

Acquiring, Analyzing, and Understanding Multimodal TikTok Short Video Data: The Case of Online Sex Worker Visibility Management

Teemu Helenius
University of Turku
E-mail: taohel@utu.fi

Abstract

This paper introduces some key questions that affect how multimodal short video data on TikTok can be accessed, acquired, and analysed. The accompanying research ethical questions will also be highlighted. The issue of data collection is approached in terms of TikTok's platform features that most readily affect how videos are made visible and available to users: audio centrality of content and its delivery via the For You Page (FYP) recommender algorithm. The specific context of data gathering, and multimodal discourse analysis are connected to the visibility management of sex workers on TikTok as affected by the platform's content and visibility moderation. The paper presents work-in-progress approaches to data gathering for building multimodal corpora, multimodal discourse analysis, and research ethics of TikTok videos. Additionally, some early findings of the analysis on online sex worker visibility management on TikTok are presented.

Keywords: multimodality, TikTok, platform affordances, content moderation, visibility, social media

Introduction

The social media platform TikTok presents an interesting opportunity and challenge for multimodal analysis. The highly multimodally complex TikTok short videos incorporate audio, still image, moving image, written text, and hypertext in multiple forms to create very dense and contextually bound multimodality. This paper introduces some of the key technical features of TikTok that structure communication on the platform. They in turn influence both how multimodal short video data can be gathered and analysed as well as how the visibility produced impinges on research ethics questions. These issues are connected to the themes of a larger research project's work in progress first article, where I examine the visibility management practices of sex workers in their promotional videos when they interact with content and visibility management by the platform. Some early findings of these forms of managing visibility are also presented.

TikTok Platform Affordances and Visibility Management

Social media platform affordances cover possibilities and constraints to users in terms of the technological and socio-cultural constitution of the platform that provides new dynamics, communication formats, and interactivity between users (boyd, 2010: 46-47; Bucher & Helmond 2017: 239; Evans et. al, 2017: 37). Two key features of TikTok contribute to making multimodality on the platform distinct from other social media: audio-centric content creation and the content recommender algorithm of the For You Page. (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström, 2022).

TikTok videos and the resulting trends and memes that circulate via the creativity of the users often centre on specific audio clips that include speech, music, sounds and

more (Zulli and Zulli, 2020). These clips are often also accompanied by specific sequences of embodied communication that connect with the prescribed audio. The ease of finding, re-using and remixing audio clips is embedded into the platform's user interface which further exemplifies the audio-centricity of communication. For example, through the *Use this sound – feature* users can instantly create a new video based on the audio clip of the video they are currently watching.

Further emphasizing creativity as the basis of activity on TikTok, Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström (2022: 12-14) conceptualize the creation of short videos on TikTok by applying the ideas of *vernacular creativity*, *social creativity*, *distributed creativity*, and *circumscribed creativity* from different scholars. I present these forms of creativity here briefly as they are relevant for understanding all types of TikTok videos:

1. *Vernacular creativity* (adapted from Burgess 2006): affective and platform-specific communication styles of users that are particularly visible as a focus on everyday and mundane content creation.
2. *Social creativity* (adapted from Glăveanu 2020): mutual shaping of creativity between social, material, and cultural assemblages that are particularly visible in features of the platform that facilitate interaction between users for creativity such as the *Use this sound – feature*.
3. *Distributed creativity* (adapted from Sawyer and DeZutter 2009): groups of individuals creating a collaborative end-product with no ownership or responsibility of the result specifically attributed to any of them.
4. *Circumscribed creativity* (adapted from Kaye, Chen, and Zeng 2021): creativity as it is facilitated and constrained by the features of short video creation on TikTok as well as

platform policies such as platform governance constraining through moderation.

The videos on TikTok are mainly discovered by users through a user-specific recommendation algorithm on the For You Page (FYP) of TikTok, which fosters new types of sociality, communication, and identity building practices (Abidin, 2021). The highly public and popular FYP makes TikTok videos very susceptible to spread “virally” to unforeseen audiences of form and scale (e.g. Boffone, 2021: 6). Users attempt to perceive how the algorithmic process turns human communication into data and attempt to structure their multimodal communication to fit this process (e.g., Burgess *et. al.*, 2022: 55-56, 86). Through how TikTok is built to deliver videos on the FYP, the visibility of messages and people’s bodies emerges as a key affordance to understand multimodal communication on TikTok. The visibility to be managed by both the users and the platform concerns the relative ease of finding users and videos on TikTok, and embodied ways of being in making oneself look and see and be seen and looked by others (Evans *et. al.*, 2017: 42; Jones, 2020: 24-25).

Sexuality and Sex Workers on Social Media

Questions of the visibility of bodies and messages take a heightened turn when the focus is on sexuality and sexual expression on social media. Sexual expression on social media is ubiquitous, but simultaneously highly regulated by platforms through “community guidelines”, content moderation practices, and de-platforming (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020; Are and Briggs, 2023). The visibility of sexuality on social media platforms is at its core a question of how sexuality as a force that shapes sociality and society is presented (Paasonen *et.al.*, 2023). I explore these points of contestation through sex worker promotional content creation, which highlights new tensions in the relationship of users and platforms.

Online sex work (OSW) is typically defined as including the production and sale of erotic or sexual content online that was either produced earlier or is provided to the audience as a live broadcast (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022). Online sex workers use social media for building a following through promotional work and creating communities and relations with prospective audiences (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022). The linkages created across social media platforms through promotional work are essential for the work in the adult entertainment industry to be economically viable (Are and Briggs, 2023). At the current stage of research, I define the promotional content quite broadly, but the core elements include implicit or even explicit sexual innuendo and double-entendres. Sex workers face a constant threat of invisibility posed by platforms to remove and reduce the visibility of sex worker content coupled with inconsistent and unclear specifications of what sexual activity, nudity, and

solicitation is and is not (Are and Briggs, 2023). Sex workers must structure multimodal communication to be understood by prospective audiences correctly, evade algorithmic detection models, and skirt the community guidelines guiding the human moderators in their work.

Moderating Content and Visibility on Social Media

A key contributing factor to the precarious state of existence for sex workers on TikTok is content and visibility moderation. Platforms shaped by human and algorithmic practices control how information is exchanged, and user activity directed by deciding on what to show and not show to different users (Zeng and Kaye, 2022). Moderation practices are based on “community guidelines” documents directed to users, and on the platform’s internal guidelines to moderators (Gillespie, 2018). TikTok’s guidelines for sexual expression ban displays of nudity and implied nudity or sex acts as well as solicitation of sexual activity or videos that glorify such solicitation (TikTok, 2023a).

Based on both the out-facing and internal guidelines, automated and human moderation practices are used by platforms in coordination, in a process where “problematic” content is either removed, reduced in visibility, or escalated for further review to human moderators (e.g., Zeng and Kaye, 2022; Gillespie, 2018). There is a trend towards the use of visibility moderation practices that in effect reduce the visibility or reach of “problematic” content (e.g. Zeng and Kaye 2022; Savolainen, 2022, Are, 2022). Such practices are often opaque to users who may not be aware that their visibility has been altered. TikTok in effect admits to this practice by stating that certain types of content are ineligible to be recommended by the FYP-algorithm (TikTok, 2023b).

The audio and algorithm centrality of TikTok’s platform affordances coupled with the platform’s intent on moderating which videos can be seen have major effects on how visibility is produced. **These effects also extend to questions of data gathering, data analysis, and how research impacts the visibility of precarious groups such as sex workers.** I thus propose that the following questions be asked with the platform affordances in mind:

- How to access and acquire multimodal TikTok short video data?
- How to analyse and understand multimodal TikTok short videos in general, and especially in terms of how online sex workers manage visibility?
- What are the implications of studying groups whose visibility on platforms is at risk and may be further threatened by research?

The next section provides some work-in-progress approaches to answer these questions and provide solutions.

How To Access and Acquire Tiktok Short Videos?

The contested status of sex worker promotional videos, and the audio and algorithm centric nature of TikTok pose a challenge for data gathering and analysis. It is generally necessary to interact with the content recommendation algorithm and various other technological platform features for manual multimodal data gathering. Any interactions with the algorithm also feed into its recommendations for the future, thus creating at least a partial bias based on the researcher's past interaction with the platform. The methods for data gathering presented here are experimental in nature and intended to mitigate at least some of the challenges that TikTok's technological structure presents. I present them here for further iteration and discussion based on the questions raised by my current approaches.

I have adopted a digital ethnography inspired methodology in the early stage of data gathering that is based on previous explorations into TikTok (Abidin, 2021; Schellewald, 2021). The methods used are more focused on spending time in the app and gaining an understanding of how content creation and multimodal communication take shape than on collecting a specific number of data samples. I have so far chosen to use 1-hour increments in data gathering with focus on the different data gathering methods outlined in this section. These sessions include taking and then reviewing field notes, screen grabbing relevant data for further analysis, experimenting with the platform's functions and recommender algorithm, and collecting information on hashtags and audio clips.

The key issue of algorithmic feedback loops that TikTok and its trends are prone to perpetuate by design can be alleviated via a more longitudinal ethnographic approach that I intend to incorporate by systematically repeating observation sessions (Schellewald, 2021: 1440-1441). Further on the course of this article's research I will also conduct supplementary interviews both to better understand multimodal practices of online sex workers as well as to give them a voice in the research design. The digital ethnography data gathering process is preceded with a walkthrough of the TikTok platform for increased context.

The walkthrough method devised by Light et.al. (2018) can be used to critically engage with the affordances of the platform, which include technological features as well as the vision, operating model, and different governing modes of the platform. The *vision* of the app concerns what the app or platform is supposed to do and by extension implies how it can be used and by whom. The *operating model* concerns the business strategy and revenue sources of the platform with underlying political and economic interests. The *governing modes* concern how the app provider seeks to manage and regulate user activity to sustain their operating model and fulfil their vision. Material for the walkthrough may be found within the app itself or as documents and guidelines produced particularly by the company operating the platform (i.e., ByteDance for TikTok). The analysis of

this expected environment of use is followed by a technical walkthrough in which I used the desktop version and the mobile app of TikTok for three key stages: registration and entry; everyday use; and app suspension, closure, and leaving. My walkthrough analysis of TikTok was particularly centred on aspects that affect multimodal communication and visibility of users on the platform.

The walkthrough provides a basis for the next step in the data gathering process, where different options for eliciting data are explored. Based on the walkthrough I devised four different options for data gathering that were and can be used in conjunction. The experiments suggest that the Use this sound – repository may emerge as the key method. The methods also reflect the ways of video discovery on TikTok in general and are outlined below:

- Feeding the algorithm
- Hashtags
- Use this sound -repository
- Identifying specific creators

My experiments in data gathering suggest that the focus should be directed to the key audio and algorithm centric qualities of TikTok in facilitating data gathering. The process relies on first finding a suitable path to the relevant content through *feeding the FYP algorithm* with inputs (i.e., liking, saving, repeatedly watching specific videos) to amass a suitable pool of videos to build upon for further data gathering. I chose to first feed the algorithm with inputs on videos that are related to dating and relationships to navigate a path to online sex worker videos. Using the FYP algorithm can however only ever catch a glimpse of the reality of what is happening on TikTok.

The process can be supplemented by identifying and analyzing the use of *specific hashtags used in the relevant content*. Following the feeding of the algorithm to amass suitable data, I then observed a further number of videos to both document the used hashtags and to loosely categorize these hashtags thematically. The intent is to find hashtags that may typically hold online sex worker content or other hashtags that host such content less overtly.

The hashtags often connect with specific audio clips that users can embed within their videos. These audio clips can be found, reused, and remixed by users through *The use this sound -repository* that acts as a further tool to understand TikTok multimodality. It offers an audio-centric way to gather data on specific audio clips. In the current stage of the experiment, I was for example able to identify a trend called “the flashing background”, where creators used items that reflect light to showcase their bodies in ways that would not normally be in line with TikTok's content and moderation policies. This trend was often presented with a specific accompanying hashtag and audio clip which both enhanced its visibility by making the videos searchable.

The last supplementary method relies on identifying and focusing on specific creators on the platform for data or

using a creator's profile as a tool to access a wider variety of TikTok trends across a longer span of time. The video data is screen recorded from the TikTok mobile app to best preserve the intended format of the material for the building of a corpus for multimodal analysis.

Multimodal Analysis of Tiktok Short Videos

The multimodal discourse analysis of the videos is done by adopting the transcription model devised by Baldry & Thibault (2005: 165-249). The transcription model is theoretically based on a systemic-functional-linguistics (e.g., Halliday, 1978) understanding of language use guided by metafunctions divided into *experiential* (demonstrating e.g. events, places, things, people), *interpersonal* (demonstrating relations between viewers and the world), *textural* (construction of an overall composition of a balanced text), and *logical* (construction of narratives and sequences of events) meaning making relations within the multimodal text (Baldry & Thibault 2005: 226).

The framework enables analysis of video-based data and the inclusion of the modalities possible for meaning making on TikTok. However, since the framework is not intended for analysis of social media data, I will present some iterations that concern TikTok's multimodal features specifically. The framework directs higher level analysis to time, visual frame, visual image, kinesic action, and soundtrack in connection with the metafunctional interpretation of the communication (Baldry & Thibault 2005: 174). They are further elaborated in the adapted framework by examining how visibility is produced via the *expression form* and *content form* of the videos. Baldry & Thibault (2005: 226) specify how the expression form and content form are linked to the metafunctional interpretations in their work as shown below.

The expression form concerns the display of invariants and their transformations in time in the delimited optic array (i.e. display of variations and repetitions in the optic qualities of the video transmitted on the screen). The metafunctions on the expression form manifest as:

- *Experiential*: Display on the screen of transformations, substitutions, nullifications of structure + visual kinaesthesia based on camera movement that produce a changing optic array
- *Interpersonal – orientational*: Field of view and movement of the camera as the optic array of the viewer + simulation of head-body movement in orientation to viewer
- *Textural*: Deletions, accretions, slippage of texture in the optic array
- *Logical -transitional*: Visual transitions as based on camera movement (e.g. pan, zoom, dolly shot), and based on video editing (e.g. cut, wipe, merge, dissolve) in post-production

The content form concerns depiction of events in the depicted world that the viewer sees on the screen. The metafunctions on the content form manifest as:

- *Experiential*: Depiction / perception of objects and events in the form of volumes and vectors in depicted world + movement of observer in depicted world
- *Interpersonal – orientational*: Use of colour, modalisation, camera angles to orient the viewer to the depicted world and to adopt an evaluative stance towards it; the creation of social-interpersonal relations between viewer and the depicted world
- *Textural*: Compositional principles of wholeness, balance, the relations of part to the whole
- *Logical -transitional*: Shot as single run of camera with no displacement in time or place of depicted scene + nesting of shots in higher-order units; dependency relations between shots

Focusing on the expression form enables the analysis of how OSW-creators combine TikTok platform features such as the extensive editing, audio creation and manipulation, and visual filtering tools to create promotional videos that circumvent content and visibility moderation. Focusing on the content form in turn enables the analysis of the meaning making by OSW-creators in terms of how they create sexualized and un-sexualized narratives and scenes in their videos. Combining these forms of displaying visual imagery and depicting the world makes it possible to analyse how visibility is managed in relation to the viewer and the platform. The focus is on how the video creator's status as creating OSW-content is made sensible to the viewers within the content guidelines enforced by TikTok.

The question of how visibility is managed in relation to the For You Page – algorithms and the governance of visibility by the platforms requires the incorporation of further functions of the platform into the analysis. The functions encompass the *like*, *comment*, *save*, and *share* functions that directly influence how users can interact with videos. When a viewer interacts with these functions, they all affect how the FYP- algorithm delivers future videos to the specific user and how likely it is to be shown to other users. As such these functions form a further component of videos are understood. Two further features for affording visibility are hashtags, and the audio clip repository. These features affect how videos can be found by users and the platform as well as how they can be re-used by other users.

Present Insights into Visibility Management by Online Sex Workers

The analysis of the videos collected so far for this research has revealed some emerging trends of content creation that are outlined briefly below:

- Creators combine kinesic action of facial expressions and visual framing of close distance to viewers with spoken audio that simulate flirting, dating, and an imagined romantic relationship between creator and viewer.
- Creators construct humorous dialogues of everyday life scenes between them and the person filming which feature sexual innuendo and jokes.
- Creators produce imitations of sexual activity with kinesic action and audio, where the visual framing leaves out parts of bodies sensitive to moderation.
- Creators produce audio clips specifically designed to be re-used by other OSW-creators for their content creation.
- Creators produce videos that specifically refer or allude to their OSW content creation practices and how they can not show everything on TikTok to highlight the content found elsewhere.
- Creators take well known genres of audio-based pornographic material and adapt them for TikTok while evading visual and text-based moderation.
- Creators employ various forms of cuts and editing of visual content that encourage repeated views of their videos which in turn feed visibility to the algorithm. These cuts also limit the time that body parts sensitive to moderation are visible.
- Creators recontextualize already popular audio meme templates with sexual innuendo which are then potentially visible to larger audiences but also to increased scrutiny of moderation.
- Creators intentionally misattribute audio clips and often refrain from using any hashtags to curate their visibility to a more specific group of viewers while making their videos less easily searchable and visible on TikTok in general.
- Creators use text overlaid on videos to contextualize the videos as sexually suggestive but carefully refrain from direct referrals to sex or choose to use strings of emojis and intentionally misspelled words to evade moderation.
- OSW-creator videos regularly feature high numbers of views, likes, comments, and shares, which suggests that creators can adapt their promotional videos in ways that reach viewers despite TikTok outlining to not recommend videos with sexual content on the FYP.

The present findings point to a wide range of uses of TikTok functions for video creation and editing by OSW-creators to manage their visibility both towards viewers and the platform's governance. The creators' use of the platform appears to be highly in concordance with the four forms of creativity identified by Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström (2022). Creators appear to be quite skilled in utilizing mundane, everyday scenarios and making them into promotional material through contextualization with sexual meanings. The creators engage in use of the interactivity features of TikTok such as creating content based on existing audio clips and then modifying them, as well as responding directly to user comments with new videos, or

creating audio clips themselves that call for user participation (e.g., staring challenges facilitating the use of the *Duet-function* that enables users to respond to a video with a video of their own played alongside the original). Creators also remix a wide variety of audio templates with little regard to how they were originally conceived, which may in some cases result in a change of the generally perceived meaning of e.g. a specific audio meme template. This process muddles the idea of ownership and responsibility over production of video content.

Finally, creators actively use the features provided for short-video creation and enhancing visibility on the platform in ways that are not in concordance with the content guidelines and policies outlined by TikTok. They can do this precisely because TikTok enables such a highly remixable, editable, and permutable multimodal meaning making. Through careful and strategic use of the multimodal meaning-making afforded by TikTok, OSW-creators can overcome many of the constraints to visibility that come in the form of content and visibility moderation. Their polysemous videos do not necessarily rely on exposure of the body or text content that may be caught by text based or visual moderation algorithms. Simultaneously, they contribute greatly to various creative processes on the platform that would not look the same without their presence. The early findings of this research suggest that the platform governance models on TikTok target a low hanging fruit of a high amount of exposure of the body or explicit nudity. TikTok can police bodies but not ideas or creativity for it fundamentally relies on their circulation.

The present analysis also suggests that to iterate this research framework further, comments could be scrutinized in more detail to better ascertain that viewers also understand these videos "correctly". Additionally, the importance of the profile page for OSW-creators should be examined since it acts as the gateway to the online sex worker content these creators are making elsewhere. The findings will also be supplemented by interviews with the creators of videos to better understand what factors they consider in managing visibilities.

Research Ethics Regarding Visibility

The analysis of sex worker promotional videos from the chosen research perspective brings with it a host of questions about visibility of these users and their communication practices. Acquiring informed consent for content that is reproduced in research is a sensible baseline. However, this only partially solves issues. I propose that it is also highly important to better understand the viewpoints of the creators that are in a precarious position through giving them a voice within the research structure. This can be carried out through supplementary interviews that also help to better capture the intent of the creators as opposed to only imposing the researcher's point of view on the videos. This is also particularly important because I do not

face the risks these creators do and stand to benefit from conducting the research.

The results of this research also raise questions of what happens when we gain a better understanding of these promotional practices that attempt to circumvent moderation? Will the platform operators of TikTok use this knowledge to put these creators at further risk of having their visibility reduced or taken away? Or is it possible through research to also make visible how sex workers act as drivers of communication on a more general level on TikTok? I have suggested that the creative uptake of TikTok's features by these users highlight the centrality of the multimodal creation features also for circumventing moderation. Altering the features is likely not something TikTok would desire. Overall, even if sex worker promotional video creation is mostly an exercise in increasing visibility and driving traffic to their respective "home platforms", it is important to remember that not all publicity is good publicity.

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