

# Dimensions of Youth Interaction on TikTok: Exploring Creativity, Multimodality, and Digital Literacy

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**Abstract:** This paper explores youth perceptions of TikTok, looking for how this platform influences their daily experience and how they build their relationship with technology. We rely on qualitative research using interviews as a method to search for evidence. Based on the analysis of data collected from 19 participants between 11 and 23 years old, interviewed by 4 researchers, individually or in groups, during seven interviews of approximately one hour, during a school year. This study addresses how users interpret their activities on the social network TikTok—after transcription of the interviews, using HappyScribe, which were subsequently reviewed manually, a total of 71 documents were obtained. A double coding process, automatic and manual, was carried out. This combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology allows for a broader understanding of the trends and patterns that mark the youth experience on TikTok. A closer look at this technique shows that it was carried out by analyzing the terms, considering the context in which each of the codes appears. This function uses an algorithm to generate a hierarchy of codes based on recurring phrases in the data. The results show that TikTok is not only an entertainment platform, but also a space for the production and negotiation of shared meanings among the platform's users, who employ different linguistic strategies. Young people generate content by adapting to algorithms and re-signifying trends based on their cultural experiences. Likewise, there is a constant interaction between creativity and algorithmic regulations, which influences which meanings consolidate or disappear. The common perceptions identified in this work reveal not only the relevance of TikTok as a tool for social interaction among young people but also how it is configured as a creative space related to the acquisition of multimodal skills and even capable of enhancing various forms of literacy.

**Keywords:** TikTok, Automatic and Manual Coding, Social Media, Creativity, Multimodality, Literacy.

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## 1. Introduction

TikTok, one of the most popular digital platforms among people (Ceci, 2025 01 17), has transformed their interactions in the digital world. Its format of short videos, combined with accessible interactive and editing tools, has given rise to a dynamic in social relationships where creativity, entertainment, and social connection are intertwined. Such resources include, for example, the AI-supported Symphony assistant (TikTok, 2024, May, 06). This article focuses on exploring young people's perceptions about TikTok, seeking how this platform influences their daily experience and how they build their relationship with technology.

We rely on qualitative research using interviews to search for evidence (Roulston, 2024). Emergent themes, identified through automatic (Iliev et al., 2015, Zhang et al., 2023, FAB\_Builder\_Code\_Generation, 2025) and manual (Saldaña, 2021, Braun and Clarke, 2024) coding processes of interactions in TikTok, are analyzed using NVIVO 15 (Windows). By focusing on youth perceptions, the article aims to highlight how this platform reflects their values, aspirations, and challenges in the context of an increasingly digitized world. These contributions enrich knowledge about the platform and open new avenues for exploring its impact on youth from an inclusive perspective.

The general objective is to explore young people's perceptions of TikTok in order to delimit how this platform influences their daily experience and the construction of their relationship with technology. The creative and discursive practices that emerge in this environment are examined. Moreover, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the study's methodological contributions, based on the integration of automatic and manual coding through the use of NVivo to analyze the qualitative data obtained.

The following sub-objectives are proposed to achieve this goal

1. Analyze the role of different types of videos and their contents in youth expression and creativity within TikTok.

2. To investigate how young people use multimodal discourses in the elaboration of videos, including editing practices and the use of the resources offered by the platform.
3. Examine how TikTok practices relate to the development of digital literacy, including aspects such as security awareness and critical thinking.

Considering it, the most relevant contributions of the study, unlike industry trend reports, such as GWI's (2022), which take a large-scale survey approach, providing a quantitative analysis of social media usage patterns, this study takes a qualitative approach that allows for an in-depth exploration of how young people experience TikTok in their daily lives. While the GWI report provides data on digital consumption habits and social media behaviour based on large samples of internet users, our research analyses the construction of meanings around the platform, considering the interaction with algorithms and the creative and discursive processes that emerge in this environment. Furthermore, by integrating automatic and manual coding using NVivo, an innovative approach is offered to identify patterns in youth discourses, allowing not only to quantify trends but also to interpret the context and sociocultural dynamics that shape their participation in the platform.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

From a theoretical perspective, this study is framed within debates on digital creativity, multimodality, and literacy in interactive environments. Creativity on TikTok not only involves the production of original content but is also based on the reconfiguration of discourses and cultural trends in a process that aligns with the notion of remix (Navas, 2012; Delfanti & Phan, 2024) and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2013). In this context, multimodality (Bezemer & Kress, 2016) plays a key role by allowing young people to construct visual and audio narratives that integrate various expressive resources—from visual effects to the strategic use of sound and text—thus configuring new forms of communication and digital learning. Digital literacy on TikTok involves technical skills and allows young people to interpret and redefine content in an ecosystem mediated by algorithms.

### 2.1 Creativity: Generating and Transforming Content

Creativity on TikTok emerges as a central dimension in teens' interactions with the digital world as creators and consumers (Kaye et al., 2022). The platform provides a unique ecosystem that combines accessible video editing, music, and visual effects tools with a dynamic social environment where young people find immediate validation, inspiration, and feedback (Zeng et al., 2021). In this context, creativity is not limited to content production but extends to how teenagers reinterpret, re-signify, and dialogue with the videos they consume. (John-Steiner, 2000). Currently, something that qualifies as creative involves both people and productions, also considering the environment in which they arise. These ideas were suggested by (Chomsky, 1965), for whom creativity is the core of language itself, its essential property. What we can understand happens when teenagers create in TikTok; it is necessary to acquire new discourses that become the creation instrument.

Creativity is associated with specific practices, knowledge construction, and even certain forms of power that involve control of discourse and emotions (Ivcevic et al., 2023). Moreover, creativity is part of a social system that involves knowing, being, and acting (Kaye et al., 2022). To some extent, to be recognized by a close or distant audience with whom they share values and ways of acting, a set of cultural practices. TikTok's culture is closer to popular culture than to culture with a capital letter. When adolescents reflect on the videos on TikTok, they highlight aspects related to originality, adaptability, and the ability to connect emotionally with other users.

Relevant in this context is the work of Henry Jenkins in relation to the concept of participatory culture (Jenkins and Scott, 2013), which defines culture as a set of creative and shared human experiences. Those who create in TikTok reconstruct what others have done and rely on the platform's resources (Bigly-Sales, 2023, December 23). At this point, these resources are mediated by artificial intelligence. Also helpful in this regard are the comments of Henry Jenkins (Brinck, 2023), who highlights the ability of AI to democratize visual representations, as they allow people to express themselves in innovative ways that were unthinkable only a short time ago. In this context, the idea of remix (Delfanti and Phan, 2024; Navas, 2023), related to creativity, makes sense. Remix means to reconstruct by transforming what is already there—for example, part of a video or even a video game. If we look at the early works of (Navas, 2012), *creation implies design and transformation, which is impossible without reference to rules, instruments, codes, and procedures*.

The above reflections also allow us to understand better the contributions of Abidin and his collaborators (Zeng et al., 2021), for whom creativity on platforms such as TikTok operates as a hybrid process, where users mix

visual, auditory and textual elements in unique ways while adapting their productions to the cultural and aesthetic norms of the digital community. TikTok acts as a creative laboratory where young people not only generate content but also evaluate and reinterpret others' productions.

## 2.2 Multimodality and Video Creation

Creativity in TikTok is essentially multimodal, as their discourses combine different forms of representation (visual, auditory, textual) to produce complex narratives. Teenagers use tools such as transitions, special effects, and musical fragments to embellish their creations and communicate meanings. **Multimodality can be considered a tool to represent reality; we have to take into account that young people's contributions in TikTok involve a reconstruction of their daily life or that of others using multimodal discourse** (Bezemer and Kress, 2016). In digital platforms such as TikTok, the principles of multimodality become especially evident. TikTok is characterized by organically integrating moving images, sound effects, text snippets, and visual transitions, creating narratives that combine different modes of communication into a cohesive and highly impactful experience (Leaver et al., 2020).

Moreover, it should be noted that although the modes of representation can be kept discrete, the rules of multimodality make it possible to combine them to build complex productions. In TikTok, this combination reaches its full potential. The platform's built-in editing tools allow users to synchronize sounds with images and text, creating an immersive experience that reinforces the message. This integration highlights how affective aspects of humans, such as empathy or emotion, are not separate from cognitive and communicative activity (Cho et al., 2022).

Finally, the grammar of multimodal discourse underlines the need for conscious reflection on the resources used and the messages conveyed in contemporary communicative contexts (Bezemer et al., 2020). Understanding how different modes of representation contribute to the construction of reality enriches our ability to interpret complex messages and gives us tools to participate actively in a constantly evolving social and digital environment.

## 2.3 Digital Literacy: Resources and Skills

Digital environments have democratized access to global communication, allowing people to publish, produce, and share information with broad and diverse audiences, something that a few years ago was reserved for a few elites (Fastrez and Landry, 2024). In TikTok, this democratization translates into the ability of young users to connect with broad audiences through short videos using multimodal resources that integrate images, music, and text. However, this active participation requires more than technical skills; it demands a critical understanding of digital discourses and their construction conventions (Marsh, 2019). We can elaborate on these competencies. First, from an operational perspective, users must use advanced editing tools to create videos that combine visual, textual, and sound modes. Smooth transitions, special effects, and precise synchronization between music and images require technical skills and a deep understanding of the platform's functionalities (Housse, 2024 12 13). In this context, TikTok offers a space where teenagers can experiment and hone these operational competencies while participating in digital social dynamics.

Second, digital literacy's cultural dimension is reflected in how users adopt and adapt community norms and values, such as the strategic use of hashtags, participation in viral challenges, and incorporation of music trends (Zappavigna and Logi, 2024). These practices reinforce shared cultural values and allow users to position themselves within the digital community. For example, a video that uses a popular hashtag or follows a viral trend can generate a sense of belonging while amplifying the creator's visibility within the platform.

Finally, regarding the understood critical dimension, TikTok users must develop an ability to evaluate how digital narratives can reinforce or challenge social and cultural structures (Gee, 2017). We will point out the contributions of Cho et al. (2022) that extend this perspective, emphasizing the importance of understanding how digital platforms shape the user experience through their algorithmic architectures and dynamics of participation. While not specifically referring to TikTok, we can consider their contributions to understand better how literacy can be developed within the framework of this social network. It will be necessary to consider, first, the presence of the self, in that as a sender it must understand both its own motivations and those of the audiences to whom it directs its messages

In short, fostering the literacy of TikTok users can become a goal in non-formal educational scenarios. It implies developing it by emphasizing how it is possible to consciously create productions that are shared using multimodal discourses within the social network framework.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Methodological Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at analyzing the digital practices that young people between 11 and 23 years old carry out in the social network TikTok. We also analyze their conceptions about the functioning of TikTok and the communicative environment created there. We seek to describe and understand the meaning that young people construct about their interactions with the TikTok platform. We understand qualitative research as a way to explore in depth the lived experiences, perceptions, and practices of participants (Denzin et al., 2024).

The study's design was inspired by various approaches, giving special importance to interviews as a method of data collection (Roulston, 2024). It has been complemented with others inspired by ethnography (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2024), as an approach interested in discovering the meanings that the participants attribute to their practices, which are reinterpreted by the research team. We also consider the analysis of cases, which we relate to the systems and information management (Simeonova and Fitzgerald, 2023) used by young people. Considering the role played by the context of each participant, the contributions of (Clarke et al., 2024), who speak of a situational approach, are also relevant.

A dual approach inspires the analyses. On the one hand, automatic (Lumivero, 2024, Zhang et al., 2023) and manual coding processes (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

#### 3.2 The Data Set and Interviews

We worked with 19 participants between 11 and 23 years of age. All of them, except one, are Spanish and live in the community of Madrid, except for two who belong to nearby communities. A relevant feature in selecting the participants was their commitment to participate in a study that would last one school year, which required them to maintain contact with one of the researchers at least once a month and observe their participation in TikTok. Each of the researchers selected a small group of participants who accepted this commitment.

As indicated, the interviews played a fundamental role in research design. Despite the apparent simplicity of the interviews, there is an exchange of subjectivities between interviewer and interviewee that we cannot disregard (Roulston, 2024). In this study, the interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to 90 minutes. They were individual or in groups, considering the friendship relationships that existed among the participants. We sought to know not only what the participants think about TikTok and their approaches to the social network from a global perspective, but also their daily practices and the changes that had occurred in its use between interviews. These were semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2018)..

Once the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed using HappyScribe software<sup>i</sup> And then manually reviewed by a project collaborator hired for this purpose. Subsequently, and with regard to the data analysis presented in this work, an automatic coding process was carried out using NVIVO 15 for Windows.<sup>ii</sup> . Automatic coding of themes does not replace the researcher's interpretation of the data. Automatic coding is limited to coding by keywords, and the program cannot interpret concepts from the data or detect humor or sarcasm, for example. The result of this first automatic coding was 3925 references coded in seven thematic cores, as the results will show in detail. The automatic coding has been complemented by another manual, which consists of defining thematic groups, considering the semantic relationships of the key terms and the context in which they appear. In other words, the subcodes were grouped manually. As mentioned above, it has adopted the perspective of thematic analysis that provides a rigorous process through which patterns are located within the data through familiarization with the data, coding, and the development and review of themes (Wilson et al., 2023). Specifically, we have assumed Braun and Clarke's approach (Braun and Clarke, 2022), which, according to the authors, requires reflexivity, creativity, and theoretical commitment.

### 4. Results

In this section, we reflect on the construction of shared meanings in TikTok and its connection to cultural and social dynamics.

### 4.1 Identify Dynamics in Groups of Participants

A significant finding was the absence of substantial differences between the groups. Despite the diversity in the sample (with groups conducted by different researchers and both individual and group interviews), perceptions of TikTok use were strikingly similar. We developed this idea based on an analysis of the most frequent terms used in each of the groups coordinated by the different researchers, the results of which are summarized in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Cloud of the most frequent terms in the groups coordinated by each researcher.**

The graph shows that the most relevant words were "interesting," "followers," and "different." According to the frequency percentages, "interesting" appears especially in the interviews of Interviewer 1 (10%), Interviewer 3 (11%), and Interviewer 4 (11%), while "followers" is more significant in the data of Interviewer 3 (15%) and Interviewer 2 (13%). The word "different" appears highly frequently in all four groups, standing out in Interviewer 2 (17%). Complementary words include terms such as "influencers" (mentioned between 7% and 8% in several groups), "comments" (with 6% in the interviews of Interviewer 1 and 4% in Interviewer 3), "application" (10% in Interviewer 4 and 6% in Interviewer 1), and "entertainment" (6% in Interviewers 2 and 4). The overall analysis of these words enriches the context of the analysis. It shows how the dialogue throughout the sessions is structured around the key elements of TikTok and the dynamics within the platform.

In summary, all groups seem to follow similar patterns in terms of consumption, creation, and editing, reinforcing the idea that in TikTok, group differences are diluted as a function of digital dynamics. Content popularity does not seem to depend on group membership but rather on how it aligns with trends and algorithms. Delving deeper into how participants conceive of algorithms and how they work could be interesting for future analysis.

The analysis was carried out in two phases: the first phase of automatic coding and a second phase of manual coding.

### 4.2 Automatic and Manual Coding

#### 4.2.1 Automatic Coding

Table 1 shows the result of the automatic coding performed with NVivo software.

**Table1: Themes created automatically**

Name	Archives	References
things	67	464
account	66	524
of/from tiktok	61	284
people	68	598
have	68	421
type	63	354
videos	67	1280

There is great variability in the number of references, with videos standing out the most, with 1280 references, a very high number compared to the others. Together with "account," this category highlights technical and structural aspects of the platform, linking closely with content creation and consumption practices. The mention of "From TikTok" underlines the importance of the platform itself, positioning it as the central frame of the narratives that emerged in the interviews. To provide further meaning and structure to these data, we manually coded these categories and subcategories, allowing for a more precise interpretation.

#### 4.2.2 Manual Coding

From the previous analysis, we chose to establish "Videos" as the main macro category, given its central role in the context of young people's interactions and practices. Video is not only the central format in TikTok but also the axis through which users' practices and relationships with algorithms are configured.

Manual coding facilitated a more specific analysis, making it possible to identify the themes that reflect the socio-cultural aspects of the interactions within the platform. Table 2 shows the results of this coding, in which the categories found and some examples of subcategories appear.

**Table 2: Subjects obtained in manual coding.**

Name	Archives	References	Examples of Subcategories
Analysis and evaluation	53	179	It makes a lot of sense, different videos, depends on the video
Consumption	36	59	watch the video, search for a video, watching videos
Content	40	69	video content, trendy video, own video
Creation and editing	59	187	duration of videos, I make a video, short videos
Distribution and popularity	52	144	interaction, some videos out, choose a video
Security problems	5	9	report some videos, remove videos, deleted videos
General references & pronouns	63	360	some videos, that video, each video
Have	27	40	has lots and lots of videos, I have private videos, I have saved videos
Type	62	266	type of video, funny videos, original video

### 4.3 Thematic Cores

From the analysis of the subcategories, we identified three thematic cores, which are developed in more detail below:

#### 4.3.1 Creativity, Consumption, Content

Creativity plays a central role in the production of digital content, where young people consume information and actively generate it. The subcategory "type of video" reflects the diversity of formats and styles used on the platform, suggesting a creative process influenced by both emerging trends and algorithmic recommendations. This idea is mentioned by one of the participants about an influencer's video:

"Yes, she used to do a type of videos, maybe from a makeup video she became famous, maybe since then she did start posting more makeup but if her account created it as a makeup target and such and started like that, or suddenly one became famous but she continued, well it will be the same content always."

The adolescent's answer reveals that, despite the new possibilities offered by digital tools, they can limit the autonomy of creators due to the restrictions imposed by algorithms. The text raises whether young people create content freely or adapt to what the algorithm favors. Moreover, creativity in these environments is not an exclusively individual process but occurs in digital communities where cultural references and narrative strategies are shared. Young people employ specific language and use shared cultural references in their content, strengthening the construction of collective digital identities. At the same time, the platform acts as a space for experimentation where new narrative and audiovisual formats are explored.

#### 4.3.2 Multimodality

Creativity occurs in a multimodality context, where combining images, music, effects, and texts allows the construction of meanings innovatively. This process is conditioned by the algorithmic dynamics of TikTok, which influences their "creating and editing" strategies. This subcategory highlights the importance that young people give to content production, as expressed by some participants:

"Of course, no, let's see, maybe it takes a little bit more, because you have to think about which one is good, which one shows the light well, which one is well understood, the text.... Above all, the hardest thing is to think about what you are going to put. But then it takes 50 seconds to publish it, to launch it for people to see it, because it uploads by itself, then you click on publish for everyone and it uploads. So it doesn't usually take long."

Thanks to the editing tools offered by TikTok, interaction is enhanced, turning users into active creators and blurring the boundaries between creators and viewers. Likewise, cultural perceptions are redefined as emerging trends, challenges, and formats that reflect and shape contemporary sociocultural dynamics.

#### 4.3.3 Literacy

The analysis reveals that young people develop specific linguistic and cognitive strategies to interact on TikTok, highlighting the need to understand their digital literacy skills better. Given that communication on TikTok is mediated by algorithms, it is critical to analyze how these factors transform users' interactions and creative practices.

The subcategory "Analysis and evaluation" is directly linked to young people's ability to interpret, criticize, and reflect on the content they consume, which makes them active participants in the construction of digital discourse. Users consume content and evaluate it, discuss it, and contribute to creating digital trends and norms, a fundamental practice in platforms such as TikTok, where the dynamics of virality and popularity are constantly changing. In addition, young people evaluate influences and trends, which involves a critical understanding of content and reflective work on what they consider relevant or authentic. This critical capacity is influenced by their prior ideas about TikTok and digital culture in general, which are formed from their previous experiences with online platforms, media, and discourses.

Finally, "Security Issues" indicates concerns about privacy, exposure to inappropriate content, and other risks associated with using social networks. Participants commented that TikTok has a powerful filter for inappropriate behavior, as reflected in the following quote:

"[...] You can say something, some word or whatever... being a minor, they won't let you have the account and they can take it away, they can take away your video, you know?"

While safety does not appear to be a priority issue in participants' responses, its inclusion in the analysis highlights the importance of continuing to explore how young people perceive and manage risks in digital environments.

## 5. Ethical Considerations

The research was approved by the Ethical Committee of The University of La Rioja (Spain). The study has been developed considering the Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>, Franzke, Aline Shakti, Bechmann, Anja, Zimmer; Michael Zimmer; Charles Ess, and the Association of Internet Researchers (2020) Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements. We have considered 'the Committee on Publication Ethics' International Standards for Authors' <https://bit.ly/3QikswN>. The study was carried out following the ethical principles established for research in digital environments. In the case of underage participants, their parents signed an informed consent form before their participation, although they were not present during the interviews. Likewise, minors and young people of legal age gave informed consent, specifying their right to leave the research at any time without consequences. The anonymity of the participants was guaranteed at all times, using pseudonyms in the transcription and analysis of the data. In addition, the research team has securely safeguarded all the information collected, ensuring its confidentiality and exclusive use for scientific purposes.

## 6. Conclusions

Analysis of participants' responses reveals the deep interconnections between creativity, algorithms, digital literacy and content consumption on platforms such as TikTok. These interactions shape not only the type of content produced, but also how young people develop strategies for visibility and engagement. Video production emerges as both a form of self-expression and a response to algorithmic pressures that determine what is promoted and viewed (Kaye et al., 2022; Zeng et al., 2021). The ubiquity of algorithmic curation influences users' cognitive and linguistic patterns as they learn to adapt their messages to platform-specific dynamics. Furthermore, the role of digital literacy becomes crucial in understanding how young users navigate these spaces. While some may develop sophisticated strategies to optimise their presence, others may struggle with the hidden mechanics of platform governance. This calls for further research into the pedagogical and socio-cultural dimensions of digital literacy, especially in an era where algorithmic visibility shapes knowledge acquisition and self-representation (Cho et al., 20-22; Bezemer and Kress, 2016). Future studies should also explore how these digital ecosystems affect users' cognitive development, identity formation, and critical engagement with media content.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.happyscribe.com>, a web-based application that allows transcribing and summarizing texts using artificial intelligence.

<sup>ii</sup> Automatic encoding for Windows in Nvivo. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FoFg7KHv6zI&t=19s>