The Dialectic of TikTok: Fakeness and Authenticity in the New Digital Age

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Abstract

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The Dialectic of TikTok: Fakeness and Authenticity in the New Digital Age

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First available in the US in 2017, TikTok is a relatively new social media platform. This, however, has not prevented it from playing a massive role in people's socialization. Although some hail social media as the end of the culture industry's tyranny, the fundamental logic of capitalist ownership and production still guides TikTok, as evidenced by the prevalence of advertising, data collection, and censorship on the platform. In capitalist society, ubiquitous hints of emancipation that are often eclipsed by realities of alienation and manipulation lead people to crave something "real," or "authentic" – perhaps explaining the latter term's status as a buzzword in TikTok discourse. With authenticity being a socially constructed designation, I aim to discern the criteria people employ to determine (in)authenticity on TikTok. I ground my critique in the Frankfurt School to explore how determinations of authenticity reinforce or subvert capitalist reality. To gather data, I conducted a "scavenger hunt" study of 238 people in which they provided links to videos they deemed fake and authentic alongside justifications for why they thought a video was apt. After coding justifications with a Systematic Thematic Discovery approach, I found that most definitions of authenticity (relatability, vulnerability, good marketing…) reinforce the capitalist status quo; however, some – like the tendency to see profiteering as fake – suggest that "seeing through" is possible. This has notable implications for the creation of echo chambers, the formation of identity, and the definition of reality in capitalist society.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Celia and Scott Smith, who, by barring me from nearly all TV shows, movies, and some books in my early years, nourished my ruthlessly critical perspective of the media that socialize us. I love you both.

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Introduction

As a repository for apparently endless short videos ranging from dances to animals to medical advice to political opining and beyond, TikTok is one of the principal sources of culture in our society. TikTok is the latest in a rapid succession of visual-dominant social media platforms: launched in 2005, YouTube paved the way for Vine in 2013, which itself buttered up the social landscape for Musical.ly in 2014. This last platform was something of an anomaly in its singular focus on replicating brief dances set to catchy snippets of pop music. In 2017, the Chinese tech startup ByteDance bought Musical.ly for about $1 billion and launched TikTok in the United States. The app almost immediately exploded: by the fall of 2018, it was already garnering more downloads from the App Store than Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat (Jennings, 2019). Then, within about four years, it had catapulted itself to over one billion active monthly users globally (Seabrook, 2022). ByteDance, the startup that owns TikTok, claims that more than half of US adults use TikTok more than once a month. This astronomical growth has rendered TikTok an undisputable peer of such older, more established platforms as Instagram and Snapchat. Used by 67 percent of American teens (Seabrook, 2022), the app is a particularly salient driver of youth culture. Although its levels of use have entered the realm of several other major platforms, the particularities of TikTok make it an important object of critical sociological inquiry.

TikTok sits somewhat awkwardly in the middle of platforms that are generally digital manifestations of "real world" social networks in which users connect primarily with those they already know (like Facebook) and platforms that are worlds unto themselves in which users forge entirely new virtual communities (like Reddit). A more

quantitative comparison with other platforms is in order: while Kemp (2022) reports that around 70 percent of Facebook users use the site to communicate with friends and family, only 15 percent of TikTok users do. Kemp (2022) also finds that 77 percent of TikTokers aim to consume entertaining and funny content but that only 34 percent actively post videos. Contrast this to Instagram, another visually oriented social media, where 70 percent of users say they post videos and pictures, and we start to see TikTok less as a site of cultural production and more as one of consumption and socialization. Corroborating this conceptualization is Seabrook's (2022) claim that, at 95 minutes per day on the app, TikTok users spend almost twice as much time on TikTok as Instagram users do on that platform.

TikTok and its Chinese ownership have recently been the subject of a sort of culture war in the United States, where concerns about TikTok's infamous algorithm and data collection policies abound. These concerns are more or less founded. The platform has been accused of "excessive" and "aggressive" data harvesting from its users (Sayegh, 2022; Touma, 2022), which is quite a matter of concern in our era of unbridled corporate surveillance. The mysteriously potent nature of the algorithm has equally elicited circumspection. It is worth including Seabrook's (2022) limpid description here:

> Instead of the app displaying content that you've chosen to see from a collection of friends and other accounts that you've curated yourself, a machine-learning algorithm is your curator. Drawing on your usage patterns, your account settings, and data from your device—which could include information about people who are contacts in your phone, Facebook friends, and people you have sent TikTok links to or opened links from—

> the app predicts what content you really want to see. If you post a video in which you appear, biometric and demographic information that includes gender, ethnicity, and age could be scraped from your face and potentially added to the data slurry.
>
> Mainly, though, the TikTok algorithm relies on the "signals" harvested from your responses to your "For You" feed: likes, comments, and the length of time you watch a video before swiping to the next one, by flicking your fingers up the screen. Every action, or lack of one, tells the A.I. something about your level of "engagement"—the caviar of social metrics.

There are legitimate reasons to impugn TikTok's data collection policies and the algorithm on the grounds of human privacy, individuality, and autonomy; however, it is hard to deny the xenophobic and nationalist "othering" rampant in many contemporary criticisms of TikTok. (I am sure the reader needs no reminder of the geopolitical tensions that currently strain Sino-American relations and the oft-hawkish rhetoric that politicians of all sides – but especially the right – project against China.) The conservative-leaning *National Review*, for example, ran a piece entitled "TikTok is China's Trojan Horse" (Ghlionn, 2021). A *Forbes* article on the subject seems to subtly fearmonger as it says, "In China, there is little question that private companies are closely linked and aligned with the wishes of its governing party, the Chinese Communist Party" (Sayegh, 2022). While not typically indulged by outlets of any serious repute, a quick Google or YouTube search readily yields conspiratorial claims that China aims to "make Americans dumb" with TikTok's stupefying algorithm.

Ultimately, the welter of reasons to question TikTok (legitimate and illegitimate alike) have had a considerable effect – in December 2022, TikTok was banned on all US government devices (Morrison, 2023). Several states – including my own (Ohio) – have followed suit. Yet many politicians and people want more: rightist Senator Josh Hawley and Representative Ken Buck introduced a bill to enact an outright TikTok ban for the entire country in January of 2023. Hawley said of the bill, "TikTok poses a threat to all Americans who have the app on their devices. It opens the door for the Chinese Communist Party to access Americans' personal information, keystrokes, and location through aggressive data harvesting. Banning it on government devices was a step in the right direction, but now is the time to ban it nationwide to protect the American people." Morrison (2023) reports that ByteDance has spent profligate sums lobbying in an attempt to avoid such a catastrophe. The result, as of now, remains to be seen.

I seek here to propound a somewhat divergent critique of TikTok. I hope to eschew dominant criticisms of the platform in which the truth is difficult to parse out from the propaganda. So, allow me to start with a little reflexivity: I first downloaded TikTok in the spring of 2020 – shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – as a sort of diversion from the conflagration that was the world around me. I initially had no intention of becoming a creator, but that changed with time. I began to produce political videos that saw mild success – a handful got into the hundreds of thousands of views, and after three months, I was nearing 6000 followers. Then, during a live stream, I said something moderately political (I do not have any recollection of what it was – it was that small) and was permanently banned from that affordance. I was simultaneously finding myself engaged in very unproductive arguments with other creators and commenters on

my own videos. This confluence of negative experiences led me to question the efficacy of TikTok as a platform for meaningful political discourse.

I was – and still am – distinctly unsurprised that the vitriolic and truncated discursive world that was TikTok emerged in the same year as the onset of Donald Trump's presidency: each phenomenon strikes me as an unfortunately logical outgrowth of the same societal trends. And so I turned to the Frankfurt School. This group of predominantly German social philosophers of the mid-20th century put forth some of the most scathing and incisive critiques of capitalist culture and fascism ever. Now, in a period of intense neo-liberalism and the chilling reemergence of fascistic tactics and rhetoric, the Frankfurt School is due for resuscitation (Jones, 2020) – especially Horkheimer and Adorno's (1944) idea of the culture industry.

"The whole world is passed through the filter of the culture industry," Horkheimer and Adorno (1944, p. 99) famously wrote of the commodified structure of cultural production in contemporary society. The culture industry functions as an engine for the capitalist whole's self-reproduction through the emission of beguiling and stupefying images. In other words, where capitalism's realm of production is alienating and fragmented, the culture industry seeks to reintegrate and pacify (Debord, 1967; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944; Marcuse, 1964). The typology of the culture industry has obviously evolved since the mid-1900s and can no longer be said to operate in a solely top-down, vertical manner: the digital era has indeed opened new prospects for "horizontal," truly democratic engagement – that is, new channels of communication through social media mean that interaction between producers and consumers of culture is now more bidirectional. In many cases (as is fairly usual on TikTok), there are

consumers that *are* producers. The erosion of this distinction has been hailed by some as the birth of cultural equality and as the concomitant death of the tyranny of the culture industry over cultural life (Chernyak & Lemanto, 2020). But this is a dubious conclusion: although the configuration of cultural production and consumption has shifted since the time of the Frankfurt School, it has not by any means undergone a revolution.

TikTok is still a company that operates pursuant to capitalist principles of profit-seeking. (And, with the imperative to gain likes, followers, and views, it also foists that model onto its users and creators.) It is still engaged, as my story demonstrates, in delimiting the boundaries of acceptable expression. And even influencers are increasingly functioning like the stars and producers of bygone eras: no longer vigilantes pursuing an uncharted lifestyle in the world of new media, influencers can now benefit from a hefty body of literature on how to be lucrative in the long haul (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022). In fact, influencers are now such accepted facets of the capitalist world that *Business Insider* projected that traditional companies would sink $5 billion to $10 billion into them by the end of 2022 (Matheson and Sedgwick, 2021). This investment was fueled by the facts that the platform's advertising reach expanded more rapidly in the first three months of 2022 than in the last three of 2021 and that, in the same period, US consumers' spending on TikTok more than doubled (Kemp, 2022). The point to be made here is that, although the functionality may be different, the general rules that TikTok and other social media obey are capitalist ones that accord with the Frankfurt School's indictment of the culture industry. This suggests that, despite the digital realm's early promise for egalitarian communication, capitalism has managed to

coopt the digital world to usher in a "New Digital Age." Insofar as a platform's users create content that benefits the platform but for which the users themselves often receive no other compensation than likes or follows, the exploitative nature of the culture industry may have even intensified in this new era. Creators and consumers have become more complicit than ever before – from a Marxian perspective, that is the whole point of "participatory media" within the capitalist totality.

Claims of horizontal emancipation in the face of business-as-usual capitalist cultural production have engendered a species of ontological crisis. Users want to believe that the content they encounter online is "real," but they are often quite aware of the distorting influences of fame-, profit-, and interaction-seeking behaviors on the part of creators. In other words, in a world of alienated and commodified cultural production where true democratic communication appears so within reach, there is a premium placed on the "real." But because of the pervasive manipulation and pure white noise emanating from the culture industry, creating intersubjective definitions of reality has become difficult such that, today, reality is a notoriously contested terrain. Grasping how reality is defined, therefore, has become paramount. Authenticity is one conceptual avenue to making assertions about what is real: the label "authentic" seeks to claim proximity either to things "as they are" or to realities that are somehow more meaningful or genuine than present ones. In either case, what is said to be authentic is given some degree of primacy in defining reality because of an ostensive capacity to "tell it like it is."

"Popular culture is obsessed with authenticity and awash in artificiality," wrote Mukerji (2007, p. 1), and the frenzy has not since abated. The fetishization of authenticity is the product of an engrained sense of estrangement from the real – or, as

Trilling (1972, p. 93) says, “our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existences.” This sense of estrangement from “real” or “authentic” experience has only grown more acute since Trilling wrote. Perhaps this is why the words “fake” and “authentic” have effectively attained buzzword status in the domain of social media discourse. The designation “fake” vaguely recognizes all the perverting vectors at play on TikTok; the label “authentic” seems to suggest a deeper yearning to cut through the manipulation to uncover something more real. These two concepts – fakeness and authenticity on TikTok – are what I aim to address in this work. To do this, I distributed a survey that gathered data through traditional questions about usage behaviors and attitudes on TikTok. I also asked users to provide a link to a video they found fake and another they found authentic and to accompany each link with a brief explanation of why they thought that video fits the bill. More on this in the Methods section – for now, I turn my attention to the literature on authenticity and its implications in capitalist society.

Literature Review

Half a century ago, Trilling (1972) put his finger on a shift from sincerity toward authenticity in society's moral landscape – there seemed to be a prevalent idea that there was an innate self and that there was a moral imperative to be true to it. It should come, therefore, as no surprise that authenticity in this sense arose alongside modern ideas of individualism (McCarthy, 2009). People have thus come to expect authenticity from themselves, and they, in turn, expect it from their peers. (Trilling (1972) avers that this is particularly true in the world of cultural and artistic production, where the work itself and its creator are both expected to be unabashedly authentic.) Now, there seem to be two primary facets to the notion of authenticity: the first is a personally experienced sensation of being oneself (Trilling, 1972; Vannini & Franzese, 2008). The second is a favorable status of being true to reality granted to cultural artifacts – an "authenticatable authenticity," as it were (Peterson, 2005).

Authenticity has, since its conceptual efflorescence, been an important object of theorization not only in sociology but also in philosophy, criticism, and art history. Although less frequently, authenticity has also been subject to empirical sociological inquiry, especially in its deployment related to the self, (mis)information, tourism, food, and music. Stepchenkova and Park (2021), for example, created a scale to measure the authenticity attitudes of tourists toward cultural objects. In a between-subjects user study, it was found that viewers were generally skeptical of the authenticity of political videos (McNamara et al., 2021). While previous research has treated the personal dimension of authenticity on TikTok by exploring how users and creators subjectively experience authenticity on the platform (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Barta & Andalibi, 2021),

there is a regrettable paucity of research that addresses the latter form – how people come to attribute (in)authenticity to the content they encounter. My research seeks to remedy this lacuna.

Vannini and Franzese (2008) identified personal authenticity as the state of being true to oneself – that is, parity between one's roles and performances and one's desires and values. The authentication of cultural artifacts generally demands a similar parity, this time between what is represented and the representation. Authenticity in this sense is a trait of that which lucidly represents the "real" – that is, things as they are. "Authenticity has been," according to McCarthy (2009, p. 241), "changed and intensified by contemporary media culture and… in a thoroughly media-saturated world the pursuit of authenticity—and the dramatization of the real vs. the fake, the natural vs. fabricated, the 'real article' vs. the phony—has become a cultural preoccupation."

There is, of course, no objective state of authenticity; rather, its criteria are determined by social relevance structures (Peterson, 2005). People construct their definitions of authenticity based on the accessible "truths" that their social surroundings project. Some type of reality furnishes individuals with the criteria of authenticity when evaluating a cultural object. Early ascriptions of authenticity were rooted in divulging the truth that capitalist reality seeks to obliterate (Fisher, 2009; Marcuse, 1979; McCarthy, 2009). In Romantic literature, such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, authenticity was painted as a rejection of bourgeois society's intrinsic *inauthenticity* (McCarthy, 2009; Trilling, 1972). Marcuse (1979, p. xi) picks up this thread in his definition of authentic art: "In this sense, every authentic work of art would be revolutionary, i.e., subversive of perceptions and understanding, an indictment of the established reality, the appearance of

the image of liberation." There certainly seems to be a distinct yearning for liberation in the era of false consciousness, false needs, and spectacle, when almost everyone seems subject to existential manipulation and alienation (Debord, 1967; Marcuse, 1964). For Marcuse (1979, p. 9), authentic art must be a source of this sort of emancipation because "the truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who established it) to *define* what is *real*."

In the world of cultural production, Benjamin (1936) suggested that authenticity is only salient in a society in which easy mechanical reproducibility denudes works of art of their auras. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that authenticity is a point of major intrigue on social media, where parasocial relationships, phantasmagoric streams of repetitive content, and plain white noise abound. People appreciate media that appears to slice through the din by authentically representing reality. This desire incentivizes TikTok creators (or really any performer in Goffman's sense) to cultivate an authentic front – by doing what Peterson (2005) calls "authenticity work" and by telling what Matheson and Sedgwick (2021) call "authenticity narratives." Success on TikTok (quantifiable interactions and qualitative fame) often predicates an authenticated authenticity in which the authenticity work on the creator's part is just so that it achieves its mission without betraying its presence (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022). Goffman (1959), one could speculate, would have a field day over this imperative to maintain a front without offending the audience's taste for the authentic. Indeed, Matheson and Sedgwick (2021, p. 21) conclude that influencers are constantly striving to unify the perceptions of their front and backstage performances to amplify appearances of vulnerability and authenticity:

> By broadcasting his inner thoughts, [James] Charles encourages his viewers to perceive him as more authentic with each confession. Charles reinforces his authenticity by telling his viewers, "Now you guys know I am pretty much an open book, and I am so open and honest with everything that goes on in my life. You all basically know every single aspect of it." This authentic narrative ensures that viewers believe they are supporting the "real" James Charles, not just a front stage version.

But the mere fact that authenticity claims to offer a glimpse of unadulterated reality does not make it so. The attribution of authenticity can readily benefit extant constellations of power: because its criteria are furnished by dominant ways of thinking, one might conclude that, in our society, the dominant guide for the designation of authenticity and overall realness is capitalist reality (Fisher, 2009). Consider the commercial premium placed on authenticity when it is used to justify the priciness of fine wines, or how entire nations have similarly conjured up narratives of authenticity to sell appealing touristic experiences (Peterson, 2005). This sort of commodified authenticity hints at why, by the mid-20th century, hopeful images for the role of authenticity began to shift (McCarthy, 2009). In depictions like those of Adorno (1964) and Lasch (1978), authenticity was simply another route for capitalist commercialization to colonize the inner life of the individual. Capitalism operates in totalities and, in so doing, seeks to create a realness so ubiquitously pervasive as to seem natural, a legitimate outgrowth of the fundamental laws governing human society (Fisher, 2009; Marcuse, 1964). Capitalist realism, therefore, is the system's effort to stifle the question, In what configurations other than the capitalist one could society be organized? Indeed, nearly any randomly

drawn sample of modern art, discourse, and politics attests to Fisher's (2009, p. 2) notion "that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism."

If reality, in sum, sets the standard for authenticity, and capitalism sets the standard for reality, then it follows that societally dominant conceptions of authenticity will be *capitalist authenticity*. This is perhaps the best explanation of the eager commodification of the patina of authenticity in capitalist society. The advent of the "deinfluencer" is emblematic of this commodified authenticity: by appearing more critical of some products, deinfluencers' positive commercial evaluations are accorded extra credence – a reality that TikTok advertisers are beginning to vigorously exploit (Peiser, Paúl, & Chong, 2023). The rather extensive business literature on commercializing authenticity as a means of fructifying brand deals is relevant here, and it is worth quoting Balaban & Szambolics's (2022, pp. 242-43) near-manual for social media influencers (SMIs) at considerable length:

> According to the interviewed SMIs, authenticity is defined by differentiation, and thus personal branding strategies enhance SMIs' self-perceived authenticity. However, their advertising activities pose a challenge to their authenticity. When SMIs have the freedom to choose the brands that they endorse, when they endorse brands that are associated with the values they stand for, and when they are allowed to express their creativity in developing advertising messages, it contributes to the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs. One of the principles SMIs adhere to is to recommend and promote only products that they have tested. Transparency

> of sponsorship as an expression of honesty to followers is positively associated with the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs. This finding is also in line with previous scholarship that empirically demonstrated transparent authenticity as a strategy that SMIs use for authenticity.
>
> Platform affordances were also identified by SMIs as a relevant factor that can contribute to creating authentic messages. Ephemerality encourages spontaneity. Spontaneity is an important element of authenticity for SMIs, and, in this regard, they are not different from any other social media user. To stay authentic, a consistent communication style is required. In line with previous literature, we found that SMIs are aware that closeness to followers is a relevant professional asset…
>
> This study also has practical implications: Marketers should consider analyzing previous content posted by particular SMIs to launch compatible collaborations between brands and SMIs, taking into consideration the importance of finding matches between the products being advertised and the profiles of SMIs in terms of authenticity. Our findings can also be relevant to influencers, who should be aware of the importance of the authenticity of the source and of the message in building long-lasting relationships with their followers.

We see quite plainly from this rather typical example that, within capitalist realism, authenticity itself is both a vaunted desideratum and a potent commodity. In sum, mainstream visions of authenticity are those that typically reaffirm and even participate in capitalist reality.

Hence we are left with two conceptions: authenticity "as an escape from the confines of a material civilization or as a kind of selling-out or material entrapment" (McCarthy, 2009, p. 243). The central question of my research at this point becomes, Which sort of authenticity are TikTok users seeking – the mainstream authenticity that reaffirms the capitalist status quo, or a more subversive one that aims beyond that which is? One might also ask, To what degree is TikTok abetting or disrupting capitalist reality?

In an *a priori* sense, the observations of Adorno (1964) and Lasch (1978) on the modern commodified character of authenticity seem to resonate more with the concept's deployment on TikTok than Flaubert's or Marcuse's (1979) more optimistic ideas about it. It indeed appears unlikely that Marcuse (1979, p. 21) would be enthusiastic about TikTok's prospects for indicting the current order: "Art cannot abolish the social division of labor which makes for its esoteric character, but neither can art 'popularize' itself without weakening its emancipatory character." TikTok's popular nature, in other words, singlehandedly betrays its systematic complicity. He later adds:

> And the more the exploited classes, "the people," succumb to the powers that be, the more will art be estranged from "the people." Art can preserve its truth, it can make conscious the necessity of change, only when it obeys its own law against that of reality. Brecht, not exactly a partisan of the autonomy of art, writes: "A work which does not exhibit its sovereignty vis à vis reality and which does not bestow sovereignty on the public vis à vis reality is not a work of art." (Marcuse, 1979, p.32)

For critical theorists, in a one-dimensional totalitarian society, popular art that seeks broad appeal within and affirmation of the system cannot be authentic art as it fails to uncover the truth that the system conceals.

Empirical inquiries into people's operational definitions of authenticity upon which we could base a hypothesis are unfortunately few. One exception to this general dearth is, interestingly enough, tourism studies (Stepchenkova & Park, 2021). Perhaps this is not surprising given the industry's existential need to provide an "authentic" experience to tourists – an interesting instance of commodified authenticity. Regardless of motive, tourism studies have generally identified three types of authenticity expectations: the first is a realist orientation toward authenticity. This suggests an expectation of an authenticity that is empirically verifiable, as in, "This monument is actually the original." The second is a constructivist orientation that seeks authenticity according to socially defined notions of what is authentic – for example, "This blanket was weaved according to tradition, so it is authentic." The final orientation is defined as a postmodern one in its repudiation of the realist or constructivist insistence upon history or tradition in favor of the immersive pleasure that a touristic experience provides, as in the expression, "Wow, this theme park is so amazing and authentic."

Although conceptually useful, these empirically observed expectations of authenticity say little about authenticity's role in the reproduction of capitalism – other than the fact that the very goal of their empirical elucidation was the intensification of the rather capitalistic tourism industry. In the age of commodified and fragmented realities, there is a pressing need to empirically grasp authenticity's role in capitalism. Early signs do not bode well for TikTok's potential to be authentic in the emancipatory sense

inasmuch as the entire goal behind influencers' authenticity is, as in the case of tourism, a principally profiteering one. To describe how I tested this hypothesis, I now turn to my methods.

Methods & Findings

Defining the target population of my study was met with the challenge of divergent information – many sites report many figures in terms of TikTok's user profile due to different categorical boundaries and perhaps less-than-rigorous data collection for marketing purposes. Aslam (2023), for example, reports that about 43 percent of users are between 18 and 24 years old. Wallaroo Media (2023) states that 60 percent of users are from Generation Z. Data about the older reaches of TikTok are even more inconsistent: Aslam (2023) found that 3.4 percent were above 55 years old, Wallaroo Media (2023) suggested that 7.1 percent were above 50, and Oberlo (n.d.) reported that only 0.32 percent were above 55. Despite this variation, it does seem reasonable to conclude that most TikTok users are young adults and minors. Gender profiles of the platform's users reflect a similar lack of consensus: Aslam (2023) says 57 percent are female, while Wallaroo Media (2023) suggests 60 percent. As before, it seems safe to say that the slight majority of users are women despite the inconsistency. Therefore, I defined the target population of the study as TikTok users in the United States with the understanding that this definitionally meant the sample would skew young and toward women (minors, however, were not included in the survey). These distinctions are ultimately not hugely consequential given that my aim is not generalizability but rather to gain a view into actual processes of meaning-making and their implications on the platform.

I collected data in the fall of 2022 on two sites: first, at Ohio University. There, the institution's central communications entity sent two emails to the entire undergraduate student population – one in September, and one in October. The second

site was the non-profit platform ResearchMatch, which is made up of volunteer participants and is funded by the National Institutes of Health for health research. On ResearchMatch, I performed seven searches for participants to contact a total of 10,499 people, and, of those, 267 (2.5%) agreed to be given the link to participate in the survey. (Note that simply agreeing to receive the link to participate on ResearchMatch in no way guaranteed actual participation.) ResearchMatch search criteria allowed anyone between the ages of 18 and 54 to be included. A limitation of the survey was that I failed to ask respondents to indicate to which sample they belonged, meaning that I cannot with precision discern what the final makeup of the survey was in regard to the pool that respondents belonged to. Given the age profile of the final sample, however, I suspect that the large majority of respondents came from the university group.

All participants completed the same Qualtrics survey, which took roughly 30 minutes to do and included the following question groups: a general description of usage behaviors, information about content creation, reasons for initially downloading the app, evaluation of the positive and negative outcomes of using TikTok, questions related to digital literacy and my theoretical backing, the 12-item General Health Questionnaire and other mental health items, questions about friends' usage behaviors, demographic attributes, and a "scavenger hunt." The scavenger hunt represents the most significant methodological contribution of my research in the field of social media studies. In this section, I asked respondents to provide links to videos that embodied 10 concepts locked in five dialectic relationships, which were propaganda—rebellious, boring—inspiring, conformist—unique, sus—based, and, most notably for the present piece, fake—authentic. Respondents also provided brief justifications for their placement of a video

within a certain category. The methodological potential of this approach to offer lucid insights into how meaning is ascribed on social media platforms is quite significant. After the survey, I provided participants who reached the end the option to be redirected to another survey in which they would participate in a raffle, which resulted in 10 winners of $20 digital gift cards. Two-hundred-eighty-seven people participated in this raffle.

All told, 1033 people started to take the survey; however, given the survey's length and the exigency of the scavenger hunt, attrition was considerable. To perform an analysis with the subset that completed each of the four items associated with the fake—authentic dialectic (two links and two justifications), I filtered the dataset and created a subset (N=238) with the following demographic profile: its median age was 20, and the median respondent had some college education. Eighty-three percent were white, and 74 percent were women. Finally, the median political identification was somewhat liberal, and the median class was middle-class.

Figure 1: Demographic Attributes of Subset with 100 Percent Completion of Fake--Authentic Pair of Scavenger Hunt

	Variable	Min	Mean	Max	SD	Measurement
1	Age	2.00	4.69	10.00	2.90	An ordinal measure of age in which 17 or under=1; 18=2; 19=3; 20=4; 21=5; 222=6; 23=7; 24=8; 25=9; 26 or over=10
2	Education	1.00	3.15	8.00	1.15	An ordinal measure of highest completed education in which Some high school=1; High school=2; Some college=3; Two-year degree=4; Four-year degree=5; Some graduate school=6; Master's or professional degree=7; PhD or doctorate degree=8
3	Whiteness	0.00	0.83	1.00	0.37	A dichotomous measure of being white in which 1=Yes and 0=No
4	Femininity	0.00	0.74	1.00	0.44	A dichotomous measure of being a woman in which 1=Yes and 0=No
5	Political ID	1.00	3.88	6.00	1.24	An ordinal measure of political leftness in which Very conservative=1; Somewhat conservative=2; Moderate=3; Somewhat liberal=4; Very liberal=5; 6=Leftist
6	Class	1.00	2.95	5.00	0.85	An ordinal measure of socioeconomic class in which Lower-class=1; Lower-middle class=2; Middle-class=3; Upper-middle class=4; Upper-class=5

Note: N=238

I used a Systematic Thematic Discovery (STD) process to code respondents' qualitative justifications of a video's fakeness or authenticity (Pugh et al., 2016; Vander Ven, 2011; Vander Ven, Wright, & Fesmire, 2018). STD involves three phases: in the first step, a theoretically grounded list of concepts is devised to guide coders' perceptions as they analyze qualitative data. It is in this respect that STD differs from grounded theory: where grounded theory purports to be purely inductive, STD recognizes the value of an overt theoretical anchoring in social science research. The second step entails diving into the data to identify words and phrases that relate to key theoretical concepts as well as identifying emergent themes – in this case, similar to grounded theory. The

final step consists in extracting relevant word pairings and phrases into a thematically organized quote log.

STD was a propitious approach for my research given my insistence upon connecting themes to the project's central theoretical thrust while also allowing for new themes to emerge around that foundation. In my case, therefore, Step 1 entailed identifying concepts of interest based on the writings of Horkheimer and Adorno (1944), Marcuse (1964; 1979), and Trilling (1972). It was immediately evident that matters that had to do with commodification (marketing, profiteering, etc.) and those that had to do with socialization (relatability, transparency, etc.) and all their conceptual appurtenances were crucial to perceive during coding. Step 2 involved scouring the data for manifestations of these and other themes. This process refined the boundaries of expected themes and helped identify emergent ones: themes like purity, pranks, vulnerability, health, and others emerged as important criteria for fakeness or authenticity in ways that are theoretically sensible but were all the same unanticipated. The concurrent development of a coding guide further delimited clear boundaries between themes, expected and emergent alike. Because my goal for this project is simply to identify the criteria of authenticity and their prevalence, Step 3 diverged from traditional STD approaches in that, rather than creating a quote log, I simply applied the coding guide to the data and recorded frequencies observed for each theme.

Using this method, I thematically coded responses based on their reason(s) for their ascription of a label. The themes for justifications of a video's fakeness were disbelief, dramaturgy, profiteering, literal interpretations of fakeness, the nature of the

video, digital alteration, misinformation, idealization, pranks, physical alteration, and N/A.

Figure 2: Descriptions and Prevalence of Thematic Codes for Justifications of Fakeness

	Theme	Definition (Reasons with this tag will…)	n	Share
1	Disbelief	Display subjective disagreement with a video's claims or disbelief in its content or circumstances.	68	26%
2	Dramaturgy	Deem fakeness because of what is interpreted as excessive or improper staging.	58	24%
3	Profiteering	Highlight a creator's intent to use the video itself for some sort of gain, whether that be financial or interactional.	55	23%
4	Literal Interpretation of Fakeness	Adopt a rather straightforward interpretation of "fakeness" -- e.g., the use of a literally fake prop.	20	8%
5	Nature	Make a circumstantially negative evaluation of the creator's or genre's character.	17	7%
6	Digital Alteration	Assert that a video is fake because of digital or technical interference such as photoshop, filters, or the like.	15	6%
7	Misinformation	Identify an objective/factual challenge to the information presented in a video.	14	6%
8	Idealization	Identify fakeness based on a sense that a video glamorizes reality alongside some element of being "too good to be true."	11	5%
9	Pranks	Focus on the specific genre of prank videos.	11	5%
#	Physical Alteration	Attribute fakeness based on physical, "real-world" alteration of a creator or subject's appearance.	9	4%
#	N/A	Be too brief or ambiguous to merit placement in another category.	9	4%

Note: N=238

For authenticity, the themes were representational parity, purity, rawness, utility, relatability, transparency, originality, vulnerability, health, literal interpretations of authenticity, good marketing, expertise, proximity, and N/A.

Figure 3: Descriptions and Prevalence of Thematic Codes for Justifications of Authenticity

	Theme	Definition (Reasons with this tag will…)	n	Share
1	Representational Parity	Focus on a video's factuality or accuracy in representing the "real world." In other words, there is a perceived alignment between what is represented and the representation.	55	23%
2	Purity	Cite some sort of innocence or simplicity as a cause for authenticity.	52	22%
3	Rawness	Highlight a video's NOT being edited or doctored. They may also highlight videos of "real-world" occurrences that seem organic.	38	16%
4	Utility	Focus on how useful or practical any advice or perspectives may be in users' daily lives.	27	11%
5	Relatability	Indicate some sort of identification between the content of the video and the experiences or views of the user.	25	11%
6	Transparency	Highlight how "open" a creator is perceived to be.	21	9%
7	Originality	Focus on the uniqueness, creativity, or entertainment value of a video.	17	7%
8	Vulnerability	Pick up on some sort of weakness, fault, or general issue being displayed in a way that combats idealized images of life.	15	6%
9	Health	Have to do with the genre of mental and/or physical health.	13	5%
10	Literal Interpretations of Authenticity	Adopt a rather straightforward interpretation of "authenticity" -- e.g., a legitimation that says a video is authentic because it is about being authentic.	13	5%
11	Good Marketing	Be made in terms of marketing a good or the appreciation of commodification.	8	3%
12	Expertise	Cite the habitus of the creator as signifying someone who can give factual (or, in this case, authentic) information.	6	3%
13	Proximity	Be based on "real world" closeness to the creator, meaning the parasociality that mediates other assessments of intent is avoided.	5	2%
14	N/A	Be too brief or ambiguous to merit placement in another category.	7	3%

Note: N=238

Discussion

I laid out two variants of authenticity in the literature review: the first is more piercing as it seeks to slice through the manipulation of the capitalist status quo to provide a glimpse of what lies beyond. The second is complicit with the capitalist system. It acts as a mirror, depicting reality as it is, and is therefore called "reflective authenticity." The central question of my research has concerned which form of authenticity TikTok users tend to deploy in their evaluations of content. I now suggest that both forms of authenticity, piercing and reflective, are mobilized by TikTok users – but not in equal proportion. In discussing the implications of my findings, I will start with the form of authenticity that is more common: reflective authenticity.

Reflective Authenticity

Representational parity, the most common theme for authentic legitimations, accounted for fully 23 percent of justifications for authenticity and, incidentally, is a fundamentally reflective category. Justifications made from this angle argued that a video was authentic in its seemingly accurate representation of reality – that is, there was congruence between the representation (the video) and the represented ("reality"):

> The video is promoting a legitimate product by the company. If you go onto the company's website, you can find the product

In this justification for authenticity, there is a clear demonstration of how the reality being represented in the video is a capitalist reality through the advertisement of a product. For some users, the fetishization of an ostensibly "good" commodity – or advertising in an appealing way – was grounds for deeming authenticity (3 percent of all justifications). The commodification of authenticity in this example rather explicitly conveys how the

Frankfurt School's culture industry performs a role in the reproduction of capitalism, but, of course, not all justifications in this category are so clearly in thrall to the commodity:

An unbiased news tiktok based off facts and information

This justification, while not so overtly capitalistic, is revealing in terms of how reflective authenticity performs as a sort of confirmation bias for users: the perceived facticity of the video can only be accepted if the user is already inclined to believe its framing. The specific use of the term "unbiased" is also significant in its implications for perceptions of subjectivity and objectivity on TikTok. It is no secret that the idea that we can step out of our subjectivity to adopt a truly neutral or objective viewpoint is something of a cultural myth. Any news, even if not brazenly ideological, inherently carries bias. Therefore, what a consumer of news may determine as unbiased actually only appears so because it accords with the consumer's pre-existing worldview. What we observe here, then, is ultimately a subjectively perceived accordance between the news video and the user's beliefs about the reality it purports to depict. This gets at the essence of this category: consumers seeking subjective perspectives that align with their subjective experiences.

The same phenomenon occurs in reverse when assessments of fakeness are made through the lens of disbelief, which itself is the most common argument for asserting fakeness at 26 percent of all justifications. In fact, this category could have been just as easily called "representational *dis*parity":

It's fake regurgitate left wing bull shit

In this justification, fakeness comes from a perceived lack of congruence between the video's claims and the reality about which it is making them. This example also provides

a rather poignant case study of the formation of echo chambers, which, at bottom, are all about seeking alignment in subjectivity – or intersubjectivity. Singer and Brooking (2018, p. 123) write of the oft-observed phenomenon of homophily, or "love of the same." This idea means users are not only more likely to seek out creators and viewpoints that are the same as their own but they are also more likely to believe the information that comes from those creators.

This helps us approach a sufficient explanation of the relatability theme of authenticity, which accounted for 11 percent of all authentic legitimations. This category goes beyond representational parity in that there is not merely an assertion that the video is "telling it like it is" but that there is also an explicit identification with the substance of a video in some way:

> This one is authentic for me because I personally relate to it. It's actually really true to what I feel like my main mental health struggle has been, I lost myself for awhile trying to "fit in" in high school but now I don't care about that as much. Moral of the story is this is authentic and true to what I feel I have gone through in the past

The pursuit of relatability may perhaps be traced to Plato's depiction of humanity's implacable struggle for unity or wholeness. Or, maybe a more Marxian image of the futile search for identity within the capitalist totality better describes the quest to find oneself reflected in a TikTok video. Regardless of the root, the effect is largely the same: the imperative for relatability leans into an authenticity that confirms, reflects, or validates one's being rather than challenging it.

The previous example's emphasis on mental health is also notable. Foucault (1961) outlined the ways in which what was once called "madness" has been seen by some as proof of lucidity or as a sign of some numinous capacity that supersedes the awareness possessed by "normal people." Trilling (1972) took this assertion even further to suggest that mental illness, when taken as a sensible response to an oppressive society, can even be seen as a reasonable expression of personal authenticity – it is the abnegation of society's moral order in favor of one's own. While this view certainly remains part of popular folklore of mental illness, it does not seem entirely sufficient to account for the majority of mental health-related justifications that respondents offered. For example:

> This person is sharing their experience and being open about habits they continue from having an eating disorder, which I think is brave.

As in this rather typical case, many justifications adducing the mental health or illness emphasis of a video were not made from a "mental-illness-is-lucidity" perspective but rather from a vulnerability or transparency perspective.

Vulnerability accounted for 6 percent of all explanations for the ascription of authenticity. Vulnerability is a venerated quality in contemporary society beyond its role in constituting authenticity (Furedi, 2004). Its privileged status ought to come as no surprise: given the credence afforded to Freud's (1930) conviction that suffering is endemic to human existence, being forthright about that suffering is logically taken to be a part of being authentic to oneself. In a cultural moment in which the psychotherapeutic lens is ascendant (Furedi, 2004), it tracks that the perception of honesty (read: vulnerability) about mental health is also a favored form of expression. Critical voices like Furedi (2004) have rather convincingly argued that lauding vulnerability engenders

passivity in the face of capitalist oppression by priming people to adopt a sort of "victim mentality" that touts individual pathologies and therapy over collective action. Popular notions, however, flip this critical perspective: as in the previous example's terms, vulnerability is frequently considered to be "brave" – that is, vulnerability is perceived as overcoming some species of adversity. However, as with James Charles and many other influencers, apparent vulnerability is often a calculated effort to obfuscate the boundaries of front and backstage life in the name of commercializing authenticity (Matheson & Sedgwick, 2021).

Not all emotional displays, however, must limn a negative picture to be authentic:

You can tell his authenticity is clear when he smiles. It's a feeling.

Purity, accounting for 22 percent of all justifications of authenticity, emerged as a quite common dimension of authenticity in cases where content was deemed simply too heartwarming to be fake. Assessments of purity, a fully subjective or intersubjective designation, depict rather limpidly how previous expectations figure into definitions of authenticity. Indeed, in cases where authenticity is deemed somewhat ineffable ("I know it when I see it"), the often subjectively predetermined character of authenticity is revealed. In the same way, the conspicuous absence of more piercing authenticity from this theme is all too clear: emotions (happiness, love, etc.) or entities (babies, animals, etc.) considered pure are summarily deemed incapable of duplicity of any sort – as if a puppy has never been used to sell anything…

These are, in sum, just a smattering of examples of the ways in which users deploy an authenticity that seeks confirmation of prior expectations and values. There are many others: justifications in the utility theme (11 percent of all authentic

legitimations) are often grounded in the provision of solutions for which users already had a need. Arguments in the physical alteration theme (4 percent of all fake legitimations) have obvious roots in popularly dismissive opinions on plastic surgery, misogynist views of makeup, and the like. Reasons in the expertise theme (3 percent of all authentic legitimations) play to existing expectations of who has the right to be knowledgeable about a topic. The conclusion to be drawn is that, as some critical theorists would have predicted, many TikTok users are not using the platform subversively but instead to intensify and develop what they already know or want, suggesting that TikTok is to some extent an engine of the redevelopment of capitalist reality. But it is not all this way.

Piercing Authenticity

The second form of authenticity involves piercing the veil forged by capitalist reality; it poses a way of seeing through the manipulation to get a glimpse beyond. Although less common than its reflective or confirmatory counterpart, some of this more emancipatory form is detectable in users' justifications. A creator's perceived intention to profiteer from a video (whether by gaining money, likes, followers, or other interactions), for example, accounted for 23 percent of all justifications of labeling a video as fake, making it the third most common theme of all. A fairly typical example reads:

> these celebrities are faking there skincare just to make money of there sponser

In this case, the intrusive commodification of the post is deemed as clear evidence of fakeness – clearly aligned with the Frankfurt School's perspective. Related to the distaste for the unabashed commodification of social media spaces in the New Digital Age may

be the demurral of the display of glamorized images of life on social media. That 5 percent of fake legitimations were made through the suspicion of a video depicting an idealized life reveals a belief that social media is a place where disingenuously positive representations of life fail to authentically reflect reality:

> Its a very glamorized version of life

Here we may have a hint of seeing through the spectacle of commodified life under capitalism (Debord, 1967). As some sort of conspicuous consumption – be it of expensive excursions, glamourous fashion, new appliances, or whatever – is often necessary to exhibiting a successful life within capitalism, the rejections of overt profiteering and idealized images of life seem to be related.

It must be noted, however, that some form of profiteering is essential to being a TikTok creator – that is, the very goal is to garner views, likes, followers, fame, or even money through one's content. While these are clearly not the only motivations to produce TikTok content, it remains flagrantly true that the platform's structure of rewards and growth is built around the profiteering concept. An interesting conundrum here emerges: creators know that users prize authenticity, so they must strive to put on an authentic front to fulfill the platform's existential goals of amassing interactions, fame, and perhaps even financial lucrativeness. At the same time, users are quick to rebuff what they see as straining too hard for authenticity as being "fake." What results is a sort of prisoner's dilemma in which users and creators alike know that everyone wants to perceive authenticity, but some threshold exists where striving too much for authenticity leads to the perception of excessive dramaturgy or fakeness. Curiously, the perception that authenticity can be faked makes the premium on "authentic authenticity" even

greater. This is the genesis of commodified authenticity on TikTok and goes far to explain the marketing rush to deinfluencers (Peiser, Paúl, & Chong, 2023). Because of this, one must to some degree impugn the suggestion that deeming perceived profiteering as fake is really a case of "seeing through." It may quite reasonably be objected that, rather than genuine seeing through, this is simply a matter of thresholds: all TikTok creators seek some sort of profit; some just do it too overtly.

A similar dynamic is at play for the dramaturgy theme of legitimations of fakeness, which accounted for 24 percent of all. Trilling (1972) reminds us that, since Plato and Rousseau, all sorts of theatrical acting have at times been considered disingenuous. The general logic of such indictments has been that actors performing a role on stage present viewers with an exaggerated or even rhapsodized version of life that distracts from the immediacy of their own lives. Actors themselves are inveighed as being the pinnacle of inauthenticity, as their entire livelihoods depend on their appearing as someone else. Trilling (1972) questions these qualms, but the most forceful counterpoint must come from Goffman (1959), who so famously and forcefully illuminated how effectively all social action and interaction can be largely understood through the lens of dramaturgical performance. Indeed, all TikTok content necessarily involves some sort of staging: the frame of the camera, the application of music, the limits of the video, any filters or stitching, and so on. Users must be aware of this just as they are of the ubiquitous imperative to profit from a video in some way. At some point, however, a threshold is crossed where the staging becomes too much:

> These prank videos always seem staged. The acting is horrible.

So, staging is as necessary to TikTok production as some degree of a profit motive – but each can be overdone. The two coincide in many cases:

> It is a staged video to produce likes and bring attention to Heidi and playboy.

It is ultimately difficult to fully grasp based on my data the degree to which such justifications are truly seeing through or whether they find a video to be simply too obvious in its performance of functions that everyone knows suffuse the platform but that no one wants to bring into the open for one reason or another. My labeling of the profiteering theme as piercing authenticity may therefore quite reasonably be seen as optimistic. Still, even if it is merely a question of thresholds, it does effectively exhibit that users are capable of critically appraising the capitalist ordering of the platform.

In a very literal sense, the misinformation lens, which accounted for 6 percent of all fakeness justifications, suggests that users do possess the capacity to critically examine even the perspectives brought to them by the algorithm:

> This tik tok is fake because they are stating that the queen is still alive as if they are the queen.

Here, widely accepted "real-world" knowledge is used to refute a video's claim as misinformation. There is a marked qualitative difference between appraisals made through this lens and those made from a stance of mere disbelief (which, it should be noted, were far more common) in that misinformation claims are able to get much nearer to a supposed objectivity – in other words, the facticity of Queen Elizabeth II's death in 2022 is as close to objective as possible. Here, the facticity of that event is used to cut through falsehood toward something that is clearly more real.

One final category that suggests a more piercing authenticity was originality. Constituting 7 percent of all legitimations of the authentic label, this category most nearly approximates Marcuse's (1979) notion of authentic art:

It's really creative

Other justifications in this category emphasized the novelty of a video:

I've never seen something like that, it's absolutely hilarious though

Marcuse (1979) believed that art does not have to be explicitly political or didactic to subvert the capitalist hegemon; rather, all it has to do is disrupt dominant expectations and perceptions – something for which he lauded humor as quite apt. Even in the face of the algorithm, even despite our own homophily, it holds true that TikTok is a vast world with images and ideas to which many of its users would have never been otherwise exposed. While De Certeau's (1987) belief that users of culture can subvert it and make their own meanings from within it may sometimes be blithely optimistic, it does indeed resonate here to some extent. And certainly it is here, if anywhere, that lies TikTok's most promising potential to indict the capitalist totality.

Conclusion

In this project, I set out to analyze how TikTok users make assessments of authenticity as they consume content. The new moral imperative for authenticity as both an individual experience and as a cultural attribute has arisen in a moment of intense alienation and fragmentation, which has engendered a certain frenzy to cut through cultural white noise to something that seems more real. What is deemed "authentic" is therefore given primacy in defining reality – which is precisely why authenticity is so important to study in the current political moment. In terms of the evaluation of cultural artifacts, authenticity can manifest in two orientations: the first entails piercing through the manipulation inherent to the capitalist status quo in order to get a glimpse of a realm that lies beyond the present social dispensation. Here, authenticity demands the subversion of the present order of society. The second form confirms the personal or political status quo – that is, authenticity is ascribed because the cultural item seems to accurately depict reality as it lies. I have sought to explore through this research the ways in which TikTok users deploy each of these forms of authenticity.

To complete my inquiry, I conducted a survey. The first part addressed usage behaviors and attitudes. The second part represented a novel approach to the study of meaning-making on social media platforms: a scavenger hunt. In this part, respondents provided links to videos that exemplified 10 concepts locked in five dialectic relationships – most notably for the present writing, fake—authentic. A subset of 238 people participated fully in this pairing of the scavenger hunt, providing both links and justifications for each concept. I coded responses using Systematic Thematic Discovery. The themes for justifications of a video's fakeness were, in order of decreasing

prevalence, disbelief, dramaturgy, profiteering, literal interpretations of fakeness, the nature of the video, digital alteration, misinformation, idealization, pranks, and physical alteration. For authenticity, the themes were, in the same order, representational parity, purity, rawness, utility, relatability, transparency, originality, vulnerability, health, literal interpretations of authenticity, good marketing, expertise, and proximity.

These findings paint a mixed picture of how TikTok users construct authenticity on the platform; however, the predominant form of authenticity observed in users' evaluations is the more reflective kind: themes like representational parity, relatability, vulnerability, purity, good marketing, and others suggest that users are bringing a definition of authenticity to TikTok that accords with pre-existing notions of what is possible or desirable. In other words, users are matching the content they observe with their prior expectations about the world to discern what is real online. This, however, does not preclude the reality that some "seeing through" is apparent in users' evaluations: the frequency with which users ascribe fakeness based on a creator's perceived intention to profiteer bespeaks some willingness to "see through" on the part of users, and the value accorded to originality offers some hope of content that creates a world unto itself that provides reprieve from, criticism of, and advancement beyond the status quo.

The ramifications of these discoveries are significant on several fronts. For one, it seems that the algorithm is not alone to blame for the production of echo chambers online – users themselves are quite willing to ascribe (in)authenticity based on their prior level of acceptance of an idea. The idea that TikTok is an excellent source of education is also somewhat countervailed by the apparent tendency to give a privileged epistemological status to videos that align with prior expectations. In many ways, it would seem that

users primarily seek to intensify their current perceptions of reality on TikTok rather than finding a way to see through or around those perceptions. This conclusion takes on a salient political meaning when we recall that the reality which we inhabit is a capitalist one.

Indeed, despite the multitude of voices who hailed the digital age as the death knell of modernist conceptualizations of the culture industry, it seems difficult and perhaps dangerous to deny that the culture industry is still performing its role of reproducing assent to capitalist reality. It seems we have indeed commenced a New Digital Age in which the interests of corporate capitalism have caught up with and perhaps even subjugated this realm that initially showed immense potential as a new cultural space for subversion. That TikTok users use the platform as a means to justify or intensify pre-existing worldviews is symptomatic of this. Now, the sheer volume of content available to users may in fact make the reproduction of capitalist reality even more entrenched: the brevity and ubiquitous accessibility of TikTok content has opened new avenues for the media's colonization of inner life, and, with more diverse and numerous outputs than the traditional culture industry could have ever conceived, TikTok and other social media have made it easier than ever to dive into the ocean of cultural noise and harvest whatever suits oneself. The algorithm has certainly galvanized these processes, but one must wonder whether users would ultimately be any more likely to regularly encounter new or subversive material even in its absence. At the same time, the facts that profiteering is so commonly derided as "fake" and that meaningfully original content is conceivable provide a spark of hope. Identifying how to approach and avail

ourselves of this glimmer is beyond the scope of the present writing, but the matter demands treatment by other theorists and researchers.

My study does not come without limitations. The sample is relatively small and is not necessarily representative of TikTok's usership. For the sake of space and scope, I have had to glance over the textual analysis of the videos that respondents provided – but doing so would contribute much to understanding what sorts of videos users find fake or authentic. A great deal of quantitative exploration equally remains to be conducted with my rich survey data. The present work does not engage crucial questions of gender and race. Using my survey data, future research should do just this, perhaps engaging the role of intersectional identities in assigning meaning on TikTok. Future interpretive research should further refine understandings of meaning-making on TikTok, perhaps by interviewing participants more profoundly as they conduct the scavenger hunt. As critical theorists may be wont to point out, the very empirical nature of my own research, while useful for providing a common ground from which to launch discussions about TikTok, may constrain the overall thrust of the analysis. Comparative and critical scholarship are paramount in contributing to an immanent critique of TikTok and situating its historical and political meaning.

Ultimately, the present piece serves as a reinvigoration of Frankfurt School notions of the culture industry in the empiricist form requisite to contemporary sociological discourse. While the Frankfurt School was rather notorious for its rejection of empirical research, it inevitably provides a forceful way to learn about the reality that critical theory seeks to subdue – even Adorno (1991, p. 187) wrote of "how critical-theoretical thought can both learn from and be corrected by empirical social research."

What we have learned about capitalist reality in the present piece is that the culture industry propels it still today, and TikTok must be regarded as a primary site of its operation.

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