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Datacasting: TikTok's Algorithmic Flow as Televisual Experience

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Abstract

Recommendation algorithms have acquired a central role in the suggestion of content within both subscription video on demand (SVOD) and advertising-based video on demand (AVOD) services and media-sharing platforms. In this article, we suggest the introduction of the datacasting paradigm, which takes into account the increasing relevance algorithms have in selection processes on audiovisual platforms. We use TikTok as a case study as it is an entirely algorithmic platform, and therefore embodies the heart of our discussion, and analyse how the algorithmic flow within the platform influences user experience, the impact it has on the enjoyment of content, and whether the platform can be considered televisual. We have opted to frame TikTok within debates on flow, as we believe that is what is at the core of the platform experience. Through the analysis of in-depth interviews, we extracted two main categories of responses: TV on TikTok and TikTok as TV. The former includes all responses related to the consumption of traditional televisual material on the platform, while the latter looks at all potential connections between the platform and television viewing habits.

Keywords

algorithmic flow; datacasting; media-sharing platforms; on-demand platforms; televisuality; TikTok

1. Television Flow: From Schedules to Algorithms

Watching television has always been a mutable experience: From early-day changes, with the introduction of remote controls and multiple channels (Uricchio, 2004), to the modern-day introduction of on-demand content, spectators have found different ways to enjoy and engage with audiovisual content. It is now widely accepted that streaming services are part of what are considered to be experiences of traditional television, and linear television has continued to thrive thanks to broadcasting practices that ensure engaging lean-back

experiences for its audience. Alongside this scenario, media-sharing platforms contribute to the development of new forms of audiovisual content, hosting increasingly televisual (Caldwell, 1995) videos which are inserted in personalised flows of content.

Our aim is to understand if the televisual framework can be applied beyond traditional television, and to explore the transformations of flow experiences in an age in which asynchronous, individualised experiences are at the core of most content-based platforms. We will do this by analysing existing theory within television studies, looking at flow theories and the evolution of viewing experiences, including the impact that recommendation algorithms have had on contemporary consumption habits, and then focusing on TikTok, as we believe it is the platform that best encapsulates the impact that an algorithmic flow has on viewing habits.

Flow (Wiliams, 2004) has long been considered *televisual essence* (Uricchio, 2004), and is seen as one of the defining characteristics of the medium. Although the medium has undergone numerous changes, modifying what flow was originally conceived to be—a continuous flow of content selected by a broadcaster—the concept persists. Uricchio, in 2004, noted how disruptions to the medium, such as increased choice and interaction, "[signal] a shift away from the programming-based notion of flow that Williams documented, to a viewer-centered notion" (Uricchio, 2004, p. 239), and followed that by stating:

> The overarching trend from the early 1950s to the present seems clear: from television as a one-way, coherent, programmer-controlled flow to television as bidirectional, fragmented, user-controlled experience; from mass audiences to atomized viewers; from a site of public memorialization to an increasingly personal site of private and public expression. (Uricchio, 2009, p. 36)

These observations capture the main changes within traditional television, emphasising the shift from a collective experience guided by a top-down force with editorial control, towards an individualised experience dictated by personal taste and recommended content.

During the broadcast era, television was a medium to be enjoyed collectively, operating as a cultural institution, communicating to large audiences key values within society (cf. Lotz, 2014, p. 37); in the multi-channel era it partially lost its identity as a mass medium, with channels targeted towards increasingly specific niches, and consequently the narrowcasting paradigm was introduced (Mullen, 2002). According to Lotz, television lost its ability to stimulate watercooler conversations (2014, p. 27) when viewers started to be able to select their own programming, leading to more and more individual experiences and the acquisition of a stronger sense of agency: Although in narrowcasting viewers are still exposed to a linear flow of content, it is within their power to select what channel to watch, i.e., what flow to enter. Alongside this, the VCR (video cassette recorder) allowed people to enjoy audiovisual products beyond scheduled times, giving them an opportunity to view *time-shifted* content.

Turning TV flow into "a set of choices and actions initiated by the viewer" (Uricchio, 2004, p. 242) greatly disrupts its initial conception, as there is no longer the possibility to guarantee the organised sequence of programmes and advertisements that Williams had described in his initial analysis. With the convergence of broadcast and broadband technologies, multiple devices have developed the capacity to host audiovisual content, and "television has faced significant competition to its dominant sociocultural position as the

primary medium for delivering video content" (Johnson, 2019, pp. 6–7). This, alongside the development of over-the-top television, contributed to the transformation of the medium into an online medium. Scholarly attention has focused on the rise of Netflix (Jenner, 2016, 2018; Lobato, 2018, 2019; Strangelove, 2015) as it is a service within which it is possible to fully observe the transformations that on-demand television has brought to viewing experiences.

It is undeniable that on a service like Netflix one cannot experience linear flow, however flow can be redefined. Cox, when talking about the service, suggests the following:

> Self-selection and user interactivity within digital platforms are not necessarily a break or departure from the flow series; rather, they suggest a contemporary and active form of "switching on" to the flow series, one that may induce users (as with broadcast television) to remain within their personalized flow given its highly individualized lure. (Cox, 2018, p. 444)

By labelling this type of flow as *on-demand flow* it becomes possible to describe the most commonly widespread model of content distribution and consumption in the contemporary media ecosystem. In the era of personcasting, flow loses its linearity, and the collective experience mostly disappears, leading to highly individualised experiences. If, as highlighted by Lotz, in the narrowcasting era it had already become difficult to find common topics for watercooler conversations, at this stage it seems to be almost impossible; users' sense of agency, then, manifests itself not only in the content they select, but in the social TV practices they enact within online spaces (Andò & Marinelli, 2018).

On-demand flow is reminiscent of what van Dijck (2013) called "staccato flow" when referring to "the self-selected short videos sequenced by user's clicks" (p. 152) on YouTube. Just as TV broadcasters were "eager to capture viewer's attention by programming a 'flow of content'…video-sharing sites are keen to keep their users glued to the screen" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 152), and by organising the platform in such a way that it encourages users to compose their own flow, YouTube contributes to the creation of a continuous flow, although it appears disconnected (cf. Pietrobruno, 2018, p. 527). This definition is accompanied by the idea of "homecasting," which refers to the role content creators play in a platform like YouTube: Here, they are the ones who make content available, be it professionally produced (with the help of production companies or agencies) or created at amateur level. On YouTube, and on all personalised streaming services, it is possible to partially experience what we are referring to as *datacasting*: Content flow is structured based on data collected by the platform or service through user interaction with the interface.

According to van Dijck, YouTube acted as a pioneer in the world of online streaming, and this innovation, alongside its ability to generate networks, and the opportunity given to users to upload videos, contributed to its popularisation (cf. van Dijck, 2013, p. 112). Video-sharing, which was at the heart of YouTube, soon morphed into video-watching (cf. van Dijck, 2013, p. 115), as people began to spend more and more time watching videos rather than making their own or sharing them. This practice was then extended to other media-sharing platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, that quickly started implementing video formats in their offer. By simplifying the recommendation process by implementing automated algorithmic feeds, social media platforms such as the aforementioned have managed to attract more and more viewers throughout the years, with a study conducted by Deloitte in 2023 confirming that people belonging to Generation Z (1997–2009) have started preferring video content available on social media to traditional television (Westcott

et al., 2023). One of the hypothesised reasons is the ease with which it is possible to find enjoyable content on social media, compared to the choice overload (cf. Gomez-Uribe & Hunt, 2015, p. 2) faced by users on traditional subscription video on demand (SVOD) services.

As we have seen, personalisation is at the centre of contemporary flow experiences, in that most platforms and services that currently offer audiovisual content are algorithm-based. What this entails is that home pages within streaming services are built according to users' algorithmic identities (Cheney-Lippold, 2011), and that these services act as gatekeepers, only showing subscribers the content they deem appropriate (Van Esler, 2021). In analysing SVOD platforms, Cox highlighted the importance of focusing on two distinct aspects of the services: *televisible* elements, which refer to visual elements within the interface, and *invisual* elements, algorithms, and softwares that influence the way in which users interact with the service (2018). The former become fundamental in shaping user experience on the platform: As highlighted by Johnson (2019), SVOD services provide users with (seemingly) infinite rows of content, which provide the feeling of choosing from an ample catalogue, although the platform algorithms are merely offering "more of the same" (Lüders & Shanke Sundet, 2022). The latter, on the other hand, are one of the key components of datacasting experiences, in that they are crucial in ensuring that the personalisation that services enact is effective. In 2009, Andrejevic had imagined what the future of television would look like, and he had hypothesised that "the paradigm shift [will be] from user-controlled surfing to algorithm-controlled sorting (or some combination of the two)" (2009, p. 36); this is not to say that users do not (partly) retain the agency they gained when the paradigm shifted from broad/narrowcasting to personcasting, as they can still make the decision to switch on to the flow, but most interactions nowadays are shaped by platform affordances, which in turn are determined by the complete datafication of user–platform interactions.

Van Es (2023) argues that because Netflix is so dependent on user data to personalise viewing experiences it should be defined as a "data-driven organization," rather than a platform or a media company. The extremely specific categorisation of content into altgenres (Pajkovic, 2022) should lead users towards easier and more enjoyable consumption experiences, although it is not uncommon for viewers to experience decision fatigue when trying to select what to watch (Gomez-Uribe & Hunt, 2015). The televisible elements of the platform, such as the order in which products are organised, the thumbnails that are chosen, and the seemingly infinite catalogue displayed through endless rows of content, give the "appearance of an abundance of content in which users have control over what, when and how to watch" (Johnson, 2019, p. 118).

The agency that viewers have gained throughout the evolution of television impacts their experience of SVOD services, and their interaction with platform affordances influences the invisual elements, which in turn influence what is made to be televisible. Johnson highlights how personalisation, on the one hand, can produce within users the positive feeling of *being known* by the platforms they use, but on the other, will contribute to the creation of feedback loops, partially hiding catalogues and only showing content that will appeal to the spectator (2019). Moreover, she analyses the role that recommendation algorithms play in distribution platforms, assigning to them a role that is similar to that of editorial control:

> Data and algorithms are being used to inform decisions about what content gets produced, licensed and renewed (traditionally the preserve of commissioners), what content and which viewers are commercially valuable to advertisers (traditionally determined by media buyers) and what content viewers see (traditionally shaped by schedulers). (Johnson, 2019, p. 149)

It is possible, then, to create a datacasting model (Table 1), which includes both SVOD platforms that function with an on-demand system, and media-sharing platforms that have continuous flows of content which are entirely algorithmically selected.

Table 1. Different paradigms for audiovisual content distribution.

Broadcasting/Narrowcasting	Personcasting	Datacasting
Top-down flow	Switching on to the flow	Switching on to the flow
Linear Flow	On-demand flow	On-demand flow/algorithmic flow
Content selected by a broadcaster	Content (apparently) selected by users	Content selected by an algorithm
Linear TV	YouTube, Netflix, Disney+, etc.	SVOD/TikTok, Reels, Shorts, etc.

2. TikTok as a Televisual Platform

We have chosen to focus on media-sharing platforms, specifically TikTok, to fully exemplify datacasting, as we believe they are (currently) the ones that best embody the model. TikTok has had an incredible growth in the last five years, reaching one billion users in 2024, and managing to compete and influence platforms that precede it. Scholars have attempted to define TikTok by comparing it to existing platforms: Bhandari and Bimo (2022), for example, place it at the intersection between social network sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007), such as Facebook, microblogging websites, such as X, and content community platforms, such as Instagram and YouTube. This rings true: On the one hand, TikTok allows users to create profiles, follow other users, and share content; on the other, it encourages users to interact with the content that is most relevant to them in order to personalise their For You pages; finally, it is a platform that is video-based and promotes the creation of communities surrounding content niches.

We believe the best way to frame TikTok is as a *platform that generates televisual experiences*. Uricchio, in 2009, pinpointed three specific criteria that in his opinion were fundamental in defining television: The first one was the medium's capacity to generate liveness, defined as the ability to broadcast live programming; the second characteristic was to possess flow, defined as a linear sequence of programmes; and the third was the capacity to aggregate audiences (Uricchio, 2009). While it is true that in the last two decades television has greatly evolved, and Uricchio's definition may no longer be what we think of when imagining what television is, the elements he described are still present in traditional linear television, and TikTok matches all three criteria. Although it is not the platform's main purpose, it is possible to watch live content on TikTok, shared by amateur users, content creators, and even professional profiles such as brands or TV networks; there definitely is a flow experience on TikTok, which we have called algorithmic flow, which is eerily similar to linear flow—both offer a continuous flow of content which is occasionally interrupted by advertisements, the main difference being who owns the content. As we have seen, in algorithmic platforms the editorial control is in the hands of the algorithm, whereas in linear television it is in the hands of broadcasters, who select programmes and advertisements, designing the perfect evening of television.

Finally, TikTok has the ability to aggregate publics that are otherwise geographically dispersed: Through the extremely precise segmentation that is enacted within the platform, users are placed in hyper-specific niches to which they develop a sense of belonging (Jones, 2023). Users of the platform imagine themselves as part

of an algorithmically constituted audience (Fisher & Mehozay, 2019; Shapiro, 2020), and enact strategies to ensure they do not leave the niche (or niches) they feel they belong to (Firth & Parisi, 2023), as they do not wish to be misread by the platform algorithm, which would then lead them to put in place forms of algorithmic resistance (Karizat et al., 2021). Audiences develop a strong attachment to the type of content they are shown (Siles & Meléndez-Moran, 2021), as well as the feeling that the platform understands them.

Faltesek et al. (2023) agree in defining TikTok as television. They add that "when we say that TikTok is television we mean that it is the form of television that is not an on-demand feature film, but the cultural and technical form flow media for which you do not have full control" (p. 11), highlighting the importance of flow in assigning televisual labels to platforms that produce content other than traditional TV. TikTok's affordances encourage users to remain within their algorithmic flow of content, interacting with the videos in order to construct accurate algorithmic identities (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). Although the content offered by content creators on the platform is not always professionally generated—rather there is a large number of amateur videos that reach viral status—the viewing experience can be defined as televisual. We define algorithmic flow as a continuous flow of content selected by recommendation algorithms based on user data they have collected through datafication processes.

From a content-based perspective, more and more production companies are investing in TikTok to share their new shows: In 2022, Kareem Rahma, an Egyptian-American comedian, created the show *Keep the Meter Running*, an unscripted series comprised of six-minute episodes in which Rahma gets into a cab in New York, asks the driver to take him to their favourite place, and to keep the meter running (Desta, 2022); the short episodes are split into four parts, in order to appeal to an audience that is used to consuming bite-sized content. Because TikTok is an algorithm-based platform, creators and producers cannot count on users following their profiles and tuning into scheduled appointments to watch new episodes: It is very important for professionally produced videos to blend into an ordinary For You page, matching the style of grassroots productions. This entails a specific kind of storytelling be associated with TikTok shows: Because producers cannot assume that their audience will be watching chronologically, every clip must have a self-contained narrative that allows viewers to enjoy each video without missing out on an ongoing story.

Furthermore, networks (such as Paramount and Peacock) and SVOD services (such as Netflix) have started sharing clips from the shows that they own on their proprietary profiles, emulating users who started this practice, by taking advantage of the lack of regulation on TikTok. By replicating a type of content made popular by "common users," networks have been able to slip under the radar and contribute to the trend. Although clips from products such as the aforementioned are not exclusively part of TikTok's platform vernacular (Gibbs et al., 2014), they are one of the main genres that are now part of the platform, and have a positive impact on the consumption of the products outside of the platform (Yang et al., 2024).

The idea behind enjoyable content-watching experiences on TikTok is that the content reaches users without them having to search for it, and that it matches their expectations of what they intend to watch at that moment. The seemingly magical match between what users desire and what the platform offers has been dubbed algorithmic conspirituality, defined as "spiritualizing beliefs about algorithms, which emerge from occasions when people find personal, often revelatory connections to content algorithmically recommended to them" (Cotter et al., 2022). Although finding clips from TV shows might not be revelatory to those who watch them, there is an element of satisfaction that can be gathered from being shown clips that one enjoys.

For this reason, it is important that networks that want to insert themselves in user practices do it by following the implicit rules developed by those who came before: Clips can be cropped to fit the screen or remain horizontal with bars above and below, must have subtitles, and must cover a whole scene. Networks will try to distinguish their clips by inserting their logo on the page, as well as the title of the show (to avoid comments such as: "What show is this from?"), and occasionally the episode number. The goal is to post a video that is virtually indistinguishable from those uploaded by other users, but that will direct attention towards official sources instead of secondary individuals with no legal claim over the product.

3. Go With the Flow

The relevance of TikTok within debates on the future of television appears to be evident when looking at conversations happening amongst media and entertainment journalists. *Fast Company* asks, "Is TikTok the Future of Television?" (Blancafor, 2023), citing the occasion in which Paramount uploaded the entire Mean Girls movie to its TikTok profile split into 23 parts, and an increasing number of media outlets are asking similar questions. Shows, that one might call TV shows, are being produced for the platform: An example of this is *Cobell Energy*, a scripted show, produced by Adam McCay's production company, that was created exclusively for TikTok (Tingley, 2023). In this case, every episode corresponded to a single TikTok, allowing the story to progress in a more linear fashion, assuming that the TikTok algorithm had the courtesy to show users the show in chronological order. On the other hand, there are amateur productions that gained immense success on the platform, such as the series *Who TF Did I Marry?*, posted by TikTok creator Tareasa "Reesa Teesa" Johnson in early 2024: The creator posted 50 videos recounting the relationship with her ex-husband, and gathered over 450 million impressions (Hailu, 2024). The story, which is now considered a series, is set to be adapted for television. In the case of amateur content, the technique that is typically used to ensure viewers can enjoy a linear narrative is labelling each video as "part 1," "part 2," etc., giving the opportunity to those who encounter a video on their For You page to search for the first video and enjoy the series from the beginning. It is sufficient to look over to TikTok's Chinese counterpart Douyin to imagine what the future of televisual productions looks like for the platform: Douyin carries a slate of original productions, shows comprised of several episodes, or even seasons, split into clips that last between a few minutes and over an hour. As well as producing variety shows, Douyin has also produced mini-dramas, usually offering the first few episodes for free and then requiring a subscription to keep watching. Regardless of the products that can be found on TikTok as of now, it is undeniable that as a platform that is based entirely on audiovisual content, looking at it from an "evolution of television" perspective allows for a more comprehensive view on its inner workings.

The research that is presented in this article is part of a larger study that was conducted to identify the leading narratives amongst TikTok users concerning their perception of the platform and the platform algorithm. A questionnaire was constructed comprising questions concerning users' scope of use of the app, their interaction with the content they are shown, and how they view the platform. The study followed a grounded theory approach (Birks & Mills, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967): Following Hutchinson (1993), a review of existing literature on TikTok was conducted before writing the interview, and the questions that emerged ranged from trying to understand why and how users use TikTok, what they aim to gain through the use of the platform, what kind of relationship they develop with content and content creators, and their level of algorithmic awareness and consequent interactions with platform affordances. The main gap we identified in the literature was a lack of focus on flow experiences within the platform, and whether and how these could compare to televisual experiences. The interviewees were selected through snowball sampling,

starting from a small network of known contacts, and then choosing people from Italy, aged 18–34, who had been TikTok users for at least a year, and used the app at least once a day. The interviews were then conducted both in person and online, recorded, and then transcribed and anonymised (and in the case of this article, translated from Italian to English), and subsequently analysed to extract leading narratives: We identified codes within the transcripts, that were then grouped into concepts and categories. The study was ended once we felt the data on algorithmic awareness had reached saturation. In this article we focus on the category of TikTok as a platform for (televisual) entertainment, bringing forward the two key concepts we identified: TV on TikTok, and TikTok as TV. The results presented in this article are taken from the analysis of 20 of these interviews with Italian users aged 25–34 (one of the most popular age ranges according to data collected by We Are Social [2024]), of which 13 are women and seven are men. The age range was selected considering that although it is the second most popular age group for TikTok users, it is the most popular one for services such as YouTube or Disney+ (according to Benes, 2022), whereas users belonging to the 18–24 range seem to find more appeal in audiovisual content on media-sharing platforms. Table 2 provides information on the interviewees.

Table 2. Research participants.

Participant	Age	Gender	Participant	Age	Gender
P1	26	F	P11	30	M
P2	26	M	P12	31	M
P3	27	F	P13	29	F
P4	26	F	P14	26	F
P5	26	F	P15	30	F
P6	27	F	P16	25	F
P7	33	M	P17	30	F
P8	28	F	P18	29	M
P9	25	F	P19	29	M
P10	26	F	P20	26	M

3.1. TV on TikTok

As seen in the aforementioned examples, there is an increasing number of actual TV products and films present on TikTok. Almost all our interviewees stated that their preferred use of the platform is for entertainment purposes, looking for a place where they can unwind by watching content that they are sure they will enjoy; P3, P15, and P16 mentioned using TikTok to find information, which was also brought up by P6 and P9, who considered TikTok to be a good place to find opinions on products, books, or shows. The algorithmic flow plays a key role in users' enjoyment of televisual content on the platform: P9, P13, P15, P16, P18, and P20 brought up the fact that TikTok has taken the place of YouTube in their viewing habits, citing as one of the main reasons how easy it is to watch enjoyable content on TikTok without having to search for it, as well as the length of the videos:

> I rarely go on YouTube, if I know there is a person who is posting a specific movie review maybe I'll go watch it, but even then I might just watch half of the video because I can't be bothered to finish it. On TikTok I'll start watching something and in two minutes it'll be over. As far as I'm concerned, my experience, I can see TikTok replacing YouTube. (P16)

Our interviewees mentioned that whenever the platform suggests clips from films and TV shows, they end up enjoying them, giving credit to the algorithm and how well it appears to know them:

> I see scenes from films, like clips, and it's all things that I end up watching, like through TikTok I watch a good 20 minutes from certain films because there is scene 1, scene 2, scene 3...and it's all things that I like. (P14)

This is achieved by specific interactions that are enacted by users, who strategically engage with content in order to shape their experience: "If I had a role in shaping my algorithm?! [laughs] I *created* my algorithm!" (P14).

Our interviewees elaborated specific stories about how their algorithm functions (Schellewald, 2022), consequently developing folk theories (DeVito et al., 2017) regarding how to interact with the platform in order to maintain their place in their preferred content niche. Their initial encounter with televisual content on the platform is usually by chance; however, many interviewees stated that an initial video would then lead them to search for more, ending up on pages dedicated to posting entire films or TV shows:

> I think I watched all of *Young Sheldon*, more or less [laughs]....I don't think I could watch the whole thing, but in clips it's okay. But yeah, one of the constant things I see is bits of films and shows, which then sometimes will lead me to watch the other parts, or sometimes I just wait for them to appear. But if something finishes with a cliffhanger I immediately go on the profile to see the next bit, or things like that, I often do that, it's a constant, and I find it funny because I'll read comments that say, "It's the first time I watch a movie on TikTok," and things like that, and I think, "Welcome to my life." (P13)

The idea that through TikTok it is easier to access content is emphasised by the way in which users talk about how content reaches them: As we can see from the above quote, there is the idea that the videos that people like will somehow reach them, without them having to search for them. The interviewees did not appear bothered by the fact that the clips they were shown were out of order; rather, if they found them interesting, they would simply treat them as an entry point to the product. P1 highlighted the key difference between TikTok and a service like Netflix, saying that "Netflix can only dream of being like TikTok," and adding:

> The difference between Netflix and TikTok is simply that Netflix is limited, because of copyright and whatnot. TikTok isn't limited, so on TikTok I can watch anything, on Netflix I can only watch Netflix's catalogue....TikTok seems infinite. TikTok is infinite, that is the problem. Netflix is finite, TikTok is infinite. (P1)

Having many different types of content readily available and delivered to the For You page without having to lift a finger seems to be the main appeal of watching televisual content on a mobile-first vertical platform such as TikTok. Although we have seen the importance of agency in the affirmation of SVOD services, and in general in the enjoyment of on-demand flow experiences, on TikTok we see users watching something because not only did the platform suggest it (as is the case on SVOD services), but the video started playing without the user having to select it: "I started rewatching *Grey's Anatomy* because TikTok was showing me videos, and this happens for a lot of things" (P14).

Moreover, P1, P4, P10, P14, P16, and P19 stated that at times they were influenced by what they were shown on the platform, and ended up watching the product elsewhere in order to fully enjoy it:

A: Recently I watched a movie because I saw bits of it on TikTok. I was influenced.

Q: Some people say you shouldn't watch movies on TikTok.

A: Just as Nolan intended [laughs]. I can't wait for them to put *Oppenheimer* on TikTok. (P4)

A: Lately I had *Abbot Elementary*, it kept turning up. Very cute, it's on Disney+.

Q: You watched it?

A: I watched it, very cute. Other things will appear and I think "skip!" and then I won't watch them. (P1)

However, others felt that by watching clips on TikTok they ended up watching a higher number of films overall:

> Some films are turned into videos and I watch more. I think I end up watching most of the film, I even go and search for the other parts of the movie if I can't find them, but I don't go look for the film [elsewhere]. (P18)

Another example of TV on TikTok is so-called "sludge content" (Weaver, 2023): split screen videos that include TV content on one side of the screen and attention-grabbing videos on the other, such as subway surfer matches, slime videos, soap being cut, or "oddly satisfying" videos. This is one of the techniques that TikTok creators use to capture viewers' attention effectively, and it is frequently used when sharing TV content. Second-screening, meaning using a different screen (usually a smartphone) while watching audiovisual products on a larger screen (usually a television), ends up happening within the same screen, and without users making the conscious decision to watch more than one video at the same time. Some of our interviewees mentioned that this type of content led them to watch clips from shows they otherwise would have skipped, whereas others stated that they did not enjoy sludge content, and would skip the videos altogether.

3.2. TikTok as TV

Taking a step back from specific televisual content, it is also possible to theorise TikTok as a form of TV, not because of the type of videos present on the platform, but because of users' viewing experience on the platform. As we have seen, from a theoretical perspective TikTok matches criteria that were previously used to define television. Our interviewees, when discussing the role the platform played in their everyday media consumption habits, occasionally compared the moments in which they chose to watch TikTok to moments they would have previously dedicated to watching television; when they did not compare them directly, however, it was still possible to see how TikTok occupies periods of time that one might associate to watching television:

Q: When do you watch TikTok?

A: When I'm chilling, when I'm on my lunch break, in the morning I wake up, I look at social media, and then I'll do a couple of quick scrolls on TikTok. I try not to spend a lot of time on it in the morning

> because then I waste time, because once I start I find it hard to stop, I lose track of time and then I'm late. Otherwise yeah, during my lunch break at work, or when I come back home, maybe I have like five minutes and I watch that. (P16)

Here we can find the expectation that TikTok users have that they will always find something they enjoy on their For You page: This correlates to the relationship they form with their algorithm (Siles & Meléndez-Moran, 2021), and the prospect of reaping the benefits of the effort they put into training it.

When describing the ideal moment to watch TikToks, one moment that recurred in our interviews was the evening:

> The one moment that is a constant is the evening before going to bed, while I'm cooking…but I can only do that now that the videos are longer, it was harder before. (P4)

> The typical moment I'd say is before going to sleep, I get in bed, I open TikTok, and I stay for as long as I can, then I close it, I close my eyes, and sleep. (P20)

While the quotes do not explicitly mention television viewing habits or how they may have evolved, the reference to the end of the day as a time to engage with TikTok suggests a parallel with traditional television consumption. In the collective imagination, the evening is typically associated with relaxation and watching films or TV shows. Thus, the association of this time of day with TikTok viewing carries particular symbolic significance, positioning the platform within a similar temporal context traditionally dominated by television. What is also interesting is that users referred to the length of the videos: Although TikTok was initially conceived to be a short-video platform (Kaye et al., 2022), inheriting the space left by Vine within the media ecosystem, it has become—over the years—a platform that allows videos that can be up to an hour in length. The response to this change varies, with many interviewees stating that they do not enjoy watching videos that are too long, and that "if I want to watch those kinds of videos, I'll go on YouTube or Spotify" (P12):

> Initially when I would see videos that I thought were too long I would skip them because I had the attention span of a hamster, whereas now I've been using them as if they were mini podcasts. I just put them on and listen to them, I watch them while I do other things. (P14)

When asked what platform they would compare TikTok to, P6, P7, and P11 mentioned Instagram, and P4, P18, and P20 mentioned YouTube, placing it therefore in what Bhandari and Bimo classified as content community platforms (2022), ones that place content at the centre and encourage users to create networks surrounding said content. Although this encouragement is not explicit in TikTok's affordances, watching content is the main activity that is suggested, and through the creation of niches, audiences within the app find a sense of community (Jones, 2023; Zulli & Zulli, 2020). The comparison with YouTube is the one that places TikTok closest to debates on the state of television, given that debates on YouTube's similarities and differences to the medium have been discussed at length (see for example Uricchio, 2009).

4. Conclusion

Although our interviews were not specifically targeted towards understanding whether or not the platform could be understood as a form of television, the theme emerged from users' lived experience of the platform.

The continuous algorithmic flow offers an experience so deeply reminiscent of the traditional linear televisual experience that it becomes complicated to interpret it without drawing from a television studies approach.

Johnson (2019) defines online TV as "services that facilitate the viewing of editorially selected audiovisual content through internet-enabled devices" (p. 1). If one were to strictly follow this definition, then, media-sharing platforms could not be included in the category, as they typically do not have editorial control of the content that is uploaded. This changes in the case of original productions on platforms such as YouTube or Douyin, when the platform plays the role of the producer. On a platform like TikTok, it becomes increasingly difficult to assign editorial control: Although the platform has filtering mechanisms in place that contribute to maintaining order within the platform, it is virtually impossible to monitor every video that is uploaded, and the filtering is done to upkeep community standards, not to follow a set agenda.

Although it is true that societal biases intrinsically imbue all algorithmic systems (Airoldi, 2022), and therefore contribute to the popularisation, or lack thereof, of specific types of content (Taylor & Abidin, 2024), it is also true that on TikTok it is possible to find videos with many different points of view, that each individual can watch after being placed in their assigned niche. The algorithmic audiences that are created on the platform do more than categorise the users: By delivering hyperpersonal content, the platform sets off an identification process that accompanies the content one watches. It is important for those who use the platform to recognise themselves in their assigned algorithmic identity (Karizat et al., 2021), as well as to feel that their algorithmically assigned community matches their imagined community (Jones, 2023). This identification process contributes to the development of a relationship between users and their algorithms, and the consequent establishment of a level of trust towards what the algorithmic flow suggests.

The shift from personcasting to datacasting can be observed not so much in the passage from selection on the part of the audience to a complete lean-back experience, but rather in what the audience learns to interact with, and what their interactions make possible: Whereas in the era of personcasting users were (and still are) encouraged to select what to watch, when to watch it, and on what platform, in order to enjoy audiovisual products free from rigid schedules, in the era of datacasting every interaction has the purpose of teaching the platform's algorithm what we like or dislike. This can be observed on several levels: On a platform like TikTok users are encouraged by the interface to interact with the videos they are shown on their For You page, rather than actively choosing what videos to watch (although it remains possible to do so). By doing so, they are contributing to data collection on the part of the platform, as every interaction counts towards composing accurate algorithmically defined identities. On SVOD platforms, users are still encouraged to select the content they most want to watch; however, what they are shown is determined by their previous interactions with the interface.

Within our interviews, the idea of not having to choose what to watch emerged frequently, alongside the idea that the platform would be making the selection based on what it already knew. Experiencing a personalised linear flow of content seemed to be one of the main appeals of TikTok, which is noteworthy considering the leading narrative within media industries that (young) people these days are no longer watching linear television (Davis & Cranz, 2023) in favour of on-demand television and user-generated content.

It is widely accepted that data has now become crucial in most, if not all, platform experiences, and it is essential to delineate consumption models that consider the impact of data on the choices that are made.

By theorising datacasting, we are not aiming to remove user agency in selection processes when it comes to audiovisual content; however, it is almost undeniable that this selection nowadays is very strongly impacted by datafication processes, and therefore users have lost some of their agency.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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