a meme thrives, mutates, or disappears as it moves across platforms.

The Three-Step Model of Memetic Translation provides a framework for analyzing these transformations. It explains how platform affordances constrain technical adaptation (Structural Adjustment), how meaning recalibrates within platform vernaculars (Semiotic Recalibration), and how cultural integration determines whether a memetic practice embeds itself in a new ecosystem or fades (Cultural Integration). These steps are recursive and distributed, shaped by platform logics, algorithmic filtering, and user participation rather than isolated individual decisions.

By outlining these dynamics, this model applies beyond TikTok and Instagram to any form of digital cultural migration across platforms, offering a tool for understanding how content adapts, mutates, and stabilizes within evolving platform environments.

Structural Adjustment: Reconfiguring Content for New Affordances

Structural Adjustment captures the technical and format-based modifications required to align with a platform's affordances, interface constraints, and governance mechanisms. Affordances operate through what Davis (2020) describes as mechanisms and conditions—ways in which platforms structure, enable, or constrain action through both technical architecture and contextual expectations. These are always interpreted through what Nagy and Neff (2015) term imagined affordances—collectively constructed understandings of how platforms function. Creators navigating TikTok's vertical, sound-integrated video interface face different constraints than on Instagram, where the architecture privileges galleries and static curation. These are not just interface differences but “affordance ecologies” (Bucher and Helmond 2018), shaped by platform-specific logics of engagement, circulation, and monetization.

Structural Adjustment also involves digital intermediation—the infrastructural power of platforms to shape and filter participation (Hutchinson 2021). As Plantin et al. (2018) argue, these adjustments are simultaneously technical and economic: watch-time metrics, file types, aspect ratios, and metadata are not just design choices but economic filters that prioritize some content forms over others. In this sense, adaptation is not just a matter of fitting content to form—it is an infrastructural negotiation that determines content viability under shifting economic and algorithmic regimes.

Users do not only react to affordances but anticipate platform logics. They develop folk theories (Gillespie 2014; Karizat et al. 2021) about algorithmic ranking, suppression, and amplification—adapting content not only in response to explicit constraints but also based on tacit, collectively understood engagement strategies. These anticipatory adjustments reflect how structural adaptation is shaped not just by technological constraints but by users’ evolving perceptions of platform dynamics. Beyond technical constraints, Structural Adjustment is conditioned by economic and governance factors. A meme that thrives within TikTok’s virality-driven model may struggle on Instagram, where network-based curation structures discovery. Content adapted from TikTok to YouTube Shorts may require adjustments in pacing, framing, and metadata to fit YouTube’s watch-time-based ranking system.

Thus, Structural Adjustment is not just about format—it is an infrastructural negotiation that determines whether content remains viable in new engagement architectures.

Semiotic Recalibration: Adapting Meaning to Platform Vernaculars

Even after content is structurally adjusted, its meaning does not automatically translate across platforms. Semiotic Recalibration refers to the interpretive shifts that occur as content is recontextualized within new platform-specific vernaculars, audience norms, and discursive expectations. This resonates with Gal's (2015) concept of *transduction*, where semiotic material transforms as it crosses communicative contexts, and with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) work on multimodal discourse, which reminds us that meaning is always relational—shaped by dominant visual, textual, and platform grammars.

Users do not simply conform to platform norms but actively negotiate meaning in anticipation of audience response and algorithmic preference. A TikTok duet that signals playful collaboration, for example, may be read as ironic ridicule when remixed into an Instagram Reel—a shift that illustrates van Dijck's (2013) argument that platform infrastructures function as meaning-making environments. These recalibrations require what Bourdieu (1993) calls attunement to the field-specific *rules of the game*—users adapt tone, reference, and stance to remain legible within new platform logics.

A meme that originates in a participatory remix culture may require adaptation when it moves to a platform where content circulates through more static or curated formats. Similarly, a meme optimized for a text-heavy platform may undergo visual restructuring to function within an image-centric ecosystem. These shifts are not incidental but embedded within the affordances and epistemologies of each platform. Without Semiotic Recalibration, even structurally adjusted content may fail to resonate—

the cues that made it meaningful in one context may be incoherent, invisible, or misread in another.

Cultural Integration: Evaluating Platform Viability and Long-Term Sustainability

Cultural Integration refers to whether a meme becomes sustainable within a new platform ecosystem. This process is not final but iterative—memetic practices may gain initial traction only to fade due to governance shifts, algorithmic suppression, or changing audience dynamics. Drawing on Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations model, integration hinges on cultural compatibility and communicative resonance. On platforms, however, that compatibility is co-determined by algorithmic visibility, moderation regimes, and participatory reinforcement.

Even after undergoing Structural Adjustment and Semiotic Recalibration, a meme's long-term viability depends on its alignment with platform incentives, governance systems, and user engagement styles. Some practices stabilize, becoming embedded in platform vernaculars and widely recognized. Others circulate briefly before being abandoned, reworked, or lost—what Appadurai (1996) might call a *cultural disjuncture*, where the translation fails to take root.

Integration also reflects what Bourdieu (1993) calls *field-level legitimation*: a meme stabilizes not just through circulation but through its recognition as culturally legible and worth repeating. This legitimacy is co-produced by user practices, platform curation, and algorithmic amplification. A meme that thrives on TikTok, for example, may struggle to gain traction on Instagram or YouTube if participatory feedback loops or ranking systems fail to support it.

Because both code and culture evolve, cultural integration is always provisional. Even memes that initially succeed may later decline due to shifts in platform policy, visibility infrastructures, or changing audience norms. These recursive dynamics often loop creators back to earlier phases, illustrating Latour's (2005) insight that social and technical elements co-constitute one another through ongoing negotiation. Cultural Integration, then, determines whether a memetic adaptation becomes part of a platform's ecosystem—or remains a transient experiment.

Memetic Translation as a Recursive and Distributed Process

Memetic translation is not an isolated decision by individual users—it is a distributed, iterative process shaped by networked participation. Each step of adaptation feeds back into the others: Semiotic Recalibration may require further Structural Adjustment, just as failures in Cultural Integration may lead to renewed adaptation strategies.

This model provides a structured yet flexible framework for analyzing cross-platform adaptation. By understanding Structural Adjustment, Semiotic Recalibration, and Cultural Integration as interdependent, recursive processes, we can move beyond descriptions of meme movement to systematically explain why certain creative practices thrive across platforms while others fragment or disappear.

The following sections apply this framework to TikTok and Instagram, demonstrating how platform affordances, engagement styles, and governance policies structure memetic adaptation. However, this model extends beyond these platforms, offering a tool for understanding how digital culture migrates, mutates, and stabilizes across diverse online environments.

METHODS

This study employs Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) (Altheide 1987) to systematically examine how memetic practices develop, adapt, and integrate across TikTok and Instagram. By treating cross-platform translation as an active negotiation rather than passive migration, this approach captures how platform environments structure meaning-making and creative adaptation. This methodology builds on Sites 1 and 2, shifting from platform-specific constraints to cross-platform negotiation, focusing on how creative practices persist, transform, or fail when migrating.

Memetic Practices for Cross-Platform Analysis

Memetic adaptation was analyzed using the ten practices identified in Chapter Three, where they were examined in their native platform environments. Rather than reintroducing these practices in full, this chapter builds on that analysis by tracing how select formats undergo cross-platform translation. Instead of tracing one or two practices through all three stages—which could obscure broader patterns—six key practices were chosen as representative cases of Structural Adjustment, Semiotic Recalibration, or Cultural Integration.

Each step of the model is analyzed through a distinct comparative structure, reflecting the type of transformation under examination: Structural Adjustment and Semiotic Recalibration analyze how platform architectures reshape memetic practices, focusing on affordance constraints and shifts in meaning. These steps require a sequential approach, first examining the practice in its origin platform before detailing how it is reconfigured after migration. Cultural Integration, by contrast, evaluates whether specific memetic instances persist or dissolve after migration, requiring side-by-side comparison

of the same content across platforms to assess how platform conditions shape long-term viability.

This distinction reflects the difference between adaptation and persistence. The first two steps identify platform-driven constraints and meaning shifts, requiring a process-focused analysis, while Cultural Integration tests sustainability, necessitating direct before-and-after comparison. This ensures that each step of the model is analyzed at the appropriate level—tracing adaptation patterns in the first two steps and assessing viability in the third.

Data Collection and Sampling

Data collection followed a three-stage process: (1) ethnographic observation, (2) structured data retrieval via platform-specific methods, and (3) systematic sampling for comparative analysis. This approach ensured that memetic adaptation was captured both organically through participant observation and systematically through targeted data retrieval. Additional details on this process and search strategies can be found in Appendix G.

Ethnographic observation and research personas.

Ethnographic practice identification was conducted using five research personas from Chapter Three, designed to capture diverse engagement styles and algorithmic exposures across TikTok and Instagram. These personas were retained to ensure continuity in platform engagement tracking and comparative analysis.

Each persona engaged in one hour of daily platform observation for six weeks between December 15th, 2024 and January 30th, 2025. To control variability in exposure, personas were maintained in isolated profile containers on a Samsung A14, accessed via

Surfshark multihop VPN for geographic consistency. Observations were documented through iteratively refined field notes to update search strategies.

Persona	Demographics	Primary Engagement Focus
Jamie Torres	24, White Male	Pop culture, music, movies
Lily Nguyen	16, Vietnamese Female	STEM, digital art, environmental activism
Mia Chen	22, Puerto Rican Female	Fashion, lifestyle, social events
Amara Davis	58, Black Female	Social justice, wellness
Darnell Rodriguez	35, Hispanic Male	Tech trends, career development

Table 7: Persona Details

Structured data retrieval and sampling.

Data retrieval was designed to systematically track memetic adaptation while accounting for platform-specific constraints. On TikTok, an impending U.S. ban necessitated rapid and broad data collection to ensure continued access for analysis. On Instagram, platform structure and content discovery mechanics required more targeted retrieval strategies. These conditions shaped how datasets were constructed for cross-platform comparability.

For TikTok, retrieval combined two approaches to ensure comprehensive coverage. The TikTok Research API enabled systematic collection through 1,000 daily

calls, each returning up to 100 videos. This was supplemented by a Python script using Selenium that automated For You Page scrolling, capturing algorithmic content distribution patterns and engagement metadata not available through the API. All data was archived in an SQLite relational database, ultimately storing ~1TB of video content and associated metadata.

Instagram's more static content architecture required different retrieval methods. *Zeeschuimer* (Peeters 2024) enabled targeted scraping of videos and metadata from Reels, Carousels, and Grid Posts, while *4CAT* (Peeters and Hagen 2022) facilitated dataset organization and visual analysis. Stories were excluded due to technical limitations in reliable data capture. This approach allowed for systematic documentation of practice adaptations while working within Instagram's platform constraints.

The initial datasets required platform-specific sampling strategies to ensure analytical comparability. TikTok's high-volume collection (~75K videos) necessitated broad ethnographic immersion before sampling could begin. Through this immersion, 1,000 examples per practice (~5,000 total) were identified and pre-filtered based on adaptation patterns. Random sampling then reduced this to 150 examples per practice. For Instagram, the initial dataset was constructed through layered retrieval—combining targeted searches, specific account tracking, and ethnographic discovery—to assemble ~2,500 examples per practice. This was then randomly reduced to 150 examples per practice using 4CAT's random sampling tool, followed by the same final selection process used for TikTok. Despite differing retrieval methods, this structured approach produced final datasets of comparable scope, enabling systematic cross-platform analysis of memetic adaptation.

Analytical Approach

The analysis followed a structured multi-stage process to assess how memetic practices adapted across platforms. Descriptive coding (Saldaña 2021) cataloged technical affordances, aesthetic structures, and engagement patterns, establishing a foundation for cross-platform comparison. Open coding identified emergent patterns in how practices were reconfigured, followed by axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998), which mapped relationships between technical constraints, user engagement, and adaptation strategies.

Given the multimodal nature of memetic practices, the analysis incorporated multimodal analysis (Kress and Leeuwen 2001) to examine how visual, textual, and auditory elements were reshaped in platform migration. Throughout, constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967) ensured adaptation processes were systematically evaluated across both origin and destination platforms. This coding framework aligned with the three-step model of memetic translation, helping identify how practices underwent structural adjustment, semiotic recalibration, and cultural integration.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed internet research best practices, prioritizing publicly available content in accordance with AoIR Ethics Guidelines (franzke et al. 2020). To mitigate researcher bias, memo-writing and triangulation (Patton 2014) were used to refine coding decisions and ensure methodological consistency. Research personas provided varied algorithmic perspectives, allowing for a broader assessment of adaptation patterns.

FINDINGS

The Structured Adaptation of Memetic Practices

Memetic practices appear across multiple platforms but rarely in identical form. The same creative expressions that thrive on TikTok often adopt different structures, meanings, and engagement patterns when adapted for Instagram. These transformations are not incidental; they emerge through a structured adaptation process shaped by platform architectures, vernacular expectations, and engagement norms.

This section examines that process through the Three-Step Model of Memetic Translation, which conceptualizes memetic adaptation as unfolding through three interrelated, patterned processes: (1) structural adjustment, as practices reconfigure to fit new technical conditions; (2) semiotic recalibration, as meanings shift within distinct platform vernaculars; and (3) cultural integration, as practices either embed into or struggle within a platform's ecosystem. I examine six practices across these three steps, pairing each step with two case studies – one practice that migrated from TikTok to Instagram and one that moved in the opposite direction.

These cases highlight distinct pressures shaping adaptation—technical constraints that require reconfiguration, platform vernaculars that reshape meaning, and engagement dynamics that determine whether a practice embeds or fragments. While each case illustrates specific transformations, they collectively demonstrate how TikTok and Instagram impose distinct conditions on participation, visibility, and creative expression.

Rather than a deliberate process of cross-platform adaptation, these shifts unfold through a process shaped by many users over time—emerging from cumulative interactions between creators, audiences, and platform-specific engagement norms rather

than individual intent or technological determinism. The findings that follow trace these patterns, revealing how structural constraints reshape form, vernaculars modulate meaning, and cultural dynamics govern what persists or dissolves in translation.

Structural Adjustment: How Memetic Practices Reconfigure

Memetic adaptation reflects what Bucher and Helmond (2018) describe as grammars of possibility—the structural conditions shaping what forms of creativity are viable. Despite shared technical features, TikTok and Instagram impose distinct platform logics shaping visibility, participation, and circulation (van Dijck and Poell 2013). TikTok's algorithmic feed prioritizes temporal emergence and participatory remixing, while Instagram's grid-based layout and networked visibility favor curated, spatially structured content.

These conditions create pressures that demand structural adaptation. Platform infrastructures do more than provide creative tools; they actively shape engagement, determining which formats, participation modes, and expressions remain viable (Neff et al. 2012). This section examines two contrasting cases of structural adjustment. The first analyzes how subtle foreshadowing must shift from TikTok's time-based, participatory format to Instagram's structured, static arrangement. The second examines how political education transforms from Instagram's static, infographic-driven approach to TikTok's dynamic, performative mode. Together, these cases show how platform architectures reshape creative practice, requiring more than surface-level modifications.

Subtle foreshadowing: from temporal sequencing to spatial reconstruction.

Subtle foreshadowing is a narrative technique where creators embed anticipatory elements—visual cues, fragmented moments, or framing devices—that only fully ‘click’

once the sequence plays out. On TikTok, this unfolds through time-based sequencing, leveraging jump cuts and layered clips to create suspense. My notes describe this as "suspense through simultaneous layering," where viewers experience setup and payoff within a continuous temporal flow. The top row of Figure 1 illustrates this through a frame-by-frame timeline: a TikTok user introduces bubble tea, takes a sip, and unexpectedly spits it out in shock. The humor relies on editing—by embedding the ending early, the final reveal lands with greater impact. TikTok's algorithmic feed reinforces this dynamic by surfacing content unpredictably, heightening collective discovery.

Instagram's spatial architecture does not support time-based suspense, pushing users to adapt foreshadowing in different ways. One approach restructures suspense through carousels. The bottom row of Figure 17 demonstrates this shift: a polished series of night-out images culminates in a chaotic and rotated-askew final slide that shows a video of the same woman coming home intoxicated. Unlike TikTok, where foreshadowing builds dynamically, Instagram requires viewers to mentally reconstruct the sequence, retroactively assigning meaning to earlier slides. Additionally, Instagram often intentionally loads carousel slides out of order, further shaping how users engage with the reveal.

A second approach uses 'swipe to reveal' mechanics to simulate TikTok's anticipatory tension. By instructing viewers to advance through the sequence, creators reintroduce suspense despite Instagram's static framework. One example captions a carousel "Swipe to see the disaster"—the first slides show a pristine cake, and the final reveals its collapse, turning swiping into a staged moment of suspense.

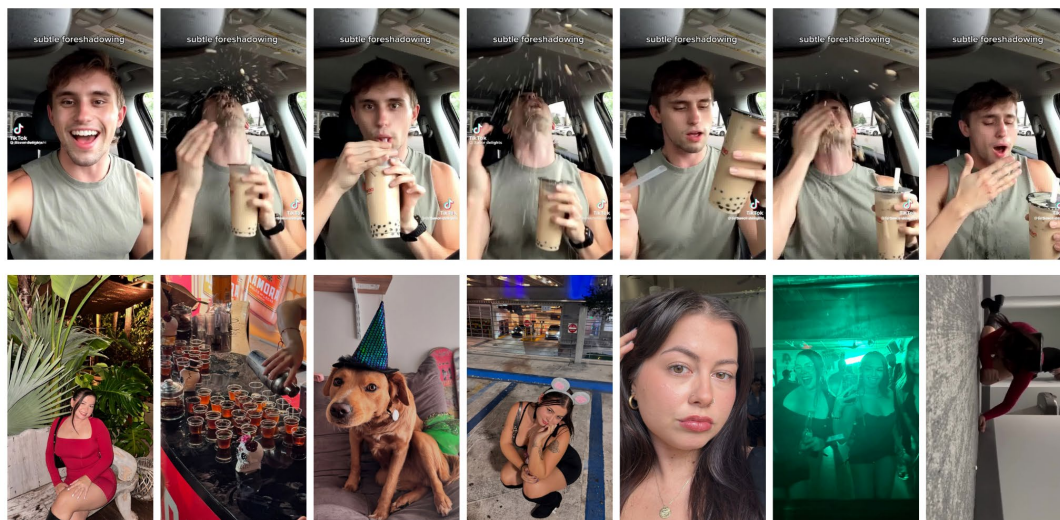


Figure 17: Structural Adjustment of Subtle Foreshadowing

A third adaptation reframes the practice as a meta-meme; rather than embedding foreshadowing through editing, users apply it explicitly to static images. For example, a photo of an athlete mid-play captioned “subtle foreshadowing” prompts viewers to anticipate its later significance, encouraging them to mentally fast-forward through an unfolding event. Here, the platform’s constraints shift foreshadowing from an implicit editing technique to an overt framing device—turning what once emerged naturally from TikTok’s short-form cuts into a more explicitly organized storyline.

These adaptations demonstrate how platform infrastructures reshape creative practices. On TikTok, foreshadowing emerges through dynamic sequencing and algorithmic surfacing. On Instagram, it requires explicit structuring, controlled reveals, and direct audience engagement. Rather than simple reformat, these shifts highlight how users actively recalibrate narrative techniques to maintain visibility and coherence across different platform environments.

Political education: from static authority to performative engagement.

Political education on Instagram relies on polished slides that establish authority

through aesthetic coherence, clarity, and expertise signaling. These infographics are designed for circulation, shareability, and, in some cases, organizing. I observed this as “knowledge for saving, not for discussing”, reflecting a mode where users accumulate and redistribute structured political content rather than actively debating or remixing it.

TikTok’s participatory, audiovisual grammar demands a fundamental restructuring of this mode. Instead of relying on static credibility markers like clean typography and citation formatting, successful political education content on TikTok produces authority through voice, delivery, and interactive engagement. This shift unfolds through four primary adaptation strategies, each exemplified in Figure 18.

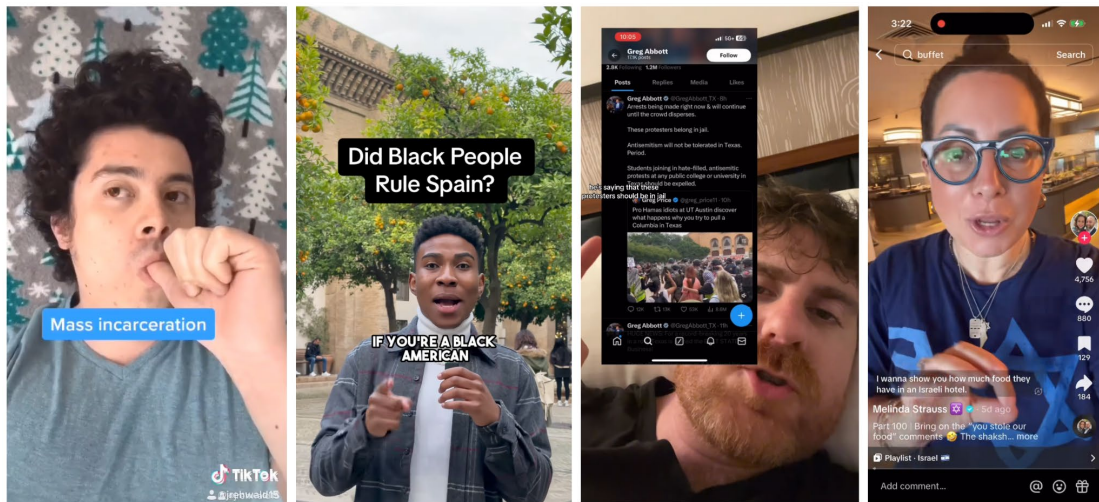


Figure 18: Structural Adjustment of Political Education

First, some creators embrace low-production, affective storytelling, leveraging TikTok’s informal aesthetics to frame political arguments as personal, direct, and emotionally compelling. For example, jrehwald15 (far left) dramatizes mass incarceration using only a phone camera, dim lighting, and basic text overlays. His videos rely on an irreverent tone, minimal costuming, simple props, and household settings to stage complex symbolic performances illustrating systemic issues—demonstrating how TikTok

lowers the production threshold for participation while maintaining affective and educational impact.

Second, others retain Instagram's emphasis on expertise but adapt it in divergent ways. Some (second from left) adopt a high-production, news-anchor format, using studio-quality visuals and polished narration to maintain traditional credibility markers. Others (second from right) eschew aesthetic polish for information density, integrating tweets, external footage, and annotation overlays into longform, research-backed storytelling. While the former translates institutional authority into TikTok's audiovisual vernacular, the latter builds legitimacy through depth, citation, and participatory engagement.

Finally, TikTok enables remix-based political commentary, where creators stitch and reframe existing media to subvert dominant narratives or introduce counter-discourses. In Figure 2 (far right), a user stitches an Israeli hotel buffet tour, framing it against Gaza food scarcity to challenge mainstream representations. This adaptation capitalizes on TikTok's stitching affordance, allowing users to intervene in ongoing discourses—a mode of engagement Instagram's slide-based format structurally discourages.

These adaptations illustrate how platform infrastructures dictate political engagement. Instagram structures political knowledge as a resource—designed for saving, archiving, and asynchronous circulation. TikTok, by contrast, restructures political education into an unfolding discourse where credibility emerges through visibility, engagement, and interaction rather than fixed expertise. This shift is not just from static to dynamic but from pre-authored legitimacy to participatory legitimization—a

transformation driven by TikTok's privileging of engagement-based content over static information.

Reformatting participation: how structure shapes engagement.

Memetic adaptation is not just a shift in format—it reorganizes participation itself. These transformations demonstrate how platform infrastructures shape meaning and engagement. Subtle foreshadowing shifts from TikTok's spontaneous, time-based suspense, where jump cuts and unpredictable surfacing create collective anticipation, to Instagram's deliberately arranged spatial structuring, where suspense is staged through carousels, manual reveals, or explicit framing. Political education moves from Instagram's static, citation-based authority, where credibility is signaled through polished infographics, to TikTok's performance-driven credibility, where voice, presence, and remixability become markers of epistemic legitimacy.

These shifts reveal a fundamental contrast in how platform architectures govern participation. TikTok fosters participatory, emergent meaning-making, where engagement itself shapes visibility, while Instagram favors carefully structured meaning-making, where coherence and stability define credibility. Platform infrastructures do not simply enable creativity; they condition which forms of participation remain viable. Having examined how platform constraints reshape practice and participation, we turn next to how meaning itself must adapt across these environments.

Semiotic Recalibration: How Platform Vernaculars Modulate Meaning

If structural adjustment reconfigures memetic practices to fit platform infrastructures, semiotic recalibration determines the extent to which meaning is preserved, mutated, or fundamentally reconstituted within distinct platform vernaculars.

While the first step of memetic translation addressed the technical constraints driving adaptation, the second examines how these adaptations either retain core functions within new semiotic frames, shift subtly to align with new cultural logics, or undergo complete transformation.

Chapter Two established how TikTok and Instagram’s infrastructures shape visibility, participation, and circulation. Chapter Three traced how users develop platform-specific vernaculars through memetic negotiation. These vernaculars – shared expressive modes – produce divergent semiotic expectations: TikTok privileges immediacy, participatory remixing, and chaotic emotional intensity, while Instagram emphasizes curation, aspirational aesthetics, and controlled self-presentation. As memetic practices migrate, they must be recalibrated to remain legible within the new framework.

This section examines that process through two case studies. The first traces how Corecore, rooted in TikTok’s audiovisual chaos and emotional overload, is distilled into melancholic, aestheticized nostalgia on Instagram. The second explores how Strategic Imperfection, originally a curated authenticity strategy on Instagram, transforms into overt, participatory performances of vulnerability on TikTok. Together, these cases reveal semiotic recalibration as a key mechanism of memetic adaptation, illustrating how platform vernaculars actively reconstitute meaning.

Corecore: from audiovisual chaos to curated melancholy.

Corecore on TikTok constructs affect through chaotic audiovisual layering—rapid edits, extreme contrasts, and remixed found footage that overwhelms the viewer. My notes describe this as “drowning in the feed,” where users are immersed in a deluge of visuals and sounds that coalesce into a participatory emotional landscape rather than a

linear narrative. This participatory structure extends beyond individual videos, as creators remix sounds, repurpose motifs, and stitch new materials into evolving memetic iterations. The discovery process is similarly emergent: TikTok's algorithmic feed surfaces Corecore clips unpredictably, reinforcing its immersive, collectively constructed affect.



Figure 19: Semiotic Recalibration of Corecore

Instagram forces a recalibration. Figure 19 illustrates how Corecore undergoes semiotic recalibration across three key dimensions: affective intensity becomes

melancholic cohesion, audiovisual layering gives way to structured text-image pairings, and ephemeral meaning-making shifts toward archivable, aesthetic contemplation. The examples in Figure 3, all taken from Instagram, highlight these shifts. The plush monkey with overlaid text exemplifies a whimsical distillation of Corecore's sentimentality, while the bottom-left image leans toward melancholic reflection. The top-right quadrant represents a more explicitly text-driven variation, where poetic snippets function as the primary affective carrier. The bottom-right quadrant integrates Corecore into Instagram's aspirational aesthetics, where light, shadow, and composition heighten the emotional impact of a declarative statement.

Rather than layering audiovisual fragments into an immersive cascade, Corecore on Instagram operates through self-contained compositions. These often take the form of nostalgic, emotionally charged text-image pairings that mirror Tumblr-era microblogging conventions more than TikTok's participatory structure. Beyond the examples in Figure 3, my sample reveals additional recalibrations: images of pomegranates paired with reflections on personal growth, black-and-white sketches overlaid with existential musings, and carousels deploying Tumblr-esque 'web-weaving' strategies—juxtaposing fragments of poetry, film stills, and song lyrics to construct a thematic mood board. These adaptations shift Corecore's function from TikTok's chaotic emotional catharsis to a curatorial practice, assembling aesthetic archives rather than affective torrents.

This transformation underscores how Instagram's vernacular constrains Corecore's participatory, emergent dimensions, instead repurposing it into a form privileging self-curation and aesthetic permanence. While Corecore thrives on TikTok's algorithmic unpredictability, Instagram's version circulates through intentional sharing—

positioned within niche aesthetic communities rather than surfacing serendipitously.

Strategic imperfection: from curated disruption to performed vulnerability.

On Instagram, imperfection functions as a deliberate disruption—a controlled contrast embedded within polished aesthetics. I captured this as “imperfection as contrast”—messiness, awkward framing, or unfinished edits signal authenticity precisely because they disrupt an otherwise cohesive visual presentation. This logic is spatial: imperfection is embedded within carousels, compositions, or grid layouts, remaining secondary to the overarching aesthetic. Discovery reinforces this function—users encounter these disruptions while scrolling curated feeds, meaning their impact depends on the very polish they purport to break.

TikTok demands a fundamental recalibration. Rather than embedding imperfection as aesthetic contrast, the platform requires it to be actively performed, narrated, and made explicit. Authenticity on TikTok is produced through expressive performance, where imperfection becomes an interactive spectacle rather than a passive aesthetic choice.

As Figure 20 illustrates, imperfection on TikTok operates through a structured typology of performance strategies. The top-left quadrant illustrates emotional transparency, which transforms imperfection into participatory engagement, as creators actively narrate their flaws in real time. Rather than subtly signaling authenticity through a raw, unfiltered image, TikTok users frame imperfections as unfolding experiences—evident in the broader trend of GRWM (Get Ready With Me) formats, where self-doubt, frustration, or anxiety are verbalized directly to the audience. Absurd imperfection similarly capitalizes on TikTok’s participatory norms but does so through humor and

exaggeration. The GRWM: 1859 Edition video in the top-right quadrant exemplifies this shift, repurposing the format to showcase an elaborate historical dressing process, complete with corsets and hoop skirts.



Figure 20: Semiotic Recalibration of Strategic Imperfection

Beyond self-expression, imperfection on TikTok also operates through interactive visibility, where authenticity emerges from shared engagement rather than static contrast. The third strategy in the bottom-left quadrant, visible messiness, implicitly shifts imperfection from a background detail to a visual focal point. While Instagram might subtly include a messy room in a carousel's background, TikTok creators highlight disorder, using before-and-after structures or captions to frame imperfection as an

ongoing process. The fourth strategy, performative interaction, turns imperfection into a mechanism for audience engagement. For example, in the bottom-right quadrant, when a user claims, “People have been asking me about...” while referencing their cluttered shelf and using a "SEND HELP" gif, imperfection is framed as responsive content. Whether real or fabricated, this interactional framing ensures imperfection aligns with TikTok’s participatory vernacular, converting static flaws into dynamic, audience-driven moments.

These transformations expose a fundamental shift in how imperfection functions across platforms. As outlined in Figure 20, imperfection operates through distinct logics on each platform. On Instagram, imperfection gains meaning through spatial contrast—it signals authenticity by subtly disrupting aesthetic consistency within controlled feeds. On TikTok, imperfection must be dynamic and engaging—it circulates through algorithmic amplification, invites response, and constructs authenticity not through contrast but through performed vulnerability. The recalibration is not just aesthetic but structural: from imperfection as curated disruption to imperfection as participatory process.

Recalibrating meaning: how platform vernaculars restructure authenticity and affect.

Semiotic recalibration does not simply reformat content—it reshapes how meaning is signaled, performed, and engaged with to remain viable within a platform. These transformations reveal how TikTok rewards affective participation and immediacy while Instagram enforces aesthetic containment, demanding that memetic practices adjust their expressive modes accordingly.

Corecore’s audiovisual chaos on TikTok thrives on algorithmic discovery and

participatory remix culture, where affective immersion drives collective meaning-making. On Instagram, Corecore is recalibrated into a melancholic, aestheticized archive, where meaning stabilizes within static, carefully composed artifacts. Similarly, Strategic Imperfection on Instagram operates as curated contrast, subtly disrupting polished feeds—while on TikTok, it must be explicitly performed, framed as interactive, and narratively staged for audience engagement.

These shifts underscore how platform vernaculars govern what forms of expression users find meaningful, dictating what circulates and how it must be expressed, framed, and rewarded. Ultimately, semiotic recalibration governs expressive constraints—revealing how memetic meaning is adapted and governed. This sets the stage for the final step of memetic translation: how memetic practices either embed within a platform’s creative logic and engagement structures or fail to take hold—shaping their long-term viability within the digital ecosystem.

Cultural Integration: Determining Structural Viability

If structural adjustment ensures technical compatibility and semiotic recalibration realigns meaning, cultural integration determines whether a practice can function within a new platform’s discovery and participation structures. Some memetic practices migrate seamlessly, adapting with little friction. Others fragment, losing essential features in the transition. This step not only assesses whether adaptation in the first two steps has occurred but also determines whether a practice can stabilize as an ongoing part of the new platform’s ecosystem.

Cultural integration is not a measure of virality or engagement—it is a test of structural viability. A practice persists only if the new platform’s architecture supports

the dynamics that made it successful in its origin environment. Serialized storytelling thrives on TikTok through algorithmic surfacing and participatory worldbuilding but falters on Instagram, where discovery is manual and narrative progression requires deliberate curation. Starter Packs, by contrast, shift easily from static Instagram collages to TikTok’s performance-driven remix culture, mutating into embodied comedic archetypes.

These cases illustrate a core principle: platform structures do not passively receive content—they actively shape whether a practice can be sustained. If cultural integration determines which memetic forms persist, then the key question is not just what migrates, but how practices embed, mutate, or fail within new engagement structures.

Failure case: serialized worldbuilding and the breakdown of participatory engagement.

Serialized worldbuilding on TikTok operates through storytelling accomplished in episodic, audience-driven narratives, often blurring the lines between fiction and reality. Creators post installments, while audience comments shape character decisions, plot twists, and pacing. This represents a sort of participatory worldbuilding where fans do not passively consume content but actively theorize, remix, and extend the story.

TikTok’s platform architecture supports and accelerates this model. Creators do not need to pre-announce overarching plots or manually direct users to prior episodes—the platform itself cues narrative immersion. Users may encounter a story midstream, be prompted by AI-generated search suggestions, and navigate backward or forward through comment-based interactions or profile scrolling, where TikTok flags their last-watched video. These affordances do not just support serialization—they drive its evolution,

transforming serialized storytelling into a participatory, co-constructed experience.

Figure 21 illustrates how TikTok scaffolds this process. A search for ‘Kyle and Veronika’ does not just return static keyword matches; it dynamically generates suggested sub-queries such as “Veronika and Kyle Kiss” or “Kyle and Veronika Banter,” nudging users toward deeper engagement – in contrast to how Instagram responds to the same search, shown in the adjacent panel. The third panel highlights TikTok’s AI-driven search prompts embedded in comment sections, auto-generating clickable queries that funnel audiences toward relevant content. The final panel shows TikTok’s in-video UI, where the platform sometimes overlays clickable search recommendations on the video itself, providing viewers with a way to sort through the story. These affordances collectively enable serialized worldbuilding to unfold more organically, with the algorithm and affordances acting as an implicit guide.

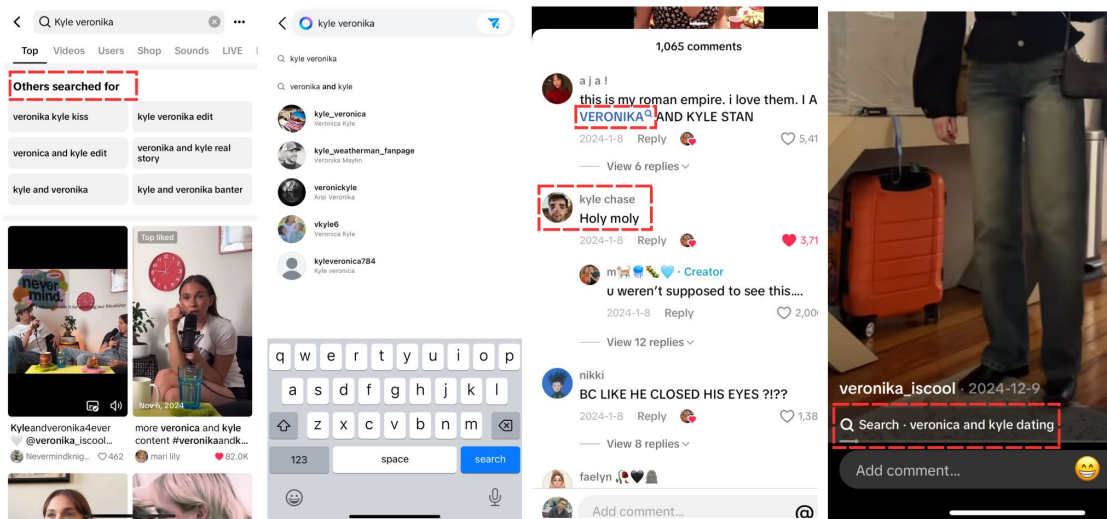


Figure 21: Platform Infrastructure for Serialized Storytelling

Instagram lacks these affordances, fundamentally reshaping serialized storytelling. Unlike TikTok, where narratives are surfaced algorithmically, Instagram

relies on manual discovery—audiences must actively follow creators, search for updates, or navigate static grids. While Instagram’s Reels feed introduces algorithmic discovery, it remains secondary to the platform’s long-standing emphasis on intentionally-curated followings and network-based visibility. Further, unlike TikTok’s FYP, the Reels feed is not the default UI. This secondary status reflects a broader structural reality: Instagram was built around intentional following and browsing, not algorithmic immersion.

Figure 22 underscores this mismatch: Veronika’s Instagram profile deprioritizes serialized content in favor of polished, brand-aligned imagery. While some story fragments are cross-posted, they appear asynchronously alongside unrelated content, disrupting narrative flow and isolating episodes rather than sustaining continuity.

This misalignment does not erase serialized storytelling outright, but it forces a strategic bifurcation. TikTok remains the primary site of narrative participation, while Instagram functions as an archival repository—but not just for in-universe content. Instagram also serves as a hub for brand-building, promotional content, and personal identity work, where creators share out-of-universe updates, merch promotions, and lifestyle content to reinforce their presence beyond serialized narratives.

Unlike Starter Packs, which mutate into participatory performances on TikTok, serialized storytelling cannot fully integrate into Instagram’s engagement model. Its survival depends not on adaptation but on creators strategically maintaining distinct approaches—leveraging TikTok for real-time engagement while using Instagram for selective, out-of-sequence curation.



Figure 22: Content bifurcation in Serialized Storytelling

Success case: starter packs as performed participation

Starter Packs emerged on Instagram as static, image-based meme formats, structured as collages pairing text and images to encapsulate recognizable archetypes. Unlike serialized storytelling, which unfolds dynamically, Starter Packs rely on passive

recognition rather than active participation. Users engage by tagging friends and commenting variations of “That’s me!” or “So accurate”, but they do not remix or extend the meme itself. Meaning is stabilized within the curated visual arrangement, reinforcing Instagram’s archival, aesthetic-driven content model, where images are browsed, saved, and shared—but not transformed.

Figure 23 represents a classic Instagram Starter Pack: a collage of cultural signifiers such as headphones, Celsius energy drinks, and finance podcasts in an “Entrepreneur Starter Pack”. These elements communicate identity through visual shorthand—requiring no additional context, sequencing, or iterative engagement. The format thrives on Instagram because it aligns with the platform’s curatorial logic, where memes function as artifacts of recognition rather than invitations to participation.

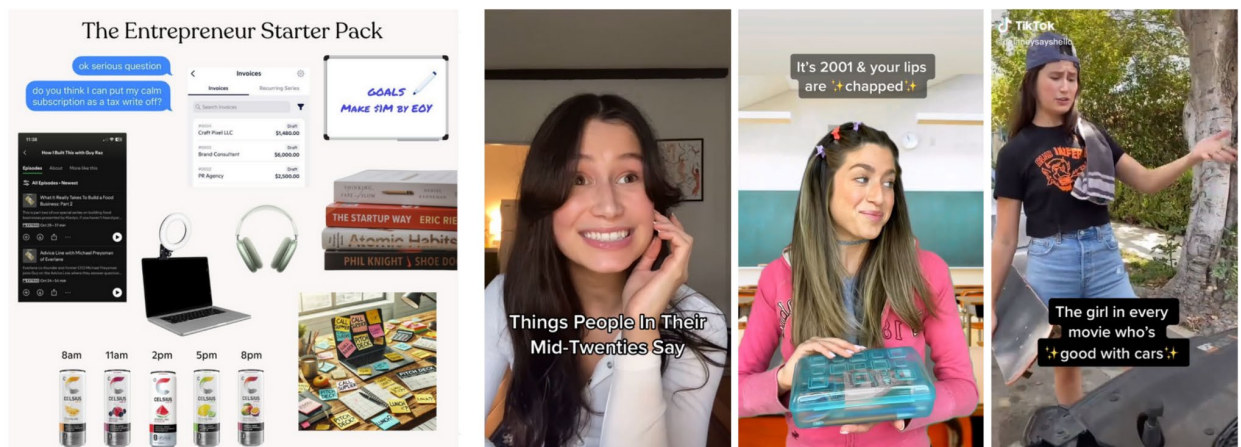


Figure 23: Cultural Integration of Starter Packs

TikTok’s participatory structure disrupts this logic. The platform prioritizes dynamic, performance-based engagement, where meaning emerges through interaction rather than passive recognition. A static Starter Pack posted to TikTok would fail to generate engagement because it does not fit the expected format of short-form, visually

driven video content. Instead, Starter Packs must be recalibrated into embodied performances, shifting from referential collages to enacted archetypes.

This transformation unfolds through distinct adaptation strategies, also illustrated in Figure 7. Rather than presenting cultural stereotypes as static lists, TikTok creators enact them through micro-performances, character embodiment, and long-form trope enactments. In fragmented micro-performances, creators break archetypes into rapid-fire phrases and gestures, each representing a familiar social type. A creator like Delaney Rowe, for instance, performs recognizable figures in short, punchy sequences where every phrase or movement signals an archetype. Other performers embrace full-character embodiment, translating Starter Packs into costumed, era-based performances where aesthetic cues replace text labels—Kate Steinberg’s nostalgic reenactments exemplify this approach. Some TikTok creators extend this adaptation into long-form trope enactments, structuring entire videos and arcs around a single archetype like Rowe’s ‘girl in every movie who’s good with cars’. This technique exaggerates physicality, speech patterns, and narrative beats, allowing performers to bring stereotypes to life in ways that engage audiences beyond mere recognition.

This shift from static curation to iterative performance is not merely an aesthetic change—it reflects how TikTok’s algorithmic and participatory systems privilege memes that invite engagement, expansion, and remixing. Unlike serialized storytelling, which failed to integrate into Instagram’s rigid discovery model, Starter Packs thrive on TikTok because their transformation aligns with platform incentives. The format does not just survive the transition—it mutates into an interactive genre, demonstrating how memetic practices must conform to the structural and participatory demands of a new environment

to persist and evolve.

Filtering survival: how platform architectures determine memetic persistence.

Cultural integration is not simply about adaptation—it is a test of structural viability. Some memetic practices migrate seamlessly, aligning with platform architectures with little friction. Others fragment or require significant reconfiguration to persist. This step reveals which practices translate across platforms and why some survive intact while others struggle to function.

Serialized content on TikTok thrives through algorithmic surfacing and participatory worldbuilding, but on Instagram, where discovery is manual and narrative progression requires deliberate curation, it cannot fully integrate. By contrast, Starter Packs transition fluidly from static Instagram collages to TikTok’s performance-driven remix culture, mutating into embodied comedic archetypes. These cases illustrate a core principle: platforms do not passively receive content—they actively shape what can be sustained.

Cultural integration marks the final step of memetic translation. If structural adjustment determines whether a practice can be technically reconfigured and semiotic recalibration governs how meaning must shift, then cultural integration reveals whether a practice can function within new engagement and discovery structures. At this stage, the question is not just what migrates, but what persists.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that cross-platform adaptation is not random or arbitrary; it follows structured, patterned transformations that reveal how platform infrastructures shape not just content circulation but the very conditions of cultural production. These

findings situate memetic translation within a broader ecology of digital participation, highlighting three key dimensions: the asymmetry of platform adaptation, the strategic fluency of creators, and the structural limitations of certain practices in new environments. The three-step model reveals how practices are not simply carried over between platforms but structurally adjusted, semiotically recalibrated, and culturally integrated (or constrained). The findings suggest that cross-platform translation is neither a frictionless process nor a chaotic free-for-all but a patterned set of transformations shaped by both structural constraints and distributed agency.

Three key patterns emerge from the analysis. First, platform architectures produce asymmetrical patterns of adaptation, rooted in core differences: TikTok thrives on ephemerality, affective immediacy, and remix-based participation, while Instagram prioritizes aesthetic consistency, archival stability, and networked visibility. Creators facing a TikTok ban could not simply shift to Instagram unchanged—platform incentives forced them to rework their approach, not just swap apps. TikTok’s algorithm fuels participation and discovery, while Instagram’s grid and follower-driven system demand static coherence. This asymmetry is not just about affordances but about fundamentally different approaches to meaning-making: TikTok structures engagement through a temporal, emergent flow of content, while Instagram imposes a spatial, curated logic. Successful practices bend to these rules: Corecore turns from TikTok’s audiovisual chaos into Instagram’s curated moodboards, and Starter Packs shift from static collages to TikTok’s embodied performances.

Second, creators demonstrate sophisticated platform literacy, strategically adjusting their practices to sustain engagement across environments. This operates at both

individual and collective levels. At an individual level, creators like Veronika adopt distinct strategies, maintaining Serialized Storytelling on TikTok while repurposing Instagram as a curated archive and a platform for audience maintenance and brand extension. At a collective level, platform-specific conventions emerge over time as communities refine best practices for engagement and format evolution. These are not just individual strategies—they reflect distributed processes of negotiation with platform conditions.

Third, some practices prove fundamentally incompatible with certain platform architectures. When practices rely heavily on platform-specific affordances—like Serialized Storytelling's dependence on algorithmic discovery—they struggle to find stable forms in new environments. This reveals how platform infrastructures do not just influence content style but determine what forms of collective creativity can exist at all.

This study bridges critical gaps between platform studies and memetic theory, demonstrating how platform infrastructures shape not just content creation but meaning-making across contexts. While scholars have thoroughly examined how platforms shape internal content dynamics (van Dijck 2013; Gillespie 2018) and how memes evolve through participatory culture (Milner 2016; Shifman 2013), this study bridges these perspectives by formalizing a structured approach to cross-platform adaptation. By incorporating semiotic recalibration as a key process, the model reveals how meaning itself must be renegotiated when practices cross platform boundaries—an aspect under-examined in prior memetic research, which often prioritizes virality over meaning transformation.

As a qualitative, process-driven analysis, this project prioritizes interpretive depth

over representational breadth. That is, this work explains how memetic translation occurs but cannot measure how often specific adaptations succeed or fail. Without quantitative measures of engagement or temporal patterns, we can explain what happens but not track broader trends in adaptation success. These limitations suggest valuable directions for future research. While this study captures the process of adaptation, future work could measure its scale and success. Engagement metrics could help identify tipping points between successful integration and failed adaptation, while temporal analysis could reveal how long practices take to stabilize in new environments.

Rather than closing the conversation, this chapter establishes a foundation for further inquiry. The three-step model provides a structured lens for analyzing cross-platform transformation. Still, the ongoing evolution of platforms—and the adaptive strategies of users—suggests that memetic translation will remain a dynamic process. Understanding how cultural production adapts across shifting platform landscapes requires continued attention to both infrastructural constraints and the creative ingenuity of users who continually test, resist, and redefine them.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Social media platforms do not simply enable creative participation; they structure and condition it. At the outset of this dissertation, I argued that digital participation is not freeform creativity but shaped by the technical, economic, and governance structures embedded in platforms. TikTok and Instagram do not merely host creative content—they define the conditions under which it can emerge, circulate, and gain visibility. This dissertation has examined how these platforms actively configure participation, not only through their technical architectures but also through engagement incentives, algorithmic filtering, and platform vernaculars.

Now, I return to this core concern to synthesize what this means holistically. Across the three sites of analysis, I have traced how participation on digital platforms is neither open-ended nor incidental but structured through platform infrastructures and governance mechanisms. I call this structured participation: the idea that digital creativity is governed by infrastructural, economic, and social imperatives that define what users can create, how content circulates, and who is seen. Rather than viewing participation as purely user-driven, this framework highlights how cultural production on platforms is shaped by both structural constraints and creative negotiation. If participation was once celebrated as a defining feature of digital culture, it is now better understood as a structured process—one that platforms actively regulate, even as users adapt, resist, and transform the conditions imposed on them.

In Chapter One, I framed memetic practices as a uniquely valuable analytic lens for studying these dynamics. Unlike static artifacts, memetic practices make visible the conditions of platformed creativity because they depend on participation, circulation, and

transformation within structured digital environments. This dissertation has demonstrated that structured participation operates at multiple levels. Chapter Two demonstrated that platforms do not merely host content but actively structure creativity through affordances, governance, and public positioning—operationalizing authenticity, creativity, community, and discovery in distinct ways that shape how cultural production unfolds. Chapter Three then examined how users experience inherent tensions within platform constraints, navigating them through memetic negotiation to arrive at three distinct vernaculars—participatory, performative, and creative. Finally, Chapter Four traced how creative practices shift across platforms, demonstrating that memetic translation is not seamless but unfolds through structural adjustment, semiotic recalibration, and cultural integration—revealing how platform logics dictate what creative expressions persist, mutate, or fade. Together, these findings reveal that participation is not purely user-driven—it is governed by the infrastructural and economic constraints of platform ecosystems, conditioning how creativity emerges, circulates, and sustains itself.

This chapter proceeds in four parts. First, I consider what structured participation reveals about platforms as structured actors, shaped by external economic, legal, and infrastructural forces. Platforms do not govern participation in isolation; their policies and affordances are shaped by financial incentives, regulatory pressures, and dependencies on external infrastructures such as app stores and cloud services. Recognizing these constraints reveals that structured participation is not just a product of internal platform policies but part of a larger system of digital governance.

Second, I explore how users experience and negotiate structured participation—not just in response to platform incentives, but in relation to broader social and cultural

pressures that govern creative participation. If platforms impose constraints, users do not simply react to them; they engage in aspirational labor, develop platform vernaculars, and navigate visibility hierarchies. Structured participation is not just a top-down process—it unfolds through the interplay of governance, creative adaptation, and strategic engagement.

Third, I discuss how memetic translation demonstrates the broader constraints shaping digital creativity. As creative practices move across platforms, they do not migrate seamlessly but must undergo structural adjustment, semiotic recalibration, and cultural integration. Memetic translation reveals that participation is not simply bound by platform-specific affordances but by larger systemic forces that condition the circulation and persistence of creative expression.

Finally, I conclude by offering three provocations—considering how decentralization, private digital spaces, and generative AI complicate and extend the theory of structured participation. If structured participation defines digital culture, what happens when participation itself changes? What happens when users withdraw from visibility-driven spaces, or when AI disrupts the very meaning of engagement? These challenges do not contradict structured participation; they reveal its adaptability. Rather than treating them as external to the framework, I argue that they demonstrate its relevance beyond TikTok and Instagram, shaping the future of platformed cultural production.

Through this final chapter, I demonstrate that structured participation is not merely an insight about TikTok and Instagram; it is a governing logic that shapes digital culture at large. It offers a way to understand how digital creativity is shaped, how users

navigate and resist constraints, and how participation itself evolves as platforms, infrastructures, and governance mechanisms change. If participation is no longer free or open-ended, then structured participation is the logic that explains how it works, who it benefits, and where it is headed.

PLATFORMS AS STRUCTURED ACTORS

Platforms are not autonomous rule-makers; they are structured actors, shaped by external economic, legal, and infrastructural forces that determine the boundaries of digital cultural production. While Chapter Two examined how platforms configure participation internally, this section extends that analysis outward—showing that platform governance strategies, affordances, and moderation policies are not merely internal choices but responses to broader structural constraints.

Participation on digital platforms is fundamentally conditioned by market imperatives. Platforms operate as capitalist intermediaries (Srnicek 2017) that prioritize revenue extraction, data monetization, and engagement maximization. For example, Instagram’s pivot to Reels was not merely an aesthetic update but a strategic response to TikTok’s rising market influence — a move designed to capture advertising revenue and secure competitive relevance. Similarly, YouTube’s 2012 shift to a watch-time-based ranking system reoriented user participation by privileging longer content to maximize ad impressions. These examples reveal that platform affordances are not neutral features; they are economic artifacts embedded within financial models that actively shape the sustainability of digital creativity.

Economic imperatives are reinforced by legal and policy constraints. Platforms often present themselves as champions of open participation while simultaneously

adapting their governance models to meet external regulatory demands. Tarleton Gillespie (2018) describes them as “reluctant regulators,” compelled to implement moderation policies and content rules that reflect state intervention, intellectual property law, and data protection mandates. YouTube’s compliance with COPPA in 2019, for instance, not only altered its moderation practices but reshaped the economic viability of entire content genres by restricting monetization on child-directed content. Such legal pressures ensure that platforms’ internal policies are inextricably linked to external legal architectures (Suzor 2019). These legal frameworks do not simply constrain platforms; regulatory compliance directly influences the economic and creative conditions that determine which cultural practices thrive and which are suppressed.

Platform autonomy is also limited by technological dependencies. Platforms rely on third-party infrastructures—such as cloud hosting services, app store policies, and payment processors—that impose additional layers of constraint (Helmond 2015). Apple’s App Store regulations, for example, directly influence monetization models for not only social media apps but also adjacent creator-driven services like OnlyFans and Patreon. These dependencies illustrate that platforms are integrated into a broader media and financial ecosystem where external constraints fundamentally shape which forms of participation can thrive.

In sum, platforms are structured actors. They do not simply set participation rules in a vacuum; they operate within a nexus of economic imperatives, legal mandates, and technological dependencies that shape their governance strategies and creative affordances. Recognizing this broader context is essential to understanding structured participation, as it reveals that the boundaries of digital cultural production are

determined by forces extending well beyond the platform itself. If platforms shape the limits of participation, then users must navigate these constraints while also responding to broader economic, cultural, and ideological pressures—a dynamic the next section explores through the lens of aspirational labor, strategic self-optimization, and the internalization of platform constraints.

USERS AS MORE THAN CREATIVE AGENTS

Users do not engage with platforms as neutral participants. Their agency is shaped not only by platform architectures but also by broader cultural and economic forces that define participation itself. If platforms set the terms of engagement, users arrive already primed to see participation as a meritocratic pursuit of visibility, success, and creative self-expression. This ideological framing does not merely exist within platform governance; it is a broader cultural condition—a mythology that participation is open and agentic, even as it remains constrained and stratified.

But ideology is not the only structuring force that users bring with them. Economic pressures also shape how users engage with structured participation. For some, posting online is seen as a potential income stream—whether through monetization, sponsorships, or platform payouts (Abidin 2018; van Dijck et al. 2018b). Even for those who do not expect to profit directly, social media remains a site where economic standing and professional identity are at stake (Gershon 2017; Marwick 2013). Users navigate participation with an awareness that what they post may impact their career, social reputation, or access to future opportunities. This extends structured participation beyond platform logics; users are not just managing visibility for engagement but also negotiating their broader social and economic positioning.

One of the primary ways users respond to these pressures is through aspirational labor—not just as a platform-driven incentive, but as a broader structuring force in digital creative work. As Duffy (2017) argues, aspirational labor is the pursuit of creative success without guaranteed reward, where users optimize their self-presentation in anticipation of future visibility. But this logic is not confined to influencers or monetized creators; it has diffused across digital participation more broadly. Sophie Bishop (2023) describes this expansion of self-branding, algorithmic optimization, and authenticity as ‘influencer creep’—the spread of influencer-driven strategies into wider creative labor. These pressures shape not just professionalized creators but everyday users, who internalize structured participation as an environment to be navigated. As Cotter (2019) argues, users learn to “play the visibility game”—adapting their self-presentation, creative choices, and engagement strategies to align with perceived platform priorities. The result is not simply participation, but participation conditioned by an awareness of algorithmic legibility, strategic self-optimization, and professional risk.

Yet users do not just adapt to these pressures; they help sustain them. The very strategies users adopt to remain visible—optimizing their content, engaging algorithmically, and performing authenticity—are the same practices that reinforce the structures they seek to navigate. Users may feel that they are exercising individual agency, but their participation remains shaped by preexisting structural and cultural conditions. Structured participation is not only something that users must work within—it is something that is continually reproduced through participation itself.

By reframing digital creativity as an optimized practice rather than a freely expressive one, platforms encourage users to internalize structured participation as a

natural and inevitable mode of engagement. If structured participation governs what is visible, what is valuable, and what is possible, then users—through their creative labor, strategic engagement, and everyday participation—are not just navigating these constraints; they are helping sustain them.

MEMETIC TRANSLATION WITHIN BROADER CONSTRAINTS

Chapter Four demonstrated that memetic translation is not a seamless process—when content moves across platforms, it must be structurally reconfigured to fit new technical conditions, semiotically recalibrated to remain legible in shifting meaning-making contexts, and culturally integrated (or not) to sustain engagement and visibility. These adaptations are not just creative choices; they reflect the governing conditions imposed by platforms. Building on this, we can now ask: How do these processes accumulate at scale, shaping not just individual acts of translation but the broader structures of digital cultural production?

One major force shaping memetic translation at scale is platform convergence. As platforms replicate each other's features—Reels mimicking TikTok, YouTube Shorts importing vertical video—they attempt to absorb not just formats but creative cultures. Yet these adaptations are never fully successful. While platforms copy design and engagement mechanics, they cannot seamlessly transfer the participatory logics that evolved within different affordance structures. This results in partial translation—where content moves across platforms, but the underlying participation frameworks remain distinct.

Economic conditions also shape which memetic practices translate successfully. Some memes adapt more easily because they fit into platform-specific monetization and

engagement models. TikTok's Creator Fund, YouTube's AdSense, and Instagram's Reels bonuses all incentivize certain content forms over others. A meme that translates into a short-form, high-retention video is more likely to persist than one that relies on formats that do not align with revenue structures. This economic filtering shapes not only what content survives in translation, but what kinds of creativity remain structurally viable.

At the same time, platforms actively prevent direct cross-platform replication. Instead of allowing seamless circulation, they use governance tools to discourage direct imports of content. For example, TikTok and Instagram suppress visibility for videos with competitor watermarks, forcing creators to reformat and re-upload content rather than directly porting it. Structured participation does not just shape translation—it regulates it, ensuring that adaptation requires strategic reworking to align with platform priorities.

If Chapter Four demonstrated how memetic translation is governed at the platform level, this section highlights how these structuring forces accumulate at scale, creating long-term patterns of cultural persistence and disappearance. Platforms do not just enable meme movement—they condition which forms of digital creativity remain sustainable across environments, shaping not only how content adapts but what kinds of cultural expression persist. Structured participation extends beyond individual user actions or single-platform constraints—it operates as a systemic mechanism for governing digital cultural production.

STRUCTURED PARTICIPATION AS AN EXPANDING RESEARCH AGENDA

Structured participation does not begin with engagement; it begins with perception. Platforms do not simply shape participation through governance and

affordances—they precondition what forms of engagement are possible by structuring what is seen, recognized, and made legible. The “algorithmic gaze” (Aleksic 2025) describes this recursive loop: platform recommendation systems do not just reflect user preferences; they actively train them, producing a structured cycle of conditioned visibility. TikTok’s For You Page, for example, does not merely suggest content; it refines user perception over time, subtly reinforcing pacing, aesthetics, and affective styles that align with platform logics. Similarly, Instagram’s Explore page curates a visual language that privileges certain self-presentations, themes, and styles while rendering others peripheral. These mechanisms do not just determine what gains traction; they define the very conditions under which engagement and participation can occur.

If structured participation preconfigures visibility, what happens when users attempt to reconfigure participation itself? Decentralized platforms promise an escape from corporate control (Koebler 2025; Lorenz 2025), yet they do not eliminate structured participation—they shift its governing mechanisms. Federated social networks such as Mastodon and Bluesky reject algorithmic amplification, yet they introduce new forms of governance through content moderation, instance-based administration, and federation rules (Gehl and Zulli 2023). The failure of Steemit (Li and Palanisamy 2019), a decentralized alternative to ad-based social media, illustrates this dynamic: rather than creating egalitarian participation, it became dominated by financial speculation and bot-driven engagement. Decentralization does not dissolve structured participation—it redistributes governance across different actors and infrastructures.

Whereas decentralization shifts structured participation, Dark Forest spaces attempt to evade it. Originally theorized in Liu Cixin’s *Three-Body Problem* (2016), the

Dark Forest concept describes a universe where civilizations remain hidden to avoid predatory forces. Applied to digital culture (Strickler 2019), it describes non-indexed, invitation-only spaces such as Discord servers, Telegram groups, and private stories, where users retreat from algorithmic visibility. These spaces suggest an alternative model—one that does not rely on engagement or recommendation algorithms but instead centers trust, exclusivity, and selective access. Yet digital culture remains cyclical: what emerges in Dark Forest spaces often reintegrates into mainstream platforms, shaping new engagement trends. Private meme-sharing groups on Telegram seed viral trends that later appear on Instagram and TikTok, while experimental creative practices developed in Discord communities migrate into public-facing content ecosystems. These patterns suggest that Dark Forest spaces are not separate from structured participation but function as a generative part of its broader system.

If decentralization redistributes structured participation and Dark Forest spaces attempt to evade it, AI-generated content accelerates it. Platforms are now engaged in an internal contradiction (Patel 2024): recommendation systems designed to optimize engagement are being overwhelmed by AI-generated content designed to exploit those very systems (c.f. Broderick 2024; Horning 2024; Koebler 2024). AI slop—the mass proliferation of low-quality, auto-generated engagement bait—is not an unintended consequence of structured participation; it is its intensification under algorithmic capitalism. The “Reverse Turing Test” (Appleton 2024) emerges as a defining condition of participation, where users must now prove their humanity to be recognized as legitimate participants. AI-generated content does not eliminate structured

participation—it forces platforms to recalibrate it, reshaping the conditions under which human engagement remains visible, valuable, and culturally meaningful.

These three forces—decentralization, Dark Forest spaces, and generative AI—do not operate independently. Rather, they form a recursive system in which each perceived alternative ultimately reinforces structured participation. AI-generated content floods mainstream platforms, pushing users toward decentralized and private spaces, yet those spaces develop their own visibility constraints, governance hierarchies, and re-monetization models. Dark Forest spaces create temporary retreats, yet they often seed content cycles that re-enter public platforms. Decentralization offers an escape from corporate control, yet it does not remove structured participation—it reconfigures it under new governance mechanisms.

If structured participation was initially theorized as a condition of platform engagement, these expansions suggest that it is better understood as an infrastructural logic that governs digital participation at multiple scales. Decentralized networks, private communities, and AI-driven content production do not dissolve structured participation; they force it to adapt, shifting its governing mechanisms while sustaining its underlying function. The result is not a dissolution of structured participation but its increasing embeddedness in the infrastructures that define digital culture.

This dissertation has argued that structured participation is not merely a feature of digital platforms but a foundational condition of mediated culture. Yet, as it evolves, new questions emerge. If decentralization fails to eliminate structured participation, does it offer meaningful alternatives or simply new governance models? If Dark Forest spaces provide temporary retreats, what forms of participation might persist outside visibility

economies? If AI blurs the boundary between human and automated participation, does structured participation still function as it once did?

These questions, however, extend beyond digital platforms—they are rooted in a broader sociological concern with structure and agency in cultural production. If participation remains structured under every apparent alternative, what does agency look like when cultural production is persistently shaped by forces beyond individual control? Structured participation does not eliminate agency, but it reconfigures it. As platforms, infrastructures, and automated systems increasingly govern participation, the challenge is not whether participation is structured but how agency is negotiated within those structures. Whether through recalibrated visibility strategies, decentralized governance, or the contested terrain of human-AI interaction, participation remains an active process of navigating and reshaping constraints.

Structured participation will not disappear—it will continue to evolve as an infrastructural condition of digital culture. The future of structured participation is thus not just a question of technological change but of how culture itself is mediated, constrained, and reimagined within evolving digital systems.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SEARCH DETAILS FOR NEWS AND TECH PRESS STATEMENTS

News Content

Initially captured via Nexis Uni with ongoing monitoring happening via Google Alerts. Nexis Uni allows for capturing 100 articles in a given export. From these exports, I wrote a Python script to concatenate these partial exports into one comprehensive file per platform, filter out duplicates and near-duplicates, and select for quotes and their surrounding context within each article.

TikTok Search Criteria

Dates: 2018-Present

Search Terms: "tiktok spokesperson" or "spokesperson from tiktok" or "bytedance spokesperson" or "spokesperson from bytedance"

Search Type: Terms and Connectors

Narrowed by: News, English, United States

Instagram Search Criteria

Dates: 2010-Present

Search Terms: "tiktok spokesperson" or "spokesperson from tiktok" or "bytedance spokesperson" or "spokesperson from bytedance"

Search Type: Terms and Connectors

Narrowed by: News, English, United States

Tech Press Content

Initially captured via Google Custom Search API with ongoing monitoring happening via Google Alerts. I wrote a script to collect links based on my search strings, save the content at these links as HTML files, and filter out duplicates and near-duplicates. Because these results were more often interviews than isolated quotes (as in the news statements), I kept the full context of each result for analysis. Because Instagram is owned and operated by Meta and they often use the parent company's name rather than 'Instagram', I manually reviewed these results to confirm that they were relevant.

My searches targeted the following outlets:

- **TechCrunch, The Verge, Wired:** These sites are known for comprehensive coverage of tech industry news, including official statements and press releases from companies like TikTok. They often publish detailed articles about company announcements and official communications.
- **Ars Technica, Engadget, CNET:** These platforms frequently feature in-depth interviews with tech executives and detailed analysis of corporate strategies, making them suitable for searching executive interviews and statements.
- **Gizmodo, Mashable, Vox (Recode):** These outlets often cover social aspects of technology, including topics like community guidelines, user safety, and social responsibility, making them ideal for searches related to TikTok's community engagement and policy discussions.

TikTok Search Criteria

Dates: 2018-Present

"TikTok" "official statement" OR "press release" site:techcrunch.com OR
site:theverge.com OR site:wired.com'

'TikTok" "CEO interview" OR "executive statement" OR "corporate vision"
site:arstechnica.com OR site:engadget.com OR site:cnet.com'

"TikTok" "community guidelines" OR "user safety" OR "social responsibility"
site:gizmodo.com OR site:mashable.com OR site:vox.com/recode'

Instagram Search Criteria

Dates: 2010-Present

"Meta" OR "Instagram" "official statement" OR "press release" site:techcrunch.com OR
site:theverge.com OR site:wired.com'

"Meta" OR "Instagram" "CEO interview" OR "executive statement" OR "corporate
vision" site:arstechnica.com OR site:engadget.com OR site:cnet.com'

"Meta" OR "Instagram" "community guidelines" OR "user safety" OR "social
responsibility" site:gizmodo.com OR site:mashable.com OR site:vox.com/recode'

APPENDIX B: DATA PROTOCOLS

For each protocol, document type refers to these five characteristics:

- Planned ahead vs. responsive (intention)
- Codified vs. ephemeral (audience)
- Formal vs. informal (format)
- Individual vs. collaborative (source[s] of material)
- Setting rules vs. setting expectations (purpose)

Governance Documents

- Document Type:
- Source Type:
- Date:
- Current or Historical:
- Purpose (Either setting rules or expectations + what else?):
- Themes (qualitative — both manifest and latent):
- Structural Characteristics (qualitative):
- Length:
- Complexity Metrics:
- Word Frequency:
- n-grams:
- Theme Frequencies:
- Sentiment Scores:
- Sentiment by Theme:
- Sentiment/Theme Correlation:
- Document Similarity:
- LDA Modeling:

Statements

- Document Type:
- Source Type:
- Purpose (Either setting rules or expectations + what else?):
- Date:
- Published internally or externally:

- Topical focus:
- Audience:
- Rhetorical Strategies:
- LDA Topic Modeling:
- Topic Modeling vs. Sentiment:
- Frame:
- Proactive or Reactive:

Videos

- Document Type:
- Source Type:
- Date:
- Purpose (Either setting rules or expectations + what else?):
- Topical Focus:
- Code for Type (e.g. tutorial, compilation, announcement, etc)
- MTM Topic Modeling (on corpus of frames and transcripts):
- Sentiment (Transcript):
- n-grams (Transcript):

Images

- Document Type:
- Source Type:
- Purpose (Either setting rules or expectations + what else?):
- Date:
- Visual Characteristics + Composition:

- Description of contents:
 - Affective Characteristics:
-

APPENDIX C: GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What are the key messages or themes conveyed in this data source?
2. How does this data source contribute to shaping user expectations and behaviors?
3. Are there any specific rules, norms, or boundaries established in this data source?
4. What kind of platform identity or brand image is projected through this data source?
5. Are there any recurring patterns, keywords, or phrases that stand out in this data source?
6. How does this data source address or engage with broader cultural, social, or political contexts?
7. Are there any inconsistencies, contradictions, or tensions within this data source or in relation to other data sources?
8. What are the potential implications or consequences of the messages or guidelines conveyed in this data source?
9. How does this data source contribute to or reinforce the platform's governance and control mechanisms?
10. In what ways does this data source delineate the platform's community and its intended culture?
11. What technological affordances or limitations are highlighted or implied by this data source?

12. How is the balance between user autonomy and platform control negotiated within this data source?
13. What insights or questions does this data source raise in relation to your overall research goals and theoretical frameworks?

APPENDIX D: CODING SCHEMA

DESCRIPTIVE CODES

Descriptive codes capture observable features of the content without interpreting their meaning.

1. Visual Elements

- **Color Schemes/Patterns**
 - **Definition:** The dominant colors, tones, or patterns used in the content.
 - **Examples:** Monochromatic, vibrant colors, pastel shades, high contrast, gradients, geometric patterns.
 - **Usage:** Note the overall color palette and any recurring patterns contributing to the content's aesthetic.
- **Text Overlays**
 - **Definition:** Text displayed directly on the visual content.
 - **Examples:** Captions within videos, quotes, memes, annotations, subtitles.
 - **Usage:** Identify any text elements added to the visual content and their purpose (e.g., emphasis, clarification).
- **Image Composition**
 - **Definition:** The arrangement and framing of visual elements within the content.
 - **Examples:** Rule of thirds, symmetry, leading lines, close-ups, wide shots, perspective angles.
 - **Usage:** Observe how visual elements are organized to direct viewer attention or convey meaning.
- **Editing Techniques**

- **Definition:** Methods used to alter or enhance the visual content.
- **Examples:** Cuts, transitions, filters, time-lapse, slow motion, split-screen, green screen effects.
- **Usage:** Note any editing styles that influence the pacing, mood, or storytelling.
- **Visual Effects/Filters**
 - **Definition:** Special effects or filters applied to change the appearance of the content.
 - **Examples:** Vintage filters, glitch effects, augmented reality elements, face filters, and color grading.
 - **Usage:** Identify any post-production effects that modify the original visuals.

2. Audio Elements

- **Music Choice**
 - **Definition:** The type and style of music used.
 - **Examples:** Popular songs, original compositions, instrumental tracks, and genres like pop, hip-hop, and classical.
 - **Usage:** Consider how the music influences the content's tone or aligns with trends.
- **Voice-over Style**
 - **Definition:** The manner in which voice is used over the content.
 - **Examples:** Narration, commentary, character voices, text-to-speech, dialogues.
 - **Usage:** Note if the voice-over adds information, humor, or a personal touch.
- **Sound Effects**
 - **Definition:** Non-musical audio elements added to enhance the content.
 - **Examples:** Applause, laughter, ambient sounds, beeps, whooshes.
 - **Usage:** Identify sound effects that contribute to the mood or emphasize actions.
- **Original vs. Borrowed Audio**
 - **Definition:** Whether the audio is created by the user or sourced from existing material.

- **Examples:** User's own recordings (original), lip-syncing to audio (borrowed).
- **Usage:** Distinguish between user-generated sounds and those taken from other sources.

3. Interactive Features

- **Hashtag Usage**
 - **Definition:** Use of hashtags to categorize or promote content.
 - **Examples:** #foryou, #dtiys, #memes, #viral.
 - **Usage:** Note the hashtags used and their relevance to trends or communities.
- **Caption Style**
 - **Definition:** The way users write captions accompanying their content.
 - **Examples:** Informative, humorous, minimalist, provocative, using emojis.
 - **Usage:** Analyze how captions add context or engage the audience.
- **Call to Action Elements**
 - **Definition:** Prompts encouraging audience interaction.
 - **Examples:** "Like and share," "Comment your thoughts," "Follow for more," and "Check link in bio."
 - **Usage:** Identify strategies used to boost engagement.
- **Comment Engagement Patterns**
 - **Definition:** How users interact with comments on their content.
 - **Examples:** Replying to comments, highlighting top comments, and creating content based on comments.
 - **Usage:** Observe the level of interaction and responsiveness.
- **Sharing Mechanisms**
 - **Definition:** Methods used to distribute content beyond the initial post.
 - **Examples:** Reposts, duets, stitches, sharing to stories, cross-platform sharing.
 - **Usage:** Note how content is amplified or adapted for wider reach.

OPEN CODES

Open codes begin to interpret the data by identifying patterns, meanings, and initial categories.

1. Expression Patterns

- **Emotional Tone**
 - **Definition:** The emotional atmosphere conveyed.
 - **Examples:** Joyful, melancholic, humorous, tense, inspirational.
 - **Usage:** Determine the dominant emotion and how it influences viewer reception.
- **Humor Style**
 - **Definition:** The type of humor used to engage or entertain.
 - **Examples:** Satire, irony, slapstick, wordplay, absurdity.
 - **Usage:** Identify comedic elements and their effectiveness.
- **Narrative Approach**
 - **Definition:** The method of storytelling or content delivery.
 - **Examples:** Linear story, flashbacks, open-ended, episodic, parodic.
 - **Usage:** Analyze how the narrative structure shapes the content.
- **Performance Style**
 - **Definition:** The manner in which users present themselves.
 - **Examples:** Dramatic, casual, exaggerated, minimalist, character portrayal.
 - **Usage:** Observe the user's demeanor and its impact on authenticity.
- **Identity Presentation**
 - **Definition:** How users portray aspects of their identity.
 - **Examples:** Gender expression, cultural identity, professional role, hobbies.
 - **Usage:** Note any identity markers and how they relate to content themes.

2. Community Dynamics

- **Collaboration Signals**
 - **Definition:** Indicators of working with others in content creation.
 - **Examples:** Featuring other creators, joint challenges, tagging collaborators.
 - **Usage:** Identify partnerships and their influence on content.
- **Response Patterns**
 - **Definition:** Ways users respond to or build upon others' content.
 - **Examples:** Reaction videos, duets, stitches, remixes.
 - **Usage:** Observe how content is part of a larger conversation.

- **Inside References**
 - **Definition:** Use of shared knowledge specific to a group.
 - **Examples:** In-jokes, memes, references to community events.
 - **Usage:** Identify content that fosters a sense of belonging.
- **Group Boundaries**
 - **Definition:** Indicators of inclusion or exclusion within communities.
 - **Examples:** Exclusive hashtags, jargon, gatekeeping.
 - **Usage:** Note how users define who is 'in' or 'out' of a group.
- **Collective Meaning-Making**
 - **Definition:** Processes by which users co-create meanings.
 - **Examples:** Participating in trends, collaborative storytelling, shared symbols.
 - **Usage:** Analyze how content contributes to communal narratives.

3. Creative Techniques

- **Format Innovation**
 - **Definition:** Creating or experimenting with new content formats.
 - **Examples:** Interactive videos, new challenge formats, unconventional storytelling.
 - **Usage:** Identify originality in presentation.
- **Convention Subversion**
 - **Definition:** Deliberately breaking norms or expectations.
 - **Examples:** Unexpected endings, anti-climactic twists, challenging stereotypes.
 - **Usage:** Observe how users disrupt standard practices.
- **Remix Strategies**
 - **Definition:** Reworking existing content to create something new.
 - **Examples:** Mashups, parodies, re-edits.
 - **Usage:** Note how users build upon others' work.
- **Genre Blending**
 - **Definition:** Combining elements from different genres.
 - **Examples:** Comedy-horror skits, educational music videos.
 - **Usage:** Identify innovative cross-genre content.
- **Platform Adaptation**

- **Definition:** Adjusting content to suit platform-specific features.
- **Examples:** Utilizing TikTok's duet function, Instagram's carousel posts.
- **Usage:** Observe how content leverages platform capabilities.

AXIAL CODES

Axial codes connect open codes to form higher-level conceptual categories, revealing underlying themes.

1. Platform Navigation

- **Feature Utilization**
 - **Definition:** Strategic use of platform tools to enhance content.
 - **Related Open Codes:** Platform Adaptation, Sharing Mechanisms, Voice-over Style.
 - **Usage:** Analyze how users maximize the potential of platform features.
- **Algorithm Engagement**
 - **Definition:** Techniques aimed at increasing visibility through understanding of the platform's algorithm.
 - **Related Open Codes:** Hashtag Usage, Call to Action Elements, Response Patterns.
 - **Usage:** Identify strategies like using trending sounds or hashtags.
- **Format Constraints**
 - **Definition:** Navigating limitations imposed by the platform.
 - **Related Open Codes:** Platform Adaptation, Format Innovation.
 - **Usage:** Observe how users creatively work within time limits or content policies.
- **Technical Workarounds**
 - **Definition:** Creative solutions to overcome platform limitations or challenges.
 - **Related Open Codes:** Format Innovation, Editing Techniques.
 - **Usage:** Note any innovative methods to bypass constraints.
- **Interface Manipulation**
 - **Definition:** Altering the presentation or interaction with the platform's interface.
 - **Related Open Codes:** Visual Effects/Filters, Convention Subversion.

- **Usage:** Identify instances where users play with the user interface for effect.

2. Cultural Negotiation

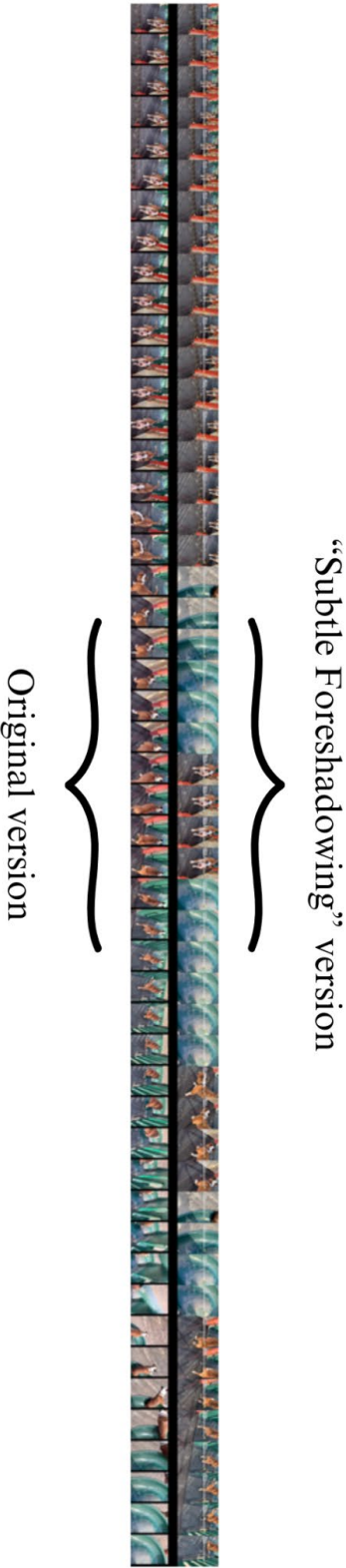
- **Authenticity Signals**
 - **Definition:** Indicators used to convey genuineness.
 - **Related Open Codes:** Performance Style, Identity Presentation, Convention Subversion.
 - **Usage:** Analyze how users build trust with their audience.
- **Community Norms**
 - **Definition:** Shared expectations and behaviors within a group.
 - **Related Open Codes:** Group Boundaries, Inside References.
 - **Usage:** Observe adherence to or deviation from group norms.
- **Creative Boundaries**
 - **Definition:** Limits of acceptable creative expression.
 - **Related Open Codes:** Format Innovation, Convention Subversion.
 - **Usage:** Identify what is considered innovative versus inappropriate.
- **Identity Performance**
 - **Definition:** The portrayal and expression of one's identity in a social context.
 - **Related Open Codes:** Identity Presentation, Performance Style.
 - **Usage:** Analyze how users navigate personal and social identities.
- **Cultural References**
 - **Definition:** Incorporation of elements from broader culture or subcultures.
 - **Related Open Codes:** Inside References, Remix Strategies.
 - **Usage:** Note references to media, events, or trends.

3. Structural Tensions

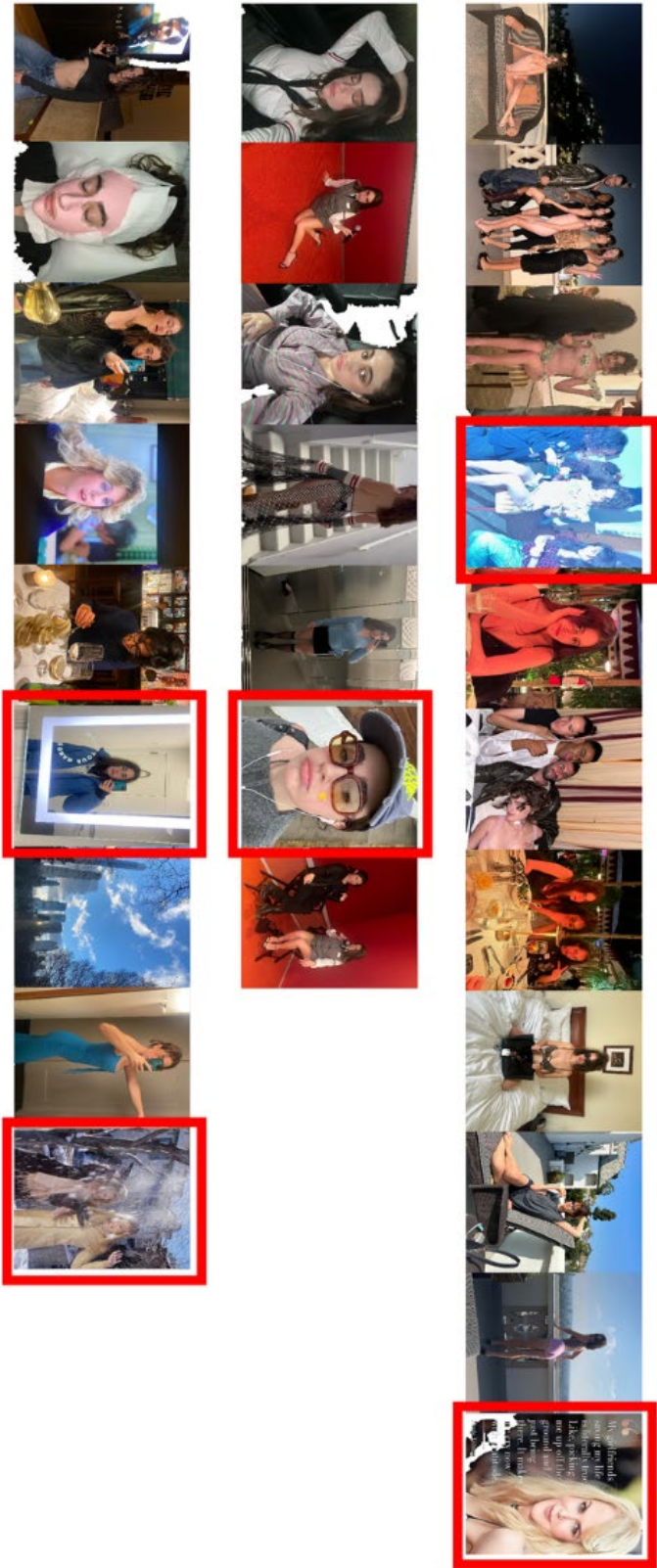
- **Individual/Collective Balance**
 - **Definition:** The tension between personal expression and communal expectations.
 - **Related Axial Codes:** Community Norms, Identity Performance.
 - **Usage:** Explore how users assert individuality while fitting into communities.

- **Innovation/Convention Balance**
 - **Definition:** The tension between creating new content and following established norms.
 - **Related Axial Codes:** Creative Boundaries, Format Innovation.
 - **Usage:** Analyze how users balance originality with audience expectations.
 - **Performance/Authenticity Balance**
 - **Definition:** The tension between performing for an audience and being genuine.
 - **Related Axial Codes:** Authenticity Signals, Performance Style.
 - **Usage:** Examine the authenticity of content versus performative aspects.
 - **Platform/User Agency**
 - **Definition:** The negotiation between platform control and user autonomy.
 - **Related Axial Codes:** Format Constraints, Technical Workarounds.
 - **Usage:** Observe how users exercise creativity within platform constraints.
 - **Visibility/Control Dynamics**
 - **Definition:** The balance between seeking exposure and managing self-presentation.
 - **Related Axial Codes:** Algorithm Engagement, Authenticity Signals.
 - **Usage:** Analyze strategies to gain attention while maintaining desired image.
-

APPENDIX E: ROTATED VERSION OF FIGURE 7



APPENDIX F: ROTATED VERSION OF FIGURE 12



APPENDIX G: MULTI-PHASE APPROACH TO CROSS-PLATFORM TRACKING

Memetic adaptation was analyzed through a **three-layered** approach:

Layer 1: Direct Mapping & Initial Targeted Searches

- **Objective:** Establish a baseline by directly mapping Chapter Three’s findings onto Chapter Four’s cross-platform adaptation process.
 - **Process:**
 - Each practice’s core logics, affordance-driven constraints, and key terms (as established in Chapter Three) were identified.
 - Search queries based on the exact name and descriptors from Chapter Three were applied to TikTok and Instagram.
 - Initial searches were conducted manually through web browsers and in-app searches using ethnographic accounts.
 - **Focus:** Capture direct mappings—instances where practices carried over with minimal transformation. This stage was primarily “pilot” searches to test the approach and guide ethnographic immersion.
-

Layer 2: Focused Ethnographic Immersion

- **Objective:** Move beyond direct mappings to capture unexpected and more complex transformations through ethnographic exploration.
- **Process:**
 - The five research personas (Jamie, Lily, Mia, Amara, Darnell) were used to systematically explore content discovery across platforms.
 - Rather than starting from predefined search terms, this phase focused on

naturalistic observation—tracking platform-native discoveries and algorithmic surfacing.

- **Field notes were recorded on:**
 - **Unexpected transformations:** How did practices mutate in form, function, and meaning?
 - **New categories:** Where did related, but not explicitly named, versions of these practices emerge?
 - **Discovery mechanisms:** Were these practices algorithmically surfaced (TikTok) or manually navigated (Instagram)?
- This phase shaped adjustments for Layer 3 retrieval.

Layer 3: Targeted Retrieval & Systematic Data Collection

- **Objective:** Systematically retrieve both direct and discovered adaptations using refined search strategies informed by Layer 2 ethnographic insights.
 - **Process:**
 - **TikTok Retrieval:**
 - API searches focused on key search terms and accounts.
 - **Instagram Retrieval:**
 - Zeeschuimer and 4CAT were used to scrape posts as well as full accounts.
 - For both platforms, I used a combination of keyword searches and hashtag searches to aim for more comprehensive coverage.
-

Having done this, I arrived at the search strategies below to capture and archive content:

TikTok to Instagram Migrations

Dreamcore/Liminal Spaces

- **Primary terms:** "dreamcore", "liminal", "backrooms"
- **Aesthetic markers:** “weirdcore”, “nostalgiacore”
- **Format signals:** "liminal space", "dreamlike"

Corecore

- **Direct terms:** "corecore", "emotional edits"
- **Style markers:** “nostalgiacore”, “traumacore”
- **Format adaptations:** "core posting", "emotional dump"

Serialized Storytelling

- **Format markers:** "series", "episode", "multipart"
- **Narrative signals:** "character arc", "plot twist" "to be continued", "next part" "tap for part 2"
- **Platform adaptation markers:** "continued", "series update" "link in bio for full"
- **Key accounts:** veronika_iscool, kylechazz, nevermindpod

Subversive Humor and Metacommentary

- **Direct terms:** "meta", "commentary", "satire"
- **Platform critique adaptations:** "self care tips", "wellness culture"
- **Key accounts:** power.of.self.care, afffirmations

Subtle Foreshadowing

- **Primary terms:** "subtle foreshadowing", "wait for it"

- **Format adaptations:** "swipe to find out", "swipe for reveal"
 - **Carousel markers:** "watch closely", "pay attention"
-

Instagram to TikTok Migrations

Strategic Imperfection

- **Daily life formats:** "grwm", "ditl", "get ready with me", "day in the life"
- **Process content:** "clean with me", "pack with me", "study with me"
- **Community markers:** "mom life", "real moms"
- **Behind-the-scenes:** "morning routine", "night routine"

Meme Accounts and Shitpost Aesthetics

- **Core terms:** "deepfried", "shitpost", "shitposting"
- **Platform adaptation:** "21stcenturyhumor", "goofyhhh"
- **Interaction markers:** "duet this meme", "stitch this meme"
- **Community signals:** "iykyk", "niche references"

Digital Art Community Practices

- **Process documentation:** "speedpaint", "timelapse", "procreate", "wip", "process video"
- **Challenge participation:** "art challenge", "dtiys", "draw this in your style"
- **Community interaction:** "fan art", "art process", "collabthis", "passthebrush"

Political Education through Infographics

- **Direct terms:** "activism", "justice", "quick explainer"
- **Awareness formats:** "raise awareness", "actnow", "infographic"
- **Platform-specific markers:** "news explanation videos", "creator reaction"

formats"

- **Key accounts:** jrehwald15, goodpoliticguy, marxismtodaymedia, kahlilgreene

Starter Packs

- **Character typing:** "that girl who", "that guy who", "the type of"
- **Group dynamics:** "every party has", "we all have that friend" "the mom friend", "the chaotic one", "the organized one", "the main character"
- **Direct usage:** "starter pack", "literally me"
- **Relatable formats:** "tell me you're [X] without telling me you're [X]"

GLOSSARY

THIS DISSERTATION'S CONCEPTUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Structured Participation: A theoretical framework that conceptualizes digital cultural participation as governed by the technical, economic, and governance structures embedded within platforms. Used across the entire dissertation and formalized in Chapter 5, structured participation explains how user creativity is shaped by affordances, monetization logics, ranking systems, and moderation practices. Contrasts with celebratory accounts of participatory culture by showing how creativity is negotiated within constraint rather than freely expressed.

The Four Platform Themes: Used as sensitizing concepts, these four themes represent how platforms structure the terms of cultural production through both rhetoric and infrastructure:

- **Authenticity:** A construct operationalized differently across platforms—on TikTok as spontaneous, unfiltered, and trend-driven expression; on Instagram as carefully curated self-presentation balancing aspiration with relatability. These platform-specific constructions shape what forms of self-expression gain visibility and legitimacy.
- **Creativity:** Framed on TikTok as accessible, participatory, and remix-driven; on Instagram as aesthetic polish, personal branding, and consistent visual identity. These divergent constructions influence the creative strategies users develop and what forms of content thrive.
- **Community:** Constructed on TikTok through participatory trends and algorithmic discovery of like-minded creators; on Instagram through pre-existing networks,

interest-based exploration, and curated connections. These approaches shape how users experience belonging and collective identity.

- **Discovery:** Operationalized on TikTok as algorithm-driven, serendipitous exposure to diverse content; on Instagram as interest-based, networked exploration within more controlled parameters. These models determine how content circulates and what gains cultural relevance.

Introduced in Chapter 2, these themes organize platform logic and guide the comparative analysis.

Memetic Negotiation: A framework describing how users collectively navigate platform constraints by developing cultural strategies that resolve key tensions—between individual and collective expression, authenticity and performance, innovation and convention. Introduced in Chapter 3, where it anchors the analysis of how users on TikTok and Instagram develop expressive styles in response to infrastructural and social limits. Draws from platform vernaculars and structuration theory but focuses on dynamic, practice-based adaptation.

Three-Step Model of Memetic Translation: A model explaining how memetic practices adapt when they move across platforms, involving three recursive and interdependent stages:

- **Structural Adjustment:** Reconfiguring a meme's form, pacing, or aesthetics to align with the technical and governance constraints of the destination platform.
- **Semiotic Recalibration:** Shifting or reinterpreting meaning so that a meme fits the new platform's cultural language, audience expectations, and expressive norms.

- **Cultural Integration:** The process by which a memetic practice either embeds into, mutates within, or dissolves from a platform's content ecosystem.

Central to Chapter 4, this model provides a concrete method for tracing cross-platform adaptation beyond metaphors of diffusion or virality. Developed in this dissertation, informed by Shifman (2013), Hall (1973), and platform infrastructure literature.

Participatory, Performative, and Creative Vernaculars: A tripartite framework used to classify the expressive strategies users develop in response to platform conditions:

- **Participatory Vernaculars:** Navigate the tension between individuality and collective trend participation.
- **Performative Vernaculars:** Manage visibility and authenticity through strategic self-presentation.
- **Creative Vernaculars:** Express innovation within genre constraints and algorithmic limits.

Emergent from empirical analysis in Chapter 3, these vernaculars help explain the varied ways users "speak" the language of platforms under structured participation.

Calibrated Authenticity, Networked Individuality, and Constrained Creativity:

Three user-developed strategies that resolve the dialectical tensions mapped through memetic negotiation:

- **Calibrated Authenticity:** Performing realness in a way that aligns with platform norms and visibility incentives.
- **Networked Individuality:** Maintaining personal expression while participating in collective cultural flows.

- **Constrained Creativity:** Innovating within—and because of—platform-imposed limits on form, style, and structure.

These are synthesized in Chapter 3 and reappear in Chapter 4 as recurring strategies through which users adapt to platform constraints.

FOUNDATIONAL THEORY IN SOCIOLOGY AND COMMUNICATION/MEDIA

Structure and Agency: The enduring sociological problem of how individual actions (agency) are shaped or constrained by social structures, and how those structures are in turn reproduced through action.

Core theorists: Anthony Giddens (1984); Pierre Bourdieu (1993). Frames the view of platformed participation as an ongoing negotiation—users are neither fully autonomous nor fully determined, but operate within conditions that they simultaneously shape and are shaped by.

Cultural Production: Analyzes how cultural goods are produced within structured fields—through networks of creators, institutions, norms, and systems of value and legitimacy.

Core theorists: Pierre Bourdieu (1993); Howard Becker (1982). Provides the foundational framework for analyzing how memes and creative content are not just user-generated but shaped by platform logics, technical affordances, and cultural hierarchies.

Encoding/Decoding: A model of communication that distinguishes between the production of media messages (encoding) and their interpretation by audiences (decoding), often in ways not intended by the producer.

Core theorist: Stuart Hall (1973). Underpins the analysis of memetic negotiation and of meaning instability and the interpretive shifts that occur during cross-platform adaptation.

Participatory Culture: Describes a shift in media culture where consumers also become producers, collaborators, and co-creators of content.

Core theorist: Henry Jenkins (1992); Jenkins, Ito, and boyd (2015). While foundational, this work critiques this celebratory view by emphasizing how participation is structured—mediated by affordances, algorithmic sorting, and governance systems.

Platformization: The process by which digital infrastructures reorganize economic, cultural, and social activity around platform logics such as data extraction, modularity, and connectivity.

Core theorists: Anne Helmond (2015); José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal (2018). Explains how platforms shape not just participation, but the very conditions of creative production, shaping content visibility and cultural legitimacy.

Affordances: Originally a perceptual concept, now used in platform studies to describe the possible actions a user can take with a technology. Davis (2020) reframes affordances as relational—emerging from interaction between technical systems, user perception, and social context.

Core theorists: James Gibson (1979); expanded by William Gaver (1991); Jenny L. Davis (2020). This dissertation adopts Davis's relational model to understand

how platform affordances both enable and constrain memetic expression and shape platform-specific practices.

Digital Folk Culture: Refers to vernacular, grassroots cultural practices online that are collaboratively produced and widely circulated—like memes, trends, and remix styles.

Core theorists: Limor Shifman (2013); Ryan Milner (2016); drawing on folklore studies. Forms the basis for treating memes as collective, negotiated practices rather than isolated content objects, with attention to how these practices are shaped by infrastructure.

Platform Governance: Describes the rules, policies, and algorithmic mechanisms through which platforms structure participation, regulate behavior, and curate visibility.

Core theorists: Tarleton Gillespie (2018); Robert Gorwa (2019); José van Dijck (2013). Serves as a key force in structured participation—governance is not only formal (e.g., moderation), but embedded in design, recommendation systems, and monetization incentives.

OPERATIONALIZED CONCEPTS

Meme: Building on but distinct from earlier definitions, this dissertation operationalizes memes not as discrete viral units (Dawkins 1976) or static templates (Shifman 2013) but as dynamic sites of negotiation between platform constraints and user agency. Memes function simultaneously as cultural texts, social practices, and infrastructural artifacts, making them uniquely valuable for studying how platforms shape cultural production.

Memetic Practice: Where memes are often analyzed as content, this dissertation focuses on memetic practices—the structured, iterative actions through which users collectively create, transform, and engage with memes. These practices involve not just producing

content but navigating visibility architectures, engagement incentives, and platform-specific constraints. This approach highlights the procedural nature of meme creation rather than just its artifacts.

Platform Vernacular: Extended beyond Gibbs et al.'s (2015) definition of platform-specific communicative styles, this dissertation operationalizes vernaculars as strategic responses to platform-specific tensions and constraints. Vernaculars emerge not just as linguistic or visual dialects but as negotiated solutions to the structural conditions of platforms—revealing the interplay between technical governance and cultural adaptation.

Constitutive Constraints: Drawing from Juarrero (2023), this dissertation defines constraints not merely as limitations but as generative conditions that enable certain forms of creativity while foreclosing others. This operational concept reframes platform restrictions as productive forces that structure creative possibilities rather than simply limiting them.

Algorithmic Systems: This dissertation treats algorithmic systems not as neutral computational tools but as sociotechnical infrastructures that structure cultural visibility. Algorithmic filtering determines what is surfaced or suppressed; algorithmic legibility refers to how users interpret and respond to perceived platform logic; and algorithmic suppression encompasses downranking or invisibility. Together, these dynamics shape user behavior, strategic adaptation, and memetic practices, functioning as a central mechanism of structured participation.

Sociotechnical Environment: Rather than isolating technical features or user behavior, this dissertation frames platforms as sociotechnical environments—integrated systems where affordances, governance mechanisms, design architecture, and user norms interact

to shape cultural production. These environments are not passive contexts but active conditions that structure how users engage, what forms of creativity emerge, and what becomes culturally legible.

Platform Logics: Platform logics refer to the underlying rationales—economic, technical, and social—that shape how participation is incentivized, evaluated, and made visible. These include engagement optimization, data extraction, monetization schemes, and algorithmic curation. This dissertation uses the concept to analyze how platform structures define not only what content thrives but also what kinds of creativity are possible, valued, or discouraged.

Remix Culture: Refers to a cultural mode in which users creatively reuse, transform, and recontextualize existing media texts. Popularized by Lawrence Lessig (2008) and Henry Jenkins (2006), remix culture frames creativity as participatory and collaborative—shaped by circulation, imitation, and reinterpretation. This dissertation emphasizes remix as a vernacular, iterative grammar shaped by platform affordances and governance systems. In line with Manovich's (2001) discussion of modularity and variability, remix is treated not just as user expression but as a platform-conditioned aesthetic logic. On TikTok and Instagram, remix becomes a core expressive strategy—manifesting through audio reuse, video layering, genre referencing, and content mutation. Rather than treating remix as a technical process or legal category, this project frames it as a dynamic social grammar that reflects both cultural fluency and constraint navigation.

Media Ecologies / Media Environments: Describes the interrelated systems through which media technologies, cultural practices, and user behaviors co-evolve. Drawing from early work by Marshall McLuhan (1964), Neil Postman (1985), and later Matthew

Fuller (2005), media ecologies foreground the idea that media systems function like environments—characterized by feedback loops, interdependence, and emergent dynamics. While this dissertation primarily uses the term *sociotechnical environment*, it draws implicitly from media ecology theory in treating platforms not as static tools but as living systems that structure, constrain, and evolve cultural production. Memetic practices are thus understood as outcomes of platform-specific ecologies—shaped by affordances, norms, governance systems, and interface design.

Platform Ecology: A framework for analyzing the broader inter-platform dynamics that shape digital culture—treating platforms not in isolation, but as interconnected systems that influence each other’s structures, practices, and norms. Building on Duffy and Poell (2023) and Nieborg and Poell (2018), platform ecology highlights how cultural production occurs within a shared, competitive, and adaptive digital landscape. This dissertation pulls on the concept to explain how memes adapt as they move between TikTok and Instagram. The concept of platform ecologies supports the Three-Step Model of Memetic Translation by showing that cross-platform adaptation is conditioned by each platform’s unique affordances, aesthetic conventions, and algorithmic logics—reflecting an uneven but entangled digital environment.

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BIOGRAPHY

Alex Turvy is an internet researcher with sociological training. His work explores internet culture—particularly on TikTok and Instagram—and the various ways that social media platforms shape user practices through design, policy, and algorithmic governance. A mixed methods researcher, Alex combines digital ethnography, critical discourse analysis, and computational approaches to study how users navigate and reshape platform environments.

His academic writing has appeared in peer-reviewed journals and been featured in public media, including *WIRED*, *The Washington Post*, *The Verge*, and *Forbes*. He also contributes to academic blogs and research networks focused on media, technology, and culture. Alex is a member of the Association of Internet Researchers, a Key Regional Leader in the TikTok Cultures Research Network, and serves as the student representative for CITAMS within the American Sociological Association.

Before academia, Alex worked as a first-grade teacher, in education startups, and as a school operations leader supporting students, families, and educators. He served as treasurer on the board of Homer Plessy Community School and as board president of The NOLA Project theater company, helping guide both organizations through periods of growth and transition.

A longtime resident of New Orleans' Upper Ninth Ward, Alex recently moved back to his home state of Ohio. He is the parent of June (2.5), husband to Devon (almost 15 years), guardian to his godson Travon, and dog parent to Boo.