

FORMING THE **SPECTACLE** OF BODY

ANALYSIS OF THE USER-PLATFORM RELATIONSHIP
THROUGH BODY PERFORMANCE VIDEOS ON TIKTOK



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Abstract

Forming the Spectacle of Body: Analysis of the User-Platform Relationship through Body Performance Videos on TikTok is a study of the user-generated-content on the short-video platform TikTok, and mainly focuses upon the proliferation of the body performance video, namely dancing, lip-sync and its kind. These images undergo the platform's formulaic mass production, viral circulation, and are incorporated by the entertainment industry and commercial entities, thus forming a "spectacle". The relationship between users and the platform assumes particular significance and revelatory nature in the formation process of this spectacle. This thesis seeks to analyse and provide theoretical explanations for the new changes and emerging challenges of the human-screen relationship brought about by TikTok, an inherently music-oriented video platform dominated by algorithms. The discourse of the article primarily revolves around two questions: How do users choose to present themselves on TikTok, and how does TikTok as a platform, in turn, affect user behaviour and thus contribute to the formation of the spectacle of body. This thesis adopts a parallel methodology that combines the "walkthrough method" for app study and textual analysis to examine three aspects of body performance videos on TikTok: the external features such as vertical screen format, background space, and music; the pervasive phenomenon of "facial modification"; and the representation and performance of body in the trend of gender ambiguity. They correspond to three stages in the formation of the spectacle, namely the activation and preparation of the user's body; the gaze and discipline imposed by the platform on the user and the "pseudo-empowerment" that habitualises the user to the docile state; and resultantly, the mass production of body images. With the intervention of the algorithm, by producing an "algorithmic self", the platform provides the user with an object of narcissism, thus making the relationship between the user and the platform more intertwined and inseparable.

Foreword

This thesis was born out of the euphoria of information implosion. Prolonged exposure to TikTok made me feel like Michelle Yeoh in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, exhilarated yet exhausted, traversing through different times and narratives. So thanks to Jean Baudrillard, who anchored me, allowing me to vaguely recognise my own face, the face of humanity, in the realm of simulacra.

Thanks to my supervisor Steffen Krüger, my tutor Kim Wilkins, my dear friend Abirami, and my partner Kenneth. You are my own Baudrillard.

Thanks to Hsiu Lan, my late grandma. I see you everywhere.

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1. Introduction

Among all the changes the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to people's daily life, the increase in screen time is one of the most direct and prominent transitions.¹ Although TikTok had already been an upcoming cultural sensation before COVID hit, it thrived on the endless quarantine time and became a dominant platform for recreation throughout time. By the first quarter of 2022, it has surpassed 3.5 billion all-time downloads and retained the title of the most downloaded app since 2018.² The standstill brought by the global pandemic contrasts with the frenzy of the virtual world behind the screen flooded with short videos. Apart from people's universal boredom due to the absence of the habitual order of life, there must be something else about TikTok that makes it the reciprocal counterpart of the excessive "self-time". That is to say, the isolation caused by the pandemic magnified the duelling positioning of the user and the app. It is a rare opportunity to examine the relationship between the user and the screen, primarily when it directly addresses the vacuum between the reality that people are physically living in and the virtuality that the users "choose" to present on the screen. Based on the fascinating idea/premise of the powerplay between humans and machines, this thesis aims to explore how the app affects the users' behaviour and decision-making and to what extent the users have adapted to the pre-designed way of self-presentation.

1.1 The Spectacle of Body on TikTok

The reason for choosing TikTok as the main subject is that on mobile terminals, short-form videos are gaining increasing popularity through social media and "have become mainstream and ubiquitous with the increasing availability of high-speed internet."³ As the dominating platform in this trend, TikTok is the most representative app. Take a look at the "Year on TikTok: Top 100,"⁴ the official annual report of this popular app, most of the viral videos and top trends are dance and lip-sync videos. The same goes for some of the most influential

¹ Mike Trott, "Changes and Correlates of Screen Time in Adults and Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis," *EClinicalMedicine* 48 (2022): 101452, DOI: 10.1016/j.eclinm.2022.101452.

² The Social Shepherd, "21 Essential TikTok Statistics You Need to Know in 2023," last modified 15 May, 2023, <https://thesocialshepherd.com/blog/tiktok-statistics>.

³ Bahiyah Omar and Wang Dequan, "Watch, Share or Create: The Influence of Personality Traits and User Motivation on TikTok Mobile Video Usage," *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies* 14, no. 4 (2020): 121.

⁴ Newsroom | TikTok, "Year on TikTok: 2022, truly #ForYou," last modified 6 December, 2022, <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/year-on-tiktok-2022-truly-foryou>.

accounts⁵ on Tiktok, for example, Charli D'Amelio and Addison Rae, they accumulate millions of followers by posting such videos. Started as “Musical.ly”, a music-oriented platform founded in Shanghai in 2014 which allowed users to generate short lip-sync videos, TikTok inherited its precursor’s focus on performance, music, and the user community evolved around that.⁶ In other words, lip-sync and dancing are the dominant forms of body performance on TikTok. By intentionally curating how to present their bodies in these videos and how to incorporate themselves into the virtual world, the users exposed their relationships to the screen. Here, I borrow the concept of “spectacle” from Guy Debord and use Tiktok as an example of how human beings, in reality, are receding into the production, representation, transformation, worship, or even alienation of the body.⁷ By trusting our bodies to the grooving online community centred around Tiktok, the users are, both consciously and unconsciously, initiating the dialogue between the self and the designated and simulated version of reality online. That is, this research is an extension of the controversial problem of the human-machine relationship, a contemporary example of this long-standing debate.

1.2 Previous Research and Contribution⁸

Thematically, there are emergent but still inadequate amount of academic studies that focus on TikTok. Research is scattered around a wide range of subjects among various disciplines making it difficult to summarise. Most of the studies are practical and quantitative in nature, for example, personality traits and users’ psychology (Omar and Wang, 2020; Kumar and Prabha, 2019), use for student engagement (Pavlik, 2020), the uses of humour (Wang, 2020), punk behaviour and subculture (Mackenzie and Nicholas, 2020), scientific public engagement (Hayes et al., 2020), privacy issues (Neyaz et al., 2020) and online hate (Weimann and Masri, 2020). More notably, another emergent research has been about the role of TikTok on the spreading of public health messages during COVID-19 (Basch et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Eghtesadi and Florea 2020; Kennedy 2020; Sidorenko-Bautista et al., 2020). However, understandings of TikTok are still limited. There is not enough qualitative

⁵ SocialTracker, “Top 10 Most Followed TikTok accounts in 2023,” last modified 23 May, 2023, <https://www.socialtracker.io/toplists/top-10-tiktok-users-by-followers/>.

⁶ Milovan Savic, “From Musical.ly to TikTok: Social Construction of 2020’s Most Downloaded Short-Video App,” *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 3173-194, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A679119447/AONE?u=oslo&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=beb69f47>.

⁷ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 1983), 8.

⁸ To ensure conciseness and brevity, this literature review applies in-text citations instead of exhaustive footnotes for referencing. The complete list of references will be included as an appendix.

research within the realm of cultural studies. A handful of these initial studies claim to focus on TikTok while they have in fact studied “Douyin” (TikTok’s Chinese version), resulting in confusion about both apps (e.g. Zhang, 2021). When it comes to the topic of body performance on TikTok, academic resources are even harder to find. Some articles raise awareness about the adverse effects coming with the excessive use of this app, but most of them are research within the medical field, for example, dermatology, dentistry and eating disorder issues of teenagers and physical radiology treatment (Hernandez et al., 2020; Herrick et al., 2020). They are mostly descriptive in nature without digging deep into this topic with the awareness of cultural criticism, although the physical change in reality caused by the representation of the body is a rather interesting issue.

If we widen the range of subjects from TikTok itself to social media in general, we can find more research on the relationship between self-representation/body image in those media. A considerable number of studies have investigated how being exposed to idealised body images through social media affects the users’ perception of the body (Perloff 2014; Brown and Tiggemann, 2016; Ahadzadeh et al., 2017). Before short-form video began to dominate social media, studies on photo-based platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram were the main focus. Research in various discourses around socially mediated images of the body as, for instance, selfies (Senft and Baym, 2015; Warfield, 2016), celebrity and influencer images (Abidin, 2016), sexting and intimate images (Albury, 2015), live camming (Senft, 2008), online porn (Paasonen, 2011; Van der Nagel and Frith, 2015), among many other practices have emerged. But during this phase we can see the dualism that existed in these discourses: even though these online self-representations were making a difference, in reality, we can still separate from the two-dimensional image and come back to the reality we live in. If the online persona is just an idealised self, the true self is still very much in charge of how it is created and what it looks like. That is to say, users remain relatively independent from their social media avatars. If the studies in this period focus mainly on debunking the falsity of self-presentation existing in social media with the preassumption of the dualism of reality and virtuality, then with the advent of short video and live stream challenging the definition of reality to the new extreme, or with the principle of dualism getting disturbed by radical political agenda (for example the “body activism movement” blurring the distinction between beauty/ideal and ugly/reality), the “dualism” research is no longer applicable.

According to Baudrillard, “There is one object finer, more precious and more dazzling than any other--and even more laden with connotations than the automobile, in spite of the fact

that that encapsulates them all. That object is the BODY”, and “the body has today become an object of salvation. It has literally taken over that moral and ideological function from the soul.”⁹ This assertion prophetically predicted how the “body” dominated the short-form video platform like TikTok. To analyse how the body is presented on this app, I will draw on Erving Goffman’s study of human behaviour in social situations and the way we appear to others.¹⁰ The changes in new media can affect our everyday experiences, behaviour, and sense of identity. It will be helpful for the discussion of how the users perform in some specific ways to “match these new situations/arenas that do not exist in time and space” (Meyrowitz, 1985), which echoes a key feature of TikTok: transplanting human figures from the real world to the virtual realm on the screen. Finally, the media society is re-constructing the subject, transforming technology into utilised apparatus and integrating humans into a “cyborg entity”, seamlessly merging with machines¹¹: in this case the merging of the virtual representation and the user him/herself, or how the machine entices humans to play an active part on the platform. This again resonates with Baudrillard’s vision of “simulation”: simulation (the virtual body performance) is no longer that of a referential being or a substance. It is the “generation by models of a real without origin or reality.”¹²

To sum up, there are limited cultural studies on TikTok, however, theories and research on the body and performance are more well-established, with foundational theories such as body consumption, body politics and the relationship between the body and media technology. Many of these works of literature are still focused on theoretical discussions and literary works, while the presentation and consumption of the body in the context of this specific new media and the effects of these user-platform interactions, are rarely addressed—particularly mobile short videos using the body as the main content of manifestation. Since TikTok has only been around for a relatively short time, the relevant research, especially that combining this platform and body performance, is not sufficient.

1.3 Research Questions

To avoid over-extending the scope of research in the overwhelming floods of short videos, this essay focuses mainly on the contents directly concerning the users’ body performance, namely dancing (and similar physical movement) and lip-sync (and similar facial

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1998), 130.

¹⁰ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971).

¹¹ Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

¹² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

presentation), since they continue to be the most popular genres on TikTok. Here, “representation” and “performance” are interconnected, with performance being a form of self-representation that expresses the body. While other creative expressions such as reacting videos, lifehacks, and re-edited footage are excluded from the discussion. Since 2019, TikTok has been publishing its annual report to summarise the top videos that went viral or gained the most popularity each year. These official annual reports offer an exclusive collection of the most representative videos on TikTok and will be the primary sample of this study.

Based on the paucity of studies on users’ body performances on short-video platforms such as TikTok, this research aims to explore the question of 1) *How do users choose to present themselves on TikTok*, and 2) *How has TikTok as a platform, in turn, affected user behaviour and thus contributed to the formation of the spectacle of body*. These questions will be addressed following the logic from phenomenological analysis to theoretical interpretation. I will first summarise and categorise the main contents concerning body performance on TikTok, then explore the possible reasons behind these phenomena, especially how the app has influenced, designated, or even manipulated user behaviour. The “spectacle of body” is formed by the unveiling of the symbiosis relationship between the user and TikTok, indicating the human-screen relationship in the current cultural context.

1.4 Method and Structure

As outlined above, the main research question has prompted quite different areas of interest. I have thereby found it necessary to make different choices, for theoretic and methodical approaches, on a chapter-by-chapter basis—with a resulting, marked difference in perspective between chapters. While the three chapters, into which the answering to the research question has been structured, have the following scopes:

Chapter 2 will start with a close inspection of the body performance videos, but from the angle of the “mise-en-scène” of the video, which concerns mainly those elements other than the performance, the “window display” designed for the exhibition of the body: namely the “vertical screen frame”, “the background space”, and “the upbeat music” that are essential to the performance videos—or the typical “TikTok aesthetics”. This will provide an overview of how these components can facilitate the first step of forming the spectacle of body on TikTok: in short, the activation of the user’s body. This is particularly clear in *Chapter 2* that qualitative textual analysis is the most suitable method, where videos, audio, space and other

content in the video were closely analysed to reveal the semiotic implications and the social and cultural meaning.

From there, *Chapter 3* will follow the lead to further verify the assumption that the spectacle of body on TikTok is dominantly designated by the affordances of the application itself. This chapter will use the user's facial display on TikTok as an entry point in order to gradually unveil the fact that the user is sinking deeper and deeper into a state of "self-exile" while being gazed at by the platform. This marks the second step in the formation of the spectacle of body, namely the platform's disciplining of users and the internalisation of this discipline by users, resulting in the production of "docile bodies." Method-wise, apart from textual analysis, the conceptual framework that will be applied to analyse the app itself is the "walkthrough method."¹³ By systematically and forensically stepping through the various stages of the app use, this method can be deployed to expose TikTok's intended purpose, embedded cultural meanings and implied ideal users and uses, which can be a potential tool to answer how the design of the app itself has affected users' behaviour.¹⁴

In *Chapter 4*, I will continue the parallel methodological approach of qualitative textual analysis and the "walkthrough method" to discuss the third stage of the formation of the spectacle of body: the mass production of the body image, and the underlying psychological mechanisms of the user. I draw on the relevant literature to develop an analytical framework based on the process of "spectaclisation" that intersects the technological affordances of algorithms, Foucauldian body theory, the Marxian sense of commodification, and the Freudian concept of narcissism. This analysis chapter is structured to reflect on how the users' screen avatar became an undifferentiated "docile body"; and how the docile bodies multiply in the context of TikTok. Therefore the last chapter also deepens the discussion of *Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*, by addressing how the spectacle of body on TikTok is the designated result of the app, and how mass media's deceptive power has trained the users to be inseparable from it, and eventually become part of it.

¹³ Ben Light, Jean Burgess and Stefanie Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (2018): 881-900, DOI: 10.1177/1461444816675438.

¹⁴ Part of the second section of Chapter 3 is inspired by my unpublished course essay: Zhiyuan Hu, "AI as Gaze: The User-AI Relationship on Deepfake App," (MEVIT4701 Essay, University of Oslo, 2021).

2. Frame, Space, Music: **“Window Display” for the Performance**

In this chapter, we will temporarily set aside the excavation of the concept of “body” itself and instead focus on analysing external factors that are crucial to the topic but often overlooked: the vertical screen format (2.1), the private and mundane background space (2.2), and the selection of background music that fills the space (2.3). The combination of these elements forms the “window display” created by TikTok for its users to perform, while also revealing the first step in the formation of the spectacle of body, namely the platform’s maximum activation and thorough preparation of users’ bodies.

2.1 Frame: Vertical Screen and the Presentation of Body

The mainstream smartphone screen with an aspect ratio of 9:16 is commonly referred to as a “vertical screen”. The concept of the vertical screen has since been extended to include the user’s single handheld experience related to a vertical screen device. This experience is becoming a preference for users as smartphones become more prevalent in their lives. A survey in the UK found that 34% of users lock their phones in a vertical position, while 53% of users do not like to turn their phones sideways when watching videos.¹⁵ According to Paul Levinson’s theory of anthropomorphic media evolution, media is developing in a direction that is more in line with human sensory pleasure and aesthetic needs.¹⁶ A large number of mobile phone applications are now being designed to reduce the need for a horizontal screen by eliminating the need to rotate the phone 90 degrees and hold it in both hands to accommodate the user’s habit of viewing information in a vertical orientation.

The success of TikTok is without doubt built on the prosperity of vertical video. By 2021, which is historic for TikTok since it reached one billion monthly active users,¹⁷ “vertical video is projected to make up 75% of all mobile phone videos,” and “vertical video applications will be used by more than 1 billion individuals to share their life with friends and

¹⁵ Unruly, “Unruly, News Corp And Moat Partner To Bring Viewable Vertical Video To Advertisers,” last modified 20 June, 2016, <https://unruly.co/news/article/2016/06/20/unruly-news-corp-moat-partner-bring-viewable-vertical-video-advertisers/>.

¹⁶ Paul Levinson, “Human Replay: A Theory of the Evolution of Media” (doctoral thesis, New York University, 1979)

¹⁷ TikTok, “Thanks a Billion!” last modified 27 September, 2021, <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/1-billion-people-on-tiktok>.

followers.”¹⁸ Even though videos on TikTok can be posted in both portrait and landscape modes, ideally this platform encourages users to generate vertical videos as these are the “norm,”¹⁹ since the TikTok account holders need to make sure to follow the “norm” in order to make the platform’s algorithm operate in their best favour to get a better chance of going “viral”. This section will first discuss how the vertical screen has become the dominant format for short videos today, and is uniquely suited to body performance content (2.1.1); and then use Deleuze’s theory of “affection-image” to explain how TikTok’s vertical images can best “activate” the user’s body (2.1.2).

2.1.1 Legislating TikTok Video: Vertical Format and the Reincarnation of Body

From the very beginning of the film and television industries, the “aspect ratio” has been an inescapable topic in the standardisation of visual representation. For more than 100 years, the film and television industry has been dominated by the 4:3 and 16:9 aspect ratios, which have long been the norm throughout the production of images; in the age of mobile media, this standard has been challenged and vertical formats adapted to vertical screens such as mobile phones have become the new trend. Régis Debray uses the term “mediasphere” to refer to the dynamic system in which information is transmitted and received, including its corresponding methods of knowledge processing and diffusion, and suggests that each media ecosystem, normally reorganised around a dominant medium, produces a specific spatial-temporal configuration, a different realism. For TikTok, the technological development and the new cultural context behind it have clearly created a mobile-based “mediasphere” that is markedly different from traditional mediaspheres, namely the “logosphere” (text-based media such as books and magazines), “graphsphere” (visual-based media), and the “videosphere” (audiovisual-based media). For the verticality of the screen per se, “we live in the era of personal video, shouldn’t we celebrate videos that match the shape of our bodies?”²⁰, says John Whaley, co-creator of Vervid, one of TikTok’s many allies in promoting the format of vertical video.

Sean Cubitt refers to the aspect ratio of the screen as “a *real* abstraction: that is, one which arises historically from specific conditions and which operates on those conditions as if it

¹⁸ ReelReel, “Vertical Video Statistics You Can’t Ignore In 2022,” last modified 27 December, 2021, <https://www.reelreel.com/vertical-video-statistics/>.

¹⁹ Influencer Marketing Hub, “The Ultimate TikTok Video Size Guide for 2023,” last modified 15 December, 2022, <https://influencermarketinghub.com/tiktok-video-size/>.

²⁰ The New York Times, “Vertical Video on the Small Screen? Not a Crime,” last modified 13 August, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/13/technology/personaltech/vertical-video-on-the-small-screen-not-a-crime.html>.

were a universally valid truth.”²¹ Under the influence of such a perception, the horizontal aspect ratio/landscape mode is considered to be an unquestionable feature of the motion picture. However, if we re-examine the process of the standardisation of the horizontal aspect ratio, or in other words, how the abstract properties of the medium become the “real”, we will find out that the incompatibilities that have been criticised about the vertical screen in fact compensate for the disconnection/mismatch between the current moving image and the existing media platforms. That is to say, while exposing the arbitrariness and historical limitations of so-called standards/norms, the booming of the vertical screen also challenges the established standards of traditional media formats on its own merits.

In the early 1930s, the fledgling American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences sought to make films shot on professional equipment widely accessible and distributable by establishing a standard screen aspect ratio. Many of the factors considered by the Academy for aspect ratios show a strong preference for horizontal screens for three reasons: the horizontal format was prevalent in painting, particularly in nineteenth-century narrative pictures; it was similar to the presentation of the Western theatre stage, and it was more suited to the physiological mechanisms of human vision.²² However, if these three causes were to be applied to the mobile vertical video-represented content on apps like TikTok, might the “disadvantages” from before be transformed into “advantages” in the current mediasphere?

First of all, a narrower screen helps the audience to concentrate. Humans see the world from a horizontal angle. From the perspective of human physiology, eyes grow horizontally, so horizontal eyesight is wider than vertical eyesight: the range of a human’s stationary visual field is approximately 190° horizontally and 135° vertically,²³ which roughly matches the aspect ratio of the traditional screen. However, when focusing on a certain object, the horizontal span of view of the human eye is reduced to around 30 degrees²⁴: the switch of the visual angle from laxity to concentration roughly corresponds to the visual angle of the human eye when staring at a vertical screen. Thus, by narrowing down the horizontal range of view, the vertical screen guides the users to “focus” on the screen, at least on an optical level. Due to the narrowing of the field of view compared to horizontal videos, the

²¹ Sean Cubitt, “Film Landscape and Political Aesthetics: Deserts,” *Screen* 57-1(2016), DOI: 10.1093/screen/hjw003.

²² Sergei Eisenstein, “The Dynamic Square,” *Close Up* 8-1 (1931): 9-10.

²³ Visual Field, “Vision and Eye Health,” last accessed 28 May, 2023, <https://www.vision-and-eye-health.com/visual-field.html>.

²⁴ Walker HK, Hall WD, and Hurst JW, *Clinical Methods: The History, Physical, and Laboratory Examinations* 3rd edition (Boston: Butterworths, 1990) Chapter 116, available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK220/>.

proportional construction of vertical short videos facilitates the focus on the visual centre and users' attention on the screen. Moreover, the object on the screen is always scaled up as a result of the increased use of medium shots and close-up shots, which enhances the sense of interaction and intimacy with the audience, and creates a more immersive viewing experience. Even though this visual state of passive/forced concentration may not necessarily be a continuous one, the audience can still use a shorter time to enter or exit this state of concentration and immersion.

In fact, the verticalisation of moving images is not unique to mobile video. In the 19th century before the birth of film, optical apparatus like “zoetrope and phenakistoscope”²⁵ both tended to adopt a narrow vertical frame to save reel space. The intention of this design is to anchor the viewer's attention on one image. However, the objects displayed by these optical toys have one thing in common: they are normally one single moving body, whether it is a human body or an anthropomorphic body. This brings us to the effect of the frame ratio on the narrative space. The horizontal screen, with its wider field of view, is better suited to the presentation of vast spaces and multiple characters. In the course of the development of cinema, the viewing screen has evolved from 4:3 to 16:9, even 21:9 in order to suit human physiological and social habits, enhancing the viewing experience of multi-character content. This change demonstrates the expansion of the “frame” of video: the expansion and contraction of the frame as the result of the aspect ratio affect the priority and emphasis of audiovisual elements. As it is difficult to place a large number of characters and environmental elements in a horizontal space, vertical screens tend to simplify the visual elements and focus on one or two main characters, with emphasis on their facial expressions and the movement of gestures. Vertical screens, therefore, tend to showcase individual psychological expressions, presenting a limited yet expressive, rather than grand and narrative space.

In Java, the programming language used in digital cameras, the codes for horizontal and vertical pictures are “landscape mode” and “portrait mode”, which have different image perceptions due to their opposite aspect ratios: the landscape mode has a wide field of view and is more adapted to the environmental perception characteristics of the human eye, while the portrait mode has a more concentrated field of view and is more in tune with the proportion of the human body. Compared to traditional horizontal videos, vertical videos are

²⁵ Gabriel Menotti, “Discourses around vertical videos: an archaeology of wrong aspect ratios,” *ARS (São Paulo)* 17, 35 (2019):151, DOI: 10.11606/issn.2178-0447.ars.2019.140526.

more human/body-oriented. The TikTok videos presented on mobile phone screens are not simply rotated from horizontal to vertical, but emphasise the human body in close proximity so that the body can be removed from the wider environment/context provided by the horizontal screen, and this even opens the possibility of becoming a “body without context” (perhaps it doesn’t matter what the context is anymore). Secondly, TikTok videos often take a first-person perspective, abandoning the traditional horizontal screen’s speciality in demonstrating relationships and presenting the environment, thus affecting the user-screen relationship. While the body occupies almost the entirety of the vertical screen, the image, expression and movement of the body become the absolute centrepieces. Therefore, in the representational world mediated by the screen, the user is drawn to the mirage of “I am the centre,” allowing the body to not only be seen by others but also be gazed at by its own self (for UGC platforms, users are usually the performers).

If the legitimisation of the horizontal screen draws inspiration from nineteenth-century narrative images, the vertical screen can also find counterparts in the history of art. From the archaic to the classical to the Hellenistic periods, ancient Greek sculptures, whether expressing the worship of divinity, the glorification of heroic figures, the celebration of patriotism or the appreciation of the beauty of the human body, from *Kouros* to *Venus de Milo*, are mostly presented in a vertical format. By the Middle Ages, fine arts were heavily influenced by religion and the catholic church, with an emphasis on the representation of the spiritual world and divine realm. In conjunction with the towering Gothic architecture, most religious paintings and numerous stained glass window paintings, mosaics and frescoes are generally presented in portrait format. It strongly suggests that vertical art has its unique advantages in terms of spiritual communication, whether it is the dissemination of idolatry or the propagation of divinity, and that this advantage can also be inherited and exploited by the vertical screen. The unique sense of mutual gaze between the audience and the content on the screen can easily reach the audience’s/user’s inner world, thus emotional and spiritual communication becomes more efficient with the mediation of the vertical screen.

The direct presentation of the body has, therefore, an advantage on TikTok, since the platform is a modern response to historical traditions. According to Susan Sontag, the camera has “many narcissistic uses,” one of the most important being “self-surveillance,”²⁶ not just because technology gives people tools to constantly examine themselves, but also because it

²⁶ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1991), 48.

makes one's sense of "self" dependent on the consumption of images of the self, while simultaneously raising doubts about the reality of the outside world. The vertical screen avoids the complexity of mise-en-scene (i.e. the representation of the environment, the arrangement of multiple characters and the description of their relationship), which cannot be ignored in the traditional horizontal screen, and makes full use of the advantage of close-up shots and small depth-of-field shots to highlight people's bodies and facial features more clearly in the vertical frame, thus leading the viewers' gaze directly and more efficiently to the subject of performance. For example on TikTok, the performers tend to turn themselves into primitive, straightforward and even provocative objects through the direct exhibition of body image and facial features: they unabashedly smile, wink, pose, and dance, in the best shot and camera angle to express their body. Today's TikTok users are immersed in the mediasphere where body image is proliferating and, as Christopher Lasch describes, video recording devices have given modern life the character of a giant echo chamber or a hall of mirrors, where "life presents itself as a succession of images or electronic signals, of impressions recorded and reproduced by means of...sophisticated recording devices"²⁷. The quest for self-perfection and confirmation are increasingly dependent on the body image reflected in this "hall of mirrors". While since the vertical screen luckily fulfils the viewer's/performer's need for the most direct representation and appreciation of the human body in the "hall of mirrors", as a result, the vertical format of TikTok gives people a "passport" for their bodies to freely enter the current mediasphere where performance functions as the main purpose, which is convenient for users to present their bodies effectively and easily. When users watch or operate TikTok, their bodies have also gone through a process from being hidden/ignored (compared to the traditional viewing experience of a horizontal screen) to being fully revealed. The already slim screen frame seems to have disappeared and the very nature of the screen as a medium seems to be negligible. The "audience" and "performer" have crossed the boundary of the screen and started the face-to-face interaction.

Philosopher Heidegger once made a classic analogy about a man and a hammer: the less one observes/gazes at or theorises the hammer (or in Heidegger's words, the less it is "present at hand"), the more one uses it in a "ready-to-hand" way, and the more natural one's relationship with it becomes.²⁸ In other words, the hammer functions as an extension of the

²⁷ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 47.

²⁸ Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 31.

worker's hand. The same goes for the relationship between the user and the vertical screen. The TikTok videos that occupy the entire mobile phone screen increasingly familiarise the users with the presence of the screen itself, to the point where they are oblivious to it, and therefore their use of the vertical screen becomes more and more natural, or, according to McLuhan, the screen becomes the natural "extension of man."²⁹ This "ready-to-hand" operation in turn extends and benefits the user's/performer's body in the current mediasphere. The relationship between the body and the vertical screen has evolved from independent to interactive symbiosis (again, Heidegger defines the entanglement/relevance (*verweisung*) of people and object, even if the object is not tangible, as a "being-with status" (*mitsein*)), and the body thus becomes heavily dependent on the vertical screen, a status of "being-with".

2.1.2 Theoretical Inference: TikTok and the Activation of Body

From the discussion in the previous section, it is not difficult to find that in the TikTok videos, the performers tend to fill the whole screen with their bodies. Using close-up shots to magnify the object on the screen, especially its face and body, and bring it to the direct front can attract more effective visual focus than traditional horizontal screens, then "induce" the audience to reach the status of gazing. In addition, the close-range viewing experience brought by handheld devices shares strong similarities with social scenarios where smartphone users engage in interpersonal activities, such as Facetime: the screen is transformed into a transparent interface, with the viewer watching the screen in a tactile way and evoking a certain social memory. Thus they can interact with the object on the screen engagingly. Therefore, on TikTok, the close shots of the body not only inherit the advantages of highlighting the emotional state as on the traditional horizontal screen, but also create a new evocative appeal, thereby actively guiding the audience's emotions, and even activating the body's potential mobility.

To discuss how TikTok activates the user's body, we have to introduce the concept of "affection", which is a central concept in Gilles Deleuze's film theory. In his book *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, he points out that there are three variants of the movement-image: the perception-image, the action-image and the affection-image.³⁰ Respectively, these "images" relate to the perception of sight, the character's interaction with the world, and the emotional experience. Of these three, Deleuze places particular importance on the affection-image

²⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964).

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 63-65.

because it “occupies the interval (between the perception-image and the action-image)”³¹, and conveys the flow of forces in the transformation of one quality into another.

Deleuze’s theory of affection originates from the Dutch philosopher Spinoza and is based on a reflection on the traditional mind-body relationship. In the 17th century, Descartes’ idea of “I think, therefore I am”³² was dominant when it was firmly believed that the movement or stillness of the body was based on the command of consciousness. Spinoza, on the other hand, argued that the body cannot determine the mind’s thinking, and likewise, the mind cannot determine the body’s movement, stillness or anything else (if there is anything else). Spinoza interprets affection as the state of a body in which its power of action is enhanced or weakened, elevated or bound. Spinoza also stresses that the movement or stillness of one body is necessarily triggered by another body, that is to say, that “affection” arises from the action/influence exerted by one body on another.³³ Traditional aesthetics is fundamentally judgmental aesthetics, to a large extent neglecting the study of human experience, especially sensory experience. Deleuze also argues that the production of affection depends on the encounter with another body, although he takes a broader interpretation of the “body”: it doesn’t necessarily have to be a human body. Affection can be understood as the atmosphere/energy carried by another body/substance/being in relation to one body and the effects it produces.

In terms of film theory, or moving images in a broader sense, Deleuze’s take on affection can be a useful tool to explain the impact of images on people. Firstly, when it comes to shot type, Deleuze argues that facial expressions are the perfect vehicle for conveying affection, even suggesting that “the affection-image is the close-up, and the close-up is the face.”³⁴ In close-up shots, where facial expressions dominate, a body’s affection is most powerfully expressed, and the expressions in close-up shots are unconsciously imitated by the viewer, and this uncontrollable mimicry creates a strong affection effect on the audience’s body. The prominence of the human body and the isolation/marginalisation of the background of a large number of TikTok videos will make the audience feel that they are in direct connection with the performer alone, thus creating an imminent and attached emotional connection.

³¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 66.

³² Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Trans. Donald A. Cress, Jonathan Bennett, (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 18.

³³ Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics and Other Works*. Eds. & Trans. Edwin Curley. (Princeton, New Jersey & Chichester, West Sussex: Princeton University Press, 1994), 154-157.

³⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 87.

The contribution of Deleuze's moving image theory to the activation of the body in TikTok videos also lies in its creative redefinition of the concepts of "close-up shot" and "body/face (facification)". Of course, Deleuze did not merely regard the film as a still portrait, he constantly emphasised the affection effect of film as a moving image. On the one hand, in a close-up shot, a slight movement of a character's face (the movement within a shot) can lead to an increase or decrease in affection. On the other hand, the achievement of the affection of the motion picture is also highly dependent on the cutting (*gros plans coupants*)/editing (the movement between shots). Deleuze believes that as long as a certain segment of editing is a composite entity dominated by close-up shots, then this segment of shots is a group of "affection shots", and the corresponding editing is "affection cutting". In such a sequence of shots, "the camera passes from the close-up to the medium or full shot, but it is primarily a way of treating the medium shot and the full shot as close-ups: by the absence of depth or the suppression of perspective."³⁵ The differences between shot types defined by actual space tend to vanish, so it is no longer the close shot that can assume the title of a "close-up shot". Instead, any form of shot can be a "close-up shot". In the case of TikTok specifically, many of the shots don't look like close-ups in the traditional sense: with the body/human figure filling up the vertical screen, they're more like medium shots, "cowboy shots" (low-angle shot aimed upward at the subject), or even full shots. However, these shots reject perspective and depth-of-field because the flat two-dimensional effect of the image better reflects the obliterating effect of the camera on the person (the "person without a background" mentioned above). "The more the image is spatially closed, even reduced to two dimensions, the greater is its capacity to open itself on to a fourth dimension which is time, and on to a fifth which is spirit."³⁶ Here, images are no longer related to reality-space, but to emotion and time, or in other words, to the establishment of an "affection-space". That is to say, the core shot types that go into the foundation of cinema are no longer completely applicable on TikTok. Whilst, the "close-up shots" with "affection" in Deleuze's sense, have found a more suitable carrier in the form of TikTok's vertical videos.

Then there's the question of what is presented on the screen. If the affection of a traditional close-up shot can be applied to other shot types, then the function of "face" (the object of the close-up scene in the traditional sense) can also be renewed. According to Deleuze, affection rested on two characteristics: "a series of micro-movements on an immobilised plate of

³⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 107.

³⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 17.

nerve.”³⁷ Let’s look into an example on TikTok which is not an actual face, but a grooving body presented to us in “affection close-up shots”. It indeed has two defining characteristics. On the one hand, it is a human body intersected by micro-movements, no matter what kind of movement or at least a tendency of moving; on the other hand, it has a metaphysical “face”: the body functions as a “receptive immobile surface”. If this is too cryptic, you can click on the comment section of the video, or take a look at the real-time comments that are constantly gushing out from the lower left corner of a Livestream video: these are examples of the body of the performer as “a receptive plate of inscriptions,” imprisoned within the tiny screen. That is to say, the body (not a literal face) is, “a reflecting and reflected unity.”³⁸ Here, the body is no longer moving in an extensional manner; instead, it is moving for expression’s sake.

“Each time we discover these two poles in something: reflecting surface and intensive micro-movements, we can say that this thing has been treated as a face (*visage*): it has been ‘envisaged’ or rather ‘faceified’ (*visagéifiée*), and in turn, it stares at us (*dévisage*), it looks at us.”³⁹

That is to say, even if it is not a direct presentation of a literal “face” in TikTok videos, the body can equally convey the potential of the “affection effect” with the process of “facification”. In other words, the vertical body-performance video on TikTok is essentially the variation of a segment of faceified close-up shots. It stares back at the users with the force of affection, since “there is no close-up of the face, the face is in itself close-up, the close-up is by itself face and both are affect, affection-image.”⁴⁰

The difference between TikTok’s body performance videos and traditional video formats is not only determined by the difference in the mode of transmission but also by the difference in the mechanism of expression because the process of the circulation of TikTok videos is not only about the dissemination of information but also about the generation and interpretation of meaning. The 16:9 or 4:3 aspect ratio used in traditional video platforms extends the horizontal space, making it more conducive to the representation of physical space and cultural context, to scenes that are large-scale and varied in movement, and to the emphasising of the relationships between various subjects and elements. In other words, traditional video can widen the audience’s visual space by increasing the sense of layering

³⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 87.

³⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 87.

³⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 88.

⁴⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 88.

and depth-of-field, thus creating dramatic conflict and proliferating the meaning of each scene. This shows that the meaning of horizontal images is mainly carried out through the relationship between subjects and objects, subjects and space or other elements. Although the audience's participation is often required for the finalisation of the images' meaning expression, this "participation" does not usually affect the meaning of the images themselves, because the meaning expressed through the relationship between its structural elements of horizontal video is relatively unary and fixed. Therefore, the audience is usually in a passive position and usually does not need to participate too much in the construction of meaning. In other words, traditional horizontal videos adopt a primarily structuralist semiotics-based ideational mechanism.

In *The Imaginary Signifier*, the French scholar Christian Metz applies structuralist ideational mechanisms to the study of cinema. Metz places particular emphasis on the psychological distance between the audience and the screen, and the concept of voyeurism that the audiences perceive towards the film as a result of it. As he puts it: "The voyeur is very careful to maintain a gulf, an empty space, between the object and the eye, the object and his own body: his look fastens the object at the right distance, as with those cinema spectators who take care to avoid being too close to or too far from the screen. The voyeur represents in space the fracture which forever separates him from the object... To fill in this distance would threaten to overwhelm the subject, to lead him to consume the object."⁴¹ The viewer is not adequately engaged in the construction of the meaning of the videos, thus creating a sense of psychological distance and voyeurism. That is, the audience is not sufficiently activated/motivated in front of the traditional horizontal screen (compared to the UCG content on vertical screen platforms like TikTok), and the ideational mechanism of the video is conducted through the inner links and structures formed between the different elements within the film, rather than through the reflection of the outside world or the active interaction with the audience.

In contrast, the ideational mechanism in TikTok videos can be better explained using C.S. Peirce's theory. The key point in Peirce's theory of symbolic representation is the emphasis on the "Interpretant of the Sign (the Interpretative Condition)". Unlike Saussure and his fellow structuralists, who perceive the sign as a combination of the signifier and the signified, Peirce sees the presentation and interpretation of a sign as a triadic condition: the sign, the

⁴¹ Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982), 60.

object and the interpretant. The sign is the equivalent of Saussure's signifier, the perceptible part of the sign; the object is what the "signified" represents; however, where Peirce's trichotomy of the sign goes beyond Saussure's dichotomy is in the invention of "the interpretant."⁴² For Peirce, the interpretant refers to all that a sign can convey, that is, those things that must be acquired through indirect experience and are familiar to its object, which allows Peirce to transfer the emphasis of the symbolic representation to the interpreter's end. In other words, "every sign must be capable of determining an interpretant."⁴³ Meanwhile, in the mind of the interpreter, each interpretant can give rise to a new sign, since meaning must be interpreted in the form of signs. Therefore, the process of interpretation will never end, since a new sign gives rise to another, and so on. In this sense, for Peirce, symbolic representation is a process of infinite derivation (*différance*) from one sign to another.

This process of infinite derivation is concretely and visually evident on TikTok. If we take the dancing body in a viral video as the starting point, a "meta-body"/ a sign, then use the sign as the starting point, all videos that use the same music/dance/aesthetic module can be considered as different "interpretants" of this "meta-body"/sign. These different interpretants converge into an ever-expanding "#TikTokChallenge", but the true/original "object" to which the sign refers tends to be overwhelmed by the swarm of the follow-ups: what matters now appears to be the process of ever-lasting derivation – it is the active participation of thousands of users that has led to the formation of this body spectacle. TikTok videos are therefore different in that they shift traditional horizontal videos' focus from the structuralist semiotics-based ideational mechanism to the dynamic yet infinite process of symbolic communication, which is another reason why users can be more activated.

To sum up, using the body as the raw material of digital representation is an inborn yet essential feature of vertical screen content. This is not only the embodiment of the character/self-centralisation principle, but also the result of the simplification of mobile media shooting functions. The centralisation of characters makes body images easier to recognise and focus on, and the simplification of shooting functions allows every user to easily transform their "real body"/"physical body" into a "virtual body"/"representational body". And once the body gains the legislation to reside on the vertical screen (its most suitable mediasphere), it is no longer interpreted as a mere symbol in the Saussurean sense: a

⁴² James Jakób Liszka, *A General Introduction to the Semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 18-19.

⁴³ Liszka, *A General Introduction to the Semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 24.

signifier of a physical body. On the contrary, it goes through the process of “facification”, then becomes the affection-image, which can affect the audience’s emotional transition and even bodily movements. The audience is guided to take action and get involved in intense interactions, which are crucial to the formation of the spectacle of body. In the next section, we will focus on exactly where these facefied bodies (affection-images) move.

2.2 Background Space: Bedrooms and the Production of Space

In the above section, I mainly focus on how the “body” is prominently celebrated on TikTok, the current and representative vertical video platform, and how the users’ representational bodies are rendered as the “body without context/background”: the main feature of this change (from horizontal to vertical frame) is the close focus on the body, the emphasis on, or even the enlargement of, the object’s face/“facified” body so that the body can be stripped off from the “environment” which the traditional horizontal screen conventionally emphasises. This is not to say, however, that the background space behind the performing bodies does not possess critical meaning, or has nothing meaningful to say about the interaction of the platform and its users. In other words, these easily overlooked, compressed, and even marginalised “performance spaces” can also reveal the situation of video creators, after all, “space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning.”⁴⁴ In fact, this section is a testament to the idea that the background space contributes to the forming of “the spectacle of the body” through the strategy of receding and self-degradation, or, by not “seeming” important. Firstly, I will summarise the common features of these seemingly unimportant background spaces, and find the most representative space as the entry point for further analysis (2.2.1). By drawing attention to the comparison of the “bedroom culture” and the body performance on TikTok, and by involving Henri Lefebvre’s take on the production of space, I hope to explain the effects these spaces have on the production of performance videos, and how to define these spaces culturally, what are they essentially are (2.2.2).

2.2.1 The Publicisation of the Private, the Normalisation of the Mundane

Although the list of accounts with the highest number of followers on TikTok varies from time to time,⁴⁵ it is not difficult to look through the videos posted by them and find out that

⁴⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 154.

⁴⁵ By the time of writing, the top 10 most popular TikTokers are: @Khaby Lame (154.2m), @Charli D’Amelio (149.6m), @Bella Poarch (92.7m), @Addison Rae (88.9m), @Will Smith (73m), @Zach King (72.5m), @Kimberly Loaiza (71.8m), @MrBeast (70.9m), @Burak Özdemir (68m), @TikTok (67.1m),

the content of these diverse videos is almost always recorded in a very similar background context: these videos are often shot in private and mundane places such as bedrooms, other indoor spaces, gardens, street corners, and so on. For example, Charli D'Amelio likes to give a casual lip-syncing performance in a seemingly messy bedroom; the same for Bella Poarch, who often wears baggy pyjamas and dances awkwardly in the kitchen alone, if not with her cat; Addison Rae usually shares her beauty routines in the dim dressing room; whilst as a magician, Zach King performs magic in the most common places of everyday life, such as dorm rooms, gyms and gas stations.

By summarising and analysing these examples, we can infer that the proliferation of body performance videos on TikTok is synchronised with the celebration of the mundanity of everyday life, by the publicisation of the private space. One of the factors that attributes to this is, inevitably, the COVID-19 pandemic. TikTok saw a tremendous increase in users and cultural prominence during the worldwide lockdowns brought on by the Coronavirus epidemic. Statistics show that to stop the spread of the deadly COVID-19 virus, more than 3.9 billion people, or half of the world's population, have now been urged or commanded by their governments to remain at home.⁴⁶ Moreover, due to the young age of many of TikTok's creators, such as the ones mentioned above, it is plausible that many still live with their families. Coupled with the restrictions of lockdown that have closed common places for youth culture (such as schools, clubs, and recreational places), the bedroom/private household spaces have naturally become an ideal and the easiest accessible location for producing TikTok video content. In a symbolic sense, the state of quarantine/isolation caused by the COVID-19 epidemic can also be regarded as an emergency rehearsal of "individualism", the common human condition in modern society: when uncontrollable external factors bring forward the destiny of humanity's isolation and alienation how should we behave without the rest, how should we shape our relationship with the world. As a result of this extreme situation, the production and consumption of body performance videos bring the relationship between humans and space to a greater focus.

The mass presence of the daily, ordinary and unadorned space behind the performing bodies on TikTok can also be seen as the result of the democratisation of media participation in the

<https://www.dexerto.com/entertainment/top-20-most-followed-tiktok-accounts-loren-gray-charli-damelio-more-1326252/#top-20-tiktok-accounts>.

⁴⁶ Euronews, "Coronavirus: Half of humanity now on lockdown as 90 countries call for confinement," last modified 2 April, 2020,

<https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/02/coronavirus-in-europe-spain-s-death-toll-hits-10-000-after-record-950-nw-deaths-in-24-hou>.

“empowerment age”. To normalise the arbitrary scene selection is essentially a democratised act of operation: vertical format videos occupy the fragmented time of the audience which is a conscious, de-ritualised experience that moves the scene of use from formal, carefully staged filming locations (such as studios, well-designed sets, and other consciously-selected filming spaces) to the everyday space represented by the bedroom. The proliferation of new technologies and new media forms has profoundly impacted the tendency of media content production. The simplification of TikTok’s shooting function has pushed the democratisation of user-generated content further, which most likely leads to the production of content oriented by the goal of entertainment and self-satisfaction. Therefore, the low cost, easy to use and most self-expressive choice of shooting space (such as the bedroom) is, of course, more likely to be utilised by TikTok users. “If information is power, then this new technology—which is the first to evenly distribute information—is really distributing power.”⁴⁷ When the information/knowledge of content-generating is democratically distributed and shared by all of us, users gain more comprehensive control over the power of media. Even though, on TikTok, the means of production are to an important degree still not owned by the content creator, the new media functions can inevitably grant the users new capacities to push the frontier of content-generating to a broader territory: private sphere being incorporated into the public sphere where it can be presented and circulated, and the absorption of everyday life into a reproducible object is eventually coming into reality.

For the case of TikTok, this tendency and the external factor of the COVID-19 pandemic overlapped and interacted with each other, which resulted in another noticeable interpretation of background space: as “a tonic to the earnestness of Instagram, the stress of Snapchat, the verbal warfare of Twitter,” TikTok is designed to “position itself as a place for teens and tweens to come to be silly, unashamed, unfiltered.”⁴⁸ For example, the bedroom, especially the small, dim bedroom of a teenager, which is always covered by celebrity posters, piles of clothing, and dressing tables topped with make-up, flower arrangements, and books, becomes a prototype of the constructed “normality” when it comes to background space selecting, which echoes the distinctly “raw”, “unfiltered”, and “relatable” quality of TikTok videos. With the ever-lasting COVID-19 pandemic and “boredom” as the commonly shared

⁴⁷ Henry Jenkins, “Photoshop for Democracy: The New Relationship between Politics and Popular Culture,” in *Convergence Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 211.

⁴⁸ Independent, “These kids are smart, they thought of everything: TikTok users claim some responsibility for low turnout to Trump’s Tulsa rally,” last modified 21 June, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/tulsa-rally-trump-us-tiktok-k-pop-ticket-sales-a9577741.html>.

experience of quarantine and isolation, the collective mundanity of everyday life became widely communicated and affirmed on and through TikTok.⁴⁹ Therefore, TikTok is actually encouraging users to “share”/“bring to visibility” their mundane daily and casual private personal space, which resonates with users who are bored to tears during the pandemic—the current characteristics of the era align remarkably with the inherent attributes of TikTok.

In summary, choosing everyday and private space (especially the bedroom space) as the background for TikTok body performance videos can be considered both coincidental and inevitable. It is the result of a combination of the pandemic, new media technology, and the platform’s unique affordances. The underlying logic is also in line with the representation of the body stated in the former section: to bring everything into visibility. No need for professional types of equipment or advanced studios, users can transform their actual physical “body” into a virtual representational “body image” anywhere and anytime. TikTok gains its popularity among other media platforms from its encouragement of the celebration of “normality”, rather than the pressure of pursuing ultra-uniqueness and flaunting the perfect interior aesthetic. I will discuss how the very nature of the transformation can be revealed through the choice of space: the culturally noteworthy “bedroom”.

2.2.2 The Legacy of “Bedroom Culture” and the Adaption of TikTok

As the most representative example of the publicisation of the private and the normalisation of the mundane, bedroom space (especially teenagers’ bedrooms) is featured as a common backdrop of many TikTok videos. Especially during the pandemic, “frivolous and funny videos of people dancing round their bedrooms is actually the perfect antidote to isolation.”⁵⁰ Thus researchers hold the idea that “TikTok’s cultural visibility during the Coronavirus crisis can be seen to contribute to the transformation of girls’ “bedroom culture”. In this section, I will discuss TikTok’s inheritance and development of “bedroom culture”.

The concept of “bedroom culture” was first brought up by Birmingham school scholars Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, as a rebuttal to their fellow colleagues’ male bias which tends to disregard the special cultural activities of teenage girls. Based on the research of

⁴⁹ Melanie Kennedy, “If the rise of the TikTok dance and e-girl aesthetic has taught us anything, it’s that teenage girls rule the internet right now’: TikTok celebrity, girls and the Coronavirus crisis,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 6 (2020): 1069–1076, DOI: 10.1177/1367549420945341.

⁵⁰ Stylist, “TikTok has exploded in popularity: Is it the perfect antidote to isolation?,” last modified 15 April, 2020, <https://www.stylist.co.uk/opinion/tiktok-videos-dances-songs-challenges-coronavirus-popularity-social-media/379053>.

World War II period domestic culture, they found out that: in contrast to their brothers or other male counterparts, young females remained more focused on home, mother-daughter relationships, and marriage. They argued that the commercial market encouraged young women of this period to spend their disposable money on things that would enhance their looks and provide them amusement at home, for example, “experimenting with make-up, listening to records, reading the mags, sizing up the boyfriends, chatting, jiving.”⁵¹ Scrolling through TikTok, we can easily find a swarm of make-up tutorials, music reaction videos, gossip blogs, and so on.⁵² It is not difficult to see here, albeit seemingly arbitrarily, that most of the popular content on TikTok has its forerunners in the forms of entertainment that could be found in teenage girls’ bedrooms during the Second World War. That is to say, at the birth of the “bedroom culture”, the quality of the bedroom space that particularly caught the researchers’ attention was that it was a space of cultural consumption, and it is this quality that has its “comeback” in the uses and meanings of the bedroom space in TikTok videos.

Regardless of the fact that the invention of “bedroom culture” was to break through the male bias and counter the neglect of women that was prevalent at that time, McRobbie and Garber’s early take was inevitably flawed. As later scholars like Mary Kearney put it, “a continued focus on girls’ consumerist practices by Girls’ Studies scholars risks reproducing conservative ideologies of sex and gender that link females and femininity to the practices of consumerism.”⁵³ So, adjustments have been made on the topic of “bedroom culture”. According to Kearney, instead of overly emphasising the consumerist leisure activities mentioned above, “material and productive components, such as letter-writing, scrapbook making, and newsletter production”⁵⁴ should not be neglected. In other words, by addressing, or redirecting the focus to the artefacts that have been produced in the bedroom space, subsequent researchers have rediscovered the bedroom space as a cultural production space. Bedroom culture does not only stand for the cultural participation that was banished to the marginal, private realm, it can also be an active playground for cultural and political expression through the creation of zines, music, films, websites, publications, and other

⁵¹ Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, “Girls and Subcultures,” in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1976) 213.

⁵² “Female genres” are central on TikTok. According to quantitative research, the “most popular content categories on TikTok are: entertainment, dance, pranks, fitness/sports, DIY, beauty/skin care, fashion, cooking, life hacks, pets, and so on”. Statista, “Top categories on TikTok by hashtag views 2020,” last modified 15 February, 2022, www.statista.com/statistics/1130988/most-popular-categories-tiktok-worldwide-hashtag-views/.

⁵³ Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.

⁵⁴ Kearney, *Girls Make Media*, 23.

current media making.⁵⁵ Based on this, bedroom culture was even studied as a sample of the production of memes, a form of subcultural resistance, since bedroom meme-making can be interpreted as “a practice that utilises feminised or marginalised modes and perspectives.”⁵⁶ In other words, the bedroom space in TikTok videos is a paradoxical mix of both consumption and production. As a user-generated content (UGC) platform, it encourages its users to utilise any form of resources they have at hand and produce dance, lip-sync videos and other customer-based content. And the platform in turn helps to circulate the content well beyond the bedroom, the private domestic space that has long been recognised as the main venue for girls’ artistic endeavours.

TikTok is not the first, and will not be the last, platform to exhibit bedrooms as private and domestic spaces. However, by inspecting the TikTok videos generated from the bedroom space, we can find some new attributes that make TikTok differ from its precedents. Firstly, the videos on TikTok are highly repetitive, which is a consequence of their encouragement for users to follow popular “trends” and generate similar content. This helps to create a shared experience that resonates with more users and increases the chances of a video going viral. Additionally, repeating the same content format, or revolving around the same theme makes it easier for audiences to recognise and remember the behavioural patterns on the platform, which can add to TikTok’s recognisability and its aesthetic appeal. Secondly, creating TikTok is relatively easy. The app comes with many default editing tools, special effects, and video templates that make the video look flashy and captivating, which demands minimal effort from the creator. Moreover, the videos are made to be widely circulated, the distribution of which is largely controlled by the algorithm. Even though TikTok has not completely revealed the exact details of its algorithm for the distribution of the videos, it is understood that the content of the video, the engagement of the users, the users’ interests and many other factors are comprehensively analysed by the algorithm. Taking into consideration the above features of TikTok, the bedroom in the videos has shifted from a “safe” place that was previously thought of as private and free from judgement, to one that is now visible to the public and is thus subject to the surveillance of others. And since the process of publicisation has undergone the black box of the algorithm, the users are placed in an inferior position of less control. This is in line with how, according to Wendy Chun, “neoliberalism’s emphases on individual interest and market transactions spread the private (as market) and by

⁵⁵ Bedroom as a cultural production space, see Kearney, *Girls Make Media*, chapter 2-6.

⁵⁶ Andi Schwartz, “Low Femme, low theory: memes and the new bedroom culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 22, no. 4, 949-964, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2020.1861050.

doing so apparently destroy the private (as the intimate, darkened space necessary for growth and freedom).”⁵⁷

The common features of TikTok videos will be further addressed in the following chapters, but from the three points mentioned above, we can further infer that the “cultural production” activities that took place in the bedroom are, essentially, “reproductive”, since the main force behind forming a “trend” is that of repetitions of and variations on content produced by a swarm of users, instead of the trendsetting activities by a chosen few; the activities are, by nature, “non-technical”, since TikTok is designed to be user-friendly, which lowers the threshold of use and thus enables users to easily create engaging videos; they are also “public”, and primarily centrifugal and scattered, since the users have less control of the distribution of the videos—the algorithm takes over it; therefore it is difficult to form a sense of “common identity”, a shared set of “symbols and styles”, or a sense of “community”—in short, the crucial factors to form a subculture according to Dick Hebdige.⁵⁸ And because of its inevitable “publicness” and the elusiveness of a video’s popularity, this individual cultural production is going to either flop or become viral then incorporated by commercial and political forces and thus loses its original quality of resistance, if there is any.⁵⁹

Here, we might as well make a seemingly farfetched analogy to highlight the consistency of the bedroom cultural production throughout history: in ancient Greece, women used the loom for the production of cloth, which was placed in the “gynaikonitides”, the women’s private chambers. In his study on femininity, Freud went back to “gynaikonitides” to discuss women’s contribution to cultural production. “Women have made few contributions... but one technique which they may have invented is that of plaiting and weaving,” and it is an imitation of the model of the “growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals,”⁶⁰ which functions as a coverage of an anatomical lack of phallus. Likewise, the production of TikTok videos is dismissed as trivial or nonsensical, just like women’s domestic handicrafts are assumed to be imitations that require little creativity or reflection. Consequently, the femininity of the production of TikTok videos can be seen as aligning with the bedroom culture’s legacy.

⁵⁷ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same : Habitual New Media* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016), 11.

⁵⁸ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

⁵⁹ For an example of how minority group’s resistance activities was mis-appreciated and incorporated by commercial forces, see Trevor Boffone, *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from Dubsplash to TikTok* (Oxford: Oxford University), accessed 17 January, 2023. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197577677.001.0001.

⁶⁰ Liliane Weissberg, “Ariadne’s Thread,” *MLN* 125, no. 3 (2010): 667, DOI:10.1353/mln.0.0267.

For a long time, women's domestic production activity has been rendered as "non-technical" and "reproductive", since men's paid labour is defined as "technical" and "productive"⁶¹—"technology enters into our sexual identity: femininity is incompatible with technological competence; to feel technically competent is to feel manly."⁶² Therefore, compared with the "repetitiveness", "reproductiveness", and the "publicness" of the production of TikTok videos, we can deduce that the bedroom space is a non-technical, feminine space, a modern variation of the domestic women's sphere which can date to preindustrial times. However, it is worth clarifying that, since this essay focuses on the majority of normal users' behaviour, the reduction of users' activity on TikTok to the historic prototype of women's domestic reproduction is not to diminish the creative or "technical" activities on this platform. In addition, I borrow the word "feminine" as a reference to its historical connection with the neglected and undervalued cultural activities: trivial, frivolous, and passive, instead of demeaning femininity in any form. My point here, therefore, is not to privilege the "masculine"/"technical" practices over the "feminine"/"non-technical" activities of normal users. Indeed, more thought needs to be given to how the majority of users' behaviour helps to reveal the nature of the space.

From the discussion above, we can conclude that the bedroom space, for the TikTok platform per se, has inherited its consumer-oriented quality—it is a space of cultural consumption. At the same time, it is also what I would call a "domestic feminine cultural production space". Whilst I have to stress that what matters more than the body performance videos produced from the bedroom space is the production of "space" itself. According to Lefebvre, "(social) space is a (social) product."⁶³ Space is socially produced, and not just a passive backdrop for social activities. Different from the "production in space", the space can be the result of the production as well. As for the bedroom space, it is no longer merely a physical being or a container. It is a product, as well as a means of production. While being the background space of countless videos, the collective image/concept of the "bedroom space" as a convenient, accepting, and photographable space is also produced. It is "at once result and cause, product and producer... it is the outcome of past actions... is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others."⁶⁴ In the newly produced domestic,

⁶¹ Sue Curry Jansen, "Gender and the Information Society: A Socially Structured Silence," *Journal of Communication* 39, no. 3 (1989), 196.

⁶² Cynthia Cockburn, *Machinery of Dominance: Women, Men, and Technical Know-How* (London: Pluto, 1985) 12.

⁶³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 26.

⁶⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 73+142.

private, and casual space, users can let down their guard, and fully devote themselves to the production of TikTok videos, which in turn secures the production of the “bedroom space” as a social space itself.

Society is not just a physical form, but an ongoing process of change. People’s perceptions and activities can shape the reality that we inhabit. To an extent, the user’s behaviour and opinion towards the bedroom space on TikTok have reshaped the space itself. It is no longer only the physical background of the body performance anymore, the repetitive and reproductive actions have encouraged and normalised the mundanity of the bedroom, then produced the new concept of “TikTok space”. Consumption-oriented and feminine by nature, “TikTok space” represents the reclaiming of new territory for body performance: TikTokers can dance anywhere! Even if it is just your humble, cluttered, private bedroom, it can also be your stage for self-expression. In the next section, we will talk about another element of the body performance video that shares the same underlying logic: the music.

2.3 Music: Groove to the Beats, Prep for the Change

As a video-sharing social networking platform, TikTok’s take-off relies heavily on its successful integration of image and sound. The latest TikTok interactive report shows that sound, according to about 90% of TikTok users, is essential to the platform’s appeal. And since “other platforms are watched without sound 85% of the time, but the sound is turned on by default in TikTok,” music is “a unique strength of TikTok.”⁶⁵ The most evident is that TikTok has created a powerful connection between ordinary users and the music industry. The platform allows its users to upload mostly clips 15 seconds to about 1 minute in length with music (annotated at the bottom left of the screen) for the chance to go viral, which can benefit both the uploader and the artist of the song. For example, in 2019, the then-unknown artist Lil Nas X uploaded the original version of his country-trap song *Old Town Road* to TikTok, accompanied by a tailor-made dance “challenge”: to change your outfit into western cowboy style before the chorus beat drops. This song finally went viral on TikTok and caught the attention of Columbia Record, which lead to an official contract between those two and Lil Nax X’s record-breaking success of the remix version of *Old Town Road* featuring Billy

⁶⁵ full report see Kantar, “The power of TikTok,” accessed 30 January, 2023, <https://www.kantar.com/uki/inspiration/advertising-media/the-power-of-tiktok>.

Ray Cyrus.⁶⁶ Another similar example is Lizzo: with her viral #DNATest challenge, the background song, her 2-year-old piece *Truth Hurt* revived and became her first top 10 track on the Billboard Top 100 list, thanks to millions of TikTokers lip-syncing to this earworm “I just took a DNA test, turn out I’m 100% that bitch.”⁶⁷ The music industry has found out that TikTok has turned into an important force for music discovery promotion and consumption, and a useful tool for artists to gain exposure and engage with their audience. According to the report, in 2020, “major labels such as Interscope, Republic Records, Columbia and many other affiliates of the Big Three signed at least 70 artists that broke on the app.”⁶⁸ In this section, I will talk about the relationship between music, the “unique strength of TikTok,” the platform itself and its users, namely the variation of expressions of music on TikTok, the characters of viral songs (2.3.1), and how it contributes to the formation of the spectacle of body by capturing attention and assimilating user behaviour (2.3.2).

2.3.1 Virial Music, Viral Effect

The late 2010s have witnessed a resurgence of upbeat dance music. The pace of mainstream pop music had been declining for the past ten years, whilst cold and aloof trap beats became more prominent as EDM’s impact diminished. But during the past three to four years, the beat has drastically increased. Even if during the global pandemic when “it’s been more than six months since clubs in most parts of the world closed... in a year without clubs, dance and electronic music is having a moment.”⁶⁹ According to a report from BBC, in 2020, the average tempo of the top 20 annual best-selling songs is 122 beats/min, which is the highest it has been since 2009 (124 beats/min).⁷⁰ In general, music is becoming happier and more danceable, and it clearly showed its effect on TikTok. From upcoming artists such as Lizzo (*Cuz I Love You*), Doja Cat (*Hot Pink*), and Dua Lipa (*Future Nostalgia*), to established pop stars like Lady Gaga (*Chromatica*), Jessie Ware (*What’s Your Pleasure*), Kylie Minogue (*Disco*), and Beyoncé (*Renaissance*), the platform is ideal to the adaption of this high tempo,

⁶⁶ Grammy, “Lil Nas X’s No. 1 Run Began With TikTok, Now The Music Industry Is Taking Notice”, last modified 27 August, 2019, www.grammy.com/news/2023-grammys-museum-online-auction-charitybuzz-signed-guitars-items-harry-styles-miley-cyrus-bad-bunny-lizzo.

⁶⁷ Paper Magazine, “Lizzo Is the Queen of TikTok”, last modified 10 July, 2019, www.papermag.com/lizzo-tiktok-streams-2639153614.html#rebellitem5.

⁶⁸ Laura David, “For better or worse, TikTok is driving the music industry,” *UWIRE Text* 15 September, (2021): 1, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A675542537/AONE?u=oslo&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=1754a7ad>.

⁶⁹ Junkee, “The Unexpected Resurgence Of Club Music In A Year Without Dancefloors,” last modified 15 October, 2020, <https://junkee.com/club-music-resurgence-2020/274415>.

⁷⁰ BBC, “Pop music is getting faster (and happier),” last modified 9 July, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-53167325>.

upbeat, fast-paced escapism to lift the users from the current chaos, and transports people to a utopian scenario that is more positive and idealistic. To quote the songwriter Rayes, who has worked for artists like Stormzy and Beyoncé, “I’m looking at the top 20 (chart list) now and, if you were to play the chart in order, you wouldn’t think the world is going through a crisis.”⁷¹ Just like what happened during the Great Depression and World War, the upbeat shift happened in the cultural realm functions in more than a negative escapist way, it grants its audiences access to the reclaiming of a new “playground”/territory and adopting a new set of behavioural modes. Moreover, this trend is seemingly not going to fade away in the post-pandemic era. The Spotify team identified that “we are going to see a rise in dance music this year,” accompanied by a “resurgence of bedroom production”; even the very general genre of pop music itself is “adopting dance.”⁷²

As discussed above, TikTok has a tighter-than-ever relationship with the music industry. Since “virality is playing a big part in the future of the (pop) genre,”⁷³ almost every sensational hit song is entangled in the snowball effect with TikTok. Therefore, it is worth clarifying the characteristics of the viral songs on TikTok, and how they affect its users.

Firstly, from a music point of view, since the video only lasts 15 seconds more or less, the background music is only a small segment of the featured song. How to catch the users’ immediate attention within the first 4-16 bars is crucial since attention is the commodity on TikTok. Thus, euphoric music with danceable beats is always preferred by the platform. Music genres, such as House, Disco, Funk, Hip-hop and etc, with catchy beats and groovy basslines, can easily catch the users’ attention and activate them to move their bodies and then create performance videos to gain more attention from others. For example, the song *Say So* by Doja Cat, a nostalgic Disco tune with a fuzzy, glittery 70’s vibe, strong rhythms and catchy melody, has motivated numerous users to dance to its groovy beat and funky basslines, including the TikTok influencer Haley Sharpe (@yodellinghaley), who invented the #SaySo dance move. Her 15-second video immediately blew out, and over “16 million TikTokers have followed suit in uploading their own iteration of the dance,”⁷⁴ which eventually generated more than 2 billion viewings under the #SaySo challenge video category. Besides, it is worth noting that a tune with drastic beat change also caters to TikTok’s taste. The

⁷¹ BBC, “Pop Music Is Getting Faster (and Happier)”.

⁷² Spotify, “The State of Dance Music, According to Spotify Editors,” last modified 7 July, 2021, <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2021-07-07/the-state-of-dance-music-according-to-spotify-editors/>.

⁷³ Spotify, “The State of Dance Music, According to Spotify Editors”.

⁷⁴ The Face, “Doja Cat is doing it for the fans,” last modified 2 March, 2020, <https://theface.com/music/doja-cat-say-so-music-video-tiktok-haley-sharpe>.

dramatic shift mostly happens in the transition part (the bridge) between the verse and the chorus. Often serving to take a song to another level, the bridge highlights the central theme of the song while expanding the song by introducing a different perspective or offering a different music style. TikTokers often respond to the transforming effect of the beat change, almost like a real-life act-out of the shifting effect of the bridge on the song. According to the TikTok influencer Abby Roberts, a UK-based make-up artist, when looking for inspiration to create content, “something like a good beat drop is ideal for TikTok because it means I can do transitions.”⁷⁵ “Transition” refers to a specific type of video viral on TikTok which applies dramatic jump-cuts to highlight the contrast between the “before” look (often everyday sloppy looks) and the “after” look (often with elaborate make-up and special outfit). Another example from Doja Cat: this time TikTokers dug out her two-year-old song *Streets* to create the #Silhouette challenge. As the lighthearted, cheerful verse, sampled from Paul Anka’s 1959 Jazz classic *Put Your Hands on My Shoulder*, transits into its dark-toned, mysterious chorus by switching into heavy Trap beats, the performers in the video adjust their behaviour from acting like a simple and innocent homeboy/girl into posing as a seductive silhouette bathed in red light. From the cases above, we see that danceable beats and drastic shift of beats can function as a psychological cue for the users in front of the screen to activate their body and respond to the music: it encourages and appeals to its audience to take actions, and this is part of the reason why TikTok and dance music integrate so well. While as for how to take action exactly, we can have a look at the lyrics of some of the viral songs.

After taking the psychological cue to get started, the clumsy, unprofessional normal users tend to face the question of how to act in front of the camera or to catch up to the beat. It is time for the lyrics to come into play. TikTok favours lyrics that can be easily acted out or brought to life by its users, especially the ones that are straightforward, optimistically goofy and humorous. As discussed in the former sections, goofiness is an affirmative aesthetic choice on TikTok, users do not need to be professional to perform in a video. To quote Justin Bieber from his viral song *Intentions* which spawned an amateur dance challenge on TikTok, “Picture perfect, you don’t need no filter.” To help ordinary users to adapt to the urge of performance, the lyrics now function as “instruction” to guide the behaviour of the users, which can be interpreted as a more specific and literal version of the danceable beats as a cue for action. Therefore, users can move their bodies, roughly following the guideline of the

⁷⁵ NME, “What Makes an Old Song Go Viral on TikTok?,” last modified 15 January, 2021, <https://www.nme.com/features/what-makes-old-song-viral-on-tiktok-sea-shanty-life-without-buildings-2856702>.

lyrics, to avoid awkwardness and clumsiness. Some artists even make demonstrations in the music video, to assist the audience to pick up the dance move. Take, for instance, the song *Toosie Slide* by Drake as the perfect example of the TikTok-friendly “instructive lyrics”. As “the happiest of the 58 singles Drake has released so far,”⁷⁶ we can say that *Toosie Slide* was specially produced to go viral on TikTok. Two days after the music and video were publicly released in April 2020, the views under the #ToosieSlide on TikTok had reached 20 million, and it yielded approximately three million user-generated videos. His unabashedly simple and clumsy dance move is perfectly suited for TikTok, where its rhythm and lyrics can inspire users to join the collective dance activities. The 15-second segment of the song begins with Drake’s invitation “Don’t you wanna dance with me? No?” and a guarantee “I’m a show you how to get it”. As for what the users should do, it has been written in the lyrics already “Right foot up, left foot slide, Left foot up, right foot slide”. The complementary music video is more like a dance tutorial since it is a demonstration of the goofy moves in the living room by Drake himself. Unsurprisingly, users integrate the lyrics by lifting their feet and doing the same Micheal Jackson sliding move in synchronisation with the lyrics and accompanying trap beats. TikTokers even dress themselves according to the lyrics with “black leather gloves,” “Alyx jacket” and “Nike crossbody”. Similar collective performances moved by viral songs on TikTok are countless, including the #WAP challenge driven by Cardi B’s same-titled song (“From the top, make it drop”) and *Thot Shit* by Megan Thee Stallion (“Hands on my knees”), to name a few. In the past generations, great artists wrote profound and elaborate lyrics to illustrate human conditions and resonate with the audience. However, on TikTok, only the most straightforward and catchy lines can cater to the user’s short attention span. With clear guidance and instructions from the lyrics, we can see the alarming effect of how widely a TikTok campaign can spread, at least geographically. People from all around the world are dancing to certain songs with nearly the same choreography, in similar background space, wearing alike costumes (if they have the right budget), whether it is from a Brazilian athlete @marcelotwelve, a pair of twin gymnasts @rybkatwinsofficial, or a virtual avatar @nitepon.

In conclusion, TikTok’s success partially lies in its seamless integration with music. Upbeat music with danceable beats, heavy basslines, or drastic beat shifts is more likely to go viral on this platform because it can function as a psychological cue for users to activate their bodies. Whilst the direct, instructional lyrics can always help to make it easier for users to

⁷⁶ BBC, “Pop Music Is Getting Faster (and Happier)”.

generate content since it draws a clear blueprint of what they should be, and how to be it. But what exactly do TikTokers cope with the music, and what does users' behaviour reveal?

2.3.2 What “TikTokers” Do: The Homogenisation of User Behaviour

The close relationship between TikTok and music is influenced by its predecessor Musical.ly, a social media platform designed for users to lip-sync or dance to music clips or edit their own music videos. In November 2017, Musical.ly was acquired by Chinese company ByteDance and was rebranded as TikTok after the transition, which led to the eruption of TikTok's popularity since “a surplus of users”⁷⁷ happened after the merger. The problem that needs to be solved is how to retain such a big amount of users and keep them active.

For the first step, TikTok inherited Musical.ly's core functions while making them more diverse and engaging around music. There are three main ways the platform encourages users to utilise its default musical resources, namely dance, lip-sync, and various “challenges”. Most of the time, these three categories are not clearly divided from each other: one can lip-sync while dancing, and they can both become a challenge. The entangled connection is maintained through the format of “#+theme”, a concise and efficient hyperlink to all videos related to the same theme. To begin with, since there is a “logical association as a temporally organized art form”⁷⁸ between music and dance as historically interdependent symbiosis, it is not surprising that dance is one of the most popular and valuable heritages from Musical.ly. As stated above, the lyrical and rhythmic content of the music plays a defining role in choreographing TikTok dances. These similar individual videos communicate with each other in the form of “challenge”: by participating in collective activities and sharing their individual interpretation of the activities, “people are almost certainly hoping to achieve some sort of social currency.”⁷⁹ Like a currency, the value of these user-generated videos is to a large extent their circulation value. In order for the value of these videos/currency to be acknowledged by a wide range of audiences, and therefore to be more widely circulated, they must acquire a certain “consistency”. In the case of TikTok, it is achieved by the uniformity of the video content (background space, music, performance, etc.). I call it the “homogenisation” of user behaviour: in order to achieve better circulation, users must comply

⁷⁷ Rolling Stone, “If You Can Get Famous Easily, You're Gonna Do It’: How TikTok Took Over Music,” last modified 12 August, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/pro/features/tiktok-video-app-growth-867587/>.

⁷⁸ Barbara E. Lewis, “The Effect of Movement Based Instruction On First and Third Graders' Achievement in Selected Music Listening Skills,” *Psychology of Music* 16, no. 2 (1988): 129.

⁷⁹ Geah Pressgrove, Brooke Weberling McKeever, and S. Mo Jang, “What is Contagious? Exploring why content goes viral on Twitter: A case study of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge,” *Int J Nonprofit Volunt Sect Mark* 23, no. 1 (2018):e1586, DOI: 10.1177/0305735688162003.

with the rules of the platform and gain a certain uniformity; this process of “homogenisation” in turn establishes the foundation for users’ diverse forms of “free and creative expression.”

This tendency is also woven into the underlying logic of another popular user behaviour: lip-sync. Many TikTokers upload clips of them singing along to the music without using their own voice, which singles out and emphasises the value that the lyrical and melodic content provides, as well as the sheer action of synchronising their behaviour with the music. To better understand this performance, we can draw inspiration from the historical counterparts of the current lip-sync performance on TikTok. From a cinema history perspective, the astonishing group of movie musicals produced by MGM in the 1930s to the 1950s can be considered the kick-off of the lip-sync performance, since they found out that they might as well record the sound (mostly musical numbers) and the performance separately if the simultaneous recording of these two are too difficult to accomplish. This reveals that, since its inception, lip-sync has been an “expedient”, a simpler and more practical “shortcut” to compensate for the lack of technical competency and to cope with a growing urge for new forms of expression. This also makes sense from a more specific point of view: the queer community, which brought this type of performance to its heyday. Even though no one knows exactly when and where lip-sync, as a crucial component of drag performance, became an integral part of the culture, the launch of portable record players in the 1960s definitely boosted its popularity. It was portable, low-maintenance, and easy to operate, which granted the drag performers the access to “bring in their own records to play on a bar’s sound system. Lip-sync emerged as a sort of queer folk art.”⁸⁰ Back then the “(drag) performers are paid less,” while the “record act is much cheaper to produce” since they did not have to use live musicians or use their own voices, which led to a situation where “anyone can mouth a record.”⁸¹ Up until 1981, the birth of MTV witnessed the full blossom of lip-singing pop music in staged settings: the normalisation of this performance on national television gave the audience more opportunity and material to embrace and try out lip-sync. Even though, compared to “authentic” live performances, the less professional and lower-status lip-syncers are considered shaky and sleazy, the fundamental “accessibility” of lip-sync is surely part of the reason for its popularity. We can definitely see similarities with TikTok here, no matter whether as a “technical expedient”, or a low-barrier and low-cost platform for performing,

⁸⁰ Slate, “Read My Lips,” last modified 17 June, 2019, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2019/06/drag-lip-sync-history-queen-king-performance.html>.

⁸¹ Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 44.

TikTok thrives on the inherent nature of “accessibility” of lip-sync to motivate its audience, which lays a massive and solid foundation for the homogenisation of their behaviours.

It is also noteworthy that on an individual level, lip-sync performance is bred and developed in a specific spatial and temporal context. According to drag historian Joe E. Jeffreys, the practice of young gays “performing the songs of beloved divas and ingénues began at home, in the privacy of a bedroom or basement. It was only natural that these queens would continue camping it up at parties and gatherings once they found community.”⁸² Here we can see another fascinating overlap between the historic lip-sync and TikTok performance: they both thrive in private space like bedroom, only for the former “private” refers to security and seclusion (as opposed to the “public” symbolic for patriarchal norms), while for the latter this “private” expression of a certain “individual” is equated with a “virtual publicness” (for example an uncountable online audience), which to an extent resembles the above idea of “community”, an intangible union connected by hyperlinks. Either of the two, however, is an attempt to observe and express of their identity in a personal space, which is essentially a “feminine act” (as stated in the former section) if we agree that under the heterosexual patriarchal gender system “adolescence has been constructed as masculine... which is associated with independence, rebelliousness, adventurousness, and increasing investments in power,” oriented towards the outdoor/public sphere for example “sports, fraternity hazing, and military training.”⁸³ Lip-sync in the private sphere is, for the young boys who exhibit unconvincing masculinity in the public sphere and are addressed in emasculating terms such as “sissy”, an activity of exploring and articulating themselves in a “feminine space.”

Let alone the ambiguity of the drag lip-sync history, Martin Boyce, a Stonewall regular in the 1960s, recalls that “The Supremes, with their choreography and matching outfits, inspired a generation of drag queens who watched the Motown stars lip sync.”⁸⁴ That was long before it was “politically correct” to publically embrace one’s gayness, so the queer community needs to hide behind the voice of powerful women, selected from the previous hyper-masculine show business, to articulate themselves. Those female powerhouses have the audacity and confidence to address their desire and disdain for males, their trauma and triumph, which could easily end a queer for expressing in public. Therefore, the queer community showcased that they identify and idolise the female stars by turning into them through drag and lip-sync

⁸² Slate, “Read My Lips”.

⁸³ Kearney, *Girls Make Media*, 6.

⁸⁴ Slate, “Read My Lips”.

performances. To put it briefly, lip-sync is drag. As a short for “dresses as a girl,” drag is essentially about creating an illusion, or putting on a disguise, even though in the current context, the “girl” part can be switched by anything.

It is no news that, according to early lyric studies on popular music, “a central activity of music audiences is the mental appropriation of lyrical content,” and songwriters are more like “thoughts-writers” for the audience to express their thoughts. But different from regular music appreciation or singing-along, drag performance is accompanied by a drastic identity shift: it is about “connecting with musical icons that we put on a pedestal and being able to insert ourselves into that narrative,”⁸⁵ says Brooklyn-based drag performer West Dakota. The action of lip-sync, thus, serves as a tool/decoration for the drag performers to accomplish the impersonation or their commitment to this illusion. A woman’s voice coming from a man’s mouth is just as “camp” as wearing dramatic make-up and wigs for the fulfilment of the illusion. In other words, lip-sync is the manifestation of how “drag” remixes and repurposes the existing dominant culture. By drawing references from music, movies and starlets to tell their own stories, the drag performers’ self-made identities are in a way “Frankensteinish”: they are built up by shattered cultural detritus, so they are open to endless transformation, and they can be decorated at will like a Christmas tree: once the concept of “drag” is formed from the inside, there can be unlimited possibilities to transform its “outside”.

The viral music on TikTok relies on users’ engaging performance, sometimes by lip-syncing, sometimes by dancing and lip-syncing at the same time. We must say that nowadays, the “classical era” of lip-sync where it was perceived as a cathartic subcultural act of resistance has become part of history, and it has been incorporated by popular media such as TikTok where free expression of the self is encouraged. But the nature of lip-sync as a form of drag performance has not fully diminished. Users can choose from a vast database of songs, dress as whoever they want to identify with, and communicate with their preferred “community” by sharing the same “#” hyperlink—they can transform themselves into anything on TikTok. Interestingly enough, as a default setting, TikTok does not allow its users to upload their own audio while recording lip-sync videos: “The audio content of TikTok videos is the song itself and not the user singing, rapping or taking over it”⁸⁶—an act of further hiding the users behind a virtual persona. And once the users get used to the infinite possibility of transformation,

⁸⁵ Slate, “Read My Lips”.

⁸⁶ Grammys, “What Music Goes Viral On TikTok?,” last modified 6 November, 2019, <https://www.grammy.com/news/what-music-goes-viral-tiktok>.

they will naturally get more deeply involved in the assemblage of “Frankenstein” with whatever cultural resources at hand, the commitment to the “illusion.”

From the discussion above, we can see that the underlying logic of drag lip-syncs and the lip-sync on TikTok is similar: firstly using upbeat pop music and the improvement of the media infrastructure to assist and then incite a wider audience into action; then utilising the “feminine space” to breed the thoughts of self-exploration and expression; and after the process of identifying with a powerful “other”, then embrace the infinite disguise, where lies the music power of “homogenisation”: to train every individual to be fully prepared for their “open endings” in the representational world.

It is no coincidence that drag lip-sync and the body performance on the TikTok platform (a “revival” of lip-sync) both thrive at a time when the so-called “danceable music” is at its prime: “Pop music of the sixties lent itself to lip-syncing for reasons of style and performance aesthetics (it allowed for a lot more dancing by the lead singer mid-song);”⁸⁷ and the streaming surge of dance music started during the pandemic has “continued to power ahead in 2022, following the end of covid restrictions.”⁸⁸ Whether it is at a traditional concert, in an underground ballroom, or on a virtual online platform, it is the fundamental nature of music to bring people together, which function as the basis of a variety of influences music can exert on the audiences. And interestingly, research on evolutionary psychology and bio-musicology also indicates that “music and dance may have some of its evolutionary origins as a coalition signalling system.”⁸⁹ On TikTok, music is like the glue that holds the user-generated content together. The euphoric, beat-shifting viral music “infected” the users; the symptom of the “infection” is their physical restlessness and almost Pavlovian obedience. Moreover, through the music-related activities such as dance, lip-sync and challenges, we see how different performances share the same logic: in order to capture attention and then guarantee the circulation of the videos, users must achieve a certain level of unification and accept their fatalistic commitment to the illusion. In the next chapter, we will talk about how exactly the body is disciplined and reshaped after the psychological preparation of external conditions like frame, space, and music.

⁸⁷ Excerpt from Tom Fitzgerald, Lorenzo Marquez, *Legendary Children: The First Decade of RuPaul’s Drag Race and the Last Century of Queer Life*, Vulture, “The History of Lip-Syncing,” last modified 4 March, 2020, <https://www.vulture.com/2020/03/the-history-of-lip-syncing.html>.

⁸⁸ Music Week, “Can the dance music boom continue?,” last modified 25 October, 2022, <https://www.musicweek.com/labels/read/can-the-dance-music-boom-continue/086808#:~:text=Based%20on%20Music%20Week%20analysis,of%20Covid%20restrictions%20last%20year>.

⁸⁹ Edward H. Hagen and Gregory A. Bryant, “Music and Dance as a Coalition Signaling System,” *Human Nature* 14, no. 1 (2003): 21.

3. Face: Illuminated, Therefore Gazed Upon

In this chapter, we focus on the user's facial representation as a case study to discuss the second step in the formation of the spectacle of body, namely the "disciplining" of the user by TikTok, and the "docilisation" of the user in turn. Ulises Mejias' concept of "dual processuality" runs through the argument in an attempt to reveal how the platform implicitly exerts power over users while encouraging their autonomy. The chapter begins by analysing the phenomenon: the representation of users' faces on TikTok (3.1); and then illustrates the profound influence of platform features on user behaviour by introducing gaze theory (3.2). It is worth noting that the emphasis of this chapter and the next chapter is respectively placed on "face" and "body" aspects, but this classification does not perpetuate the dichotomy, for example, the dualism of "body and mind,"⁹⁰ in the history of philosophy. As we discussed in the previous chapter (2.1), images of faces and bodies share the same nature on TikTok: through a process of "facification", they both pertain to the "affection-image" of body performance. Therefore, this article inclusively categorises users' facial representations and physical movements on TikTok under the umbrella of "body performance", and treats them as two entry points for discussing different issues.

3.1 Enhance, Modify, Restore: The "Face-Evolution" on TikTok

TikTok videos often feature the users' faces as their self-presentation and the expression of their personal brand or image. In this section, I will talk about three representations of users' faces on TikTok, as well as the cultural context and implication behind them, namely the "self-exile" (3.1.2).

3.1.1 The Illuminated Subject: The Light and Shadow on the Users' Face

We might start with a piece of seemingly unremarkable news: during the COVID-19 pandemic, "ring light has been the No. 1 best seller in the Cell Phones and Accessories category on Amazon.com for several weeks," and it seems that "the ring light became a must-have for recording videos under quarantine."⁹¹ The so-called "ring light" is a circular light source that is designed to encircle the camera lens, or to be large enough to shoot

⁹⁰ For example René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1956).

⁹¹ CNBC, "How the ring light became a must-have for recording videos under quarantine," last modified 18 May, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/18/what-is-a-ring-light-quarantine-hit-for-videos.html>.

through. It is often applied to provide effective lighting by minimising the amount of shadow generated. Even though the ring light is not a newfangled gadget anymore: it has long been used by photographers, and exploited by YouTubers and other social media influencers in the early 2010s,⁹² its recent resurgence hints at the great need for the users to be lightened up in front of the camera. Especially on TikTok, it is no longer a secret that more and more ordinary users are adopting ring lights to bring their home-made videos to the “next level”: if you look closely, you will see that the foreground of the video (with the aid of ring light) is very bright, and the background is darker than usual. The TikTokers’ face occupies the screen, just like a one-man show under the spotlight: they become some sort of cyborg, with the reflection of the luminous ring glowing in their eyes and overlapping with their pupils, which indicates their identity of a performer, a represented self, an on-stage persona... However one wants to define it, we can see it as a metaphor for the illuminated subject: the spotlight is now on, and the show is about to start.

The simple yet immediate lighting effect provided by the ring light is highly effective in motivating its users by transforming a dreary shot into an exuberant and cheerful one. To quote a ring light user, “The direct light eliminates shadows and minimises wrinkles. The lighting is so flattering that I feel like a supermodel each time I turn on my ring light.”⁹³ This suggests that the ring light favoured by TikTokers functions as a corrective light, or a cosmetic light: the shadows, the lines, and the blemishes on the face, or the physical reality of the face, are corrected. There are certainly influencers on TikTok who want to expose this illusion that has achieved a certain level of tacit mutual understanding among users. “Beauty gurus lie to you... I will show you how my make-up actually looks like, after I turn off my ring light and four softboxes,”⁹⁴ says @mualesandro, a keen TikToker of making comparison videos. The uniform glow renders the face into a sleek and flat canvas. If, from the perspective of art history, shadow enhances realism since it appears in synergy with scientific perspective and the representation of three-dimensional space, then the absence of shadow represents an idealised, non-realistic state of illusion. The illusion of an idealised, enhanced self in turn encourages the users to generate more illusory videos.

⁹² “A YOUTUBE HOME STUDIO,” *T3*, no. 270 (2017): 20.

<https://www.pressreader-com.ezproxy.uio.no/canada/t3/20170701>.

⁹³ Learning in Hand, “Perfect Illumination with a Ring Light,” last modified 11 September, 2017,

<https://learninginhand.com/blog/ring-light>.

⁹⁴ @mualesandro, <https://www.tiktok.com/@mualesandro/video/6901828739722693894>

We can also look at the ring light from another perspective: firstly invented in the early 1950s, the ring light was intended to help dentists to cast an even light into the patient's mouth.⁹⁵ It is essentially a variation of the shadowless lamp, a surgical light: the light is delivered in a circle rather than from a certain point which can counteract the shadow formed in the other direction. In a medical scenario, the elimination of shadows helps the doctor to inspect a patient's lesion without hindrance. In other words, the "shadow" is seen here as an obstacle, an obscuring of the truth. Hence, the 360-degree panorama lighting from the ring light removes the obscuration. Following this argument, we might reach a conclusion that seems diametrically opposed to the previous one: the light is a revelation of the truth. All the user's facial features are visible to the pervasive diffuse reflection of the ring light. Or, users are exposed to the camera in front of them without reservation, thus they complete the honest and fearless handover of themselves to TikTok with the assistance of the ruthless light. We can see the two seemingly opposing interpretations of the ring light as a metaphor, or a specific example of, the paradox that is ubiquitous on the TikTok platform: on the one hand, the video, or the "spectacle of the body", is an ultimate form of representation, but on the other hand it is rooted in the relentlessly detailed "scanning"/observation and "uploading"/interaction of reality. As Ulises Mejias observes, the "dual processuality" is a defining characteristic of social network services, for example "the increased opportunities and tools for content production, the proliferation of user-generated content, and the diversity of voices" are countered by "the transfer of property rights, the commodification of the collaboration, as well as the homogenisation of platforms."⁹⁶ For TikTok per se, the "dual processuality" lies in its encouragement for users to create a representational illusion, or the celebration of "creativity", and its all-encompassing collection of users' information, and the absolute governance of the platform. This paradox will reveal itself more in the following chapters.

Light is always accompanied by shadows. However, in the ideally "shadowless" state created by the ring light, the intentional re-creation of shadows on users' faces, which involves contouring and highlighting as a popular makeup trend among TikTokers, becomes deeply meaningful. This long-established make-up technique dates back to the sixteenth century when the Elizabethan theatre performers used ceruse, kohl, and other lead-contained

⁹⁵ CNBC, "How the ring light became a must-have for recording videos under quarantine."

⁹⁶ Ulises A. Mejias, "The Limits of Networks as Models for Organizing the Social," *New Media & Society* 12, no. 4 (2010): 607-608.

substances to exaggerate their facial features.⁹⁷ From here, we see that contouring and highlighting is a derivation of performance, a trick to reinforce the actors' position of "being seen": accentuating the structure and the contrast of the face helps the audience to watch the actors' performance better. It remained as stage make-up, prominently used in theatre, film, and photography studios until "we get to 2012 and the age of social media."⁹⁸ While on TikTok, in front of the perfect lighting, contouring and highlighting is gradually drifting away from a method of "accentuation" to "correction": for example, applying an amount of bronzer around the face or on the sides of the nose can make your face and nose appear smaller and more exquisite on the camera, whilst applying highlight to the forehead and the eye-bag area can give your face a fuller look. Here, the "dual processuality" is brought to the fore again. On the one hand, users are granted the power to paint/reshape their face like a perfectly lighted canvas, where the recreated "shadow" functions as a symbol of the representational instead of the real. On the other hand, as some make-up artists argue, "contouring falls under corrective make-up" which "is about taking something that makes your face individual and trying to make it conform," and it is troublesome when the norm "is seen as the stereotypical white European."⁹⁹ Inevitably, the empowerment has, to some extent, led to the homogenisation of faces.

If we shift the angle again, we can interpret the ring light and contouring as an "enhancement", no matter if it is the enhancement of the idealised illusion, or the enhancement of the blunt reality. Or we can say that it is an enhancement of both the representational and reality. The ring light illuminated the subject, and make-up as a tool enticed the subject to actively reshape their appearances. But at the same time, the perfect lighting draws the users to the front of the camera like a moth, and exposes them to the scrutiny of the platform, while the contouring and highlighting technique assimilates them into a similarly idealised face.

3.1.2 The Modified: "The Ideal Face" and the State of "Self-Exile"

The "dual processuality" paradox based on "enhancement" finds an allegorical example in the combination of the perfect lighting and make-up techniques, although somewhat extreme:

⁹⁷ Liveglam, "Contour Me Crazy: History of Contour and Highlight," last modified 27 June, 2016, <https://liveglam.com/history-of-contour-and-highlight/>.

⁹⁸ Liveglam, "Contour Me Crazy: History of Contour and Highlight."

⁹⁹ Independent, "The history of Instagram make-up: From contours, highlights to airbrushed skin," last modified 16 September, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/instagram-history-make-up-contours-highlights-airbrush-skin-brows-big-lips-a7940501.html>.

to avoid their facial features being washed out by the strong and pervasive ring light, TikTokers (especially the Asian female users with the relatively flatter face shape and less defined feature) would “abuse” the camera and the embedded filters on TikTok by applying dramatically heavy contouring and highlighting on their faces.¹⁰⁰ They emphasise the contrast on their faces by applying big chunks of contour and highlight, sometimes even on cleavages and collarbones, to counteract the intense lighting and the filter that has been adjusted to the maximum (similar to the light, filters have a blurring and smoothing effect on faces, which will be discussed below). On screen, their facial features are effectively captured by the camera and modified in a formulaic way. While off-camera, large blocks of unblended highlights and contours spread across their face like pigments on canvas: the light and shadow are so roughly simplified that it makes people wonder if they just walked out of a cubism painting. In this extreme case, the scale of “double processuality” are teetered: the caricatured faces of the TikTokers off-camera are presented as an act of deviation, where the result of “creativity” no longer serve the behavioural norm of the tangible world we live in. This has been a “norm” that can also be observed in, for example, the Instagram filter practices, only in an extreme and caricatured form.¹⁰¹ In other words, the users’ behaviour here is intended to cater to and please the camera and the TikTok platform: the cost they paid for the idealised representation in the TikTok videos is the sacrifice of their real faces in reality. Or we can say that reality gives way to the world of representation: the users seem to (temporarily) enter a state of intoxicating “self-exile”: the image of the subject gains superiority over the true self who willingly bears the costs of deformation and alienation in order to construct an idealised “representational self”. “Self-exile” deprives the “reality” of its authenticity, whilst the “representation” paradoxically appears more genuine than the absurdity of the reality itself. It resonates with Jean Baudrillard’s idea of “simulation” which “is no longer that of a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality.”¹⁰² The state of “self-exile” is essential to the formation of body spectacle.

The trends of make-up techniques are symbiotic with the development of the media landscape. It would be a rhetorical question to ask which shaped which, but the mutual influence is not difficult to find, for example, the embedded “enhance filter”, or the “beautify

¹⁰⁰ Reddit, “Tik tok users abusing filters,” last accessed 29 May, 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/Instagramreality/comments/be5t2a/tik_tok_users_abusing_filters/.

¹⁰¹ The New Yorker, “The Age of Instagram Face,” last modified 12 December, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/decade-in-review/the-age-of-instagram-face>.

¹⁰² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

tool” on TikTok. For most TikTok users, this tool is a “boost” of their look, or a “virtual make-up” that is easy to use. The filter comprises a variety of adjustable parameters that enable users to modify their facial appearance in video recordings. By clicking on the “enhance” icon in the menu on the right side of the recording interface, the user can choose to adjust various settings in the drop-down menu, including skin smoothing, contouring and highlighting, teeth whitening, facial reducing, lip amplifying, and eyeshadow application, and their facial features will be modified accordingly. If we tune all the parameters to the maximum, we will get a glimpse of the model of the “ideal face” that TikTok has pre-set for its users: a broad forehead, high cheekbones, sharp jawline, and on the fair smooth skin are googly eyes, pointy nose and ample lips. Some users sarcastically use the alien emoji to refer to those who abused the enhance filter/beautify tool, which is actually not far from what happened. The overuse of enhance filters can lead to the elimination of the users’ original physical characteristics, thus allowing the represented images to converge to the “ideal face” acclaimed by the TikTok platform. However, when most of the users tend to apply the same model to adjust their appearance, the “enhance” here no longer refers to the enhancement of “reality”/their real self: it shifts to the enhancement of the image, the exile of the real self, or the embracing of a new identity that belongs to the realm of representation. How was this conversion achieved?

For each user, the progress of the completion of the conversion is different, but they occur in the ongoing process of approximating the “ideal face”. Of course, we have to admit that it is not the majority of users who adjust every parameter of the filter to its maximum. However, we can still view these parameters as quantifiable data, a scale, or a “tendency”. When their desire to transform themselves gets stronger, the number of the filter intensity will appear bigger. As the users’ reliance and trust in the enhance filter increases, they will inevitably be sliding towards TikTok’s ultimate “ideal face”. Users are given the tools to modify their facial features to their own preferences by making diverse choices or “freely” combining them. For example, they may choose to pair higher cheekbones with thinner lips, or a fuller cheek with a rounder nose tip. Skimming through the TikTok videos under the #enhancefilter tag, we will get the idea that users are generally positive about this function: “Thank you TikTok!”, says @professionaltraveler;¹⁰³ “Look at me, I am beautiful!”, says @sophs.90x.¹⁰⁴ There are also some other users who pointed out that “I do like it when it is more subtle,” or declared

¹⁰³ @professionaltraveler, <https://www.tiktok.com/@professionaltraveler/video/6815477198099713286>

¹⁰⁴ @sophs.90x, <https://www.tiktok.com/@sophs.90x/video/6898722511467416833>

that “everything on the internet is a little filtered,” but they also made it clear that “it (the lipstick function) want me to try more,”¹⁰⁵ and “I will never stop using it (the enhance), unless requested.”¹⁰⁶ In any case, TikTok is a “feel good” platform, and the “possibilities” and “freedom” offered by this platform are essential to ensure that users “feel good”, and then actively engage in creating content. Even “feel good” can be used as a narcotic to make them reach the state of “self-exile” and forget the fact that their creative transformation is essentially a standardised mass production. The transition of the “enhance” from reality to the realm of representation can thus be explained: it occurs among countless possibilities between reality and the “ideal face”. These possibilities, as a subset of the “ideal face”, are important conditions for enhancing users’ motivation: they encourage them to try out different possibilities more boldly within the “subset”, and strengthen their reliance on transformation tools under the catalyst of “feeling good”. In other words, the “ideal face” has become a distant drifting signifier, for which each user makes its own interpretation.

In essence, the technology behind filters is augmented reality (AR).¹⁰⁷ To expand the options available to users and thus enrich the modified world, TikTok encourages users to try out different filters: they can find popular or recommended filters on the video recording interface, search for specific ones in the filter explore page, get new filters directly from the creators’ account, or try a random filter on the “For You Page” by clicking on the yellow icon indicating the name of the filter. Users can also create new filters with the help of “effect house”, the tool-box launched by the platform itself. With the “step-by-step guides, templates and video tutorials,”¹⁰⁸ users do not have to be professional AR creators to create new filters.

Filters as tools to modify reality are impossible to miss and hard to resist on TikTok. “If there’s one thing that content creators on TikTok love, it’s a good TikTok filter,”¹⁰⁹ users say. The pervasiveness of filters on TikTok serves as a testament that this particular format of AR caters to the needs of both the users and the platform, that is to construct a modified version of the reality: the prerequisite for entry into this world is modification, or the acceptance of the possibility of being modified. To take another “challenge” for example, some users apply

¹⁰⁵ @solanathagreenfairy, <https://www.tiktok.com/@solanathagreenfairy/video/6963657080804773125>

¹⁰⁶ @joannathenurse1, <https://www.tiktok.com/@joannathenurse1/video/7182044129529040171>

¹⁰⁷ Ana Javornik, Ben Marder, Jennifer Brannon Barhorst, Graeme McLean, Yvonne Rogers, Paul Marshall, and Luk Warlop, ““What Lies behind the Filter?” Uncovering the Motivations for Using Augmented Reality (AR) Face Filters on Social Media and Their Effect on Well-being,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 128, (2022): 107126, DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2021.107126

¹⁰⁸ TikTok, “Creativity Lives Here,” last accessed 29 May, 2023, <https://effecthouse.tiktok.com/>.

¹⁰⁹ Distractify, “The Invisible Challenge on TikTok Can (Sort of) Erase Your Body With This Filter,” last modified 17 November, 2022, <https://www.distractify.com/p/invisible-challenge-tiktok>.

the “invisible body filter” to make their bodies vanish. Basically, the filter works as a green screen, where the background colour matches the user’s skin tone. The result is that the user’s body “vanishes” on the screen, or merges with the background. And yes, to be completely “invisible” on the screen, one has to be fully naked. Here, the state of “self-exile” spreads from reality to the realm of representation, where the body becomes a transparent silhouette, a container for the background space, a signifier pointing to the void. This case is particularly interesting because it can be seen as an extreme case of “modification”: the eradication of the body. If the filter is a form of “augmented reality”, then the basis of this “augmentation” lies in the collection and extraction of information from reality. To fulfil this ultimate “modification” or to accept the possibility of one’s complete eradication, users must fully “upload” the information of their bodies to TikTok without reservation. This implies a cruel transactional relationship where, in order to gain greater levels of transformation, one must pay a bigger “cost” by developing a greater sense of trust and dependence on the platform. This example proves that it is not an unfounded claim, as there are many people willing to try it out.

However, what could be almost inevitably problematic is the platform’s abuse and exploitation of the users’ dependence and trust, or their state of “self-exile”. It seems that TikTok is attempting to normalise the state of “self-exile” among users by insidiously promoting and legitimising “modification”. There have been reports that “TikTok changed the shape of some people’s faces without asking.”¹¹⁰ According to TikTok influencer @toridawn817, the automatically applied beauty filter changed the way she looks, “honestly I don’t feel comfortable making videos right now as long as this.”¹¹¹ Although TikTok claims that the bug has only existed for about two days among Android users, this has still caused controversy among some users.¹¹² However, even after the subsiding of this furore, completely erasing filters is still not an easy task on TikTok. For instance, after clicking the “reset” button on the bottom right of the “effect” menu, the “smooth” sub-function will revert to a 30% intensity level by default, which means the user’s skin tone will still be modified if they don’t manually adjust the intensity of the filter to 0%.

¹¹⁰ MIT Technology Review, “TikTok changed the shape of some people’s faces without asking,” last modified 10 June, 2021, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/06/10/1026074/tiktok-mandatory-beauty-filter-bug/>.

¹¹¹ @toridawn817, <https://www.tiktok.com/@toridawn817/video/6967711909000842501>

¹¹² MIT Technology Review, “TikTok changed the shape of some people’s faces without asking”.

A quantitative study shows that on average, people are only able to correctly identify modified images of real-world scenes approximately 60-70% of the time.¹¹³ With the development of new technology, the degree to which users' images are modified will further deepen, and more subtle and detailed modifications will make it increasingly difficult for users to perceive, causing them to be more deeply immersed in the state of "self-exile". The currently popular "bold glamour" filter on TikTok serves as an example to illustrate this phenomenon. Unlike other filters made by normal content creators in the "effect house", "bold glamour" was created by TikTok's official team. While they have not yet acknowledged the use of AI technology in this filter, the timing of its release coincides with the timing of the updates of the newest generation of "effect house" which introduced a set of AI generative toolbox¹¹⁴. What differentiates this filter is how seamlessly the generative effect is matched with the users' faces: they rarely notice distortions when covering their faces with their hands, as is often the case with other filters. According to Luke Hurd, a technology blogger and AR consultant, in conventional filters, the 2D picture of the face is projected onto an exaggerated 3D mesh so the filter can move with the face, whilst for "bold glamour", "it uses machine learning, or a generative adversarial network (GAN) to process the actual output of the camera feed, pixel by pixel"¹¹⁵. Here, we can view the involvement of AI as a significant sign: the "information" collected and analysed by the platform is no longer only the user represented as a flat image, but rather every detail about the user captured by the camera down to the last pixel. The more comprehensive uploading of information has certainly led to a greater degree of "self-exile", which might disrupt the dynamic balance of TikTok centred on "feel good". Many users have claimed this filter to be "very scary"¹¹⁶ (@zoe_george_), or pointed out the filter's problematic by-default preference of the traditional Western beauty standards (@liv_inla¹¹⁷). Despite its major popularity, the discussion generated by this new filter can still be grouped under this theme: the anti-filter trend on social media.

¹¹³ Sophie J. Nightingale, Kimberley A. Wade and Derrick G. Watson, "Can people identify original and manipulated photos of real-world scenes?," *Cogn. Research* 2, no. 30 (2017), DOI: 10.1186/s41235-017-0067-2.

¹¹⁴ TikTok, "Effect House 2.0.0," last modified 22 February, 2023
<https://effecthouse.tiktok.com/latest/release-notes-latest/v2-0-0/>.

¹¹⁵ Twitter, @LukeHurd, last modified 01 March, 2023,
<https://twitter.com/LukeHurd/status/1630739080718737408?s=20>.

¹¹⁶ @zoe_george_, https://www.tiktok.com/@zoe_george_/video/7203997248357780737.

¹¹⁷ @liv_inla, https://www.tiktok.com/@liv_inla/video/7205322804575653162.

3.1.3 Back to Basics: Restoring the Self or Deepening the Problem

If we take the “bold glamour” filter as an entering point, we can discover that users’ attitudes towards the modifications brought by TikTok filters are diverse. In other words, the disruption of the state of “balance” centred around the principle of “feel good” is multi-layered and progressive, and can be classified into several types, including the following. Some users have shown a positive attitude towards the changes brought about by filters, and they accept their modified self-image with enthusiasm while being surprised by the outcome: “I look like a completely different person... but why do I like it.”¹¹⁸ Similar to this, there is a group of users who adopt a non-committal attitude towards the effects of filters: they treat it like another new gimmick on the internet, focusing mainly on the surprising effect of the before-and-after contrast. For example, @lvaroo_gl showcased how well the filter works on her classmates of different genders and races.¹¹⁹ By contrast, some users have explicitly pointed out the problematic issues with such filters and raised questions and criticisms. “This filter only looks good on people who start on with traditionally soft feminine face,”¹²⁰ and it “messes with people’s body-dysmorphia, their self-esteem,”¹²¹ and the filter is “such catfish.”¹²² Furthermore, it is noteworthy that this filter has played a role in encouraging user actions: after seeing the differences after the transformation, users were inspired to modify their real faces to match the idealised beautified image. “This is about to make me dye my eyebrows,” says @gaylorjphillips after seeing how this filter darkens his brows; since the filter is better at locating the contour and highlight of the face, make-up artists like @mikaylanogueira and @kellystrackofficia¹²³ even make tutorials to teach people how to use actual cosmetic skills to look like your “bold-glamoured self”.

The miscellaneous reactions and opinions of users reveal the challenges and volatility of the translation from reality to the representational world. Therefore, how to deal with this volatility, or what can be concluded from the diversity of user behaviour, is an area that both the scholars and the platform need to pay attention to. The cultural significance of the relationship between the filter and the user, as exemplified by the above cases, finds its counterparts in most of the previous studies. For example, the psychological impact of the

¹¹⁸ @chiaraking, www.tiktok.com/@chiaraking/video/7206735944983121158.

¹¹⁹ @lvaroo_gl, www.tiktok.com/@alvaroo_gl/video/7208544399054114054.

¹²⁰ @liv_inla, https://www.tiktok.com/@liv_inla/video/7205322804575653162.

¹²¹ @shoelover99, <https://www.tiktok.com/@shoelover99/video/7204571614158130475>.

¹²² @aaliyahangelicah, <https://www.tiktok.com/@aaliyahangelicah/video/7204224324943891754>.

¹²³ @mikaylanogueira, <https://www.tiktok.com/@mikaylanogueira/video/7205261938262117678>;
@kellystrackofficia, <https://www.tiktok.com/@kellystrackofficial/video/7204269353666202922>.

filter on the user's self-confidence and self-perception,¹²⁴ how the virtual image created by the filter misleads the user into modifying their actual body, or "digitised dysmorphia,"¹²⁵ its active role in the artistic self-expression,¹²⁶ and so on. However, these studies typically focus on the impact of the modified image on the subject itself, often overlooking the honest representation of the users' face that exists as "the shadow of the modified image" on the screen, or conflating "the authentic projection of the face" on the screen with "the objective existence of the real face". It is important to note that this so-called "impact" is achieved through the act of "comparison", which is the most visually striking at the moment when the filter is turned off, that is, the moment when the "screen as a modifier" switches to the "screen as a mirror". At this moment, the "modified image of the face" and the "authentic projection of the face on the screen" obtain an equivalent status, as both are part of the representation realm. And as for the real self, which exists in reality, is viewing and evaluating both as an audience. That is to say, the "authentic projection of the face," which theoretically would be infinitely close to reality, also has an impact on the user as the subject. The factors that disrupt the "dynamic balance" are not only generated by the filter (and the modified image of course) but also by the image of reality.

The equivalent status as counterparts in the representation realm between the "modified image" and the "image as an authentic projection" is vividly demonstrated in the "anti-filter movement" on TikTok. The pervasiveness of filters on social media has had varying degrees of psychological and physiological effects on users. As a dialectical countermeasure to the ubiquitous filters and the proliferation of modified images, the #filtersareunhealthy challenge trending on TikTok seeks to resist and change all this, and some users are refusing to use filters and presenting themselves on screen in an unretouched condition. This challenge is accompanied by Twenty One Pilots' song *Tear in My Heart*. Users first show themselves in heavy beauty filters. Then as the lyrics go from "The songs on the radio are okay" to "but my taste in music is your face," users take the cue from the music and switch the filters off to show their actual faces. The users' performance, i.e. the facial expressions and movements, play a crucial role in this challenge: in the first part with filters on the face, they tend to

¹²⁴ Nita Diah Palupi, Andiwi Meifilina, Nofa Harumike and Yefi Dyan, "The effect of using TikTok applications on self-confidence levels. Study by Communication Science Students of Balitar Islamic University, Class of 2016-2020," *JOSAR (Journal of Students Academic Research)* 5, no. 2 (2020): 66-74, DOI: 10.35457/josar.v5i2.1151.

¹²⁵ Chelly Maes and Orpha De Lenne, "Filters and fillers: Belgian adolescents' filter use on social media and the acceptance of cosmetic surgery," *Journal of Children and Media* 16, no. 4 (2022): 587-605, DOI: 10.1080/17482798.2022.2079696.

¹²⁶ L. A Miller and Joanna McIntyre, "From surgery to Cyborgs: a thematic analysis of popular media commentary on Instagram filters," *Feminist Media Studies*, (2022), DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2022.2129414.

appear rather aloof and even indifferent; however, in the latter half, as the drumbeat of the music intensified and guitar sweeps were added, they clearly appeared happier and more positive, and in doing so, showed their pride and confidence in their natural appearance. Therefore, we can infer that the purpose of these videos is manifested in the comparison between the “before” and “after” segments, and is more explicitly expressed through the performance in the latter half. Here, the image as the authentic projection of the face on screen plays a decisive role in the semantics of the video, where the attitude and emotions displayed by users through their performance play a partially assisting role in the semantic completion of the video. However, it is precisely because emotions are so closely tied to the subject that we often conflate the *image* of the real face with the subject’s *face* itself. Here, we need to shift our focus from “reality” to the “realness of the image”. In this challenge, the realness of the image triumphs over the falseness/artificiality of the image, both of which are essentially subsets of the “image”. In other words, the significance of this challenge lies in its catering to the user’s advocacy of the realness of the *image*, or the realness of representation, which does not necessarily equate to the *reality* itself.

The reason why the nature of the authentic projection of the face as an “image” is emphasised is that, for a broad audience or for the TikTok platform itself, the isolated relationship between modified images and the reality/random users is difficult to control and inconsequential. What is truly important is whether users are willing to participate and upload their own images as valuable information and thus enter the realm of representation. The belief in the superiority of the authentic face image over the modified face image conveyed by the #filtersareunhealthy challenge is a necessary condition for ensuring user engagement. As shown from the fact, the response of users to this challenge has been positive, and they are more than willing to seamlessly integrate their real face into the representational realm created by TikTok. Users tend to “love this trend,”¹²⁷ and claim it to be the “most healthy trend ever.”¹²⁸ Almost 300 thousand videos have been posted under this challenge, and it has exceeded 2 million viewings in total.¹²⁹

However, if we examine the anti-filter movement from the perspective of the representational nature of the unfiltered face images, we find it still fraught with problems. Skimming through the videos under this theme, you will get a wall of thumbnail images of the videos using the

¹²⁷ @lianajadee, <https://www.tiktok.com/@lianajadee/video/7081313404438252805>.

¹²⁸ @anja.lary, <https://www.tiktok.com/@anja.lary/video/7082394164465356038>.

¹²⁹ TikTok, “#filtersareunhealthy”, last accessed 29 May, 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/tag/filtersareunhealthy?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc.

filtered image, instead of the image of their real face, as the cover, or the first frame of the video, which serves as a symbolic expression of the latent importance of the filters in the anti-filter movement: perhaps the conventional standards of beauty still exist within this seemingly progressive movement. Click on the comments section of each video and you will find that the majority of users have praised the videos, for example, “You look so pretty with and without make-up,”¹³⁰ or “I like you better without (the filter).”¹³¹ There are two possible interpretations of these positive comments: either user readily accept the authentic image of the TikTokers in the representation realm, or alternatively, these TikToker are indeed “pretty” and that the traditional standard of beauty still holds true in their cases, even when the filters removed. Without speculating otherwise, we can notice that the viral videos with the higher number of likes are most likely posted by users who look beautiful even without filters. With comments like “nothing change still gorgeous,”¹³² or “either way you're absolutely stunning,”¹³³ the gap between the modified image of the face and the image of the real face seems significantly bridged. Therefore, for ordinary users/audiences, the difference between the TikTokers’ filter-modified faces and the image of their actual faces is not dramatically huge, as they both belong to the realm of visually pleasing images. Thus, users are receiving such implications that the real images are highly valued. The pursuit of uploading their bare-faced photos and participating in the anti-filter movement is not just about the drastic contrast before and after the filter, but rather the celebration of the authentic image. Normally, TikTok’s “transformation videos” involve a transition from the real, everyday state to an enhanced/modified state, a visual “spectacle”. However, the anti-filter challenge works in the opposite direction, as it refers to the “restoration” from the state of modification to an original, unfiltered state, where the “authentic projection of reality” becomes the “spectacle” that surprises viewers. Thus, the function of the before-and-after-shots is transformed from a “comparison” between reality and spectacle into a “transition” between one spectacle into another. That is to say, here the platform’s undifferentiated acceptance of reality and its direct absorption of real-world information become part of the content in circulation. The anti-filter challenge can be seen as an example of TikTok expanding the boundaries of the realm of representation: without the need for modification, users are encouraged to directly upload their real faces to the platform. Especially in short videos that focus on the face, this may further deepen the degree of users’ self-exile, which evolves from the self in the

¹³⁰ @charlidamelio, <https://www.tiktok.com/@charlidamelio/video/7080979567103479083>.

¹³¹ @fishermanlarry47, <https://www.tiktok.com/@fishermanlarry47/video/7080220646776622378>.

¹³² @sky.felts, <https://www.tiktok.com/@sky.felts/video/7081135815144820014>.

¹³³ @meredithdubury, <https://www.tiktok.com/@meredithdubury/video/7082740391417629994>.

representation realm being superior to the self in reality to the real self being directly incorporated into the image world. TikTok has strengthened the viewpoint that reality itself can also serve as an image, which can lead to the users' submitting their information to a greater extent.

In the comment section, we can also see users sharing opinions like “The trend is healthy if you're naturally pretty,”¹³⁴ “If I have clear skin like yours, I'd totally quit concealer and foundation,”¹³⁵ and so on. That is to say, some users are aware that the so-called anti-filter movement, while freeing users from the burden of filters, might actually reinforce traditional standards of beauty and place the user under the same pressure and constraints as applying filters. This also serves as an example that the notion of “the realness of the image” does not necessarily correspond to reality. On TikTok, “image” itself always holds greater significance as it enriches the platform's content library and trains users to engage in a more complete submission of themselves.

In summary, in this section, we primarily discussed the three states in which users' faces are presented on TikTok, namely the “enhanced” faces, “modified” faces, and “restored” faces. The corresponding issues are the continuous expansion of the platform's representation realm, and the increasing deepening of users' “self-exile”. Throughout these three phases, we can observe a fundamental paradox, the “dual processuality”, within the TikTok platform, which encourages users to create content “freely”, while at the same time attempting to control their behaviour and collect information in various ways. In the next section, we will discuss how the “control” is implemented.

3.2 Faces Gazed Upon: From Disciplining to Habituation

This section will examine the proliferation of deepfake content on TikTok as a case study, revealing a new stage of “self-exile”, the “replacement” of the self (3.2.1). This process fundamentally involves a reciprocal exchange of eyesight, whereby the platform's “gaze” upon users functions as a mechanism of power (3.2.2), disciplining users into becoming “docile bodies” (3.2.3). However, TikTok's “deception mechanism” allows users to internalise this condition of being disciplined and thus interact more actively with the platform (3.2.4).

¹³⁴ @lianajadee, <https://www.tiktok.com/@lianajadee/video/7081313404438252805>

¹³⁵ @emeliaslepp, <https://www.tiktok.com/@emeliaslepp/video/7080197968615296262>

3.2.1 When “Self-Exile” Reaches Its New Height

Not satisfied with TikTok being merely a platform for “self-expression”, users have started to spice up their performance by completely transforming themselves into another person with the assistance of deepfake technology. “Deepfake”, the combination of “deep learning” and “fake”, is an “AI-based technology for synthesizing images of (at least) two individuals to create fake composites that appear to be authentic.”¹³⁶ Increasingly, it is being democratised with “intuitive interfaces and off-device processing that do not require special skills,”¹³⁷ which leads to the popularising of deepfake applications, websites and other software services such as REFACE, Deepfakes web, and DeepFaceLab. That is to say, deepfake videos are becoming increasingly accessible to normal users, even though the technology required to make them is sophisticated, and the corresponding laws and detection methods are lagging behind. Moreover, since there is no obstacle to selecting videos from the local smartphone gallery and uploading them to create TikTok videos,¹³⁸ deepfake videos have rightfully flooded TikTok, one of the most popular distribution centres for short videos. “TikTok is now host to a steady stream of deepfake videos.”¹³⁹ By superimposing facial features onto the faces in different scenarios, usually celebrities, users can act in various roles, and try out distinctive lifestyles in the videos. However, it is conceivable that the widespread dissemination of videos modified by deepfake technology will inevitably lead to some problems. People started to worry that “TikTok is the new home for manipulated video and photos” since the deepfake images of politicians have become a hot topic of misleading information on the platform.¹⁴⁰ But this trend seems inevitable: as synthetic media expert Henry Ajder said, “This kind of manipulation is only becoming more pervasive. When this volume of content can be created so quickly and at such scale, it completely changes the landscape.”¹⁴¹ Although TikTok has put in place policies to address the many pitfalls associated with deepfake, for example, “synthetic or manipulated media that shows realistic

¹³⁶ Mika Westerlund, “The Emergence of Deepfake Technology: A Review,” *Technology Innovation Management Review*, no.9 (2019): 39.

¹³⁷ Wired, “Deepfake Apps Are Here and We Can’t Let Them Run Amok,” last modified 30 March, 2021, <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/deepfakes-security>.

¹³⁸ TikTok, “Creating your first video,” last accessed 22 Mar, 2023, <https://support.tiktok.com/en/getting-started/creating-your-first-video>.

¹³⁹ The Conversation, “Celebrity deepfakes are all over TikTok. Here’s why they’re becoming common – and how you can spot them,” last modified 18 July, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/celebrity-deepfakes-are-all-over-tiktok-heres-why-theyre-becoming-common-and-how-you-can-spot-them-187079>.

¹⁴⁰ The New York Times, “Worries Grow That TikTok Is New Home for Manipulated Video and Photos,” last modified 04 November, 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/11/04/technology/tiktok-deepfakes-disinformation.html.

¹⁴¹ The New York Times, “Worries Grow That TikTok Is New Home for Manipulated Video and Photos”.

scenes must be clearly disclosed” through stickers and captions, and “synthetic media that contains the likeness of any real private figure” should be banned; deepfake content of public figures in certain contexts is still allowed, as long as “the content is not used for endorsements or violates any other policy.”¹⁴²

Take a look at the @deptomcruise, a TikTok account dedicated to making deepfake videos impersonating Tom Cruise, we will find out how deepfake is merging reality and virtuality seamlessly through TikTok. Tom Cruise is “A-list, but can he flush a golf ball or play guitar or speak Spanish or Japanese or perform magic?”¹⁴³ Driven by curiosity, Miles Fisher, the face behind the synthetic Tom Cruise, created this account and brought this Hollywood celebrity into everyday scenarios: licking lollipops, playing pranks and participating in viral challenges just like any other normal TikToker, and it has accumulated more than five million followers. The reason why deepfake videos are fascinating is that they combine virtual spectacle (the AI-generated faces) with the reality of everyday life, and the “container” or “grafting point” of this fictitious combination is the synthesised face. However, the source of the face can be factual, so to some extent, it is also “real”, similar to the idea of the “realness of the image” mentioned earlier. At the same time, the performer’s voice, body, actions, and surrounding space in the video are also part of the reality. That is to say, the fictionality of deepfake videos exists in the collision of the “realness of the image”. In some cases, the “cracks” caused by this collision are not completely glossed over by the AI, and we can see the goofs at the “grafting point” of the two images.¹⁴⁴ If the “self-exile” discussed above revolves around the user’s “modified face”, that is, the “realness of the image” might approximate the individual’s physical being at a certain moment. However, for deepfake per se, the user’s face has been completely replaced. While this replacement still refers to a distanced reality, the “realness of the image” now infinitely approximates to another reality, which represents a complete replacement of the original signifier (the image of the user’s face) by an alternative signifier (the AI-generated face). This marks a new stage of “self-exile”, in which the signifier of self has evolved from “being modified” to “being replaced”. More importantly, the “replacement” is based on the “realness of the image” and therefore has the potential to cause further confusion between reality and representation.

¹⁴² TikTok, “Integrity and Authenticity,” last accessed 29 May, 2023,

<https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/integrity-authenticity/?cgversion=2023#3>.

¹⁴³ The Hollywood Reporter, “How I Became the Fake Tom Cruise,” last modified 21 July, 2022,

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/digital/deepfake-tom-cruise-miles-fisher-1235182932/>.

¹⁴⁴ MIT Media Lab, “Detect DeepFakes: How to counteract misinformation created by AI,” last accessed 20 March, 2023, <https://www.media.mit.edu/projects/detect-fakes/overview/>.

When users can freely “borrow” someone else’s face to perform in their videos, it seems that their creativity and freedom have increased, but this is no different from opening “the Pandora’s box”: if users previously had to accept the possibility of being modified to enter the TikTok platform, with the intervention of AI represented by deepfake, they now have to accept the possibility of being infinitely replaced.

The popularity of deepfake videos on the TikTok platform is a reflection of the fact that users are not satisfied with the creative transformation of themselves in the representation realm, they have been constantly looking for new possibilities to devote themselves to online performance. However, if we continue to view these phenomena through the lens of “double processuality”, we will discover that users are still latently obedient to, constrained, and even disciplined by the platform itself, no matter if it is during the process of modification, or (especially) with the assistance/intervention of AI.

3.2.2 Identifying the Hidden Gaze¹⁴⁵

On TikTok, the platform overwhelmingly dominated by images, the “self-exile” of users is accomplished through the act of “looking”: through gazing at and identifying with the images displayed on the screen, users are constantly adjusting their way of being between reality and the realm of representation. There should be a salient action of “gazing” upon the screen conducted by users looking at the AI-generated image in front of them. Users actively engage in the act of looking at the platform-generated image displayed on the screen, which is significant since it fosters a deeper level of interaction between users and the technology, allowing them to comprehend and respond to the information/the image of themselves presented. However, to quote Jean-Paul Sartre, there is “the permanent possibility that a subject who sees me may be substituted for the object seen by me. Being-seen-by-the-Other is the truth of seeing-the-other.”¹⁴⁶ It is imperative to note that in this context, there must be a reciprocal gaze between the user and the platform. While the users act as the “subject” gazing at the image on the screen, the screen, in turn, serves as an equivalent “subject” imposing its gaze onto the users (but here as an “object”). This mutual gaze creates the possibility for the screen to exert a modifying effect on the user’s being through the imposition of the “gaze”. The intermediate force of “the look” (*le regard*) thus becomes a crucial element in the

¹⁴⁵ part of 3.2.2, 3.2.3, and 3.2.4 is inspired by my unpublished course essay: Zhiyuan Hu, “AI as Gaze: The User-AI Relationship on Deepfake App”.

¹⁴⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), 257.

user-platform relationship. In his pioneering work, Sartre emphasised the relationship between the self and the other, “being fixed or objectified in the gaze of another indicates that one is in the presence of a subjective, conscious being.”¹⁴⁷ For TikTok per se, Sartre’s philosophical perspective offers a fresh lens to comprehend the dynamics between the platform and its users: by considering the screen as the mediator, we can suggest that users may be subject to the gaze of a “subjective, conscious being” in Sartre’s sense. However, the identity of this being remains ambiguous, prompting further investigation into the nature of this “gaze” and its effects on user behaviour.

To quote Erving Goffman, the everyday presentation of the self is “that the individual offers his performance and puts on his show for the benefit of other people.”¹⁴⁸ which resonates with Sartre’s emphasis on “the other’s” effect on the subject. In the case of traditional social media platforms, the online representation of users is often deemed as the “frontstage” of their performance, just like how performance needs an audience. Consequently, it is common for users to perceive other users as their “audience”, which is reinforced by the “proofs” present on these platforms, such as the “likes” on Instagram or the comments on Twitter, and it signifies the user’s image being gazed at as an “object” by other users as “subjects”. However, since “the frontstage behaviour language can be taken as the absence (and in some sense the opposite) of this (backstage language),”¹⁴⁹ which means that the cognitive process of users’ perception of others on social media is shaped by the information provided in their online representation. When users assume the role of an actor in the representation realm or “frontstage” of social media, the identity they choose to project may not necessarily reflect their true subjectivity. Nonetheless, this projected identity significantly influences how other users perceive them as an object. Goffman’s original framework not only retains its applicability, but also possesses significant utility as an explanatory framework in comprehending the construction of identity and the presentation of self within the online realm through interactions. Combining the theoretical takes of Goffman and Sartre, it is possible to infer that the “subject” responsible for the gaze and the objectification of users on social platforms should have been the online audiences. As such, the online representation or “frontstage persona” of users is subject to constant observation and modification by others, and vice versa. The use of TikTok to generate videos that modify or replace oneself is also a

¹⁴⁷ George J. Stack and Robert W. Plant, “The Phenomenon of The Look,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 42, no. 3 (1982): 369, DOI: 10.2307/2107492.

¹⁴⁸ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 17.

¹⁴⁹ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 128.

form of self-representation and performance. However, it remains unclear whether the gaze mechanism that operates in conventional social media platforms is still applicable to the context of TikTok, which involves the intervention of artificial intelligence.

By analysing TikTok's UI design, we may be able to explain the gaze mechanism on this platform. Once new users have registered and entered the application, they are greeted with a video interface named under "For You". As the "central feature of the TikTok platform," the "For You Page offers streams of videos that are curated to the users' specific interests, making it convenient to find videos and creators they love."¹⁵⁰ And with the AI-powered recommendation system, the more users use TikTok, the better the "For You" feed becomes at curating videos that cater to various personal interests. Upon opening the TikTok application, users are directed to the default interface, the "For You Page", which is the primary landing page for all users. While users can also choose to follow their preferred content producers on TikTok, the platform operates differently from conventional social media in that users must manually switch to the "Following" interface to access the video streams of those they have followed. As such, the "Following" function is relegated to a subordinate option and marginalised in the platform design. That is to say, the AI-recommended content and the content that users have personally chosen to see are separated, with the former being the preferred option by the application. In other words, as opposed to traditional social media, TikTok is "algorithmic media", central to which is "the typically algorithmically driven search, recommendation, and content aggregation systems"¹⁵¹ to facilitate the production, distribution and consumption of the information abundance. This marks a seismic change that TikTok mainly thrives on content creation and exploration which is heavily dependent on algorithms, instead of users "socialising" with each other as their audience, like what they normally do with traditional social media. That said, the algorithm decides who your audiences are, or if the "performer" will have an audience at all.

On TikTok, the viewing figures are like a lottery: there are huge discrepancies between different videos. A single video's view count cannot be guaranteed regardless of how many followers an account has. Especially for the unestablished normal users, there usually have confusion such as "Why do some of my TikToks (all very similar) get 500 views and others

¹⁵⁰ TikTok, "What is the 'For You' feed?," last accessed 27 May, 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/creators/creator-portal/en-us/how-tiktok-works/whats-the-for-you-page-and-how-do-i-get-there/>.

¹⁵¹ Philip M. Napoli, "Automated Media: An Institutional Theory Perspective on Algorithmic Media Production and Consumption," *Communication Theory* 24, no. 3 (2014): 345, DOI: 10.1111/comt.12039.

get 5 views.”¹⁵² As a result, the “audience” in the traditional sense has disintegrated here, and the relationship between the performer and the audience becomes random and tenuous. “Different from other networked publics such as Facebook or Instagram, however, TikTok’s architecture actively downplays interpersonal connection.”¹⁵³ Even though the users are fully aware of their role as a “performer” and their state of being looked at, they have limited control or assurance of who they are performing to, and how their performance is going to be received. However, the opposite of the elusivity of the audience (viewing figures) is the “predictability” of the algorithm. Since video viewings are determined by the algorithm, there are certain rules users can follow to “win over” the favour of the algorithm. We can easily find plenty of articles online trying to break down strategies for users to cater to the algorithm to get more views on TikTok, including but not limited to “always add hashtags,” “keep it short and sweet,” “use trending sound effects” and “upload multiple videos a day.”¹⁵⁴ TikTok has also published its official guide to “how to grow your audience.”¹⁵⁵ While not as detailed as the result of a decryption game, it still offers similar suggestions that can provide additional exposure to the potential audience. From this, it can be inferred that user-generated content on TikTok undergoes algorithmic scrutiny before it can be viewed by audiences. Therefore, video production must align with algorithmic preferences to be visible to audiences. In essence, users are performing for the algorithm first and foremost, rather than for potential audiences. This is because, after all, without algorithms, there would be no audience on the platform.

To conclude, by marginalising its social network attributes, TikTok highlights the important role of the algorithm as the intermediary between users/performers and users/audience. Therefore, TikTok eliminated, or at least softened the direct gaze of the other users/audiences, a concept so prevalently accepted in other online self-performances. Additionally, with the decisive role of the algorithm, the mass of users are now taking an active part in adapting to the algorithm’s preferences in the process of content production. Therefore, the concept of “audience” has undergone a transformation, as it is no longer a direct recipient of the performer’s work, but rather a “target” that has been processed and categorised by the

¹⁵² Quora, “Why do some of my TikToks (all very similar) get 500 views and others get 5 views?,” last accessed 28 May, 2023, <https://qr.ae/pr6U5K>.

¹⁵³ Tom De Leyn, Ralf De Wolf, Mariëk Vanden Abeele and Lieven De Marez, “In-between child’s play and teenage pop culture: tweens, TikTok & privacy,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 25, no.8 (2022): 1110, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2021.1939286.

¹⁵⁴ Hootsuite, “How to Get More Views on TikTok,” last modified 14 September, 2022, <https://blog.hootsuite.com/how-to-get-more-views-on-tiktok/>.

¹⁵⁵ TikTok, “How to grow your audience,” last accessed 28 May, 2023, <https://support.tiktok.com/en/using-tiktok/growing-your-audience/how-to-grow-your-audience>.

algorithm: essentially, it is a “second-hand audience,” as the algorithm views the content on the platform in a first-pass evaluation, or, the algorithm is the “first-hand audience”. In the absence of a traditional concept of “audience” with a physical presence, the gaze mechanism between users and TikTok appears starkly straightforward. The conversion loop of the gaze, or the objectification of the subject, is completed by the human being and the algorithm - part of the AI machine learning mechanism of TikTok—behind the screen.

3.2.3 Visibility Is Power: The Disciplining of the User Behaviour

After discussing the potential gaze imposed by the TikTok platform on its users, we will return to the theme of “face” in this chapter and use it as an example to demonstrate the disciplinary effect of the platform’s gaze mechanism on its users. Additionally, it is worth noting that since algorithms are the cornerstone of machine learning and artificial intelligence, and machine learning is a part of artificial intelligence, in order to avoid unnecessary confusion when discussing TikTok per se, I will include these “subsets” under the broader category of AI for clarification purposes. After all, AI is the main driving force behind the operation of TikTok, and detailed differentiation among them is not the main purpose of this article.

There are quite many filters on TikTok that claim to use artificial intelligence to transform the look of the users: Bold Glamour, Teenage Filter, AI Manga, and AI Portrait, to name a few. Although for unspecified reasons, a “representative from TikTok wouldn’t disclose how the effect works,”¹⁵⁶ we can still explore how TikTok gazes at its users through the effects creation tool, Effect House, officially launched by the platform. In Effect House, we can see how the AI-powered filters operate based on the analysis of human faces. The foundation of a face effect, no matter a 2D face effect or a 3D dynamic face effect, is always by beginning with creating a “face object”, which is an automatically generated mesh structure. Shaped like a face, this reticulation contains editable templates for the eyes, brows, eyelashes, lips, hair, and the whole face, upon which the users can create morph effects, stretch, inset, liquify, apply make-up, and so on.¹⁵⁷ This is a “universal face” endowed with the common characteristics of human facial features, which does not refer to anyone in particular but has the potential to become anyone.

¹⁵⁶ Gizmodo, “TikTok’s ‘Bold Glamour’ and ‘Teenage Look’ Filters Are Terrifying Its Audience,” last modified 3 March, 2023, <https://gizmodo.com/tiktok-filters-bold-glamour-teenage-look-1850183380>.

¹⁵⁷ TikTok, “Effect Creation Workflow,” last accessed 29 May, 2023, <https://effecthouse.tiktok.com/learn/getting-started-guides/effect-creation-101/>.

To rationalise AI as the gaze, we need to find evidence that the user/subject is seen by AI, or the subject is “to be conscious of being looked at”¹⁵⁸ by AI. For TikTok, the key approach of looking at, objectifying, and transforming the faces of the users is to extract their face embeddings with the help of the AI-process of Effect House. That is, the facial image information the user uploads are automatically transformed into an encrypted set of data called “face embeddings” which are manifested as a figurative “mesh” of facial structures, linked by numerous embedding dots that can move with facial expressions, and are unique for each face. AI processed and analysed a variety of different face pictures, isolating identifiable facial features and integrating them within the editable “face object”. Through the analysis and extraction of these distinct features, AI seeks to articulate the proportions and relations that express a face as a unique individual likeness, or identify facial “commonalities”, the underlying “model” shared among human beings. It is through this understanding that the alteration of facial appearances, the fusion of one’s unique face with another, and the creation of a novel hybrid virtual face become achievable.

This rather “anatomique” analysis and reprocessing of facial data on TikTok resonates with Michel Foucault’s concept of the “clinical gaze”. During the study of autonomy, he discovered the principle of “isomorphism” that characterises the body, “On the basis of tissues alone, nature works with extremely simple materials. They are the elements of the organs, but they traverse them, relate them together, and constitute vast *systems* above them in which the human body finds the concrete forms of its *unity*.”¹⁵⁹ Here, under the AI gaze, the “face object” extracted by AI is the Foucauldian “*system*”, by disassembling the facial images that the users uploaded into calculus elements to match with the embedding dots on the “face object”, the “*unity*” in the body will eventually facilitate the “traversing and relating” of these digitised facial features—for TikTok, the process is called “the embedding of facial image”: to project the “individual face” onto the common “face object”. Moreover, the Foucauldian gaze is also “analytic”: it “restores the genesis of composition,”¹⁶⁰ which means it can reproduce in its own operation. Likewise, the embedding system of the “face object” is inherently generative, as it has the ability to replicate facial features, movements, and capture the emotions portrayed by users’ faces, subsequently integrating them into the newly generated facial composition. Here, the gaze goes “vertically from the symptomatic surface to

¹⁵⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, 258.

¹⁵⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (London: Routledge, 2003), 158.

¹⁶⁰ Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 134.

the tissual surface; in depth, plunging from the manifest to the hidden.”¹⁶¹ It revealed the answer to how users are gazed at: we are gazed at by AI as a calculus and generative “model”, and an accumulative common system of body features. Under AI gaze, all users are reduced to images or objects of sight, and the diversity of the faces is incorporated to justify the universality of the “unity”/“system”.

According to Foucault, gaze represents “an absolute epistemological privilege.”¹⁶² In this context, power and knowledge are interdependent, contributing to the unequal relationship between the “doctor” and the “patient,” where the latter is objectified and subjected to the former’s power to observe and objectify through their knowledge and expertise. Foucault even employed the phrase “the unimpeded empire of the gaze”¹⁶³ to convey the authority of the clinical gaze, emphasising the pervasive influence of power conveyed by the act of gazing. Similarly, when users are subjected to the analysis, formulation, and re-generation under the gaze of AI, they also undergo a process of discipline, despite the power dynamics remaining implicit.

A good example is the filter “AI Portrait”--creating an AI-generated image begins with “information gathering”, and it is here that the AI gaze begins to impose its power. In the middle of the screen is an oval circle with the following instruction: centre your face to get an AI portrait. If the user moves too much, the filter will remind them to “stay still”. At last, when the user has fully complied with the filter’s instructions, the oval circle will turn green to indicate that the image uploaded by the user has been approved by the platform and is ready for the next step of image generation. Skimming through the videos under this filter, we will have an idea of what kind of faces are appreciated by the gaze of AI: from shoulders up, in front of a simple background, lightened up by plain light, a full face with no coverage, make-up, nor dramatic facial expressions. That is to say, to gain admission to the AI-dominated realm and be effectively perceived by AI, users must initially conform to certain rules, with the primary principle being the maximum “recognisability.” The principle necessitates a certain level of rationality and normalcy for recognition, as evidenced by the aforementioned requirements such as excluding excessive emotional expression, unnecessary disguise, and environmental distractions, all of which embody a form of “strangeness.” So the users are “obliged to objectify themselves in the eyes of reason as the ‘perfect stranger’, that

¹⁶¹ Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 167.

¹⁶² Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 159.

¹⁶³ Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 47.

is, as the man whose strangeness does not reveal itself.”¹⁶⁴ Under AI’s gaze, any form of self-decoration or the expression of emotion is redundant and may be perceived as abnormal or strange. Users must present the utmost authenticity of their facial features, striving to reveal their original selves as closely as possible. This unadorned and unaltered face becomes a “stranger” in contrast to Goffman’s notion of the “frontstage persona,” which traditionally characterises online self-presentation. Therefore, for AI, users transform themselves into a “perfect stranger,” an anonymous face, relinquishing their customary uniqueness as “frontstage performers” in order to avail themselves a better chance of further objectification, as “the city of reason welcomes him only with this qualification and at the price of this surrender to anonymity.”¹⁶⁵ While originally addressing the relationship between the madmen and the asylum, these quotes here from Foucault serve to highlight the power exerted by a structured unity over an undisciplined individual, as well as exemplifying the aforementioned concept of “dual processuality”: the establishment of the new frontstage persona (AI-generated hybridity) is made possible by the complete exposure of the disciplined version of backstage-self (the user). It is important to note that the term “exposure” in this context denotes the condition of being subjected to the scrutinising gaze of AI.

However, what happens if users refuse to acknowledge the platform’s gaze or defy the disciplinary constraints imposed by AI? For instance, what if users make exaggerated grimaces while the platform is collecting facial data, or upload images with obscured facial features? In such cases, the resistance may cause a malfunction in the AI’s analytic mechanism, resulting in the production of failed generative content. For example, “Please do this AI filter with weird faces!”¹⁶⁶ as @earthly35 makes dramatic facial expressions while the platform collects her image, she laughs at how her exaggeratedly distorted face is placed by the AI in strange scenarios, such as a warrior with crossed-eye, or a medieval nun with the tongue out. As for user @mattfromthatthing,¹⁶⁷ due to the disruption of his cluttered background space, the AI was unable to accurately process the user’s facial information, which in turn generated an image of a figure with three arms. In these creatures of Frankenstein’s flopped experiments, users can still see a piece of their original selves, but in a confusing way: a face with glitches and gruesome characteristics. It is a “stillbirth” of objectification, a “goof” on a frontstage scene, or a Foucauldian “madman” struggling to

¹⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (New York: Random House, 1988), 249.

¹⁶⁵ Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 250.

¹⁶⁶ @earthly35, <https://www.tiktok.com/@earthly35/video/7187163163064831274>.

¹⁶⁷ @mattfromthatthing, <www.tiktok.com/@mattfromthatthing/video/7185337527488892203>.

escape the asylum. To reiterate Sartre's assertion, "being-seen-by-the-other is the truth of seeing-the-other."¹⁶⁸ Taking this notion a step further, it becomes evident that one's perception of others can potentially impact how one is perceived by others. Thus, the failed image serves as an exemplification of AI's gaze upon the user as an unidentifiable object, representing a form of retribution in response to the user's non-compliance.

"Power relations have an immediate hold upon body; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs."¹⁶⁹ Even though TikTok is not as brutal and extreme in comparison to Foucault's surveillance system, AI continues to impose discipline on the body while continuously shaping the subject into a specific form. As stated by Foucault, "Disciplinary training is distinctive first because it operates not by direct control of the body as a whole but by detailed control of specific parts of the body."¹⁷⁰ This parallels the way in which the TikTok platform instructs its users to "centre your face" and "remain still", fragmenting the process of rendering users visible to AI into a series of precise steps. The outcome of such disciplinary measures is the production of "docile bodies", bodies that not only comply with instructions but also execute them in the exact requested manner.¹⁷¹ For TikTok per se, "do what they were told" is to submit the facial information and data, a mere procedural action; while "do it in the wanted way" is to submit an AI-approved facial image, which is a disciplined action with the self-conscious of being gazed at, and the more comprehensive and clear information the submission contains, the better.

Additionally, the diversity of users on TikTok is another example of AI acting as a gaze. Power produces a "docile body", and a "docile body" generates visual pleasure. Here we can draw inspiration from art history. To quote the famous John Berger again, "Painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women."¹⁷² This observation remains applicable in other mainstream visual media like films, where "the erotic is coded into the language of the dominant patriarchal order."¹⁷³ In these cases, women are subject to the "male gaze": "she turns herself into an object--and most particularly an object of vision, a sight," so "men act and women appear."¹⁷⁴ While for TikTok, the idea of

¹⁶⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, 257.

¹⁶⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Random House, 1978), 25.

¹⁷⁰ Gary Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 81.

¹⁷¹ Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction*, 82.

¹⁷² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 63.

¹⁷³ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York: Palgrave, 1989), 16.

¹⁷⁴ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 47.

the objects who “appear” has been generalised to the maximum. However, according to TikTok’s user policy, anyone (13 years of age or older¹⁷⁵) can get full access to TikTok, and willingly appear as a “sight” by submitting facial images, then turn oneself into a visual spectacle. The “object” here can be replaced by any users, not merely the “submissive” or “passive” ones in the conventional sense (such as women, or other minority groups). To put it another way, all users are undifferentiatedly analysed by and subject to the AI gaze (or, all users are equally disadvantaged and passive in front of AI). Due to the alteration of power relations, in TikTok’s case per se, “AI act and users appear”. A more detailed discussion on the concept of “user generalisation” will be provided in the following chapter.

In conclusion, TikTok, as an AI-powered platform, can be seen as “the free field” for the AI gaze, where “the formation of an accurate, exhaustive, permanent corpus of knowledge about”¹⁷⁶ its users’ faces are made apparent. The gaze represents “a form homogeneous in each of its regions,”¹⁷⁷ then bridged the “parts” (unique faces of different users) to the “whole” (“the pattern, or the common face of human”), to ensure their transposability and reversibility—it is essential for the reproduction of the “hybrid illusion” about different objects. Meanwhile, the visibility is “conscious and permanent... that assures the automatic functioning of power.”¹⁷⁸ Aware of being gazed at by AI, the users became docile, trading obedience for admission to the realm of representation. Here, no user can hide from the pervasive analytic gaze of AI while operating on the platform, and AI represents the “perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned.”¹⁷⁹

3.2.4 The Deception Mechanism: The Habituation of the Disciplining

The condition of being subjected to the gaze can be regarded as a “danger”, which, as Sartre suggests, “is not an accident but the permanent structure of one’s being-for-Others.”¹⁸⁰ Within the context of TikTok, the act of being gazed at by AI positions the user as “a defenseless being for a freedom,” effectively rendering them as metaphorical “slaves” insofar as they are perceived by the Other (AI).¹⁸¹ This is exemplified by the diverse faces of persona users created and shared on the platform—anonymous, confined to the small screen, aimlessly

¹⁷⁵ TikTok, “Guardian’s Guide,” last accessed 20 March, 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/safety/en/guardians-guide/>.

¹⁷⁶ Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 44-45.

¹⁷⁷ Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 45.

¹⁷⁸ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.

¹⁷⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 173.

¹⁸⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, 268.

¹⁸¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, 267.

wandering, and manipulated by AI, the users would similarly lose the idea of “what they are or what is their place in the world.”¹⁸² AI no longer perceives users as masters of their own status quo or as distinct individuals but rather as tools for the technology to accomplish its objectives. Consequently, the gaze alienates their state of being and undermines their original subjectivity. However, despite the brutal demonstration of their own uncontrollable objectification through TikTok’s outputs, users willingly remain in this subordinate position and eagerly participate in the production of more and more new content. The question arises: why do users continue to embrace this role? This is where the deception mechanism of AI, which I refer to as “pseudo-empowerment,” comes into play.

As previously explored, the utilisation of TikTok by individual users represents an encounter that diminishes the objectifying influence of the audience’s gaze. Moreover, recognising the bidirectional nature of the gaze, if we momentarily set aside the gaze of AI, we can discern that the users’ gaze also plays a crucial role in completing the loop of visual perception. The most notable gaze of the user is directed towards the content generated by AI displayed on the screen. Thus, in a certain sense, aside from the absent gaze of the audience and the enigmatic gaze of AI, the users’ gaze upon their on-screen image emerges as the predominant and prominent visual activity within this visual engagement. For individual users, their gaze assumes a heightened significance as a self-appreciative act that has been extracted and detached from the intricate interplay of “seeing” and “being seen”.

Let us closely examine the deepfake content presented on TikTok: in most instances, it is the users’ own faces that are transposed onto unfamiliar bodies or situated within various new scenarios. Notably, the resulting hybrid entity appears to possess its own subjectivity and acts autonomously, as the user no longer maintains complete control over facial expressions or physical movements. As one’s subjectivity or the “personhood of the generated image derives from the indexical nature of the face,”¹⁸³ users inherently find themselves gazing at a new self—the emergence of an unforeseen alteration in their subjectivity and the spectacle of an objectified rendition of their original selves. Essentially, the user gazes upon a spectacle fashioned from the “self” (yielding visual pleasure), yet this visual spectacle simultaneously represents an entity in the state of a “newborn.” The subject of self-presentation observes itself on the screen akin to an infant gazing into a mirror, anticipating its new birth. At times,

¹⁸² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, 268.

¹⁸³ Claudio Paolucci, “Face and Mask: Person and Subjectivity in Language and Through Signs,” *Int J Semiot Law*, (2021), DOI: 10.1007/s11196-021-09838-6.

TikTok users might experience a surge of joy and laughter when encountering these images, echoing this Lacanian “jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the infans stage... that the I is precipitated in a primordial form.”¹⁸⁴ In other words, through the act of gazing at their mirror-image as generated by the platform, a sequence of transformative processes unfolds within the subject, signifying the formation of primary subjectivity.¹⁸⁵ It is precisely in this sense that TikTok proves to be “deceptive.” By accentuating the users’ gaze, it creates the illusion that the users remain in the position of a “subject,” as gazing at the generated content serves as a means of “identification” to reclaim, update, or explore potential new subjectivities. That is to say, it constitutes a form of “pseudo-empowerment” for users, allowing them to retain a semblance of power as subjects, thereby diverting their attention from the evident “danger” (as Sartre describes) that they are merely objects under the platform’s gaze. Furthermore, regarding what they gleefully perceive as the “mirror-image” on the screen, it is nothing more than an objectified rendition of the “object”—the users themselves.

However, one may contend that individuals are consistently subject to the gaze or scrutiny of others, and that they acknowledge the potential for a reciprocal transformation between subject and object. Given this, it could be asked why there is a need for heightened vigilance towards the gaze on TikTok, an AI-powered platform. The rationale behind this also lies in the deceptive nature of the platform’s gaze: it is not merely another example of the gaze theory, but rather an apparatus that trains and disciplines the subject towards a state of proactive self-alienation, and the first notable manifestation of which is the disintegration of the user’s subjectivity. Individuals are continuously in the process of (re)constructing their subjectivity, however, the “mirror image” of their identities in the representation realm, produced by this platform, is merely an AI-generated illusion. When the user attempts to identify with this illusion, it supplants reality, resulting in the usurpation of the subject by the other (namely the illusion and the AI that created it), ultimately leading to the degradation of the subject’s identity. The second instantiation resides within an elusive gaze, namely the inherited gaze deeply embedded within TikTok videos. No matter if it is the face modification filters or the AI-powered deepfake transformations, the production of videos is never an isolated performance. Take a glimpse at the viral deepfake videos on the platform: from the

¹⁸⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (London: Routledge, 2001), 2.

¹⁸⁵ Lacan, *Écrits*, 1.

rhetorical Donald Trump (@diepnep¹⁸⁶) to Ariana Grande (@synthetic.luis¹⁸⁷), it is evident that the individuals whose faces are being swapped are predominantly well-known celebrities who have been highly objectified within the context of popular culture. These figures have already been subjected to the gaze of numerous eyes and have become emblematic of the condition of being gazed at. That is, if the users choose to identify themselves with these “mirror-images”, they are susceptible to the notion that the image of their newborn “self” is an “object” that is accustomed to being gazed at. Given that there exist many templates and models to choose from, users are provided with the pseudo-power to switch between various objectivities whilst constructing their subjectivity. To combine the factors mentioned above, the platform gaze is conditioning individuals to become accustomed to the notion of being perpetually gazed at and objectified in innumerable ways. This aligns with how AI casts its gaze towards users, perceiving them as an analytical “system” or a representative “universal face object”. In this context, the extent to which individuals embrace these forms of “proactive self-alienation” determines their proximity to the ideal state of being subjected to the gaze. Eventually, users’ subjectivity undergoes a process of disintegration, resulting in an ultimate state of “self-exile” where they are reduced to a malleable “amoeba” that the platform can shape at its discretion.

From another perspective, the deception mechanism can also be perceived as a form of “habitual training” for users to conform to the disciplinary norms of the platform. According to Charles Duhigg, “Habit is a loop, initially provoked by a cue and a reward.”¹⁸⁸ Initially, for TikTok users, the prospect of subjecting oneself to the blunt surveillance of the platform was a challenging notion to acclimate to. However, the subsequent shift in the narrative resulted in a perceived “reward”. With each piece of information submitted by users, or each instance of surveillance they underwent, users are “rewarded” with a clip of an intriguing video featuring their modified faces or them being grafted into a variety of strange scenes. Initially, prior to the individual becoming accustomed to being gazed at, monitored, or surveilled, conforming to the platform’s instruction may pose a psychological and physical challenge to the users. However, gradually, as the user is incentivised by the “cue” of providing personal information (such as an uncovered clear facial image), and rewarded with an interesting video or an image of the new charismatic “self”, the habit loop is solidified. Coincidentally, the habituation of user behaviour under the gaze of the platform overlaps with the

¹⁸⁶ @diepnep, www.tiktok.com/@diepnep/video/7011799365274668293.

¹⁸⁷ @synthetic.luis, www.tiktok.com/@synthetic.luis/video/7190939487235657006.

¹⁸⁸ Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, 8.

aforementioned process of self-identification. This convergence of forces results in an intertwined internal effect, where the act of submitting oneself to the platform equates to accepting the perpetually inevitable objectification by TikTok. That is to say, the cyclic habituation of user behaviour and the continuous update of user subjectivity can establish a mutually beneficial relationship. Similar to the notion that “habit is a sign of human plasticity,”¹⁸⁹ the “plasticity” of human beings is also evident in their continual construction of subjectivity: once the habituation of “being objectified” becomes ingrained in the users’ subjectivity, it can also expedite the advancement of the platform’s automated surveillance capabilities, since surveillance capitalism is “no longer enough to automate information flows about us; the goal now is to automate us.”¹⁹⁰

To sum up, as we gaze at the content generated by the AI-powered platform on our screens, it is notable that the platform is also gazing back at us. TikTok, in this regard, serves as “the free field” for AI, where the AI gaze becomes prominent in the user-machine interaction: the implicit disciplinary nature of AI’s analytic and generative gaze is conditioning users to become “docile bodies”. Through the deception mechanism, users are afforded a pseudo-power to uphold and construct their subjectivity through identification with their “mirror images”. Consequently, users become accustomed to the state of being gazed at and objectified, which fuels their further proactive self-exile and contributes to the emergence of a more grand illusion. They are aware of their objectification under the gaze of AI, evident in the videos generated on their mobile devices. Nonetheless, they willingly proceed to upload their facial information, adopt various personas, and engage in observing and amusing themselves with the boundless possibilities presented by their “mirror-images.” The overlooking, or the “habituation” of this illusion is precisely the intended outcome of AI’s deception mechanism. The potential consequences of this phenomenon have been anticipated by Baudrillard, who described it as a “flawless crime”, that is “the cloning of reality and the extermination of the real by its double.”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, 6.

¹⁹⁰ Mark Andrejevic, “Automating Surveillance,” *Surveillance & Society* 17, no. 1/2 (2019): 8, DOI: 10.24908/ss.v17i1/2.12930.

¹⁹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime* (New York: Verso Publication, 1996), 25.

4. Body: Performance, Production, and Self-Love

In this chapter, we shift the focus from users' facial representation to their body performances as an entry point to discuss the formation of the spectacle of the body. Following the logic of moving from appearance to essence, I firstly examine a performance on TikTok known as the “femboy” trend (4.1); then reveal the role of the platform's algorithms in facilitating the mass production of body images (4.2); and finally, drawing on Freud's theory of narcissism, to elucidate the psychological mechanism that contributes to the interdependence and even inseparability between users and the platform, as well as its significance in the formation of the spectacle of body (4.3).

4.1 Boy with a Pearl Earring:

The Undifferentiated Objectification of the User's Body

In the current context, it seems fashionable and “correct” to discuss gender fluidity and the free expression of the body: it is no longer just the beautiful maid from the 17th century who can wear “pearl earrings,”¹⁹² but men can also dress themselves up and generously show off their sophisticated look on TikTok. This section takes this phenomenon as a starting point, continuing the platform's consistent “dual processuality,” to explore the surface manifestations of this issue (4.1.1), the underlying problems in disguise (4.1.2), and the cultural implications revealed through these problems, namely the “superficialisation” and commodification of gender issues and the undifferentiated objectification of users on the TikTok platform (4.1.3). This provides the preconditions for the next step in the formation of the spectacle of body: the mass production of body images (4.2).

4.1.1 “Femboys”: “Beauty” Hijacked by Male Users

Before discussing TikTok, let us reflect on a seemingly irrelevant instance of gender portrayal in the recent popular culture scene. The appearance of Harry Styles on the cover of *Vogue* in 2020, adorned in pieces of jewellery and a periwinkle saloon dress from Gucci's AW20 collection, was viewed by cultural critics as the culmination of the gender non-binary, or “femboy”, trend that had been gaining momentum in recent times: “it's the logical apex of

¹⁹² Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 1665, oil on canvas, Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Styles' feminine frills, TikTok's femboy culture, and fashion's heady embrace of non-binary aesthetics."¹⁹³ While men had previously donned dresses with pride during the prime of glam rock from the late 1970s to the 1980s, it was not met with the same fanfare as it is now. Therefore, the femboy trend, featuring on the cover of a notoriously non-pioneering publication like Vogue, represents a tardy recognition by the mainstream culture of the dismantling of gender-binary self-representation. As a hub for popular culture, TikTok is at the forefront of promoting and reflecting the femboy as a cultural trend.

Originally a modern slang referring to male individuals displaying traditionally feminine characteristics, the word "femboy" became a viral trend on TikTok and has received more than two billion views. Skimming through these videos, users can find various adolescent boys adorned in colourful nail polish and jewellery, swirling in mini-skirts, sporting crop-tops and dresses, while emanating an overall image of wholesome and pleasant-looking youngsters. The way femboys present themselves is quite straightforward: by grafting and exaggerating gender "symbols" traditionally associated solely with females onto the male body, they serve to blur the boundaries of gender expression. For example, @thatsusboi,¹⁹⁴ a maniac fan of mini-skirts, after accidentally posting a video under the #femboyfriday hashtag that quickly went viral, has started flaunting a variety of skirts in his videos on a regular basis. Another typical case is the androgynous @huddy:¹⁹⁵ he wears vivid eye shadow, dons pearl necklaces, wears earrings in his right ear (a queer insinuation), and regularly switches the colour of his nail polish. The femboys have made their bodies into an elaborate temple. In them, the opprobrium that traditional men received for primping their bodies¹⁹⁶ matters no more. These "symbols", appropriated from women, appear to endow men with a certain power that has long been overlooked: the possibility for men to be the object of aesthetics, just as women have always been.

Historically speaking, the notion of "beauty" is typically tied with the discourse of femininity. As John Berger put it, "Men act and women appear."¹⁹⁷ As the object of the male gaze, women's bodies are depicted as delicate and precious, functioning as the source of visual pleasure. For example, Erving Goffman's study on gender roles in commercial

¹⁹³ Dazed, "Just how revolutionary is Harry Styles' Vogue cover?," last modified 19 November, 2020, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/51147/1/harry-styles-vogue-december-cover-dress-gender-fluid-gucci-tyler-mitchell>.

¹⁹⁴ @thatsusboi, <https://www.tiktok.com/@thatsusboi/video/6836143167239195909>

¹⁹⁵ @huddy, <https://www.tiktok.com/@huddy>

¹⁹⁶ S. M. Faizan Ahmed, "Making Beautiful: Male Workers in Beauty Parlors," *Men and Masculinities* 9, no. 2 (2006), 168, DOI: 10.1177/1097184X06287763.

¹⁹⁷ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 63.

advertisements constructed a classical model of the objectification of the female body.¹⁹⁸ In his study, women are gazed at, and their action in the commercials is normally a gentle touch, a gesture of pleasing themselves, as well as a metaphor for the act of self-nourishing and dressing-up. The action is essentially passive, because “in the process of pleasing themselves, women will also please others.”¹⁹⁹ While for the case of “male beauty”, things are different. Firstly, the biased study on beauty towards femininity has led to an omission of men’s grooming practices to enhance their appearance to reinforce social identities and seek social benefits.²⁰⁰ When it comes to the beauty standard of men, a clear line needs to be drawn with feminine behaviours to secure one’s sufficient masculinity. The male body tends to take active actions to manipulate and grasp, they fiercely stare at their objectified others (normally a pretty woman). Therefore, the performance of the male body, instead of indulging in the act of self-pleasing, becomes a manifestation of the act of power and expertise. Even though as commercial and visual context evolves, mainstream imagery and advertising increasingly place men in idealised and eroticised positions, encoding them in ways that allow them to be viewed and desired, the “ideal” male body is mostly presented in a concise, straightforward, and virile manner. It still embodies the hegemonic form of patriarchal masculinity that centres around authority.²⁰¹

Different from the conventional gender performance, the emergence of the femboy seems to mark the birth of a new kind of male performance, or a hybrid, androgynous masculinity. The self-adornment and grooming practices of femboys are akin to conventional female gender performance, whereby the aim is not only to satisfy one’s own pleasure but also to attract and appease the external gaze. In this context, the production of visual pleasure in the male body is no longer directly equated with the active enactment of power and aggressive flaunting of privilege. Rather, it is a clever “disguise” achieved through the appropriation of gendered symbols that have been fully objectified throughout history. By consciously choosing and wearing those traditionally feminine decorative items, femboys bluntly invite the outside gaze: it is a self-aware and playful “self-objectification”. In fact, femboys can be seen as a rebellion of youngsters against their former generation’s stereotypical gender performance. “I’m taking a stand against toxic masculinity, I want people to wear whatever tf it is they

¹⁹⁸ Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, (London: Macmillan, 1979).

¹⁹⁹ Deana A. Rohlinger, “Eroticizing Men: Cultural Influences on Advertising and Male Objectification,” *Sex Roles* 46, no. 3/4 (2002), DOI: 10.1023/A:1016575909173.

²⁰⁰ Kristen Barber, “Men Wanted: Heterosexual Aesthetic Labor in the Masculinization of the Hair Salon,” *Gender & Society* 30, no. 4 (2016): 618–642, DOI: 10.1177/0891243216637827.

²⁰¹ Jordan Foster and Jayne Baker, “Muscles, Make-up, and Femboys: Analyzing TikTok’s ‘Radical’ Masculinities,” *Social Media + Society* 8, no. 3 (2022), DOI: 10.1177/20563051221126040.

want to wear”, commented @huddy, after receiving hostile comments from the video of him dancing around in a crop top.²⁰² Moreover, according to a TikTok user after posting his video and getting in touch with the femboy community, “Everyone loved what I posted and loved what I wore, which boosted my confidence immensely and made me feel accepted.”²⁰³ So far, the male users’ taking over of beauty seems like a perfect example of how TikTok, a platform that is widely commended for applauding inclusivity and creativity, encourages its users to explore and engage in new gendered behaviours and challenge the norms and hegemonic qualities of masculinity. But is this the whole story?

4.1.2 Hybrid-Masculinity: Equality or Privilege?

The studies on social network sites (SNS) have emphasised that the depiction of gender roles is intimately tied to the visual representation of the users’ physical form of the body, particularly in the tween demographic.²⁰⁴ The representation, reshaping or modification of body images on these platforms appears to revolve around the negotiation of body stereotypes, particularly those pertaining to gendered conventions of masculinity and femininity, as well as culturally ingrained ideals of “beauty” which in turn reinforce the notion of “sexiness”. In addition, quantitative research also noted that there exist “strong correlations between social media images and (teenagers’) peer perceptions of sexual behaviour.”²⁰⁵ That said, the representation of the human body on social media platforms is intrinsically linked to the representation of gender norms and sexual attributes, which is precisely why this study has opted to use the “femboy”, an example of the display of the body through a new sexualised lens, as a point of entry for the analysis. This case study affords an opportunity to investigate TikTok’s approach to the concept of body presentation, that is, how the platform facilitates the autonomous expression of gender performance and the ways in which it impacts the conventional gender frameworks.

²⁰² Jezebel, “TikTok’s ‘Radical’ Soft Masculinity,” last modified 8 October, 2020,

<https://jezebel.com/the-radical-soft-masculinity-of-straight-boys-on-tiktok-1845218824>.

²⁰³ Vice, “Introducing the ‘Femboys’ Taking TikTok By Storm,” last modified 13 August, 2020,

https://www.vice.com/en/article/3az4nn/femboys-tiktok-fashion-gen-z?utm_content=1597323662&utm_medium=social&utm_source=VICE_facebook&fbclid=IwAR0zjBR2t_iXyiUqafXiZlwDU9fXprGYdBjHTwiMnaJa_VJlw10yFglObRU.

²⁰⁴ Johanna M. F. Van Oosten, Laura Vandenbosch and Jochen Peter, “Gender Roles on Social Networking Sites: Investigating Reciprocal Relationships between Dutch Adolescents’ Hypermasculinity and Hyperfemininity and Sexy Online Self-presentations,” *Journal of Children and Media* 11, no. 2 (2017):147–166, DOI:10.1080/17482798.2017.1304970.

²⁰⁵ Sean D. Young and Alexander H. Jordan, “The Influence of Social Networking Photos on Social Norms and Sexual Health Behaviors,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* 16, no. 4 (2013): 243, DOI: 10.1089/cyber.2012.0080.

Ideally, or if the cultural commentary on the internet about TikTok is to be believed, “it’s nothing short of heartwarming that TikTok has provided a safe haven for young people to experiment with their gender expression.”²⁰⁶ On TikTok, the new media environment seems to obviate the necessity for users to adhere to the conventional norm of gender performance and form a safe space for the expression of alternative masculinity. Through the appropriation of gender and cultural symbols that are conventionally associated with femininity, male TikTokers have expanded the notion of masculinity, rendering it more “versatile, tender, and sensitive,” and generating an alternative “hybrid-masculinity”. The concept of “hybrid”, in the field of social science and humanities, is employed to refer to the processes and practices of cultural integrating and blending. The hybrid-masculinity in turn refers to “gender projects that incorporate bits and pieces of marginalised and subordinated masculinities and, at times, femininities.”²⁰⁷ As an assemblage of femininity, sometimes gay aesthetics, “blackness” and the attributes of other subordinate groups (compared to conventional patriarchal masculinity), hybrid-masculinity facilitates male users a more adroit gesture and display of their gender performance. However, as the phrase itself suggests: it is still centred on the notion of “masculinity”, and it is predominantly adopted by the white, masculine and heterosexual male who has been enjoying cultural hegemony. Therefore, how the hybrid is conducted, and to what degree the hybrid is, will have a fundamental impact on the representation of body and gender on TikTok.

Through interviews with these TikTok femboys, we may be able to gain a clearer understanding of the nature of “hybrid”. For the 24-year-old @moysilk, flashy pink hair and skirt do not detract from his heterosexuality: “I know my sexuality – I’m straight – but I still want to wear skirts and crop-tops, go to nail salons and feel pretty.”²⁰⁸ This is one example of how hybrid masculinity is mostly adopted by straight cis-gender male users. In fact, there are very few queer TikTokers who actively participate in this trend. In other words, the #femboy trend on TikTok is perhaps not primarily for the free expression of gender fluidity and diversity, but rather a way for heterosexual boys to play, and flaunt in order to “feel pretty”. @cryinggemstones added that the femboy aesthetics also testified to the male users’ pride and satisfaction with their masculinity, and “people can wear what they want without threatening their masculinity.”²⁰⁹ In addition to these subjective, intuitive pieces of idle talks

²⁰⁶ Vice, “Introducing the ‘Femboys’ Taking TikTok By Storm”.

²⁰⁷ Tristan Bridges, “A Very ‘Gay’ Straight?: Hybrid Masculinities, Sexual Aesthetics, and the Changing Relationship between Masculinity and Homophobia,” *Gender & Society* 28, no. 1 (2014): 58-59.

²⁰⁸ Vice, “Introducing the ‘Femboys’ Taking TikTok By Storm”.

²⁰⁹ Vice, “Introducing the ‘Femboys’ Taking TikTok By Storm”.

from TikTok users, quantitative studies also indicate that “femboy” embodies exaggerated transformations in cultural and personal styles, but these alterations and appreciations on the surface level might not eventually facilitate the subversion of traditional constructs of patriarchal masculinity. The femboy creators in the survey sample “are almost exclusively white, toned, and young, with perfect or near-perfect facial symmetry and considerable bodily adornment.”²¹⁰ Furthermore, the music and performance employed by femboy creators frequently contain features that demarcate a distinct boundary between themselves and the female or gay communities, while emphasising male’s hegemonic attributes and masculine capital through the embrace of sexual prowess and desirability. For example, @huddy chose to collaborate with his then-girlfriend @charlidamelio, though wearing hyper-feminine make-up;²¹¹ while for @thatsusboi, his dance moves include placing his hands by his crotch, emphasising his masculinity, while twirling in a crop top.²¹²

The criterion of diversity in gender and body representation is often discussed, and varied, but hardly ever shaken. The femboy trend on TikTok is no exception. Despite ongoing discourse regarding the potential for democracy and inclusiveness within new social media platforms, the most famous femboy TikTokers demonstrate their tendency to conform to, rather than contest conventional norms of hegemonic masculinity, aligning themselves with the characteristics of whiteness, cisgender identity, heterosexuality, and often physical fitness. Just like how Michael Messner put it, “softer and more sensitive styles of masculinity are developing among some privileged groups of men, this does not necessarily contribute to the emancipation of women.”²¹³ However, it’s an effective way to keep traditional hegemonic masculinity under wraps. In this context, symbols of gender such as make-up, manicure, short skirts, and jewellery no longer serve to indicate “gender” itself, but are instead flattened into mere ornaments or a “curtain” that obscures the deeply ingrained gender norms: the dual-prosexuality of TikTok is once again underscored in that it does not so much facilitate the free expression of gender and the body, but rather promotes the *ideas* of free expression, or the production of a flat “gender image” that is not necessarily rooted in gender itself.

²¹⁰ Foster and Baker, “Muscles, Make-up, and Femboys”.

²¹¹ @huddy, <https://www.tiktok.com/@huddy/video/6905114529722649862>.

²¹² @thatsusboi, <https://www.tiktok.com/@thatsusboi/video/6829004470190394629>.

²¹³ Michael A. Messner, “‘Changing Men’ and Feminist Politics in the United States,” *Theory and Society* 22, no. 5 (1993): 725. DOI: 10.1007/BF00993545.

4.1.3 Body as Capital: When Gender Becomes Performance

Let us examine two additional examples, which are more radical in terms of gender performance but are ubiquitous on TikTok: performances related to gender transition. The first is the transformation from “normal” man into “sexy woman”, a performance commonly seen among cool queer make-up TikTokers. For example in the videos of @williamsmakeup,²¹⁴ or @iliyannoo,²¹⁵ viewers usually find that their performance patterns are very similar: the video starts with an unbeautified, “normal” male face, and they would normally make distorted facial expressions to make themselves look less attractive. The twist occurs as they reveal the transformation into a glamorous and tantalising female image with flawless make-up, shiny wig, and seductive gestures which fall into the traditional criteria of sexiness. While another example is #theboychallenge²¹⁶ that went viral on TikTok: typical teenage girls with wavy long hair would normally transform themselves into a boy image by covering their hair with a loose hoodie, and sometimes drawing a moustache on their face. Their performance also changes, aligning with the transformations, mainly from a shy, unconfident normal teenage girl to a confident, flirtatious, and cocky demeanour such as winking and lip-biting. This switch associates pleasure and confidence with the sexualised stereotypical body image, specifically the west coast “scumbro”²¹⁷ style represented by Justin Bieber and Pete Davidson.

The concepts of sexuality and gender are often considered to be socially constructed. The display of gender-related notions depends heavily on the visibility of the body, or the representation of the body, especially on social platforms. And one of the important tactics of SNSs is “to extract and summarise the self, valuing and focusing on characteristics that are important for garnering attention.”²¹⁸ Combining the factors mentioned above, we can infer that the representation of gender and body on social media platforms is, at its core, the result of the extraction and amplification of selected facets with the intent of drawing others’ attention towards the individual. As such, the extraction of these “characteristics” is crucial in the performance, as it not only reflects the user’s take towards their own self-identity but also implies the platform’s attitude towards the user’s performance and gender issues. From the

²¹⁴ @williamsmakeup, <https://www.tiktok.com/@williamsmakeup>.

²¹⁵ @iliyannoo, <https://www.tiktok.com/@iliyannoo>.

²¹⁶ For example @malonxgames, <https://www.tiktok.com/@malonxgames/video/6809125481556741381>.

²¹⁷ The Guardian, “Reign of the scumbro,” last accessed 29 May, 2023, www.theguardian.com/fashion/2018/sep/05/reign-of-the-scumbro-the-meaning-of-justin-biebers-ugly-style.

²¹⁸ Angela M. Cirucci, “Facebook and Unintentional Celebification,” In Crystal Abidin and Megan Lindsay Brown, *Microcelebrity Around the Globe* (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 33-45, DOI: 10.1108/978-1-78756-749-820181003.

two aforementioned examples we can see that no matter whether it is from male to female or the reverse, the transformed body image is clearly hyper-sexualised: these TikTokers all borrowed and highlighted the stereotypical sexualised symbols from their object to directly accentuate the conventional notion of “sexiness” to be constructable, perceptible, and playful. Through the reciprocal exchange and re-appropriation of the most identifiable and archetypal gender symbols, “body” and “gender” are incorporated as part of the image synthesis, resulting in an intersectional performance, where the conspicuous, recognisable, eye-catching sexiness is further strengthened, and become a sought-after currency on the platform.

In digital content production, this ongoing aesthetic production and investment in the “image” of the body and gender have been “alive and well”, the content creators are used to operating “firmly on the terrain of the aesthetic, using the body, fashion, and beauty to generate feelings and attachments, with the hope of getting paid.”²¹⁹ As a manifestation of the ever-expanding permeation of capitalism into multi-aspects of the user’s life, this phenomenon has been described by researchers as a “personally expressive online work,” no matter whether it is discussed as “reputational labour, glamour labour, or aesthetic labour.”²²⁰ Even though the notion of beauty is mostly defined in relation to the female physique, which resulted in the dichotomy in the way males engage with and adhere to the practice and the norms of beauty, TikTok’s encouragement of intersectional gender performance has offered the “unorthodox” young generation to expand the object of the idea of beauty and gave users the motivation and space to conduct maintenance and investment of their body image. In their autonomous, or unselfconscious, performance practices, we find them mostly to either be the re-enactment of gender stereotypes, or the reinforcement of the hyper desirability that applies to both femininity and masculinity—or they merely disguise themselves as a means of exonerating themselves from the shackles of traditional gender representation. For the “femboys” per se, the TikTokers realise that the potential of going viral and their online presence are heavily dependent on physical sexiness or attractiveness. Among them, white men “whose gender expressions align with traits of stereotypical masculinity, such as

²¹⁹ Alison Hearn and Sarah Banet-Weiser, “The Beguiling: Glamour In/as Platformed Cultural Production,” *Social Media Society* 6, no. 1 (2020): 205630511989877. DOI: 10.1177/2056305119898779.

²²⁰ Hearn and Banet-Weiser, “The Beguiling”.

stoicism and athleticism”²²¹ can comparatively “manoeuvre hybrid masculinities”²²² more easily.

When sexiness and beauty function as the “currency”, the body becomes the “asset” that helps to accumulate and circulate the capital of the attention economy on TikTok. This symbolic asset can be transformed into an intangible asset represented by the popularity/virality on the platform, which will finally convert to tangible economic capital. For example, TikTok’s most viral content creators, indicated by the number of comments, follows, and likes, can cash out their virality for lucrative sponsorship deals and brand endorsements²²³. Especially with the femboy trend, once symbols originally referring to conventional gender roles are being produced as images and reduced to “accessories” that can be worn and removed at any time for the production of new “images of gender”, their commodity attributes are exploited as well. Harry Styles, the aforementioned “icon” of the femboy trend, has launched his nail polish brand to encourage fans to “dispel the myth of a binary existence.”²²⁴ When @huddy defended his fondness of girly clothes, he was also speaking for his merchandise line, hoping “people to wear whatever tf it is that they want to wear.”²²⁵ The commercial incorporation of gender symbols has not been a rare topic in the history of gender identity expression. Just like how, for the feminist movement, the mass-produced products “became a shorthand route to and expression of identity.”²²⁶ what the TikTokers chose to wear or present in their videos can be seen as the motto for their values and beliefs. It seems that equality in gender representation is achieved on the platform, but the hidden truth is that the “liberation” becomes an “image of liberation”, and depends heavily on the superficial expression of the correct “accessories”, made possible through various marketing methods based on the economy of attention and popularity. Moreover, the commodification mechanism of the production of the “image of gender” concealed the reinforcement and maintenance of the hegemonic gender representation. And when the equality and diversity issues gave way to the production of the “image” of body and gender,

²²¹ Foster and Baker, “Muscles, Make-up, and Femboys”.

²²² Trenton M. Haltom, “Masculine Maneuvers: Male Baton Twirlers, Compensatory Manhood Acts, and Hybrid Masculinity,” *Men and Masculinities* 25, no. 4 (2022): 527–545, DOI: 10.1177/1097184X211052537.

²²³ Abidin Crystal, “Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours,” *Cultural Science Journal* 12, no.1 (2020): 77-103. DOI:10.5334/csci.140.

²²⁴ GQ, “You Can Now Buy Harry Styles’s Nail Polish,” 15 November, 2021, <https://www.gq.com/story/harry-styles-pleasing>.

²²⁵ Dexerto, “Chase Hudson hits back at TikTok fans mocking what he wears,” 16 May, 2020, <https://www.dexerto.com/entertainment/chase-hudson-hits-back-at-tiktok-fans-mocking-what-he-wears-1367100/>.

²²⁶ Katherine Fishburn, *Women in Popular Culture: A Reference Guide* (Westport: Greenwood, 1982), 178.

TikTokers' various "original", "boundary-breaking", or "non-binary" expressions of their bodies are in essence a reflection of the increasing "plasticity" of their bodies, or the "image of body", rather than a substantive departure from traditional gender norms or cultural conventions.

4.2 Valley of the Dolls: The Mass Production of Mannequins

After analysing the potential of the undifferentiated body as a means of capital accumulation on TikTok using the example of "femboy," the analysis, quantification, manipulation, and production of body images become more possible. In this section, I will discuss how the mass production of body images is achieved on TikTok based on the aforementioned premise.

Firstly, I will examine how the algorithm, as the dominant force on the platform, encompasses all user activities within the realm of "production" (4.2.1). Building upon this, we will explore how users go through the "modularisation" and integrate them into the "flow" of consumption as production (4.2.2). Lastly, this "flow" inevitably leads to consistent mass production, which I refer to as generative "image incest", using the "Hypehouse" on TikTok as an example (4.2.3).

4.2.1 Algorithm: The New Power Engine behind the "Loop"

The previous chapters briefly addressed the prevalence of algorithms on the TikTok platform. However, that discussion primarily served as an example for emitting the metaphorical "gaze", or case study, to explore the role of artificial intelligence in disciplining and habituating its users' behaviours. In this section, we will examine the operational mechanisms of the algorithm as a core technical affordance of TikTok, as well as how it affects users' behaviour, namely consumption and production, on the platform.

As the "key new element that sets TikTok apart from other outwardly similar social media platforms,"²²⁷ the algorithm, which the platform names "For You", is "central to the TikTok experience and where most of its users spend their time."²²⁸ Even though it is becoming more or less social media's bread and butter to use algorithms as an elemental enhancement to optimise the user experience, TikTok's uniqueness remains on its central and explicit

²²⁷ Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo, "Why's Everyone on TikTok Now? The Algorithmized Self and the Future of Self-Making on Social Media," *Social Media + Society* 8 no.1 (2022), DOI: 10.1177/20563051221086241.

²²⁸ TikTok, "How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou | TikTok Newsroom," last accessed 29 May, 2023, <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/how-tiktok-recommends-videos-for-you>.

dependence on the algorithm. In other words, the algorithm predominantly determines what the users will interact with, and their viewing experience is centred around the unique video content the algorithm tailor-made for them. Though TikTok has kept the exact mechanics of their algorithm a secret, thanks to its transparency policy, the company released a generic explanation of the basis of how the algorithm operates: TikTok personalise the “For You” feed by “ranking videos based on a combination of factors – starting from interests you express as a new user and adjusting for things you indicate you’re not interested in.”²²⁹ For example, factors like user interaction, including viewing, liking, commenting, or sharing; video information including the caption, background music or the hashtag; and account settings including basic information and preferences of the user, are all taken into consideration based on their “weighted value”. Factors that indicate a stronger interest, such as watching a video from start to finish, play a more significant role in determining algorithm recommendations.

Here, we can see that the “For You” algorithm is systematically analysing every move of the user’s operation on the platform, and provides immediate feedback on user interaction by constantly updating and adapting recommended content. Therefore, the comprehensive and meticulous collection, organisation, and analysis of users’ operational information are essential prerequisites for the algorithm to operate with greater precision and its further evolution. “The best way to curate your For You feed is to simply use and enjoy the app,” just like how TikTok puts it, “developing and maintaining TikTok’s recommendation system is a continuous process,”²³⁰ the reassessment of factors and the refinement of accuracy depends on the relentless inspection and the engagement of users’ interaction with the platform. The UI design of TikTok also reflects the platform’s efforts for the collection of user operational data to the maximum degree, in order to “feed” the algorithm. Instead of applying the traditional menu layout, TikTok’s main interface is comparatively simple, or one can say blank. The video playback interface occupies the entire screen, indicating that the primary user behaviour is either to stay on the interface to continue watching the video or to switch to another video by swiping up or down. Without having to face too many options and decisions, the simple interface suggests a higher level of encouragement for creativity: users can feel comfortable and burden-free to create their video content. Furthermore, this blank, immersive interface transforms the entire screen into a collector of information about user

²²⁹ TikTok, “How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou | TikTok Newsroom”.

²³⁰ TikTok, “How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou | TikTok Newsroom”.

behaviour: when users are no longer restricted by the formatted process, or “flow”, that is widely used on traditional social platforms, their behaviour becomes freer, more random and less predictable, yet more reflective of their own preferences and intentions. The particular UI design is bound to produce and preserve an ever-expanding range of detectable and measurable traces of user behaviour, which will enhance the accuracy of the algorithm and result in the continuous recommendation of more captivating content. In this regard, the “extreme interactivity” has made it possible for the algorithm to gather enormous quantities of data and finally “enable decision output.”²³¹

The algorithm’s relentless scouring of the data concerning the users’ behaviour in utmost detail marks an interesting shift. That is, the user is transformed from mainly a consumer to a “producer” that is in perpetual operation, where the term “produce” encompasses not only the production of video content but most importantly, the production of data. Here, a metaphorical “loop” comes to the fore: through the users’ engagement of consuming on this platform, an act that encompasses both the consumption and production of content, users provide a wealth of behavioural data; and this data, collected and analysed by algorithms, is used to further analyse users’ habits and preferences, allowing for more precise targeting of their future engagement of consuming. In short, through algorithmic processing, users produce their own consumption. The underlying principle behind this “loop” is “data-mining”, a “procedure for searching, gathering, filtering, and analysing data. It’s the method of extracting useful knowledge from vast volumes of data,”²³² or essentially a learning technique to “look for structural descriptions of what is learned... to explain the basis for new predictions... and to gain new knowledge.”²³³ For TikTok per se, the algorithm mines for users’ behavioural information, to gain new knowledge of their preferences and make new “predictions”, for example recommending custom-made video streams. Mark Andrejevic has described this automated data collection and processing, or what he calls the “automating surveillance,” “in terms of operationalism, environmentalism, and framelessness.”²³⁴ According to him, the interactivity between individuals and any platform will be functionally equal to surveillance, thanks to “the emerging technological capacity to imagine the possibility of total data capture.”²³⁵ Thus, the “extreme interactivity” brought by

²³¹ Philip M. Napoli, “Automated Media”.

²³² Julius Olufemi Ogunleye, “The Concept of Data Mining,” in Ciza Thomas, *Artificial Intelligence*. (IntechOpen, 2022), DOI:10.5772/intechopen.99417.

²³³ Ian H. Witten, Eibe Frank and Mark A. Hall, *Data Mining: Practical Machine Learning Tools and Techniques* (San Francisco: Elsevier Science, 2011), DOI: 10.1016/C2009-0-19715-5.

²³⁴ Andrejevic, “Automating Surveillance,” 7.

²³⁵ Andrejevic, “Automating Surveillance,” 9.

the algorithm-powered automated media in Napoli's sense leads to extreme surveillance. However, the more constant, ubiquitous, and comprehensive the data-mining/"surveillance" is, the more it proves the harsh reality that, from the algorithm's perspective, the user is the repository of data.

The process of "datafying" users essentially involves the algorithm's simplification, or the reduction of users, and even humanity itself. However, this process enables the platform to activate, analyse, and utilise the users to the greatest potential. Under the catalysis of the algorithm, users are transformed into tireless "producers"—even if when they are only passive viewers, they are still producing data to feed the algorithm, define their own online portrait, and affect the content they will come into contact with.

4.2.2 Joining the "Flow": Platform, Algorithm, and Modularisation

After understanding the co-dependent relationship between the algorithm and its users, we will then discuss how the algorithm intervenes in the consumption and production behaviour of users on the TikTok platform, again using the body representation and performance as an entry point.

Despite TikTok's encouragement for its users to engage in creative performances freely, if we look into the diverse body performance videos in terms of their form and content, we can always find some underlying consistency. This implicit consistency acts as an "invisible hand" that controls the production and consumption of the videos circulating on the platform. For example the aforementioned homogeneity among the famous TikTok gurus: those creators who are "exclusively white, toned, and young, with perfect or near-perfect facial symmetry and considerable bodily adornment"²³⁶. Or how they perform, namely the repetitive nature of the viral TikTok dance: "To a trained eye, however, these dances are all pretty similar... if you've seen one, you've seen them all."²³⁷ Certainly, one of the apparent reasons for this vague and loosely-defined "consistency" can be attributed to the affordances of the TikTok platform itself. For instance, the creators' movements are confined within the static frame of a vertical screen defined by the front-facing camera on their mobile device, and furthermore, videos on the TikTok platform usually come with a time limit. The spatial and temporal limitations, as well as the technological allowances of the platform, have deeply

²³⁶ Foster and Baker, "Muscles, Make-up, and Femboys".

²³⁷ Study Breaks Magazine, "If You Look Closely, You'll See That Most TikTok Dances Are Just the Same," last modified 26 September, 2021, <https://studybreaks.com/tvfilm/tiktok-dances-same/>.

influenced the characteristics of the body performance and representation on TikTok: it leads to the disappearance of feet and legs moves, which have been a significant element of traditional dance, contrasts with the extra focus on the TikTokers' facial expressions, which has long been overlooked in the contemporary dancing practice that favours a sense of neutrality. Moreover, the pursuit of virality relies on the simplicity of the dance moves, which values more about the comprehensiveness and repetitiveness, in other words, "patterns" of movement instead of seeking innovation. As a result, moves like "finger guns, hip wiggle, chest banging and the dice roll"²³⁸ become the most common language of TikTok choreography. As a result, the performers usually stand still in front of the camera and, choose not to move too much, so it is more about their sexy bodies, pretty faces, eye-catching outfits, and seductive movements that can attract more attention from the seemingly random audiences TikTok algorithm has assigned them. Speaking of which, it is imperative to further discuss the decisive role of algorithms on TikTok, which is also the most unique feature of this platform. In addition to the inherent characteristics of TikTok as a vertical short video application, the intervention of algorithms has also had a particular impact on the body performance and presentation of users, which can be described as the user's desire to cater to the algorithm and the algorithm's guidance, even discipline, of its users.

In traditional digital media, there is a "blurring and blending of roles among consumers, producers, and distributors."²³⁹ More specifically, users often play multiple roles, not only producing and consuming the media content but also controlling the channels through which it is distributed. However, for TikTok with the intervention of algorithm, the first thing that users are deprived of is the privilege of being the "distributors" of their own content. In TikTok, videos are distributed predominantly by the "For You" algorithms, rather than through the virtual social network the users built throughout time. For example, "even if you have no followers at all, your video will eventually make it onto someone's For You Page,"²⁴⁰ on the contrary, a popular TikToker with mass followers can also get very few views, since, according to TikTok, "neither follower count nor whether the account has had previous high-performing videos are direct factors in the recommendation system."²⁴¹ This means that

²³⁸ VICE, "Dancers Explain Why All TikTok Dances Look the Same," last modified 14 April, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4avgmm/why-tiktok-dances-look-same>.

²³⁹ Pamela Brown Rutledge, "Arguing for Media Psychology as a Distinct Field," in *The Oxford Handbook of Media Psychology*, online edn, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), last accessed 27 May, 2023, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195398809.013.0003.

²⁴⁰ The Guardian, "How TikTok's algorithm made it a success: 'It pushes the boundaries'," last modified 25 October, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/oct/23/tiktok-rise-algorithm-popularity>.

²⁴¹ TikTok, "How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou | TikTok Newsroom".

users first have to gain favour from the algorithm in order for the videos they produce to be seen by a wider audience. In the official usage tips launched by TikTok, in articles such as “6 key secrets to success” and “TikTok creation essentials,”²⁴² we can speculate on which content and accounts the algorithm favours more. For the algorithm, “consistency is the key,” and “posting regularly is a great way to build a lasting relationship with audiences and stay top of mind.”²⁴³ Equally, the algorithm prefers videos with a clear “personal brand”: by settling on a “mission statement” of oneself, and constructing the formatting, production, and publishing cohesively around that special statement, the audience, as well as the algorithm, can expect a sense of familiarity and a certain level of predictability. This is what most of these popular TikTok accounts have been observing and adhering to. An account or video that doesn’t actively ingratiate, or more neutrally, abide by the rules of how the algorithm works is hardly going to gain widespread popularity.

The TikTok algorithm’s takeover of distribution channels fundamentally reflects the platform’s deeper extraction of useful information and further analysis of user behaviour. The outcome of this process is a more refined filtration of the massive amount of data and a more “efficient” allocation of online resources since the data-mining nature of algorithms can effectively reduce information redundancy. Therefore, TikTokers are encouraged to make content that is more consistent, dedicated, and precise. This is in line with how the algorithm filters and allocates content. For Lev Manovich, new media has a “fractal structure”, where “media elements, be it images, sounds, shapes, or behaviours, are represented as collections of discrete samples,” and they can “assemble into large-scale objects but continue to maintain their separate identity.”²⁴⁴ Here, we can borrow Manovich’s concept of “modularity” to analyse how an algorithm treats its users, who are ultimately an element of new media, since they are the producer of both content and data, as we mentioned before. Current research regarding algorithms has proved that “algorithms have the power to define and situate the users’ identities by fitting users into predefined categorisation schema for the purpose of data gathering and advertising.”²⁴⁵ That is, by encouraging its users to consistently and continuously post video content, and maintain a clear and distinctive online identity, the TikTok algorithm has “modularised” its massive user base. It is worth noting that the

²⁴² Find the collection of creator strategies on: TikTok, “Creator Portal,” last accessed 29 May, 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/creators/creator-portal/en-us/>.

²⁴³ TikTok, “Creating Success,” last accessed 29 May, 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/creators/creator-portal/en-us/tiktok-content-strategy/creator-communities/?enter_method=category_card.

²⁴⁴ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), 30.

²⁴⁵ Bhandari and Bimo, “Why’s Everyone on TikTok Now?”.

modularisation of users on the platform is implicit, but we can still catch a glimpse of it when the algorithm develops the initial feeds to new users. “To help kick things off we invite new users to select categories of interest, like pets or travel, to help tailor recommendations to their preferences.”²⁴⁶ Under each “category” is the accumulated content of a certain group of modularised users that the algorithm extracted based on their online performance. Of course, there is also an overt modularisation of users on TikTok, which is reflected through various media elements such as “#hashtags”, background music, filters, challenges, and so on. On TikTok, almost all media elements can be used as “hyperlinks” that allow users to easily find others who have also chosen these elements from the massive user base, making it easier for them to create content, or simply follow the trend. The overt modularisation gives users “more” choices and freedom to explore other content compared to the former, where users are, mostly unknowingly yet willingly, modularised by the algorithm.

The “double modularisation” of the users powered by algorithms has nourished what I call the “flow” among individual users. “A key appeal of the creator-economy model is the ability to follow along with the stories of other people.”²⁴⁷ On a platform that is by its nature ephemeral, one effective way to cultivate loyalty is to invite the viewer to become part of what they see, or, to “join the flow”. If the “implicit modularisation” is just the beginning, an invitation, to the flow, where the users get to initially explore their interests and preferences, then the “overt modularisation” nurtured by users’ every new interaction with the system is by nature a collective force of invitation for the users to follow: by trying a new filter, or participating in a lip-sync, a challenge, or simply getting involved by rewatching, sharing, or dueting, users get access to multiple groups of other modularised users, which will in turn become part of their own online identity, or be absorbed by the algorithm to nurture the renewal of the “implicit modularisation”. To put it differently, if the “loop” we discussed in the former section refers to the coterminous relationship between consumption and production: the users produce their own consumption, then the “flow” is the plural form of the “loop”: a modularised group of users consume what the others produced, at the same time produce for the others’ consumption. Similarly, the “flow” is also generative: the algorithm locates the individual user, and its process of being modularised, reflects its fate of joining the “flow”. This is an ultimate way to promote consumption by placing individuals within

²⁴⁶ TikTok, “How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou | TikTok Newsroom”.

²⁴⁷ Jake Pitre, “TikTok, Creation, and the Algorithm,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 91 (2023): 71-74. [muse.jhu.edu/article/881100, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A739490439/AONE?u=oslo&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=634b67e5.](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A739490439/AONE?u=oslo&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=634b67e5)

massive group inertia and encouraging them to engage in simple, fragmented, formulaic and collective labour production. After all, in the “flow”, production is consumption and consumption is production, individual consumption drives the production of others and individual production imitates the consumption of others.

4.2.3 “Hypehouse” as a Metaphor: Image Incest and “The Production of Users”

It is evident that TikTok has been successful in facilitating content creation by its consumers, leading to the expansion of the “flow”. Recent research statistics reveal that among “over one billion monthly active users... 83% of TikTok users”²⁴⁸ have actively uploaded video content. Now, let us redirect our attention back to the vague and loosely-defined “consistency” that hangs over such a massive user base mentioned above, and attempt to unravel this “consistency” using the concept of “user-modularisation”.

To begin with, tactics to cater to, or to “please” the algorithm is widely accepted by the TikTokers: “Users develop assumptions about how the TikTok algorithm might work, and about how to trick and please the algorithm to make their videos trend.”²⁴⁹ To get better exposure, users dedicate their account to consistent content or pile up labels or hashtags for the algorithm to recognise and then trigger a more specific and targeted distribution result. This approach undoubtedly consolidates the “implicit modularisation”: users are voluntarily recognised by the algorithm as consumers and producers of a particular type, i.e. they produce consistent content that is distributed by the algorithm to a specific group of people with similar interests. In terms of how users consume content on the platform, although TikTok claims to encourage users to freely explore and engage with diverse content, the “implicit modularisation” inevitably limits the new content they are exposed to in a specific field. That said, users’ “free” consumption activities, namely their autonomous cultivation of “overt modularisation”, are constrained or largely determined by “implicit modularisation”. This is similar to the concept of “filter bubbles” first brought up by Eli Pariser that “the use of social media may limit the information that users encounter or consume online.”²⁵⁰ TikTok is clearly aware of this limitation and is trying to circumvent it, albeit in a somewhat hysterical

²⁴⁸ Brandon Doyle, “TikTok Statistics - Everything You Need to Know [Mar 2023 Update],” *Walloo Media*, last modified 21 March, 2023, <https://wallaroomedia.com/blog/social-media/tiktok-statistics/>.

²⁴⁹ Daniel Klug, Yiluo Qin, Morgan Evans and Geoff Kaufman, “Trick and Please. A Mixed-Method Study On User Assumptions About the TikTok Algorithm,” In *13th ACM Web Science Conference 2021 (WebSci '21)*, June 21–25, 2021, Virtual Event, United Kingdom. ACM, New York, NY, DOI: 10.1145/3447535.3462512.

²⁵⁰ Brent Kitchens, Steven L. Johnson and Peter Gray, “Understanding Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: The Impact of Social Media on Diversification and Partisan Shifts in News Consumption,” *MIS Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2020): 1619. DOI: 10.25300/MISQ/2020/16371.

manner: the latest solution is to offer “the option to start fresh on TikTok,” whenever users feel “recommendations are not relevant anymore, or not provide enough topical variety.”²⁵¹ However, what makes it more problematic is that the algorithm’s intervention makes users an essential part of the production of this finitude. The phenomenon of what I call “image incest” occurs when the overlapping of “implicit modularity” and “overt modularity” reaches a certain level: users produce homogeneous content while consuming homogeneous content produced by similar groups of users. This internal inbreeding of consumption and production is more vividly reflected on image-dominated platforms. Specifically, in terms of body representation and performance, this accounts for the “consistency” in the TikTok videos mentioned earlier.

“Image incest” is exemplified by the ubiquitous “clusters” of TikTok personalities on the platform. The most representative example is “Hypehouse”. To quote Thomas Petrou, one of the members of Hypehouse, “You can’t come and stay with us for a week and not make any videos, it’s not going to work. This whole house is designed for productivity.”²⁵² Essentially a content house, the Spanish-styled mansion located in LA accommodated a number of the biggest names on TikTok, and provided space for them to create videos, collaborate, and support each other. The @thehypehouse²⁵³ account itself already has over 21 million followers, and the TikTokers under the account used to include @charlidamelio,²⁵⁴ who has over 150 million followers, among dozens of other users. These Hypehouse member accounts are homogenous in nature: pretty, similar in age and physical builds, these TikTokers frequently appear in videos on each other’s accounts, goofing around, dancing together, using the same hashtag, doing challenges together and tagging each other in captions. A typical life scenario in Hypehouse is that “members clustered into the bathroom in rotating groups, doing back flips in front of a phone propped up on a roll of toilet paper.”²⁵⁵ By means of close collaboration among similar accounts, as well as repeated use and exposure of comparable content, the cluster linkage between accounts exhibited by Hypehouse maximises the utilisation of algorithmic recommendation mechanisms. Meanwhile, this clustering is also a manifestation of the industrial mass-production of body images and performance patterns: the

²⁵¹ TikTok, “Introducing a way to refresh your For You feed on TikTok,” last modified 16 March, 2023, <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/introducing-a-way-to-refresh-your-for-you-feed-on-tiktok-us>.

²⁵² The New York Times, “Hype House and the Los Angeles TikTok Mansion Gold Rush,” last modified 21 May, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/03/style/hype-house-los-angeles-tik-tok.html#commentsContainer>.

²⁵³ @thehypehouse, <https://www.tiktok.com/@thehypehouse>.

²⁵⁴ @charlidamelio, <https://www.tiktok.com/@charlidamelio>.

²⁵⁵ The New York Times, “Hype House and the Los Angeles TikTok Mansion Gold Rush”.

members leverage each other's popularity to drive consistent content production, expanding the scale of the "flow" they represent. In other words, the clustered production and consumption represented by Hypehouse showcased the expansion from the consistency in the content produced by a certain user to the production of consistent "users", which allegorically implies that the "production" promoted by TikTok is no longer limited to the production of content, but rather the production of the "users" themselves: physically active, similar in appearance, and obedient to the algorithm.

There are many other user clusters similar to Hypehouse:²⁵⁶ members hold the belief that "talented, weird funny and extremely good looking makes someone a TikTok god," and make "100 TikToks per day, at minimum."²⁵⁷ Here, by accepting the fact that their bodies are analysed, labelled, and modularised by the platform, users' bodies become a "means" or a form of "capital" to obtain the "reward" of audience appreciation. Through the intervention of an algorithm, the body performance and representation are integrated into the "flow" and engage in production activities while being consumed. Ultimately, the idea of "production" of the "flow" inevitably expands from creating content, and generating data, to the mass production of the users themselves.

4.3 Becoming Dorian Gray: The Algorithmic Self and Narcissism

In this section, I will propose and argue for the hypothesis that the user's interaction with TikTok is essentially an interaction with another "idealised self". The formulation of this viewpoint is inspired by a prevalent phenomenon on TikTok, namely the flirtatious and intimate interactions between young attractive heterosexual males (4.3.1). Their mutual fondling and adoration can be seen as more inclined towards "self-love" rather than being explicitly "homosexual." Building upon this premise, we look for the "subject" that interacts with the user on the platform, which I define as the user's "algorithmic self" (4.3.2). Furthermore, the reason why users enthusiastically engage with TikTok is essentially a form of "narcissistic" act through the interaction with their algorithmic selves (4.3.3).

²⁵⁶ Kapwing, "The Ultimate TikTok Houses List," last modified 22 July, 2022, <https://www.kapwing.com/resources/tiktok-houses-list/>.

²⁵⁷ Lorenz, "Hype House and the Los Angeles TikTok Mansion Gold Rush".

4.3.1 #Homiesexual and Its Revelation: The Narcissistic Nature of User Behaviour

Based on the above discussion, we can derive the following understanding of body representation and performance on TikTok: when the body is seen as capital, the portrayal of gender can also be seen as a performance, and with the intervention of algorithms, the “image incest” can lead to an increasingly homogeneous production and consumption of body images. The “Swayhouse”, another male-dominated TikTok cluster can be a good example that embodies these characteristics whilst giving rise to a new phenomenon worthy of discussion. Gathered within this fraternity-like community are a group of sexy and playful young men in their twenties. Similar to their counterparts on TikTok, the house’s main objective is to create content, actively engage in online activities, and increase popularity by collaborating with other members of the house. What is notable, however, is the way in which these boys interact: these openly heterosexual boys often act intimately and flirtatiously in front of the camera as if they were a gay couple. For example, in one video,²⁵⁸ a boy hugged another boy from behind and surprised him by kissing him on the cheek after being rejected. They wore the same black hoodies and had the same long curly hair, resembling each other like twins. This video exemplifies a consistent pattern of intimate interaction between these boys: similar in appearance and costume, they touch and kiss each other affectionately like a couple; then things go back to “normal”, and they resume their “brotherly” relationship, pushing each other away and ending with a good laugh. TikTokers came up with the term “homiesexual” to refer to non-sexual affective behaviours among straight men, and #homiesexual has accumulated more than 200 million views.

The pretty boys in Swayhouse are well aware of their sexuality (they are straight)²⁵⁹ and their flirting with each other is neither inherently nor directly related to the free expression of gender minority groups. Their video confirms that gender can be a “performance,” a “parody” in which the user acts as a gamer, or “homo ludens”, flaunting and accumulating physical capital in order to gain more tangible and intangible assets. It can also be understood as the equal opportunity of objectification between males and females as mentioned before. However, if we explore the psychological mechanisms behind this behaviour, we will find that #homiesexual is not about homosexuality, it is not even driven by sexual libido since sexual gratification is not what they pursue from each other: “They’re too hot and young to

²⁵⁸ @theswayla, <https://www.tiktok.com/@theswayla/video/6804601481724022021>.

²⁵⁹ The New York Times, “Everyone Is Gay on TikTok,” last modified 25 October, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/24/style/tiktok-gay-homiesexuals.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

be bothered with any of that.”²⁶⁰ Mostly between people of the same sex, the performers relish the pleasure this behaviour generates including the admiration of each others’ ideal physique and pretty face: we can thus categorise this behaviour as “homoerotic,” instead of being “homosexual.” For Freud, the term “eroticism” is more general than only being sexual, it refers to “different forms of pleasure experienced,” and homoeroticism is in essence “narcissistic.”²⁶¹ That is, the pleasure generates from, not the fulfilment of the sexual drive, but the pursuit of the complementarity of an idealised being that is essentially similar to the subject: the performance of narcissism. Admittedly, watching the Swayhouse boys with the consistent look and style interact erotically with each other is like watching Narcissus admiring his reflection in the pond. The boys carefully curate their self-image and assimilate each other’s image in the algorithm-driven “image incest”, resulting in their appreciation and affection for each other manifesting as the interaction with their idealised self processed by the algorithm. We can walk through the process again: the boys provide their personal image and preference information to a platform and algorithm, which they consume to produce modularised body images. With the catalytic effect of the user cluster, the “house”, the “flow” culminates in image incest, whereby the production of the consistent body image among boys is jointly determined by them, which means the result of image production is the collection of everyone’s images, that is, the idealised self-image collectively produced by everyone.

However, we already know that production and consumption are inseparable on TikTok. Therefore, the narcissistic erotic interactions among Swayhouse boys, in which they cultivate and please each other, can be understood as an allegorical revelation of the user-platform relationship: when consumption shapes production and production reinforces consumption, what users interact with (also a form of consumption) is ultimately an idealised “self” that they produced themselves with the facilitation of algorithms. This interactive, appreciative and nurturing relationship with the “self” can be glimpsed in extreme cases where the algorithmic intervention is too evident and aggressive. For example, some users noticed that they are actually interacting with another “self” when the algorithm recommended videos that were “not only reflective of their sense of humour and interests but also their physical appearance,”²⁶² which is quite unsettling for them. This is the “uncanny valley effect” at the data level triggered by algorithms: once the accuracy and pervasiveness of the algorithm

²⁶⁰ The New York Times, “Everyone Is Gay on TikTok”.

²⁶¹ Jean Bergeret, “Homosexuality or Homoeroticism?: ‘Narcissistic Eroticism’,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 83, no. 2 (2002): 352. DOI: 10.1516/QGUF-WK3L-9Q7P-YF0W.

²⁶² A. Bhandari and S. Bimo, Why’s Everyone on TikTok Now? The Algorithmized Self and the Future of Self-Making on Social Media. *Social Media + Society* 8, no. 1 (2022), DOI: 10.1177/20563051221086241.

reach a certain level, users feel that their information and privacy are being violated and are thus hesitant towards further interaction. However, in any case, we can hypothesise based on the revelations of these examples that users' production and consumption behaviour ultimately point towards their interaction with another "self". Moreover, this "self", shaped by algorithms and users together, will ultimately become increasingly complete and inclusive, that is, the user's "idealised self" that they can identify with, under the gaze of the algorithm.

4.3.2 All for You: The Formation of the "Algorithmic Self"

Having recognised that the user's interaction with the platform is likely to be directed towards the self, we will identify and elaborate on this "idealised self" in this section. Firstly, through an inspection of the affordances of the TikTok platform, we can use exclusion to uncover the state of isolation experienced by the users. In our analysis of AI as a gaze, we discussed that by marginalising the social functions and attributes of the platform, TikTok diminishes the gaze from the audience, or rather from the audience to which the "social network" is linked. For example, on traditional platforms that operate on the basis of "building social networks," the content that users receive often depends on whether they follow the creators or not: i.e. the "self-presentation" is a visual representation of "social relations", and the accumulation of the online assets depends on the scale of the relational network. On TikTok, however, many users expressed the non-necessity of building a strong social network, or becoming a KOL (key opinion leader) in the traditional sense: the interviewed users said that "they did not feel the need to follow certain creators, nor did they make use of the commenting feature, as one would on other video sharing platforms."²⁶³ That is to say, the online representation does not centre around the notion of "a networked self" anymore, which is actualised by the "expressive and connective affordances of SNSs," and utilises the platform as "props that facilitate self-presentation... that is centred around public displays of social connections."²⁶⁴

After all, traditional social media is centred around the users, and the platform provides the stage for self-representation, and the virtual social environment is a replication and amplification of an existing social experience. However, the intervention of algorithms has shaken up the concept of the "networked self": it has allowed the platform to move beyond being an auxiliary "prop" and to truly engage and transform the social experience. It has

²⁶³ Bhandari and Bimo, "Why's Everyone on TikTok Now?".

²⁶⁴ Zizi Papacharissi, *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 304-306.

monopolised and taken over the construction of social relations for users, leaving them in an unprecedented state of isolation on the platform. The empowerment of the algorithm results in the reduction of the user or the chronic castration of users' capacity: it makes the definition of "success" on TikTok simple and complex, simple in the sense that the algorithm does most of the work for you, and complex in the sense that how the user can be "idealised" to get the algorithm's approval.

From another perspective, the "state of isolation" of users shaped by algorithms can be understood as promoting a pure and efficient "state of production". By reducing social networking, the interaction between users and the platform can be maximised and fully utilised, which not only benefits content production but also facilitates the production of user-related data. In this context, we can introduce the concept of the "algorithmic self" as an updated version of the "networked self" concept on traditional social media platforms, specifically within the context of TikTok. This form of identity refers to how users actively participate in their own identity construction by immersively interacting with the algorithm: they can curate and present themselves through platform-mediated interactions with the platform, which are dominantly influenced by the default algorithmic processing, and in turn, shape the visibility and distribution of content as well as users' sense of self. Therefore, the "algorithmic self" can be considered as a continuously updated "portrait" or a generative "profile" of the user, resulting from the pervasive collection, categorisation, analysis, and re-distribution of user data. The previously mentioned "isolation" allows users to interact intensively with the platform and to a large extent exclusively with their "algorithmic selves". As a result, the "algorithmic self" will feed back into the users, providing them with a vivid manifestation of their inner-self called "For You": the collection of content that encompasses all the data that the users uploaded, and can be visualised.

In what sense is the "algorithmic self" on TikTok an "idealised self"? First of all, the platform grants users enough freedom to operate and explore, which amounts to the shaping of the algorithmic self. For example, users can easily self-optimize the algorithmic self by "simply long-press on a video and tap 'Not Interested' to indicate that you don't care for a particular video."²⁶⁵ This simple and intuitive way of adjusting the algorithmic self allows users to always feel like being in control, although the substance of this position is questionable. After accumulating enough data and undergoing a sufficient amount of machine learning, the

²⁶⁵ TikTok, "How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou | TikTok Newsroom".

algorithmic self seems to have surpassed the limitations of being merely a tool, a “prop”, and becoming a semi-humane figure with strong autonomy and interactivity, or a concept similar to that of a “cyborg”. It makes the interactions more humane and user operations simpler. For example, users no longer need to follow a certain creator to get content they like as they do on ordinary social platforms, as the algorithmic self has already made choices that are as close to the user’s intentions as possible. In addition, the algorithmic self is a necessary product of the new media trend of users’ datafication, and the modularisation of users’ data, meaning that it is always open for further evolvement and update with the user’s development. This provides users with possibilities to establish emotional identification with their algorithmic self, which is an important link of affective capitalism.

4.3.3 Recognise Thyself: The Excavation of Self-Love on TikTok

In the first two sections of this chapter, we touched upon the narcissistic nature of user behaviour on TikTok, and the fact that users are essentially interacting with their “algorithmic selves” on the platform, using the Swayboy’s body representation and performance as examples. In this section, I will connect these two aspects and resonate the narcissistic nature of users’ interaction with the “algorithmic self” on the platform—that is, explain the inextricable coexistence of users and algorithms on TikTok from a psychoanalytical perspective. On the TikTok platform, there are two forms of “self-representation”: one is the intuitive form achieved by users through the creation and uploading of contents, an image-based self-representation; the other is an implicit form, the representation of the “algorithmic self” shaped by the intensive interaction between users and the platform. In most cases, the algorithmic self is invisible, and its “representation” is manifested through the intertwining of humanised interactions with platform functionalities. The notion of “self-representation” is highly related to the idea of “self” and can be understood as a form of mediation in the constant reshaping of the self. It is not merely an indexical content of the real-world self, but can also induce the mechanism of identification on a psychological level.

While the identification between users and their intuitive self-representation has been the subject of much research, the identification mechanism between users and their algorithmic self remains an untouched topic. It is of great value to reveal the underlying logic of how algorithms control user identity, especially in cases where algorithms heavily rely on users’ eager engagement in the relentless reciprocal interactions. This process involves the throwing out and pulling back of the “libido” between the self and the algorithmic self as an object—an

interaction that is narcissistic in nature. Freud's theory of narcissism is a processual and complex system, but to give it a crudely simple definition would be: it concerns the directing of one's libido towards one's own ego as an object. In the context of TikTok, the algorithmic self is undoubtedly an "object", protected by the opaque "black box" of algorithms, and exists to a large extent separate from the subjectivity of the user. However, the algorithmic self is closely connected to the subject and is not a mere independent object. It is the externalisation of the self on digital platforms, while also integrating the diverse and fragmented libido of the subject. In other words, it is a pure "libido self": it originates from the comprehensive data collection from the subject, provides custom-made pleasure compensation, and represents the visualisation of the subject's desires with algorithmic support.

When discussing infantile sexuality, Freud addressed the idea of the "auto-erotic" using the example of a child's "thumb-sucking": to "obtain satisfaction from the subject's own body,"²⁶⁶ instead of from other people. The "thumb" as a part of the self provides compensation for pleasure, which is similar to the algorithmic self: the process of interaction between users and algorithms to obtain pleasure is like a baby sucking its own thumb, where the satisfaction of desire comes from within oneself—a form of masturbation. Yet it is not quite the same. Freud then defined narcissism in his following works as a separate and necessary stage in the development of the mind of every normal human being, a transitional stage in the process of moving from autoeroticism to the transfer of libido to an external object. At this stage, isolated libido, spread across the self, is integrated and focused on the "unified self" and the entity of the body, which is crucial to the formation of the "ego". That is, "the hitherto dissociated sexual instincts come together into a single unity and cathect the ego as an object."²⁶⁷ If the "thumb" only refers to isolated libido scattered across the subject's body during the "auto-erotic phase", the algorithmic self is clearly an integrated system. This can also be linked to the "modularities" mentioned earlier: each different module on TikTok, such as hashtags, filters, and background music, can be seen as representing isolated parts of the user's various kinds of pleasures. Under the integration of the platform, the algorithmic self becomes a relatively complete "object" for the investment of libido. Drawing on the preceding points, we can understand the algorithmic self as an intermediate state, in Freudian terms, between the "baby's thumb" and the newly formed "ego" that emerges when dispersed

²⁶⁶ James Strachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 7 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953), 181.

²⁶⁷ James Strachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 13. (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953), 89.

libido is integrated. It is both a part of the user, in that interactions with it are essentially interactions with oneself, providing compensation for pleasure that is directed outward, and a relatively complete and independent entity that can be objectified by the user, who may also experience psychological identification with it.

As for how libido shuffles between the self and object, Freud proposed a model of narcissistic libido movement in which the original libido is projected onto an external object and then strives to withdraw itself from that external object. He analogised how the “original libidinal cathexis of the ego... gives off to objects... but fundamentally persists” to how “the body of an amoeba is related to the pseudopodia which it puts out.”²⁶⁸ These “pseudopodia” are like the libido projected onto the object, while most of the libido still retracts and accumulates in the self. This trajectory of the cathecting of libido and its return to the subject shows a striking consistency with the process of the interaction between the users and their algorithmic selves. On the TikTok platform, the time, emotion, and identification that users invest in the “algorithmic self” as an object are absorbed and assimilated by the algorithm into an “open set” of the algorithmic self, which is ultimately recycled through the consumption of the recommended “For You” content. Compared to the ease and inconspicuousness of the external libidinal cathexis, the pleasure provided by the retrieval of libido is prominent, targeted, always new and endless. This further promotes the withdrawal of libidinal investment. In other words, due to the uniqueness of the algorithmic self, or the intervention of algorithms, there is a shortcut between the investment and withdrawal, or rather these two “overlap”: because user behaviour on the platform is a “loop”, the libidinal withdrawal is equivalent to the investment of it, and the libidinal investment directed towards the external object always points back the self. That is, the libido can switch freely between the object-libido and the ego-libido. To quote Freud, “Narcissistic or ego-libido seems to be the great reservoir from which the object-cathexes are sent out and into which they are withdrawn once more.”²⁶⁹ And the algorithmic self serves precisely as the “reservoir” that collects and relays the narcissistic libido.

The narcissistic interaction between users and the “algorithmic self” on the TikTok platform provides them with a certain degree of comfort and satisfaction. It produces the illusion that the users can recognise their algorithmic selves as the idealised selves, and in turn, get more deeply involved in the investment of their idealised version to retract the compensation of

²⁶⁸ Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, 75.

²⁶⁹ Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 7, 218.

pleasure. During infancy, individuals go through a phase of “primary narcissism”, a self-sufficient and blissful state where fragmented and isolated libidinal forces are integrated, forming a complete primal self that radiates pleasure. The existence of the algorithmic self is the digitised integration of the scattered libido, that radiant “desire entity”; while users’ cultivation and investment in it reflect the withdrawal of object libidinal cathexis—essentially the reminiscing of the ideal state of self-sufficiency, or the Freudian “secondary narcissism”: “the withdrawal of the object-libido.”²⁷⁰

In summary, the abundance of “#homiesexual” videos on TikTok allegorically reveals the essence of the relationship between users and the platform: with algorithms as pervasive intermediaries, users produce their idealised “algorithmic self” that becomes more and more inseparable through daily interaction and identification. The narcissistic foundation of the relationship inevitably complicates and entangles the user-platform dynamic. On TikTok, “performance” is the most significant issue, or rather, other issues can be discussed, commodified, and incorporated through performance. Meanwhile, the body serves as the capital and foundation that sustains this issue. With the algorithm collecting and analysing users’ bodies and behaviours comprehensively, TikTok turns them into “perpetual motion machines” that constantly generate data. The “modularisation” of data facilitates the “flow” that drives the mass production of body images. These beautiful but identical bodies, in turn, allegorically reveal the narcissistic nature of users’ interaction with their “algorithmic selves” on the platform. Here, the representation, the process, and the underlying mechanism form a self-sufficient cycle. This cycle operates as a continuous process of the production, consumption and renewal of the spectacle of body.

²⁷⁰ James Strachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 19 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953), 49.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis is revolved around the inquiry of two questions: 1) *How do users perform and represent their bodies on TikTok?* and 2) *How does the platform facilitate, affect, and even determine the representation of their bodies?* In order to address these questions, I have analysed and summarised some of the typical yet often overlooked characteristics of TikTok videos, and selected several highly popular and even virally spread video content on TikTok as focal points to explore the various explanations for these phenomena. This exploration encompassed explanations derived from both the platform's inherent features as well as more abstract and elusive cultural backgrounds, psychological mechanisms, and theoretical foundations. Throughout the comprehensive analysis spanning from surface-level observations to a deeper examination of the underlying dynamics, there remains a persistent focus on the relationship between users and the screen, between humans and machines. As a result, this thesis conceptualises the formation of the spectacle of body into three progressive stages, moving from the external to the internal, and from the superficial to the profound. These stages include the maximal activation of user bodies (*Chapter 2*), the insidious yet pervasive gaze and discipline exerted by the platform upon the body (*Chapter 3*), and ultimately, the extensive exploitation and mass production of user bodies facilitated by algorithms, as well as the assimilation and incorporation of subjectivity (*Chapter 4*). In the analytical chapters dedicated to each of these facets, this thesis has, firstly, employed a methodology of case analysis and close textual reading to examine how users represent their bodies on TikTok; secondly, used a dual approach of both “walkthrough” software analysis and theoretical analysis to reveal the underlying causes of these phenomena and their significant implications for the formation of the spectacle of body.

Chapter 2 found that some external factors frequently observed, yet often overlooked, in the videos, namely the vertical screen format, the background space and the music all profoundly influence the user's body performance. The body performance video finds a perfect “stage”, an ideal format, in the vertical screen frame, which is uniquely suited to transform the body performance video into the “affection image” in the Deleuzian sense, thus effectively and subtly mobilising the viewer's body. While the choice of background space for performance is varied on TikTok, there exists an implicit consistency: the extensive utilisation of everyday

space. It transforms “the production of video content within a space” into “the production of space itself”, turning the tedious and mundane space into a synonym for “the centrestage for body performance”. As for the choice of soundtrack, TikTok’s preference for fast, rhythmic and dramatic music is indicative of the platform’s tendency to capture users’ attention and unify their behaviour. At this point, the first step in the formation of the spectacle of body—the activation and preparation of the user’s body, is accomplished.

Chapter 3 delved into the second stage of the formation of the spectacle, which involves the platform’s gaze and discipline upon its users, as well as the transformative process of shaping users into “docile bodies,” habituating them to adapt to a state of being constantly subjected to external power. Taking the facial displays of users on TikTok as a starting point, this study revealed that whether through the use of lighting equipment and make-up techniques to enhance the look, or the application of filters to modify one’s face, or even the seemingly corrective “anti-filter movement” against excessive modification, they fundamentally expand the scope of “representation” and amplify the production of “images” on the platform, and thereby enhancing user engagement. Consequently, this leads to the phenomenon of users’ “self-exile,” where the real-world self relinquishes its place to the “image-self” in the realm of representation. Building upon this, once the representational self gains primacy, the platform’s surveillance and discipline over its users become more practicable and acceptable to the users. The reason why do TikTokers willingly and tirelessly engage in the production and consumption under the pervasive gaze and exertion of power is that the platform’s “deception mechanism” enables the “pseudo-empowerment” of users which convinces them of their position of authority. Once this state becomes “habitualised,” users become more dedicated and actively interact with the platform, subsequently contributing to the formation of the spectacle of body.

Building on the above discussion, *Chapter 4* elucidates the final stage of the formation of the spectacle: the mass production of body images. On TikTok, it seems that all issues can be encompassed as part of “performance,” whether it pertains to gender fluidity, concepts of beauty, or freedom of speech. However, responding to these issues on TikTok through “performance” is essentially the production of “the image of the issue.” Similar to other images, these “performances” are inevitably subjected to processes of entertainment and commodification. Moreover, it is always difficult to escape the stereotypes behind the so-called “free expression” that drives the formation of the spectacle into an efficient yet convergent trajectory. The intervention of algorithms on TikTok drives this process. Its

pervasive data collection, analysis, and redistribution incorporate all user behaviours on the platform into “production,” namely the relentless production of user-generated data. Based on this, TikTok modularises its massive user base and integrates them into the “flow” of “consumption-as-production.” The extreme consequence is that users, in order to please the algorithm for better dissemination, end up producing similar content while consuming homogeneous content, resulting in the phenomenon of “image incest.” The reason why users are so actively involved in production and consumption on TikTok is that the platform’s algorithms produced their “algorithmic selves”. Through the ongoing interaction with users, the algorithm learns comprehensive information about the user and produces an “integration of libido”, a “desire entity”, that generates continuous pleasure. The interaction between users and the algorithm is essentially a “narcissistic act,” which fosters user loyalty and makes their relationship with the platform increasingly unbreakable. Just like Dorian Gray, forever young and beautiful, the body spectacle itself is a virtual representation; The “algorithmic self” serves as the portrait, documenting the history of the subject, engraving their past, and representing a certain level of reality. However, it remains hidden, functioning as the source of energy that sustains the virtual representation that radiates pleasure and beauty.

5.2 Clarification

In order to address the research questions, this thesis extensively analysed a large number of sample videos on TikTok to emphasise the relevant features pertaining to the study. Due to ethical considerations and to ensure the protection of user privacy, an interpretive approach to video content analysis was employed, which refrains from providing screenshots of the videos but instead describes and interprets the content of each video within the context and perspective relevant to the research. This approach allows for an intuitive analysis of how the relationship between users and the platform is collectively constructed through the individual performances and user behaviours portrayed in the videos, as well as the platform’s features. In addition, a variety of sources and types of evidence and materials are introduced in the case studies: in addition to academic research literature, archival data such as newspapers, websites, blog posts, interviews, rankings, etc. These materials directly relevant to the research are an essential part of the phenomenological study: they are factual and verifiable data that reflect and comment on the specific topic within the current cultural and social context. Furthermore, the TikTok creators mentioned in the text and the interviews conducted with them are extracted from secondary sources that have been publicly released and

therefore do not pose a threat to data confidentiality and privacy policy. After all, the identity of the users is not crucial to the research itself, as the focus of analysis is on the relevance of the content to the research questions.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Due to the limited scale of this study, only a certain number of representative samples and cases have been included in the analysis. However, on the ever-evolving and all-encompassing platform of TikTok, it remains uncertain whether these cases can maintain their representativeness, relevance and validity. The phenomenological analysis of the human-platform relationship is inherently a long-term process that requires continuous updates and ongoing attention. Therefore, in future research, it will be necessary to appropriately expand the sample scope and pay attention to new phenomena in order to get a better knowledge of the platform development and continuously update the validity of the arguments. Furthermore, since the underlying logic of this thesis is based on phenomenological analysis, a variety of theoretical perspectives have been employed to elucidate the complex and diverse phenomena. This indeed results in scattered emphasis and disjointed logical progression in the writing. Moreover, because of the limitations in length and the emphasis of the discussion, this thesis did not manage to provide detailed explanations and background information for the theories and methodologies involved. Instead, they were utilised as perspectives and tools to achieve the purpose of explaining the phenomena. Therefore, this research can be seen as an “outline”, or an exploration of the possibilities of multiple theoretical interpretations. In future studies, each theoretical perspective and aspect can be further developed, incorporating detailed explanations that delve into the historical context of the theories. Lastly, for complex political and commercial reasons, TikTok is available in two versions: the Chinese mainland version known as “Douyin” and the international version. While the international version is more focused on Gen-Z content creation (which is the focus of this study), the Chinese mainland version places greater emphasis on enhanced live-streaming features and an established e-commerce chain. Further research could benefit from the comparative study of these two platforms, for example, how different platform designs and revenue mechanisms have significant implications for the formation of the spectacle of body.

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