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Algorithmic Interaction Ritual Chains on TikTok

Scrolling through Feedback Loops

Bazan Royuela, David

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ALGORITHMIC INTERACTION RITUAL CHAINS propose a conceptual tool to explore human-algorithm interactions on TikTok.

Scrolling on TikTok involves a constant back and forth between the user and the algorithmic recommender system. By watching, liking or skipping, users act on the recommendations curated by the platform. These small actions create the underpinnings of the feedback loops that configure the type of content a user sees. This thesis draws on digital ethnography to study how users' attention while scrolling is connected to the emotional payoff provided by specific content, as feedback loops become meaningful negotiations about (mis)alignment of cultural capital and the resonance of content within users' everyday lives.

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David Bazan Royuela

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Doctoral dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University to be publicly defended on the 26th of September 2025 at 10.15 in Edens Hörsal, Allhelgona kyrkogatan 14, Lund

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Abstract:
Algorithmic recommendations have become ubiquitous in everyday life. From films, music, and potential partners to cute cats and silly dances, social media platforms develop powerful algorithms to predict what users might like and need. However, algorithmic recommendations do not suggest the same content to all users but instead adapt their recommendations dynamically through endless feedback loops. This thesis takes feedback loops as a topic of sociological interest to understand human-algorithm interactions on TikTok. Drawing on interaction ritual theory, the thesis develops the model of algorithmic interaction ritual to study ritualised patterns in algorithmic encounters. Through digital ethnography, the study highlights the embeddedness of feedback loops in users' lives, evolving based on the different moods and challenges users experience in their everyday routines. In this sense, what captures the attention of users in the constant stream of TikToks depends on users' affective states, the perceived vibes, the relatability of content, and how well this aligns with the feelings feedback loops help to create. Human–algorithm interactions consist of recurrent moments of alignment and disruption which, through chains of successive feedback loops, shape how people experience and make sense of scrolling on TikTok. While some suggest that users passively consume algorithmic curated content, this thesis argues that feedback loops are the result of the active participation of both human and algorithmic agents in establishing the content that users encounter. In this way, this thesis contributes to understanding the sociotechnical underpinnings of social action in algorithmic societies.

Key words: Feedback loops, algorithms, TikTok, interaction ritual, microsociology, emotional energy, attention, cultural capital.

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Table of Contents

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List of Figures

List of Tables

Abbreviations

AI	Artificial inteligence
AIR	Algorithmic interaction ritual
ANT	Actor-Network Theory
ASMR	Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response
EE	Emotional energy
FYP	For You Page
IRT	Interaction ritual theory
ML	Machine learning
NLP	Natural Language Processing
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
USA	United States of America

1 Introduction

Few people today would be surprised to learn that, in one way or another, algorithms regulate most aspects of social life. This is not intended to be a dystopian claim, but a reflection of how most contemporary societies rely on algorithms to organise processes and manage vast quantities of data (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021). Algorithms are employed across a variety of domains to manage individuals, groups, and processes — from surveilling borders (Marciano, 2019), policing communities (Brayne & Christin, 2020), and governing workforces (Kiviat, 2019; Vallas & Schor, 2020) to extracting massive quantities of personal data for economic and political profit (Zuboff, 2019). In addition, algorithms are central to many of the activities and interactions that people perform online. Everyday practices that rely on digital technologies and the Internet — such as using social media (Bucher, 2017), streaming music, films, and TV series (Eriksson et al., 2019; Gaw, 2022), booking holidays, shopping on retail platforms, and dating (Duguay, 2017; Guo et al., 2024) — generally entail interactions with algorithms that filter, curate, and recommend information for users. Regardless of whether we consider algorithms to be disruptive forces or tools for creating new opportunities, the reality is that most people interact with them multiple times a day.

This multiplicity of encounters has made people increasingly aware of the presence of algorithms in their everyday lives, leading to the development of assumptions and knowledge about them (Bucher, 2017, 2018; Siles, 2023). These informal understandings, based on everyday experiences, are essential to how people make sense of algorithms, use platforms, and navigate digital spaces. However, such assumptions are not necessarily formed through technical awareness, nor contextual understandings of how algorithms work. Rather, they emerge through anticipations, personal stories and embodied responses to algorithmic outcomes. In other words, awareness and knowledge about algorithms are expressed through the moods, sensations, and feelings algorithms help to create (Bucher, 2017; Ruckenstein, 2023). The affective responses produced by algorithmic outputs invite users to imagine and reflect on algorithmic processes by prompting them to make sense of why algorithms arrive at certain conclusions, or

question why a platform "knows" them so well or so poorly. These reflections, in turn, influence how people engage with a platform (Bucher, 2017).

Most sociological analyses agree on the impact on and relevance of algorithms to society. However, while much of the analysis has tended to focus on how algorithms organise society, transform consumption, surveil and discipline workers, and (re)produce inequalities (see for example Beer, 2009; Griesbach et al., 2019; MacKenzie, 2014; Zajko, 2022), less attention has been paid to the lived experience of interacting with algorithmic agents on a daily basis. As Adler et al. (1987) highlighted, studying how people interact in their everyday contexts is essential for any understanding of society, as it reveals the perceptions, feelings, and meanings that shape social experience. Therefore, in a world increasingly shaped by algorithmic encounters, this thesis is driven by the conviction that sociologists must examine the situations and socially patterned ways in which interactions between humans and algorithms unfold, and how they shape everyday life in this algorithmic age.

To ground the analysis of how everyday contexts are becoming entangled with algorithmic agents, this thesis examines the case of TikTok. As a starting point, I turn to an autoethnographic note drawn from my own use of TikTok to outline the embeddedness of algorithms in everyday life.

> It was late in the evening when I arrived home from work. As on many days, I made it home past the acceptable Nordic dinner time. It is one of the perks of living alone, one could have ironically said, in spite of the feeling of loneliness. I turned the key in the lock and opened the door. Automatically, I fell into my usual routine: switching on the lights, taking off my jacket, removing my shoes, placing the shopping bag on the kitchen counter, and tidying around until I found my way to the sofa.
>
> I would lay generally on the sofa for some time before starting to prepare dinner. Usually, I would pick up my phone, and after checking some messages, I would end up immersed in TikTok. Scrolling on the app gave me a sense of rest and relaxation, providing an excuse to postpone my tasks: "Ten minutes and I will start preparing dinner!" More importantly, by shutting my brain off, I could escape from all the thoughts, worries, tasks, and difficulties of the day.
>
> My feed was typically filled with generic content — travel, content creators travelling, cute cats, humour, generic therapy and dating content, etc. — but that particular day, I was scrolling through TikTok mindlessly

when a cartoonish animated character popped up on my For You Page (FYP) (Figure 1.1, "Lennie the blob" autoethnography). The TikTok began with "Lennie the blob" saying "Hi!" I had never seen anything similar before, and normally I would skip past childish TikToks, but there was something that caught my attention in that "Hi!". Maybe it was the tone, maybe the pastel green colour and the aesthetics. Maybe it was the captions — "Hiii Just a lil reminder!" — but that high-pitched voice grabbed hold of me. "You're not missing out on anything", the TikTok continued, "wherever you are right now is exactly where you're supposed to be".

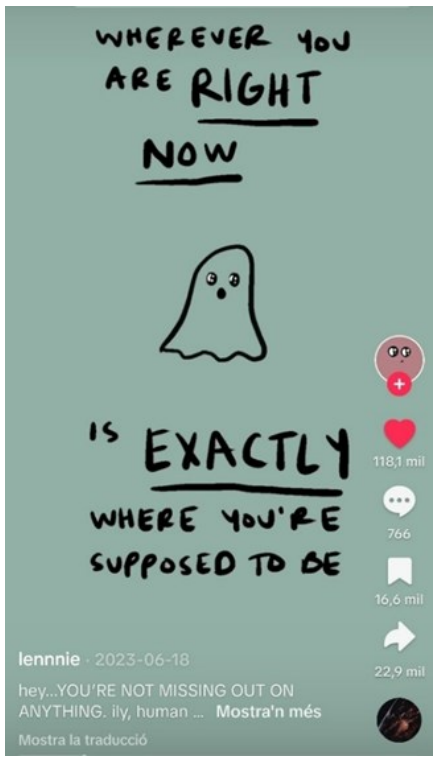

Figure 1.1 Lennie the Blob autoethnography

In a way that is hard to describe, something in those words started to move me beyond explanation. I felt a spark inside me, tingling through my back. I started to feel sadness and joy at the same time. My eyes welled up as I tried to contain myself, even though I was alone. However, repressing my emotions had the opposite effect and full tears started to stream down my cheeks. Somehow, that stupid voice had captured exactly how I was feeling.

> I felt an overwhelming sadness, but also an inexplicable sense of relief; my body was vibrating with emotion that I was trying hard to hold back. That simple, childish voice felt so relatable, it helped me feel better, reminding me that it was okay to just be myself. That it is okay to face hurdles. Indeed, we all face obstacles and defeats. In that moment, I didn't just feel comforted or understood. I felt the possibility of a better future, the possibility of feeling a different way, one that I had long forgotten. As a result, a deep, physical sense of hope washed over me—something that moved me far beyond words.

After an experience such as the one described above, it is worth asking how TikTok can create these. Compared to traditional forms of media, where character identification typically leads audiences to be emotionally moved (Oatley, 1996),[1] the ephemeral, fast-paced environment of TikTok *a priori* makes it difficult to establish any form of emotional connection with a particular character or content creator. It was, after all, the first time that "Lennnie the blob" had appeared on my feed. To understand my reaction, it is necessary to consider why that particular video appeared at that specific moment and provoked the emotional response described.

Platforms like TikTok rely on *recommender systems*, a class of algorithms used to create personalised recommendations for users (Gillespie, 2014; Seaver, 2022). Recommender systems curate and suggest content for each user based on their perceived interests and behaviour on a platform, thereby shaping how users experience and engage with it. To put it simply, every TikTok recommended to a user — whether showing a cute cat, a content creator, or "Lennie the blob" — depends on how TikTok's recommender system classifies a particular user. Hence, the emotional moment I experienced cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the myriad other possibilities the algorithm excluded from my FYP at that time. From this perspective, recommender systems, and algorithms in general, hold social power due to their capacity to classify, sort, order, and rank what users see (Beer, 2017). However, it would be misleading to suggest that TikTok inherently promotes content to provoke tears, or recommends the same content to every user at once. After all, an algorithm cannot comprehend the emotional needs of users, let alone understand how they feel. It is merely a sophisticated set of computational processes, calculations, and rules based on associations established through vast quantities of data (Gillespie, 2014; Roberge &

[1] Oatley's article focuses on literature, but the author notes that "my discussion here mainly concerns writing and reading of novels, but it also applies to plays and films." (p. 54).

Seyfert, 2016). In this way, the emotional impact I experienced was not exclusively tied to the algorithm itself, nor was it solely the result of my need to release and regulate my emotions in a stressful period. Instead, that algorithmic encounter occurred as a consequence of the *feedback loops* that I had established with the platform.

Feedback loops are the dynamic process through which user data collected by algorithmic systems is used as input to generate future output. On TikTok, users' actions provide inputs that help recommender systems to constantly refine their performance and shape the scope of recommendations (Airoldi, 2021; Beer, 2017). In turn, algorithms influence which content users are exposed to by inferring their interests and generating suggestions based on these predictions. Therefore, the stream of TikToks a user encounters is produced by the intertwined actions of both the user and TikTok's recommender system. Feedback loops are not produced in a vacuum; they are rooted in a shared language established through specific patterns of engagement, such as skipping, watching, liking, replaying, and the amount of time spent on a video. Recommender systems constantly track these signals to infer user preferences and accordingly adjust recommendations. Through this recursive process, TikTok's recommender system and the user negotiate, knowingly or unknowingly, the stream of content recommendations in a way that resonates with the user.

While the previous example was drawn from my personal experience, it served to illustrate the kind of questions that led to this PhD thesis. My reaction to that particular TikTok cannot be detached from how I was feeling at that time: I was struggling to move forward with my PhD, to the point where I felt it would not work. I had changed my research topic in the middle of my research project, and I was dealing with the consequences: I had abandoned a theoretical framework I felt comfortable with for one I was unfamiliar with. At that point, I only had a rough outline of how to move forward with my research. Moreover, my situation paled compared to the idealised representation I held about what a successful PhD would look like. These feelings reflect common aspects of the PhD journey; as Adler and Adler (2005) described, the development of an academic identity implies a transition that often confronts PhD students with various challenges, and is characterised by periods of self-doubt, stress, and poor mental health. These struggles are further exacerbated by broader neoliberal pressures within academia, which place increasing emphasis on productivity, individual responsibility, and market success (Gill, 2016). As a result, the feedback loops I established with TikTok when I was using the app to distract myself — i.e., my interaction with the

app, the content I engaged with, and what captured my attention — were deeply embedded in and shaped by my everyday experiences and the cultural and social contexts underpinning them. As Ruckenstein (2023, p. 17) highlighted, data acts back on people, "creating feedback loops that figure in intimate experiences with technological systems". Consequently, "Lennnie the blob" did not emerge from nowhere. TikTok's recommender system had identified that I was inclined to engage with a certain type of content, containing platitudes and therapeutic ideas, which led the algorithm to recommend such content.

I have had similar experiences that have captured my sociological imagination since I started using TikTok. While these experiences did not necessarily leave me in tears, certain TikToks struck me by arriving precisely when they were relevant to me. I set up my first TikTok account shortly after starting my PhD, driven by curiosity about the app's increasing popularity. During that period, I had just broken up with my girlfriend. One day, while scrolling through my TikTok feed, I came across a video of a man speaking in a close-up shot, wearing a cap. Under warm lighting, with calm music in the background and in a soothing voice, the man talked about the contradiction of still being in love with someone yet feeling that it might be time to move on from that relationship. Imagine my surprise; the TikTok captured exactly my situation. How could the platform know about it? I had not explicitly searched for such content, nor do I remember engaging with anything similar apart from some content creators talking generically about wellbeing, love, and life. However, through TikTok's constant tracking and my reactions to content, both I and TikTok's recommender system had redirected the stream of content towards recommendations that made sense for my situation. However, not every TikTok evoked a welcomed emotion. During the same period, I remember my extreme irritation when an Italian recipe appeared on my FYP, a reminder of when I had been learning recipes to impress my Sicilian ex; or the nostalgia when I got content featuring Labrador puppies, a type of content I used to watch with her, on my feed. The content I was seeing was shaped by previous interactions, but it no longer resonated with my current reality. In this way, my attention shifted towards content that aligned more closely with my (then) present situation.

The feedback loops established by each user depend on how they interact with the platform and the context in which interactions occur. For this reason, if we are to better understand how this recursive process functions, and how TikTok users make sense of content, we need to explore what draws people into specific feedback loops and how these take shape. In other words, we need to understand how affectivity and meaning live inside data flows.

1.1 Scrolling on TikTok

Any understanding of feedback loops on TikTok must consider *scrolling* as a practice through which users interact with the platform and make sense of their feeds. The digital world has required the development of specific terms to define and interpret the use of digital technologies. The notion of scrolling has permeated everyday language as social-media platforms have become increasingly important in how people connect to one another and the world (Helmond, 2015; Giancola et al., 2023). Scrolling refers to the action of moving text or images up, down, or across a computer or haptic screen to access content that does not fit entirely within the screen (Sanchez & Wiley, 2009). This action is far from trivial, as it structures how individuals access information, and plays a key role in how they encounter, or do not encounter, content as they navigate the increasing quantity of information available online.

Scrolling is often associated with passivity and social malaise; terms like "mindless scrolling" or "doomscrolling" suggest that it is an activity that promotes aimless distraction, a remedy to the pressures of work and everyday life (Marek, 2023): to scroll is to lose time, to wait for something to happen (Jovicic, 2020). It has also been compared to binge-watching TV series (Kendall, 2021) and is at the centre of moral panics, with particular concerns about how young people are losing their attention spans and struggling to stop scrolling in an age of hyperconnectivity (Alter, 2017; Hari, 2023). In a way, scrolling is regarded as a sign that people are too connected to digital media (Baym et al., 2017). Yet despite these negative connotations, scrolling remains one of the primary ways that users interact with platforms and social media through the screens of their devices. Scrolling might be an ordinary social activity, but it is a practice embedded in the rhythms of everyday life that reflects broader meanings, values, and norms in society. As people scroll, they access different dimensions of their social worlds. For example, scrolling enables users to quickly glance into different social groups, as well as to see peers in their own networks, with low effort (Jovicic, 2020). Lupinacci (2021) describes how scrolling is essential to creating a sense of constant connectedness, i.e., a feeling that something worthy of attention might happen at any moment, which positions social media as the primary means to keep updated and be immersed in a continuous flow of content about the world that is available online. Constant connectivity creates a sense of anticipation that translates into an ambivalent emotional experience that oscillates between feelings of excitement, anxiety, and fatigue.

If we compare scrolling on TikTok to platforms where users might stream a song, such as Spotify, or watch longer videos, such as YouTube, on TikTok scrolling is embedded into the logic of the platform, and represents not just a way to access content, but an essential part of how the platform is experienced and navigated. Therefore, the way users scroll on TikTok is a foundation for different experiences of the platform. As users scroll through a stream of short videos, they are continuously exposed to new and varied content featuring storytelling elements that, through visual and audio elements, try to capture their attention (Vizcaino-Verdú & Abidin, 2022). This scrolling serves as an ongoing form of interaction with TikTok's recommender system as they act as implicit feedback for the algorithmic system to suggest new content. The constant interaction with the algorithm is part of the rationale for using TikTok as the case-study in this research. One of the main characteristics of TikTok, and what differentiates it from other mainstream social-media platforms such as Facebook, Spotify, and Instagram, is that when users open the app, they are immediately immersed in their FYPs. While all platforms incorporate algorithmic recommendations, TikTok is purposely built around them. In this way, scrolling directly affects the course of feedback loops and shapes how users experience the app.

The idea that users are active participants in negotiating the content on their FYPs contradicts common depictions of scrolling as a passive activity. Some media scholars have problematised the tendency to frame audiences as inherently passive viewers; much like television viewers, who were once seen as passive audiences of obvious meanings that were given to them (Livingstone, 2013; Gill, 2012), those who scroll on TikTok face similar accusations because it is perceived as a mindless activity. However, this view ignores how users interpret content (Schellewald, 2023), and how scrolling functions as the entry point for users in shaping their own FYPs. If we consider every TikTok on the platform as a distinct cultural object that users encounter through scrolling — whether they watch, like, share, comment on, or skip each — scrolling becomes the practice through which content acquires significance as users interpret long chains of cultural objects. As McDonnell (2023) argues, cultural objects shape people's perceptions and influence their actions, not only through the meaning they carry but through their material and affective affordances. In this sense, scrolling is not simply a mechanical act of moving through content, but a material, cultural, and affective process that is intertwined with TikTok's recommendation system, in generating FYPs that are specific to each user.

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

The main aim of the research presented in this thesis was to develop an understanding of human–algorithm interactions by analysing how feedback loops on TikTok are experienced and made sense by users through their engagement with the platform's recommender system. Rather than treating feedback loops as purely technical mechanisms, they are seen as expressions of the encounters between users and TikTok's recommender system. Drawing on the microsociological tradition of interaction theories, which is concerned with how individuals interact in socially patterned situations, I approach feedback loops as interactions that are constitutive of the users' experience of TikTok, and that entail a continuous process of negotiation and transformation in shaping what appears on users' FYPs. Building on this, the study explores the dynamics and structure of interactions, specifically how users and TikTok's recommender system influence one another, and the implications of this mutual shaping for the display of personalised content on the FYP. This involves understanding the practices that articulate algorithmic encounters, i.e. how users understand and perform their interactions with TikTok, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the relational dynamics that emerge from users interacting with the algorithmic system. Furthermore, the study explores how users develop certain streams of recommendations, and how meaning and affect coordinate and sustain attention during these interactions. To achieve this aim, the following research questions guided the research:

1. How do users experience and make sense of feedback loops in their interactions with TikTok's recommender system?
2. How can we study feedback loops as ritualised interactions on TikTok?
3. How do affective responses influence user interactions with TikTok's recommender system and contribute to the formation of feedback loops?
4. How do recursive feedback loops on TikTok drive users' connections to the platform as a social environment?

The first research question — *How do users experience and make sense of feedback loops in their interactions with TikTok's recommender system?* — had the aim of establishing a basis to approach human-algorithm interactions as a constant back and forth, in which the outcomes of algorithmic recommendations are negotiated on the basis of user's meanings and lived experience. By focusing on the ongoing

dynamics underlying feedback loops, the thesis explores how the context of everyday life shapes the nature of algorithmic recommendations. This involves developing a microsociological perspective on feedback loops that aligns with the foundational sociological interest in understanding how society is (re)produced and felt.

The second research question — *How can we study feedback loops as ritualised interactions on TikTok?* — is intertwined with the previous one, and opens the possibility of analysing human-algorithm interactions not as a series of isolated encounters, but as patterned engagements. This involves identifying the different elements that anchor and sustain feedback loops between users and TikTok's recommender system. The question considers the elements that contribute to successful rituals, and, conversely, which contribute to failed ones. If interactionism focuses on how interactions between people are sustained through shared social scripts, meanings, and rules, here we ask which elements sustain interactions with TikTok's recommender system, and how they are articulated. Researching the different elements of the algorithmic interaction ritual is vital to understanding how people engage with TikTok, and the social aspects of this type of sociotechnical encounter. Moreover, it provides a conceptual path towards understanding the nature of algorithmically mediated social life.

The third research question — *In what ways do affective responses influence user interactions with TikTok's recommender system and contribute to the formation of feedback loops?* — examined whether feedback loops are rooted in the interplay of meaning and affect, and, where they are, how this is achieved. This involved exploring how the meanings that TikTok users attach to algorithmic recommendations combine with their feelings about content. The aim was to explore the role of meaning and affective states such as feelings, moods, and vibes in capturing users' attention and producing emotional energy. Following Collins (2004), I use the concept of *emotional energy* to refer to the emotional intensity and motivation generated through algorithmic interaction rituals. The aim was to explore whether positive and negative feelings influence how users engage with content, and how the resulting feedback loops reinforce and shape future algorithmic responses. Here, I want to clarify that I use the term *affective* in a way that slightly differs from "emotional energy", because "affective" captures the potential of content to draw a user's attention. As such, I use the term in the research question to encompass processes, feelings towards feedback loops, and the broad range of intensities, or vibes, that draw users to content.

The idea of studying how interactions with algorithms are grounded in how users feel is not new to the field of sociology, which has long studied how social action is grounded in emotions. Since the origins of the discipline, sociologists such as Durkheim and Tarde have studied how emotions are not merely individual experiences, but deeply embedded in social structures, meanings, and collective practices (Shilling, 2005; Abrutyn & Mueller, 2024). People act based on what is meaningful to them (Blumer, 1962), and meaning is intertwined with feelings and emotions (Alexander, 2004; Thoits, 1989). Therefore, I approach the study of feedback loops while taking into account how engagement with algorithms is sustained by how they make people feel (Bucher, 2018; Ruckenstein, 2023).

This realisation appeared in my own fieldwork. Initially, my PhD research project was not focused on the emotional elements of feedback loops, and how they shape social action in digital spaces.[2] Instead, my original research design aimed to explore how feedback loops (re)produce cultural stratification. However, as I conducted my first round of interviews, I started to get of participants often presenting their arguments about accepting or rejecting algorithmic recommendations along two registers: "The algorithm does not understand how I feel" and, contrastingly, "I like recommendations because they stay within my bubble of comfort".[3] It became increasingly clear that an affective and emotional dimension was crucial to understanding the feedback loops people participate in.

Finally, the fourth research question — *How do recursive feedback loops on TikTok drive users' connections to the platform as a social space?* — investigated how feedback loops contribute to connections among users by examining how feedback loops participate in and support the formation of social solidarities and moral frameworks in digital environments. Social solidarity represents the establishment of cohesion within a society or group, characterised by a shared sense of belonging, interdependence, and mutual support. Given the content that users encounter on their FYPs is not inherently determined by the design of the platform, but rather produced through ongoing user-algorithm interactions, I wanted to explore the potential of feedback loops to enhance social solidarities and participate in collective processes.

[2] See *Appendix C: Initial project* for a discussion of the motives and implications of changing the PhD research project.

[3] I use the expression "comfort bubble," which was used by one of the original participants in the research on cultural stratification on Spotify. This expression refers to recommendations that fall within one's comfort zone.

To answer these questions, the study engaged a digital ethnographic approach that combined interviews with young TikTok users between 18 and 29 years of age with online observation of the researcher's TikTok FYP, which was the ethnographic field site. Both the interviews and online observation were intended to capture the dynamics of feedback loops. This was combined with autoethnography, which was used as a sensitising approach to guide the research and inform about the spaces where the algorithm and users meet, along with screen-recording. Through this approach, I analyse the wider social and cultural context in which feedback loops develop, and how algorithmic encounters move users in social ways.

1.3 Significance of the Thesis

Sociologically, the significance of feedback loops extends beyond their purely technical function, as they are also social, cultural, and affective processes that are embedded in the everyday lives of users. Accordingly, studying interactions on TikTok as ritualised encounters provides new opportunities to understand sociotechnical dynamics on social media platforms. However, despite the stimulating work of some sociologists, sociology has been slower to study algorithmic processes than other disciplines (Scheradie, 2020; Zajko, 2022). In this regard, the interdisciplinary field of "critical algorithm studies" has produced extensive work on the sociotechnical nature of algorithms (see for example Dourish, 2016). Within this field, the focus has shifted away from the need to open the "black box" of algorithms and towards examining the intersections where algorithms and people meet (Christin, 2020). Successful ethnographies have already explored what it means to live with algorithms (e.g., Siles, 2023; Eriksson Krutrök, 2021; Seaver, 2017;), and how people's interpretations and anticipations affect their engagement with algorithms (Bucher, 2018; Ruckenstein, 2023). This thesis seeks to add to this perspective by developing theoretical tools with which to understand algorithmic feedback loops as a ritualised interaction formally structured and affectively generative binding users. Hence, this thesis seeks to explore the dynamism that underpins feedback loops from a qualitative point of view.

First, certain elements of the interactions between users and algorithms resemble "traditional" social interactions, making it possible to examine human–algorithm interactions through this lens. Despite the clear differences as compared to human–only interactions, studying interactions with non-humans is attainable because individuals project capacities onto objects when they feel able to interact with them

(Cerulo, 2009). This idea will be explored in depth in Chapters Three, Four and Seven, but it can be summarised here by noting that, as well as being increasingly aware of their interactions with algorithms, people also recognise that the ways they interact with TikTok directly influence how content is presented on their devices.

Second, feedback loops transcend digital spaces as they are embedded in users' lives and everyday experiences, extending beyond the screens of devices. In this sense, content becomes intertwined with the interests and experiences of users. Those familiar with TikTok will recognise that, despite mainstream-media critiques, user do not stay on a particular course of recommendations unless they keep engaging with videos on a particular topic. By this I mean that to some degree a user needs to feel comfortable, recognised, aligned with, or convinced by the topics recommended. This potential alignment is contingent on the context, and affective state of the user's everyday life. Moreover, feedback loops influence not only how users engage with content, but how they interpret their social reality when they are offline — blurring any distinction between offline and online worlds (Orton-Johnson & Prior, 2013).

An important argument to study feedback loops is that of recursion. Beer (2017; 2022), Kennedy (2016), and Airoldi (2021) have all emphasised the role of feedback loops in contemporary societies. Airoldi (2021) has examined how feedback loops incorporate data propensities that (re)produce social structures and patterns of inequality. By establishing statistical associations that link data points with social categories, algorithms tend to reproduce categories and representations that exist in society. Beer (2022) focused on data coils, i.e., how feedback loop after feedback loop creates independent data structures that independently feed into further feedback loops. This sum of feedback loops creates recursive structures that, Beer observed, mean that "the many and vast integrations of data, analytics and algorithms lead to a society defined by feedback loops and processes of recursivity" (Beer, 2022, p. 3). Here, one of the biggest challenges for algorithmic scholarship is understanding the implications of recursive data structures for society.

However, sociological analyses of feedback loops and recursion have overlooked lived experience of feedback loops, along with their interactional aspects and how users experience them on an empirical level. By examining how algorithmic interactions occur, we can better understand the relationships between individual users and the data patterns of platforms. If recursion is nothing more than taking a category for granted, this study will explore how recursive loops are constantly (re)configured according to the elements identified in the conceptual model. Rather than focusing on the specificity of recursivity in algorithmic environments, this

approach aims to highlight how even when we are just data points, social categories are reified though interaction. As a result, encounters with algorithms are not momentary, but ongoing processes of transformation that are enacted by every TikTok that appears in users' FYPs. This allows for the sociologisation of platform dynamics through interaction ritual theory. In particular, the term "chains" in algorithmic interaction ritual chains points to how each interaction entails the ossification that Beer describes with his concept of the data coil. Therefore, although not always explicitly, at least in the context of social media platforms, each algorithmic interaction ritual contributes to the formation of data structures through everyday encounters. By combining insights from cultural sociology, digital sociology, and critical algorithm studies, the theoretical framework of this thesis model contributes with an understanding of the recursive nature of algorithmic encounters.

A further aim of this thesis is to contribute to debates on the ability of online interactions to create successful interaction rituals (see e.g., Collins, 2004; Johannessen, 2023; 2020; DiMaggio et al., 2018). By analysing the case of TikTok, I provide empirical insights regarding how interaction rituals can emerge, not only between users but between users and algorithmic agents, hence creating algorithmic interaction rituals. This expands the scope of interaction ritual theory (IRT) into the study of digital spaces that are shaped by algorithmic encounters.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

The thesis is structured around three main sections: the first is a theoretical part that introduces the concepts and theories used to study feedback loops, and to present algorithmic IRT. The second is a methodological chapter, while a third and final section is dedicated to the empirical analysis of feedback loops on TikTok, and the conclusions, where the arguments developed throughout the thesis are discussed.

In Chapter Two, I outline the basic concepts for understanding algorithms. I define algorithms, and more specifically recommender systems. Drawing on Airoldi's (2021) idea that algorithms undergo processes that are similar to socialisation, I discuss how social structures are internalised through statistical propensities in data. The concept of socialisation through machine learning is important in understanding the interactions of users with algorithmic recommendations, because algorithms learn to act in socially patterned ways. I argue that their ability to respond to and anticipate the interests and actions of users

grants them the status of *algorithmic agents*, as they exhibit some degree of agency in terms of their ability to update outputs in response to human action. Along with this claim, I develop an interpretation of this agency that leads to a discussion on the relevance of studying feedback loops, emphasising how they mirror social interactions — a concept that is familiar to sociologists.

Chapter Three provides a review of scholarship on TikTok and the logics of platformisation. I begin introducing TikTok and its platform governance. Then, I continue by tracing the popularity of TikTok comedic short videos back to Vine, a platform that particularly paved the way for a memetic style in social media platforms. Moreover, I describe how the affordances of platforms, in this case TikTok, shape a particular type of use of the app. The chapter continues by reviewing current criticism of TikTok as a source of addiction and disruption in society. I discuss these critiques in relation to a historic tendency among some groups to examine technological developments as a threat to society, using the example of the telegraph. I then provide a detailed account of research on TikTok. While this is inevitably an incomplete overview, it positions TikTok as a sociotechnical object entangled in social processes. The chapter concludes by reviewing research on algorithmic imaginaries, situating this thesis within the interdisciplinary field of critical algorithmic studies and debates on human–algorithm interactions. This discussion paves the way for the introduction of the theoretical framework, which is based on IRT and places this research in dialogue with existing studies on algorithmic imaginaries.

In Chapter Four, I introduce my theoretical framework. To make sense of feedback loops, I depart from Randall Collins's (2004) *interaction ritual theory* (IRT). This theory has the aim of explaining the ritualised patterning of interactions, and how individuals chase interactions that maximise their *emotional energy*. I discuss the relationship between social interactions and ritual and collective processes, and relate this to why scrolling on TikTok can be considered a social situation. For Collins (2004; 2020), his theory [as it was originally conceived] is not applicable to study digital domains. To address this, I examine both sides of the debate, and argue that IRT is still useful to study algorithmic encounters. The limitations of the theory, which relate to the lack of bodily copresence in online interactions and of materiality in terms of algorithms, can be reworked such that it can be adapted to algorithmic contexts. This discussion provides a foundation for developing the model of *algorithmic interaction ritual* (AIR). I contend that although the sociologists who lived a hundred, fifty, or twenty years ago did not have the need to explain the digitalisation of society, this does not mean that their

theories excluded such a reality *per se*. Those theories simply were not designed with digitalisation in mind. However, if we abstract for a moment, such theories refer to basic social processes that today repeat, and that have the particular characteristic that digital media mediates them. The fact that they are mediated does not, in itself, negate the analytical capacity of these theories.

Having introduced AIR, attention is the entry point to studying algorithmic interaction rituals. Collins is not very clear in distinguishing the affective architecture underpinning attention; for him, emotions and affect are elements that emanate from the interaction, but he does not make any effort to differentiate them. This point is not trivial, because when users scroll on TikTok they are immersed in a constant stream of TikToks. Hence, they are affected by content, but this does not necessarily produce an emotional response, nor emotional energy. In Chapter Four, I delineate what captures the attention of users by drawing inspiration from Lupinacci's (2024b) idea of "vibes" and moods. This approach allows us to escape from debates about affect and emotions and how to research them. I suggest that vibes help us to grasp how users make sense of the affective atmospheres in digital spaces, which plays a crucial role in drawing their attention and (re)directing feedback loops. In other words, it gives users "a sense" about content. By exploring the relationship between attention, vibes, and moods, it is possible to follow encounters and interactions in digital spaces.

Chapter Five outlines the research methods used in this project, which are grounded in a digital ethnographic approach. To build a comprehensive data corpus, I combined interviews with online observations, scroll back method, screen-recordings, and autoethnography. The participants in the research were young TikTok users aged between 18 and 29 years, and so the research explores the feedback loops that this particular part of the population – young users – establish. Furthermore, studying feedback loops as a unit of analysis presented the challenge of capturing an ephemeral, elusive, and constantly evolving phenomenon. I will discuss these challenges, which were encountered throughout the research process, and describe how some methods that I considered to be adequate failed to capture the type of data that I sought. Additionally, I will address the ethical considerations of conducting research in digital spaces.

Following the methodological chapter, the empirical analysis is presented in Chapters Six to Nine. In Chapter Six, I explore how the research participants interact with TikTok, specifically examining their experience of scrolling through the app. Collins (2004, p. 4) emphasises that a theory of interaction rituals is above all a theory of situations, because "from the dynamics of a situation we can derive almost

everything that we want to know about individuals". Accordingly, the chapter examines the situations in which users open the app, and untangles the affordances of TikTok in creating particular algorithmic interaction rituals. To put it simply, how a user interacts with an algorithm is shaped by the expectations and uses of the platform on which the algorithm operates. In the case of TikTok, interactions often start as a transition ritual, filling the empty spaces in the everyday lives of young TikTok users.

Chapter Seven introduces the concept of algorithmic interaction ritual in order to study the patterns of interactions between users and algorithmic agents on TikTok. The chapter empirically unpacks the four elements of AIR: copresence, boundaries to outsiders, mutual focus of attention, and synchronisation. Through the AIR framework, it is possible to understand scrolling patterns and identify the characteristics that produce a successful engagement with the platform. A central idea is that "successful" interactions with TikTok's recommender system require that this aligns with users' cultural capital, interests, and life needs. The dynamics of the ritual are shaped by the degree of synchronisation between algorithmic recommendation and user disposition. More importantly, building on AIR, users are no longer seen as passive individuals moved by the invisible hand of the algorithm, and emerge as (co)constructors of the content that appears on their FYPs.

Chapter Eight delves into the creation of emotional energy as the outcome of successful algorithmic interaction rituals. Emotional energy is a positive force that motivates people to seek those interactions that produce positive feelings, and is central to IRT. Hence, the production of emotional energy is key to understanding the engagement of users with TikTok. In my analysis I identify three different types of emotional energy that users develop in relation to TikTok — hedonic, eudaimonic, and intimate — which are the result of different types of feedback loops. I argue that emotional energy can take different forms which, when analysed, offer deeper insights into the nature of rituals. In other words, the positive feelings that sustain a ritual can originate from different sources and motivations. Finally, the chapter explores the role of negative feelings as disruptors, as well as redirectors towards negotiating content on the FYPs of users, highlighting the ambivalence that some users feel following algorithmic encounters.

In the final empirical chapter, Chapter Nine, I focus on social solidarities and the development of moral frameworks and symbols in the context of TikTok and its feedback loops. One of the aims of interaction theories is to establish how the aggregation of multiple interactions produces social processes. In relation to this, I discuss how algorithmic interaction rituals move from the individual level to

participation in collective processes.[4] The starting point of the chapter is how TikTok's algorithm is perceived as a system that can be manipulated to advance the collective aims of a community. This illustrates how algorithmic interaction rituals can produce social solidarity, as users strategically engage with the platform to support shared goals. In my analysis, I suggest that the outcomes of a successful ritual produce time as a symbol of interest and caring, reflecting its importance in a culture of connectivity. Moreover, by bringing humour into focus, users establish moral boundaries around certain representations — often articulated through the practice of reading other users' comments — thus shaping a collective sense of what is legitimate or profane within TikTok.

Finally, in Chapter Ten I summarise the main findings and arguments presented throughout this thesis. The chapter addresses the broader implications of this study, reflecting on how studying feedback loops contributes to our understanding of a future that is increasingly likely to be shaped by interaction between humans and algorithms. Furthermore, it includes a section on the delimitations and future directions of the research. In conclusion, the programme of this thesis aims to contribute to an understanding of the dynamics between users and algorithmic agents, based on the case of TikTok.

[4] I want to qualify this statement by clarifying that an individual interaction is already a social process in itself, in the sense that it reifies the categories and representations that have been established through an infinite number of prior social interactions.

2 Recommender Systems and Feedback Loops on TikTok

The exponential digitalisation of societies has produced an intensification of information flows which require an informational architecture in order to make sense of them (Lash, 2001; Castells, 2004; Beer, 2009). In the decades since the initial expansion of digital technologies, algorithms have become essential to sustaining all the social processes that rely on the use of digital devices and the Internet (Marres, 2017). They have emerged as critical actors due to their efficiency in managing the vast quantities of information produced as a result of digitalisation (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Algorithms are responsible for aligning information with individual, corporate, and governmental interests (Kitchin, 2017), and have increasingly been used to delegate decision-making through data-driven processes and provide guidance in a wide range of activities (Mittelstadt et al., 2016). Lee (2018, p. 2) observes that "algorithms may enable efficient, optimized, and data-driven decision-making, and in fact this vision is one of [the] main drivers of increasing adoption of algorithms for managerial and organizational decisions." Examples of algorithmic decision-making range from credit scoring to selecting relevant information for health activities and medical research (Ruckenstein & Schüll, 2017), among others. Social-media platforms like TikTok are no exception to this; in these spaces, algorithms are used to efficiently provide personalised content to users (Swart, 2021).

Delegating decision-making to algorithms highlights their authority in making choices on what matters and what becomes more visible. Such authority positions algorithms as agents capable of performing actions with consequences, and transforms them into what Airoldi (2021) refers to as *algorithmic agents*. As a consequence, social experience is increasingly mediated by digital technologies that turn people's experiences, relations, and identities into data (Cheney-Lippold, 2017; Siles, 2023). This transformation into data, known as *datafication*, allows experiences to be quantified and processed by algorithms, turning everyday actions into measurable inputs. Datafied experiences can be processed by algorithms,

creating the conditions for algorithmic agency. Indeed, the logic of algorithmic systems has become embedded in the definition of social situations, subjecting human discourse and knowledge to the specificities of computational logic (Gillespie, 2014). Therefore, it is worth exploring how agency is enacted at the intersection of human practices and algorithmic systems. Algorithms, and the outcomes of algorithmic decision-making, are so all-encompassing that studying the places where people and algorithms meet is essential (Christin, 2020). This is especially critical because social action is increasingly intertwined with sociotechnical meaning-making processes, which are shaped by algorithmic encounters.

To explore these dynamics, this chapter makes the case for studying humans-algorithm interactions is important to understand social action in the 21st century. First, I will conceptualise what algorithms are and how to study them. Definitions of what an algorithm is and what it does are more complex than they might seem at first glance. People develop different understandings of algorithms depending on the context, meaning-making processes, and sphere of activity (Seaver, 2017). Second, I will introduce the family of algorithms that concern us in this thesis: recommender systems. Recommender systems generate suggestions to users based on the behaviour and perceived interests of users on a given platform. Third, building on the prior discussion, I introduce the TikTok recommender system. Fourth, Airoldi (2021) draws on Bourdieu's concept of habitus to articulate how machine-learning (ML) algorithms "learn" in social ways. By learning, he refers to how algorithms become encoded with social patterns through data they are trained on, the biases of coders, and the local contexts in which they are applied. Therefore, Airoldi invites us to reflect on what algorithms do and how they (re)produce social patterns in their authority to determine what is seen and what is not. Finally, I discuss the importance of approaching feedback loops as a sociological unit of analysis to understand the implications and consequences of human-algorithm interactions.

2.1 Algorithms in Society

Algorithms have existed for centuries, long before the advent of computers and the Internet (Striphas, 2015). The ancient Babylonians, for instance, developed some of the first mathematical algorithms for deriving square roots and factors (Finn, 2017). According to Striphas (2015), the contemporary use of the term algorithm dates

back to Persian mathematician Abū Jafar Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī. Yet, despite its historical roots, algorithms are now most commonly associated with digital technologies and the logics of computation. On the most basic level, an algorithm is a set of step-by-step procedures that has been defined in order to solve a problem or accomplish an objective, where each step follows a series of rules. However, defining algorithms is more complex than it may initially appear. To unpack this complexity, I will contrast two different definitions of the term: the most common, technological understanding of the term, and an alternative one that frames algorithms as not only technical objects, but social and cultural ones.

The technological definition of algorithms conceives of them as "a set of mathematical procedures whose purpose is to expose some truth or tendency about the world" (Striphas, 2015, p. 404). The set of procedures needs to be described with sufficient precision, clarity, and efficient use of calculation resources to be executed successfully by a computer (Cormen et al., 2009). This definition of algorithms sees them as objective and technical solutions to managing vast quantities of data, linking "the certainties of mathematics with the objectivity of technology" (Seaver, 2013, p. 2, cited in Kitchin, 2017). Therefore, they are used to transform uncertainties into a malleable single output of weighted probabilities in order to make decisions actionable (Amoore, 2018). Such a definition is rooted in a rationalistic discourse, which assumes that algorithms are accurate, objective, and free from error, on the basis that they are independent of human subjectivity. As Fourcade and Healy (2024, p. 13) argue, this perspective can even promote the "firm belief that 'code' could and should solve most problems facing society" — a conviction particularly prevalent in the tech industry.

When algorithms are just technical objects, they are regarded as essential for managing digital information flows, and prised due to their efficiency in regulating the vast quantities of data and information produced by digitalisation (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). They are used in the provision of public services, credit scoring, citizen management, and surveillance (Katzenbach & Lena, 2019), and their benefits stem from the introduction of algorithmic forms of management that make organisations and processes more efficient, while addressing the increasing demand for data-driven solutions (Kellogg et al., 2020).

The rationalistic discourse is focused on the design and optimisation of algorithms from a purely technical perspective, yet fails to consider what they do in the world (Seaver, 2017). They are responsible for how "information is produced, surfaced, made sense of and seen as legitimate" (Ananny, 2016, p. 96). Understanding algorithms in this way "forecloses more complex readings of the

political spaces in which algorithms function, are produced, and modified" (Crawford, 2016, p. 79). The technological understanding of the term acts as a powerful rationalising force that serves to reify the consequences of the work of algorithms, conferring upon them a mystical agency that places behind a black box the set of elements and relations that make them alive and hides the effects of their actions on the world (Pasquale, 2015). It ignores the fact that the behaviour of algorithmic systems is algorithmically confounded, i.e., it is engineered by the developers to induce particular behaviours in users (Salganik, 2018).

A more fruitful way of defining and studying algorithms is to view as eminently social and cultural. The anthropologist Nick Seaver (2017) uses the concept of *algorithms as culture* to account for the collection of human practices embedded in code that assembles certain ideas, values, norms, and interests. These practices within algorithms relate to how computational processes sort, classify, and hierarchise people, places, objects, and ideas. Similarly, Kitchin (2017, p. 18) emphasises that "algorithms need to be understood as relational, contingent, contextual in nature, framed within the wider context of their sociotechnical assemblage." The omnipresence of algorithms mediating many, if not all, social processes is captured in the concept of *algorithmic culture* (Striphas, 2015). However, Seaver (2017, p. 5) draws attention to the fact that *algorithms as culture* differs from Striphas's own definition of *algorithmic culture* where the latter "posits algorithms as a transformative force, exogenous to culture. In this view, a movie recommender is cultural because it shapes flows of cultural material, not because its algorithmic logics are themselves cultural." With this remark, Seaver reminds us that algorithms are part of culture not only because they operate on culture and society, but because they are themselves composed of collective human practices. This emphasis is important, as it reflects the need to study the recursive relationships between human practices and algorithmic systems. Indeed, this idea is increasingly present in studies on algorithms as, Striphas himself (2023, p.5) emphasizes how algorithmic cultures include "the repertoires of thought, conduct, expression, and feeling that flow from and back into those processes." At the core of this perspective lies the idea that algorithms are not stable objects that simply produce mathematical outcomes powered by computational methods, but that they exist embedded in social processes.

The idea of sociotechnical assemblages, which is a concept that comes from science and technology studies (STS), helps to make sense of how materiality and humans form interdependent groups of relations that enact particular realities (Law, 1987; Hess, 2020). Latour and Woolgar (1986) studied how agency can be delegated

to material objects in laboratory settings, giving them the ability to construct social facts, i.e., to produce causes and effects within assemblages of scientists, materiality, and living organisms.

Dourish (2016) observed algorithms emerge in practice through the systems of relations they inhabit, and that give them meaning and power through the interconnectedness of code, data, design decisions, organisational goals, interests, and ideas. For instance, whether TikTok recommends a video containing misogynistic ideas to a teenager relies not only on a line of code, but on the criteria of the software engineers who wrote the code, the corporation's decisions regarding what content is acceptable, the work of data annotators, and whether other users have previously interacted with the video, among other things. To say that meaning and affect are sociotechnical is to acknowledge that they take place both through the ways in which people engage with and interpret algorithms, and how the latter influence the former. As Dourish (2016, p. 2) notes: "this is not to dissolve the algorithm in a sea of relations, but rather to understand how algorithm – as a technical object, as a form of discourse, as an object of professional practice, and as a topic of public or academic concern – comes to play the particular role that it does." Therefore, the aim of viewing algorithms as part of culture is not to establish what algorithms are *per se*, but to explore when and how they mobilise relations and become relevant within different social processes (Bucher, 2018). Given the opacity of algorithms and the barriers that corporations and institutions create to prevent accountability, the algorithms-as-culture approach shifts the focus away from opening the black box of algorithms and towards examining the effects and consequences of interactions between algorithms and people (Christin, 2020).

Despite the hype surrounding ML algorithms, it is important to acknowledge that correlation does not imply causation. Software developers and data scientists frequently view their models as entities that learn and reason around "real-world truths", when in reality these systems are simply processing statistical patterns and establishing relationships between data. In this sense, algorithms are channels through which power is exercised (Beer, 2009), and that select and reinforce certain orderings of information at the expense of others (Mackenzie, 2006, p. 44). Therefore, questions of who has the power to define the parameters of how these algorithms work, what they allow to be seen, and what the effects of their actions are essential to defining them. Algorithms exercise power by managing and controlling work processes and how workers perform tasks (Kellogg et al., 2020). For example, food-delivery workers are subjected to strict control over their schedules, delivery payments, and practices, often leading to a race to the bottom

(Griesbach et al., 2019). Similarly, sex workers on online platforms engage in extreme practices to improve their algorithmic visibility (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). The success of such workers is constantly tracked and measured through metrics, pushing them to adapt to the demands of these systems. To navigate algorithmic tracking, workers employ cultural frameworks to interpret and respond to these systems (Christin, 2020). Algorithms also serve as channels of power in political fields: they are used to manufacture consent (Treré, 2016) through, for example, consistently ranking right-wing content higher on certain platforms, thereby amplifying some messages and diminishing the visibility of others (Huszár et al., 2021).

Additionally, algorithms are key vehicles in perpetuating and (re)producing inequalities, promoting or restricting access to services for certain social groups, and monitoring and punishing some groups more than others (Zajko, 2022). Their use is often justified in terms of making decision-making more transparent and impersonal, but algorithms reinforce inequalities along the lines of social class, gender, and ethnicity (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021). For instance, when algorithms are used to estimate the eligibility of people for social benefits, they punish the members of the most vulnerable social classes who fit, or do not fit, particular risk profiles (Eubanks, 2017). Similarly, algorithms can discriminate against members of vulnerable groups when they apply for financial credit, impacting their credit assessments (Bicharra Garcia et al., 2023).

Algorithms also can reinforce inequalities due to historical patterns of discrimination encoded in the data used to train them (Hacker, 2018). A notable example is used by Amazon, which developed an algorithm to automate its hiring process that was trained using the CVs of employees in managerial positions, historically held predominantly by men. As a result, the algorithm began favouring male candidates and rejecting female applicants, thereby perpetuating gender inequality in the hiring process (Gebru, 2020). Furthermore, algorithms can reproduce and amplify racism within society (Noble, 2018). For instance, an algorithm that prescribed healthcare interventions identified fewer Black patients in need of additional care (Obermeyer et al., 2019). While these issues can be seen from a technical perspective as errors that can be fixed with new code or better data, framing algorithms as culture highlights their increasing importance as sociotechnical actors in processes of meaning-making. In other words, data, values, institutional practices, and existing inequalities are embedded in code and its design and usage (Joyce et al., 2021).

2.2 Recommender Systems

The concept of *algorithm* is very broad; analytically, talking about algorithms can conflate various tools with different functions that are used to undertake a variety of practices and aims. In this thesis, I am concerned with a particular family of algorithms: *recommender systems*. These are software tools and techniques that are designed to provide suggestions that are considered to be relevant to users; to help them find content and products that are attractive to them (Ricci et al., 2011). They are basic features on platforms such as Amazon, Instagram, Tinder, LinkedIn, YouTube, Spotify, Facebook, Google, and TikTok, all of which rely on recommender systems to offer targeted content to their users.

People encounter recommender systems on almost every platform. They can recommend songs to listen to on a happy day, people to date, videos of cute dogs to watch, jobs to apply for, and connections based on a particular user's profile, skills, and education, among other things. The particular property of recommender systems as compared to other types of algorithm is that they provide recommendations without the active input of the user, who does not have to search or write anything; instead, the recommender system creates suggestions based on its understanding of the user. This understanding arises from the user's interactions with the platform, other users' interactions with the platform, and inferred sociodemographic variables about their characteristics. Since users do not actively search for content, *personalisation* is the underlying working logic that can be used to understand how recommender systems operate. This is to say that they rely on their ability to target content to the user's interests.

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Algorithmically personalised feeds are responsible for increasing user engagement with content on platforms, which use this type of algorithm to manage the increasingly wide range of information and products available online. Users are offered specific content in relation to how the algorithms perceive the user's attributes, tastes, and interests as compared to other users. To achieve this, recommender systems try to predict the interests of users by tracking their behaviour on the platform, on the basis that platforms consider recommendations to be essential to securing user fidelity for the service (Seaver, 2019). For example, Spotify creates personalised playlists to enhance the moods of users: the "moody mix" is designed to soothe listeners at sad times, and is periodically updated with songs with low valence and slow tempos that the user has previously listened to, as well as tracks from similar artists to the ones the user enjoys. Similarly, Amazon suggests baby products if the recommender system has detected purchases or a search history that indicates the existence of a newborn in the life of the user.

Bozdag (2013) states that recommender systems work on the basis of user profiling. Platforms create user profiles by extracting data, including demographic information such as name, age, country, education level, and information regarding the interests and preferences of either a single user or a potential group of users. Platforms conduct data analyses using statistical correlation models to uncover sociodemographic variables such as gender, ethnic background, age, and social status (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). This process has the aim of improving the quality of recommendations and inferring the intentions of users. Platforms use user data from purchases, click logs, and user-generated likes and ratings to create such recommendations (Ekstrand et al., 2018). There is an imperative to extract and store as much data as possible, in order to study and learn about people's everyday activities amd produce better predictions so as to "trap" them on the platform (Beer, 2009). Software developers believe that with more data they can better model the potential interests of users. Recommender systems are generally based on models that distribute data within a geometrical space, and establish meaningful associations between data according to their distance apart within the space. This approach allows everything in the space to be measured (Seaver, 2021).

A good way to illustrate the representation of users and items in a geometrical space is Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction*. In this seminal work, Bourdieu used a spatial method to represent cultural inequalities on two axes, representing capitals and volume of capitals. Through this representation, he showed how lifestyles, occupations, and education levels were grouped along social class lines in France in the 1960s. Figure 2.1 is a classical image that most sociology students have

encountered at some point during their education. In it, he opposed the "space of position" within the dominant taste, i.e., he opposed the taste of the new and old bourgeoise classes. In the figure we can observe how the upper class, with high economic capital and low cultural capital, enjoyed popular culture like *The Blue Danube* and *Raphael*, while classes with lower economic capital but higher cultural capital enjoyed abstract art such as Kandinsky's expressionist works. A classic Bourdesian interpretation would be that members of the new bourgeoisie, endowed with high cultural capital, are drawn to forms of artistic expression that challenge consumption from a purely pleasurable perspective. This preference reflects an unconscious effort to assert distinction and legitimise their social position by deploying their cultural capital.

Beyond any considerations of Bourdieu's work and its interpretation, the relevant point for us is that recommender systems, and any spatial method in general, work abstractly and based on the same logic: things, items, and users that are closer to one another are assumed to represent similar tastes and interests. In this way, the best recommender systems are those that can extract more information about people and items concerning their relative positions in such spaces.

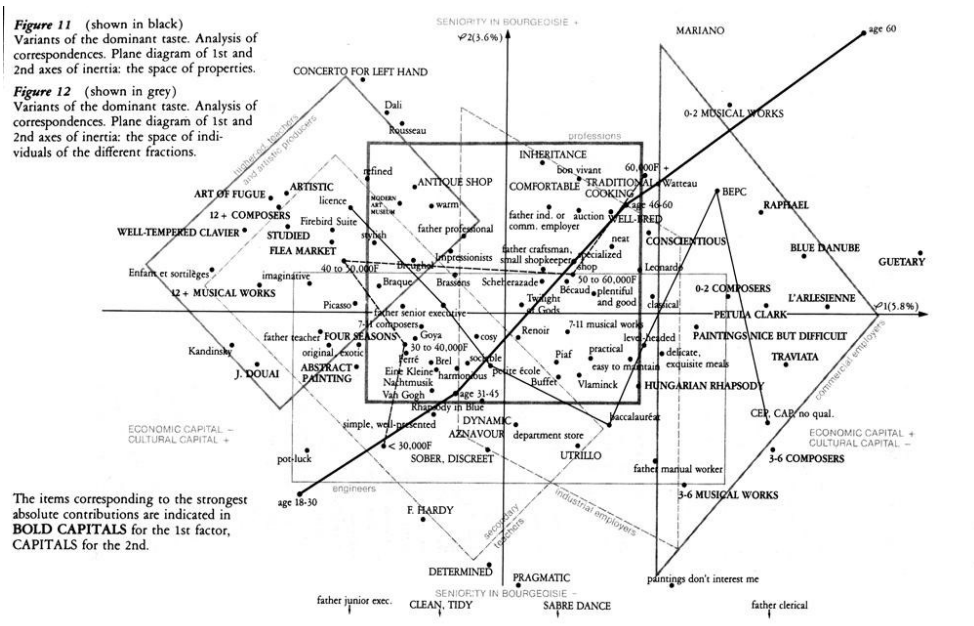

Figure 2.1 Distinction Bourdieu, Source: Bourdieu, P. (1984). Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. Harvard University Press. Reproduced for academic purposes.

However, this grants too much weight to the assumption that people located together in such mathematical spaces share similar lifestyles, which can lead to the reinforcing of inequalities through the construction and interpretation of algorithms. As a result, recommender systems tend to drive users towards a logic of similarity, based on existing social categories that sustain intersecting hierarchies of race, class, gender, and inequality (Fourcade & Johns, 2020)

From a technical perspective, recommender systems are not just one type of algorithm, but a set of sub-algorithms. TikTok's recommender system is not just one algorithm that recommends content to users, but a set of sub-algorithms that perform different tasks managed by different teams, all with the aim of creating personalised feeds. Generally, recommender systems entail a combination of approaches, methods, and techniques, and have two main tasks: first, the process of categorising content, and second, making recommendations based on the profiles of users. The process of categorising content entails identifying the features of the items that form the corpus of the platform, be they songs, videos, or people. To categorise this, the algorithm extracts information about an item and classifies it according to different parameters and rules established beforehand. Spotify, for instance, uses categories such as danceability, energy, key, valence, acousticness, instrumentalness, liveness, and tempo to determine how to classify a song. In the case of video platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, the recommender system labels the visual and audio features of a video. The second process consists of the proper elaboration of recommendations. The main approaches to designing recommender systems involve *content filtering, collaborative filtering*, and *knowledge-based filtering* (Burke, 2000).

In content filtering, suggestions are created based on item similarity, with more popular items with similar characteristics to items previously enjoyed by a user being recommended. For example, if a user named Gerd on Spotify likes to listen songs by Beyonce, Spotify will recommend songs by Rihanna because the platform has determined that their music has similar properties. In collaborative filtering, by contrast, items are recommended to a user based on the values assigned by other people with similar tastes and engagement patterns. Collaborative filtering works under the assumption that the likelihood of a user enjoying certain information or content is determined by their group memberships, and by the items consumed by similar individuals (MacPherson et al., 2001). If our fictional user, Gerd, listens to Beyonce and also to Fontaines D.C., and a second fictional user, Gabor, also listens to Beyonce, the recommender system will determine a similarity in taste between both users and recommend Fontaines D.C. to Gabor. This approach is based on

creating embeddings in a vector space, which are compact, low-dimensional representations of users and items; the closer two items, the more similar (Zhao et al., 2023). Finally, knowledge-based recommendations are based on existing knowledge or rules about user behaviour and items. Knowledge is constructed by extracting information from a user's records, as well as from item functions generated during previous interactions with the system (Zhang, 2021). Let's imagine that Gerd likes to go running in the mornings, and enjoys listening to music while running so searches for upbeat music playlists on Spotify. The recommender system would use that information to narrow the parameters of recommendations and, based on its library of rules, i.e., "if-this-then-that", present waves of recommendations, starting with, for example, "energetic" songs. It is important to remark that knowledge-based recommenders are mostly used for items that are very rarely used or bought, and there is scarce information about them.[5] Moreover, recommender systems also use some degree of curation by people who are considered experts in a topic (Eriksson et al., 2019).

However, recommendations are not static; recommender systems assume changes in the profiles of users, so are constantly updating through *feedback loops*. These are an essential element of the functioning of recommender systems, because they allow algorithmic systems to evaluate the quality of their recommendations. They work as basic mechanisms, wherein the algorithmic system and user are engaged in a mutual, dynamic evolution. Recommender systems focus on a particular set of user signals in order to curate the information that they provide. They learn to automate particular courses of action according to a given platform's segmentation and clustering of interests. However, as Gillespie (2018) highlights, more data does not automatically translate into more varied data. Platforms base the optimisation of algorithmic recommendations on the distinct courses of action developed for different groups of users, the activities that users engage in on platforms, and the feedback loops established between the two. User behaviour on a particular platform is constantly updated as users interact with the recommendations generated by the recommender system and how the effectiveness of these is assessed. At the same time, the recommender system is also affected by the user interacting with the system.

Recommender systems, along with search engines, advertisements, and "influencers", shape how people receive information on online platforms. They participate in the techno-social (re)production of society, because they exert

[5] This is what developers term a "cold start problem".

influence on and within society. They are powerful mechanisms of categorisation, classification, and filtering, hence how they categorise people and things does not have arbitrary implications. Because recommender systems have become legitimate intermediaries in the circulation of content online, they are powerful actors. Intermediaries have an important role in shaping taste and preferences, because "they are implicated in constituting and circulating categories of legitimate culture and thus, possibly, in challenging and changing them" (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 7). Algorithmic assumptions about people and things can reproduce stereotyped representations that reinforce social categorisations and the self-presentation of individuals. Recommender systems learn based on the examples they are exposed to (Barocas & Sebst, 2016; Airoldi, 2021), but this shapes how they generate representations of people. The effort to optimise user retention essentialises the cultural profiles of individuals, recommending to users what is of interest to them based on what they already like. The question, then, is how these algorithmic gatekeepers shape the reception of information and culture as compared to traditional gatekeepers, such as critics, experts, and traditional media outlets, i.e., TV and newspapers.

2.3 The TikTok Recommender System

For the sake of simplicity, throughout this thesis I use the term "TikTok's algorithm", "TikTok's recommender system" or "the algorithm" indistinctly to describe algorithmic practices on the part of TikTok, and its role as an algorithmic agent. However, it is important to note that TikTok's recommender system operates through a complex assemblage involving multiple algorithms, data, and practices.

TikTok's recommendation strategy relies on the ability of the recommender system to categorise content, and on the accuracy of recommendations in relation to users. Although corporations hide the specifics of how algorithms work, researchers have tried to outline the main characteristics of TikTok's recommender system. First, the aim of TikTok's recommendation strategy is to categorise content as efficiently as possible. To achieve this, TikTok combines computer vision, natural language processing (NLP), and metadata (Wang, 2022). Computer vision uses deep learning, a type of machine-learning process which employs neural networks to interpret images within TikTok videos. The computer-vision algorithm is supported by a dataset comprising millions of labelled images, which allows the algorithm to identify new images by analysing distinct traits and features. For example, with a

TikTok of somebody swimming in the sea, the algorithm will label the different elements appearing on it: beach, person, ocean. NLP is used to recognise, describe, and classify the audio features of videos in relation to potential topics. Finally, metadata from hashtags and captions is also included in the analysis. These different techniques enable the algorithm to "understand" the content of videos being created. Second, TikTok combines collaborative and content filtering. As such, the platform uses hybrid models to develop its recommender system, considering user interactions such as likes, comments, shares, and time spent on a video, along with accompanying text such as hashtags and captions (Zhou, 2024; Koç, 2023). The underlying objective of the platform is to combine better content categorisations and recommendations to ensure a deeper degree of personalisation that maximises user retention, increasing the time people spend on the platform.

TikTok's recommender system has an important role in shaping user experience on the app, and is the key ingredient in the platform's success. Bhandari and Bimo (2022) concluded that TikTok users are continuously confronted with content that is selected by an algorithm that is, to an extent, a representation of themselves. However, this representation is only partial, as the recommender system provides fragmented versions of the user. In other words, the algorithm offers an evolving version of the user's personal identity. Lee et al. (2022) followed the same line of research by examining how users are confronted with multiple and fragmented representations of themselves through the platform's algorithmic personalisation. This is not surprising, as one of the primary drivers of user engagement with content is its relatability (Schellewald, 2023).

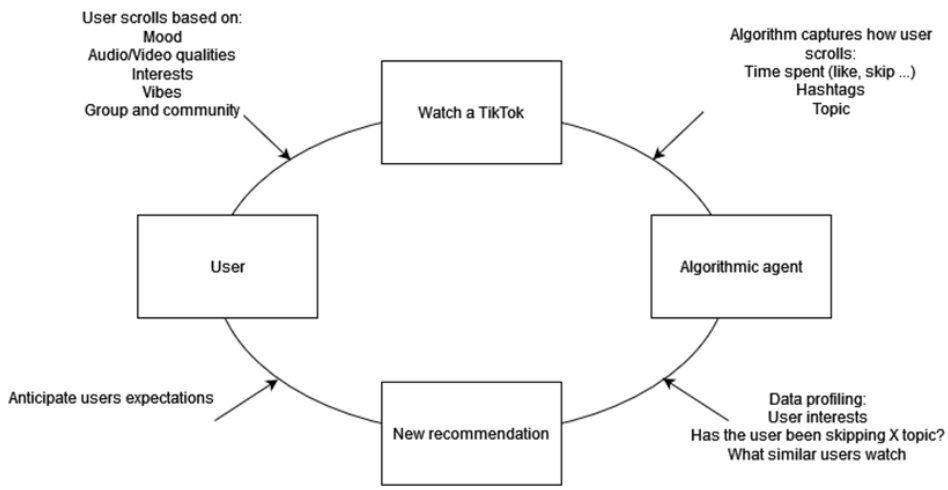

Figure 2.2 Feedback Loops on TikTok (2025)

The motivation for focusing on recommender systems is twofold. First, they are key actors in providing and prioritising certain orderings of the world to different groups of users in digital spaces. Second, to deliver accurate suggestions, recommender systems participate in feedback loops. These feedback loops have an interactional nature that should be familiar to sociologists. Figure 2.2 shows how the cycle of feedback loops on TikTok functions.

The feedback loop starts with a user scrolling on the app. When an individual picks up their phone and begins to scroll on TikTok, how they feel shapes how they engage with the app. Whether they are tired after a long day of work, worried about a family member, excited about a new relationship, or experiencing a breakup, their mood affects how they scroll. The audio and video characteristics as well as their interests can also attract their attention. A particular song or sound might capture their attention. It also makes a difference whether someone is passionate about bonsai, participates in the techno scene or has a deep sense of belonging to a particular group, institution or identity. These contextual conditions influence which TikTok video an individual stops to watch, and which they scroll past. Moreover, TikTok videos are very short, and an individual uses their intuition, a sense, or as I will define in *Chapter Four* vibes, which interrelated with the other conditions helps to decide whether or not to watch each TikTok video.

Every time an individual engages with, ignores, or rejects a TikTok, the recommender system is capturing every piece of information both on how the individual acts, along with the characteristics of each video appearing on the individual's FYP. This allows the TikTok recommender system to build a detailed data profile to refine recommendations. This data profile, combined with how other data profiles of individuals with similar scrolling habits, and the own platform logics enable the algorithm to generate the next iteration of recommendations for the individual. Therefore, the individual shapes, at least partially, the recommendations that they will receive in the future. In turn, the recommender system shapes the individual’s choices by offering a curated version of reality determined by the interaction of datasets, algorithms, user behaviour, and platform interests. This is an ongoing process for every video that appears on the FYP and is the basis of this thesis's interest in feedback loops and human-algorithm interactions. Hence, untangling the feedback loops created between users, algorithmic recommender systems, and data can shed light on the dynamics of meaning-making in digital spaces. Moreover, studying how these feedback loops operate can reveal the ways algorithmic recommender systems influence action in data-driven, algorithmically mediated societies.

2.4 Machine Learning and Algorithmic Agents

Before exploring the specifics of feedback loops, it is important to introduce the concept of machine-learning algorithms. If algorithms are sequences of code and recommender systems are a family of algorithms that suggest content to users, ML algorithms represent a broader category of algorithms that help computers learn how to handle data more efficiently. This distinction is crucial because most recommender systems are powered by ML algorithms. These algorithms learn from data to extract patterns and make predictions, without being explicitly programmed (Molina & Garip, 2019). Thus, the majority of recommender systems rely on ML to generate recommendations.

In ML, a computer program learns from experience with respect to a class of tasks that has been assigned by the code creator, whether that be a software developer, an engineer, or a computer scientist. The algorithm evaluates its performance in relation to the task, and uses its experience to improve (Carbonell et al., 1983). In simple terms, while humans learn from experience due to their capacity for reasoning, computers cannot do this: they do not reason, and instead learn by identifying patterns in data and assess the success of their tasks through feedback loops.

In *Machine Habitus*, the sociologist Massimmo Airoldi (2021) argues that, despite the differences between humans and algorithms, both learn according to experience, and are subjected to a process that is akin to socialisation. Using a Bourdesian lens, he asserts that ML algorithms develop something akin to their own habitus. A key concept in Pierre Bourdieu's work, this refers to a set of learned dispositions through which a person perceives and acts in the social world.

> Systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53)

The scope of this thesis does not extend to engaging in debates about the adequacy or shortcomings of Bourdieu's concept, but it is interesting to note that Airoldi uses it to illuminate how ML algorithms develop their own practical dispositions, which in turn affect the recommendations they generate. Airoldi rejects any type of

awareness or intentionality in the creation of these dispositions, and any parallel between human socialisation and algorithmic socialisation — a perspective I share with him. As he asserts: "No matter how 'intelligent' a machine might be, intersubjective identification with a common world and affective bonds with other social agents are still precluded to machine learning" (Airoldi, 2021, p. 58). In other words, algorithms do not possess symbolic capacity to represent reality, but they still act in a social way by (re)producing the statistical propensities they find in data.

For Airoldi, it is through data training and subsequent feedback loops that ML algorithms learn to identify data propensities and create associations that tend to repeat over time. This recursive character of algorithmic feedback loops is what characterises algorithms as algorithmic agents. When they are exposed to data, ML algorithms encode propensities, in the form of statistical weights and function parameters, which are then applied to future iterations of recommendations. Data is, as Crawford (2021, p. 95) notes, "the basis for sense-making in AI, not as classical representations of the world with individual meaning, but as a mass collection of data for machine abstractions and operations chine abstractions and operations."; there is never enough data. Let us, to take an example, consider how TikTok's algorithm interacts with two groups of users: one group that enjoys electronic music, luxurious vacations in St. Tropez and the Maldives, and expensive cars, and another that prefers indie music, international cuisine, and backpacking in South America. Although both groups enjoy holidays abroad and food, TikTok's recommender system will learn that the two groups enjoy different types of recommendation. Over time, the propensity of the first group to engage with TikTok videos about luxury holidays, and of the second to engage with TikToks created by digital nomads in Honduras, will establish different cultural understandings for each group. The root of the development of these dispositions is the practical orientation created in every computational iteration. Through this, Airoldi presents a sociological explanation for how artificial social agents operate in the world.

The idea that ML algorithms develop their own dispositions and (re)produce social patterns is relevant to the study of recommender systems, particularly in the case of feedback loops. Recommender systems develop particular dispositions by learning from socially structured data, which in turn shapes the interactions that users have with algorithms. These interactions are further reinforced or transformed by feedback loops, which not only adjust the recommender system's predictions but help create or solidify new social patterns. This characterisation highlights the fact that, for a machine-learning algorithm, learning cannot be separated from the feedback loops that regulate its task performance. While platforms decide the rules

of engagement for a given recommender system, i.e. suggesting content to users based on how similar these users are to other users, it is through individual user feedback loops that recommender systems formulate highly personalised predictions that are relevant to a given user. Airoldi (2021) articulates this distinction through the notion of *global data contexts* and *local data contexts*. These feedback loops not only regulate the algorithm's learning process but shape the personalised predictions that are generated for individual users. Therefore, ML algorithms and feedback loops not only reproduce social assumptions, but are inherently linked to each other. Unpacking feedback loops involves understanding that when recommender systems become algorithmic agents, they incorporate a level of openness through the meanings and feelings expressed by users, which in turn are fed back into the system of recommendations.

2.5 Sociology of Feedback Loops

An understanding of feedback loops is fundamental for understanding the interactions between recommender systems and users, as well as the circulation of content on platforms. A closer inspection of feedback loops is essential in order to study the specific interactions between humans and algorithmic agents, as well as the sociality that the latter enable. For Blumer (1969), the study of society must begin by studying the actions of individuals, i.e. acting people, rather than treating the individual and society as separate entities. Society has to be seen as the sum of the actions of people.

In digital societies, actions involve many processes mediated by technologies. Recommender systems, as algorithmic agents, have the particularity of updating outcomes to adjust to human action through complex computational architectures. Since these encounters pervade many social processes, an understanding of feedback loops is therefore essential to an understanding of algorithmic societies, as individual actions and algorithmic responses constantly shape and reshape each other. Amershi et al. (2014, p. 107) argue that feedback loops create "rapid train-feedback-correct cycles, where users iteratively provide corrective feedback to the algorithm, after viewing its output". To produce relevant suggestions, recommender systems are constantly collecting and updating user data in order to learn what the

user wants.[6] Thus, they are more than just simple mechanisms for calibrating the accuracy of recommendations; they create courses of action, where each iteration of recommendations relies, at least partly, on past interactions between data, user, and algorithm.

Feedback loops originate in the training databases used by machine-learning algorithms, which define the initial parameters and course of action for the algorithm (Engdahl, 2024). Recommendations tend to reinforce and extend past courses of action, and make detecting or overcoming unwarranted suggestions more difficult due to the weight of previous paths. This process is recursive in nature, because the output of a computational process is itself embedded in the input of a new iteration (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022, pp. 416–417).

The term "recursive" describes a "relationship of self-reference in which related parts are embedded in, or stacked upon, each other in a form that may be either infinitely self-reproducing or not" (Platt, 1989, p. 638). In the context of recommender systems, recommendations are assembled through the accumulation of repeated interactions between users, algorithms, and the original training data. In other words, learning is never independent of preexisting data, because recommender systems rely on the corpus of past interaction to make suggestions (Fourcade & Johns, 2020). Over time, every feedback loop represents far more than just a simple new interaction between a user and an algorithm, repeated every time anew. Instead, feedback loops are the result of previous feedback loops and how these have shaped past actions, practices, and behaviours. As a result, the sociologist David Beer (2022) coined the term *recursive societies* to acknowledge how social action is embedded within multiple chains of feedback loops. Contrary to a vision of algorithms as linear series of programmable steps, feedback loops are better thought of as spirals. This shifts our understanding; rather than conceiving of feedback loops as having endpoints, the concept of the spiral suggests that actions evolve in various directions beyond their initial conditions of existence (Amoore, 2019).

Feedback loops usually do not follow linear causality, wherein a particular line of code (A) translates automatically into output (B). Instead, feedback loops generally entail a cyclic process of recommendations, the addition of user feedback into model updates, and the repetition of the procedure. Hence, algorithmic feedback loops continuously evolve in response to user interactions, creating dynamic recommendations that are sensitive to the contexts of users. By acknowledging this

[6] I reiterate that feedback loops are not unique to recommender systems, and instead part of machine-learning algorithms.

non-linear nature, it is possible to appreciate how algorithms shape and are shaped recursively by continuous user engagement, ultimately influencing both recommender systems and user behaviour in an iterative, changing process. Moreover, the logic of algorithms being dominated by a rationalistic discourse fails to predict the potential of feedback loops to generate unpredictable behaviours that can spiral out of the control of the system, creating new paths of action (Amoore, 2019).

Lury and Day (2019) assert that in a datafied environment, algorithmic personalisation means that algorithms know users better than they know themselves. Yet individuals are not represented as singular, fixed entities within the data, but as dynamic data-entry points —accumulations of interactions and iterations captured in the system dataset, which limit the individuality that personalisation promises. Here, "individuality" refers to the idea that a user represents a coherent and stable identity; in contrast to this, feedback loops simply manipulate and re-sequence suggestions based on probability modelling, which predicts the next-best option (Shah, 2024). For example, in the case of sexual identity, Wang and Spronk (2023) found that, on the platform Duoyin,[7] the process of configuring sexual identification is processual. Algorithmic feedback loops on social media participate in creating fluid sexual identifications as part of relational processes that are subject to real-time feedback loops; this is as opposed to sexual identity being a fixed signifier, both for heterosexual and queer users. The researchers found that straight users were being recommended content made by queer users, and vice-versa. Users have to make sense of these encounters for each recommendation, and as a result are presented with a broad spectrum of recommendations that configure an erotic curiosity that is in constant flux (Wang and Spronk, 2023 p. 7). The continuous fluidity that we find in the nature of human interactions is also found in a datafied environment, where preferences and identities are not fixed and are instead shaped by ongoing engagement and feedback from the algorithm.

If we forget for a moment that we are talking about interacting with a sequence of code that constantly updates their information, we encounter that we are mainly talking about studying relations. The interactive nature anchoring feedback loops entails a characteristic that should be very familiar for sociologists, since studying social relations has been one of the main interests for sociologists since the inception of the discipline. The emphasis on relations highlights that the world consists primarily of processes rather than substances. As Mustafa Emirbayer (1997)

[7] The Chinese, and first, version of TikTok.

suggests, it is more adequate to think about individuals or institutions as dynamic unfolding relations rather than static "things". This view aligns with relational sociologist Pierpaolo Donati's (2010) claim that society is created, (re)produced and transformed through the relations that people create with other people. Following this lens, while algorithmic expressions carry no meaning in themselves per se, meaning emerges through the interaction between humans and recommender systems. How good is a recommendation relies on the verification of the user. Therefore, rather than viewing users as passive subjects led by the algorithm, they should be seen as active co-creators in the algorithmic process. As Schinkel (2023, p. 173) points "in the interval between recursive calculations lies contingency and agentic initiative, giving rise to interaction rather than one-sided action." Users have an essential role in generating and feeding the learning process and feedback loops (Bucher, 2020). To say that meaning is made additively in feedback loops is not to say that machine learning algorithms are inflexible or inattentive to unpredictability. It is to assert that each iteration is constructed through the attention process of both algorithm and user (McPherson, 2023).

It is important to note that recursivity is not a new phenomenon, nor one that is exclusive to algorithms. It has long been the case that classifications and categorisations of people and things have fed and altered the behaviours and/or characteristics of people using particular categories of thought. Goffman (1961a) introduced the notion of *looping* when analysing the interactions between staff and inmates in a mental institution. More broadly, looping can be seen as a means through which cultural and social norms reassert themselves repeatedly, and the unequal power to accept or resist them is expressed. Ian Hacking (1995; 1999) used the notion of *looping* to describe how classifications and categorisations fold back to shape social action.

Moving back to a period where algorithms are embedded in many areas of social life, the unique quality of recursivity lies in how feedback loops have accelerated this phenomenon, and produced new forms of and opportunities for recursion to be implemented through data and code (Beer, 2022). Here, we can see how looping can help us to think about recursivity in algorithmic processes. Beer (2022) argued for thinking about algorithmic encounters in relation to the concept of data coils, in order to study how encounters affect people not only through the data being produced as a result of actions, practices, and behaviours, but through how previous feedback loops have shaped those actions, practices, and behaviours. If we think of algorithms as agents with a habitus, as Airoldi (2021) proposed, then Beer's observation points to the implications of encountering algorithms with distinctive

habitus that do not simply react to algorithmic interactions, but accumulate automatic, patterned responses based on data propensities. From this perspective, encountering an algorithm implies engaging with a system that has developed a distinctive mode of action that is shaped by aggregated histories of interactions and data.

What today constitutes social action is in part embedded in algorithmic processes. Digital technologies increasingly mediate social domains, and so we increasingly encounter social action that is elaborated through feedback loops. This transformation positions algorithms as sociotechnical agents that can define social situations. Algorithms have consequences for how people experience their lives, receive information, and think about things. Consequently, recursivity is anchored in the propensities that shape recommender systems and their interactions with users. Moreover, human agency exhibits a recursive character due to the schematisation of social experience. The actions of individuals are "manifested in actors" abilities to recall, to select, and to appropriately apply the more or less tacit and taken-for-granted schemas of action that they have developed through past interactions" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 975). This raises important questions about how individuals experience and feel interactions with algorithms. Because of this, users are affected by each recommendation, and this in turn affects the propensity of the algorithm to recommend. This makes understanding recursive feedback loops one of the biggest challenges for any attempt to understand the structures, experiences, and connections of the social world (Beer, 2022). Feedback loops are constantly (re)defining culture and society through ongoing adjustments and transformations involving human and non-human actors. Hence, if we assume that relations are the basis with which to understand any conception of the social, the aim of this thesis should be considered in relation to studies of social relations and how meaning-making is negotiated through sociotechnical encounters with algorithmic agents.

While recommender systems provide the infrastructural logic through which content is curated and circulated on TikTok, public discourses about the platform reveal how this infrastructure is interpreted, contested, and framed. The next chapter explores how TikTok has become a site of concern, community, and afforded agency, highlighting the sociotechnical tensions that shape how users make sense of the platform.

3 Studying TikTok as a Research Object

TikTok is used every day by millions of people who turn to it for entertainment, self-expression, information, or simply to pass the time. This seemingly ordinary platform with viral trends and dances created from the bedroom is increasingly drawing the attention of researchers who seek to understand how the platform is used and how it gets intertwined with the everyday lives of its users. Imagine a place where scrolling practices, interests, cultural capital, and symbolic and affective processes leave footprints that can be observed and analysed by researchers. This is precisely how TikTok's digital environment works. Every step a user takes online is carefully recorded by digital platforms, and TikTok is no exception. During a conversation with a TikTok user about their experience of the app, they jokingly remarked that "TikTok thinks I'm a lesbian!" This humorous observation shows that their FYP was filled with content that they would associate with being a lesbian. But why would TikTok suggest this? This brief anecdote highlights the sociotechnical processes through which meaning is constructed, and what makes TikTok an ideal case to study the dynamics of feedback loops and the relationship between attention and emotional energy in the circulation of content. To declare that TikTok thought they were a lesbian, this user needed to have a preconceived notion of the kind of content a lesbian would consume. In turn, through their interaction with the algorithm, they helped construct a space where this type of content became dominant. Both content[8] and algorithmic awareness become part of the everyday experience of using TikTok and highlight the recursive processes that are increasingly enabled through algorithmic encounters.

To examine the nature of such moments on TikTok, this chapter approaches it as an object of scholarly attention. It contrasts different perspectives from platform studies and critical algorithm studies to outline how research has approached TikTok, and where this project seeks to contribute. I first introduce research

[8] Content refers not just to TikToks as media artifacts in themselves, but to the meanings they carry and the symbolic interpretations users make of them.

focusing on platform governance and how it affects the strategies of content creators on TikTok. Then, I describe TikTok as the heir to Vine. By describing Vine's popularity, I discuss the importance of memes and virality, which helps to explain TikTok's later success. Following this, I examine the concept of *affordances.* This concept provides a lens to study how platforms shape and enact user agency, and is central to this research because TikTok, which functions as an algorithmic agent, constrains and shapes the agency of users. The next two sections examine existing academic research on TikTok, outlining two main strands: (1) studies that emphasise the potential harms of TikTok; and (2) studies of TikTok cultures and everyday practices. Finally, I discuss research into how people make sense of algorithms, and introduce the notion of *algorithmic imaginaries*. Although the AIR model proposed in this work differs from the concept of algorithmic imaginaries, the latter concept has significantly inspired this framework. By applying a sociological lens to studying algorithmic imaginaries, this research aims to contribute with a model to unpack how people navigate and interpret living with algorithms.

3.1 TikTok and Platform Governance

TikTok has become one of the fastest growing and most widely used social media platforms in the world. To understand the platform's logic, it is necessary to briefly trace its development. The origins of the platform date back to September of 2016 when the Chinese company ByteDance released Duoyin, a short-video platform designed for the Chinese market in which users could create and share content. Duoyin was created following in the footsteps of other social media platforms that provided short videos as a form of entertainment. These types of platforms were characterised by the high spreadability of content, low production costs, and an increasingly blurred distinction between content producers and consumers. As Kaye et al. (2021) described, short-form video platforms had already achieved popularity in China since the early 2010's and Douyin's efforts were founded on the success of this type of entertainment. A year later, in 2017, ByteDance launched TikTok to expand its short-video platform into the international market. To support the company's expansion, that same year ByteDance acquired Musical.ly, another short-video platform that had gained some degree of popularity, particularly among U.S. teenagers. Finally, in 2018, both platforms were merged into what is known today as TikTok. Although TikTok and Douyin operate separately, their functions, and

everyday uses are nearly identical with differences primarily in their infrastructures of governance (Kaye et al., 2021).

This separation has become increasingly significant, as TikTok's global expansion has brought it into the centre of geopolitical controversy. TikToks parent company, ByteDance is a Chinese owned platform, and this fact has placed TikTok at the centre of different controversies over its governance. The platform has been accused by the U.S. and European governments of operating in benefit of the Chinese government, raising concerns about content moderation policies, data security, and algorithmic control (Bernot et al., 2024). In response to these concerns, even if TikTok and Douyin operate as separate platforms, several countries have introduced restrictions on TikTok. For example, India has banned the use of the app since 2020. In the U.S. in 2024 President Joe Biden signed a bill requiring the app to sell to an American company or risk being banned in the U.S. Moreover, the U.S. government has forbidden federal employees from installing TikTok on their work devices (Ingram, 2022). In turn, the European Union (EU) has responded by issuing a fine of 530 million euros to TikTok for violating the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in relation to data transfers to China.

Despite these controversies, TikTok's popularity has continued to grow. The platform's rise in popularity coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when TikTok outperformed established platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger becoming the most downloaded app (Iqbal, 2020). It is estimated that in the first half of 2025 it had 1.59 billion global monthly active users (DataReportal, 2025). In the EU, 62% of individuals aged between 16 and 74 reported having watched video content on platforms such as YouTube and TikTok in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024). Focusing specifically on TikTok, the company reported 159 million active users across the EU during the second half of 2024 (TikTok, 2024). In the case of Sweden, TikTok declared that at the end of 2024 over 3.3 million Swedish users (TikTok, 2024), or in other words, around one third of the Swedish population. Regarding the profile of its users, the platform is particularly popular among teenagers and young people (Montag et al., 2021). According to Celi (2022), in 2021 71% of young people between 18 and 29 years old had a TikTok account compared to 65% of users of the same age who used Instagram. While older age groups are increasingly adopting TikTok (Ng & Indran, 2022), the platform remains especially popular among young people, who find in it a space distinct from traditional forms of media consumption (Barta et al., 2023).

TikTok is a platform that is based on user-generated content that incorporates video, music, sound effects, filters, and stickers, among other creative elements

(Feldkamp, 2021). However, the platform also creates the conditions of possibility for the practices that emerge within it. According to Burgess (2021) a platform is not just a technological tool, and is better understood as an environment that introduces competing social, technical, and political-economic imperatives into the contexts in which it operates. Despite the efforts of digital platforms to portray themselves as neutral spaces for user engagement (Gillespie, 2010), digital environments are shaped by the interests of those in charge of them, who are ultimately responsible for shaping how users can act and interact, and how content is created and disseminated (Gillespie, 2010; Helmond, 2015).

Van Dijck et al. (2018) developed the concept of *platform society* to highlight the significant role of digital platforms in organising governmental, economic, and cultural sectors, along with public life. They argue that social and economic processes are increasingly mediated by a global platform ecosystem that is driven by algorithms and sustained by data extraction. In turn, digital platforms are designed to organise interactions between users, institutions, and markets in programmed ways. Duffy et al. (2019, p. 1) observed that the consequence of this is that platforms are "reconfiguring the production, distribution, and monetisation of cultural content in staggering and complex ways".

From the perspective of platform studies, TikTok functions as both a distribution platform[9] and a creative tool for content production. This duality blurs the distinction between professional and amateur creators, and commercial and non-commercial activities on the platform (Mahetaji & Nieborg, 2024). As Poell et al. (2019) observed, platforms aim to facilitate interactions between users, who in the case of TikTok watch short videos, and "complementors" — entrepreneurs and companies, such as advertisers, who target users and distribute the products and services provided by the platform. The task of the platform is to make sure that both sides are active and grow in order to develop their business models. Haenlein et al. (2020) described how, compared to platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, which rely on influencer-based promotions, TikTok encourages a form of participatory marketing, wherein brands engage with users through challenges, duets[10], and user-generated content. In this way, brands achieve great engagement without substantial advertising budgets, while reaching high conversion rates. Liang

[9] Braun (2015, p. 1) defines a distribution platform as a platform that circulates messages addressed to individuals and publics.

[10] A duet is a TikTok feature that allows users to post a video side-by-side an existing video on the platform. This enables users to produce content in which they comment and or critique a video previously posted.

(2022) described how the attention economy in Douyin, TikTok's Chinese counterpart, relies heavily on the platforms' algorithmic system. The algorithmic system regulates what is shown to users based on digital tags used to identify and label content. Liang's aim is to highlight the growing role of algorithms as agents in the competition for visibility on platforms.

Algorithmic regulation is one of the mechanisms used by platforms to organise their activity. According to Gorwa (2019), the notion of platform governance encompasses content policies, terms of service, algorithms, interfaces, and other socio-technical infrastructural aspects that shape how a platform operates. Understanding platform governance is important because it defines what content is permitted and is visible, and how revenue is distributed. Unpacking platform governance requires understanding the technical infrastructure and actors involved, as well as the global context within which these platforms operate. Because of this global context, it is difficult to regulate the platform through national-level regulations.

TikTok's affordances, which emphasise short-form, audio-visual content, have introduced distinct governance challenges. Zeng and Kaye (2022) observed that, compared to platforms based on text or static images, such as X and Instagram, moderating video content is technologically more complex and labour-intensive, requiring advanced tools for real-time analysis of sound, image, and contextual meaning. Hence, they introduce the notion of *visibility moderation*, which refers to the ability to suppress or amplify the reach of certain content. Rather than removing content, TikTok makes rules about what should and should not be seen, thereby disciplining content creators through their desire for visibility. Coincidentally, TikTok promotes content that aligns with the platform's overall corporate image. TikTok is also affected by the geopolitics and regulations of the regions in which it operates: it is well known that the platform has Chinese ownership, and there is a likely relationship between this and the attempt of the U.S. government to ban it for national-security reasons (Clausius, 2022).

Some researchers have focused on a bottom-up understanding of platform logic, examining how content creators use knowledge to navigate platforms and achieve visibility (Cotter, 2019; Bishop, 2019). Content moderation affects the cultural resources and social scripts that creators use (Gillespie, 2018). As Abidin (2021, p. 79) noted: "TikTok users strive to have individual posts accumulate 'engagements' in the form of views, comments, and shares, as encouraged by TikTok's culture of aiming to be picked up for and catalogued by the For You Page." To achieve visibility, users monitor the latest viral trends, and adapt their content in the hope of

being promoted by the algorithm. Bishop (2019) noted that creators use and share *algorithmic gossip* to make sense of content moderation, combining knowledge about the platform's terms of service and algorithmic logic with their own content-creation strategies. Steen et al. (2023) introduced the idea of *algospeak* to account for how users understand the politics of content moderation as random, inaccurate, or biased. With the aim of ensuring adequate freedom of speech and equality, creators use on-screen text, video captions, and hashtags to anticipate and circumvent potential algorithmic moderation restrictions. For example, they described how a sex educator used the corn emoji (🌽) to share their thoughts on "pornography," due to the perception that this topic was heavily moderated by TikTok. However, it is not enough to develop knowledge about algorithmic work, as the opacity surrounding the platform's content moderation procedures often means that content creators are left merely speculating about what the app censors and how this translates into their visibility (Steen et al., 2023).

When it comes to the strategies used to achieve visibility, TikTok has certain specificities: TikTok's microcelebrity culture represents a departure from the ideal life presented on Instagram, instead promoting a more relatable, although still carefully curated, sense of ordinariness (Abidin, 2021). A common way in which content creators connect with users is through performances of authenticity and relatability (Schellewald, 2023). The platform's affordances foster a sense of intimacy between creators and viewers, with content often focusing on shared anxieties, discomforts, and sensations (Southerton, 2021). Establishing an affective attunement is a powerful approach to engagement that drives attention on social-media platforms, influencing users to consume specific content (Papacharissi, 2015). For example, insecurities about climate change circulate on the app, connecting personal narratives of worry with technical features such as hashtags and viral sounds (Hautea et al., 2021). Similarly, users rely on the affective resonances of content by using humour to manage difficult emotions and express disempowerment relating to the lack of governmental action on climate change (Brown et al., 2024). Affect and emotion are thus key to why users choose to skip some content and engage with other pieces. By placing affects and emotions as an important lens to understand the circulation of content, we can start to outline how the interpretation of content entails also an affective negotiation shaped by what resonates with or interpellates users.

Apart from informal strategies by creators to manage visibility, TikTok also institutionalises content control through programmes like the Creator Fund. Abidin (2021) described the introduction of the Creator Fund, a programme that

corporatises platform support by promoting certain TikTok influencers. The programme decides which creators qualify for visibility based on their acceptance of TikTok's Community Guidelines, which determine grey areas of moderation. Violation of these can result in the de-platforming of creators who gain visibility by, for example, addressing issues of social (in)justice.

While focusing on the platform logics of TikTok provides insights into how the platform shapes the production of content, this study concentrates on how users co-produce meaning with algorithmic agents through everyday interactions such as scrolling and content engagement. Rather than presenting a relatively macro understanding of TikTok, the aim is to develop a relational perspective on the interactions between algorithm and user. One way to begin outlining this relationship is by examining the characteristics of the interaction that TikTok supports between users and the platform.

3.2 TikTok, Vine and Affordances

The platform has extended the memetic cultural logic of the Internet to social media, creating a distinctive communication style and cultural landscape with trends, challenges and dances (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). While the platform is often associated with playful and fun content, it has increasingly become a space to present more "serious" topics such as education, politics, sexualities or identities (Cervi & Divon, 2023). Young people are increasingly using TikTok to stay informed about the world, and creators are becoming key sources of information for them. As a result, TikTok is not only transforming the way news is consumed but also influencing the broad media landscape (Divon and Eriksson Krutrök, 2025). However, as Schellewald (2021, p.1450) observes, the platform still privileges "a predominant rhythm of comedic and upbeat content, seeking to spark immediate affective responses like laughter or joy.". Therefore, the way young people consume information on TikTok is still imbued with the platform's humorous style and distinctive cultural logic. For instance, Divon and Eriksson Krutrök (2025, p. 12) found that in the context of the Ukrainian war, content creators reported on the war "by blending journalistic reporting with the influencer's adept use of platform-specific aesthetics, viral trends, and playful templates".

TikTok's success in western countries as a short-video platform had a precursor in the app Vine. Founded in 2012 and released to the public in 2013 after being purchased by Twitter, Vine allowed users to record, edit, and post videos that were

up to 6 seconds long (Honan, 2013). The platform was designed to create a space where users could self-document their lives using vignettes to replicate the "status update" functionality of other social-media platforms (McGarrigle, 2014). By creating Vines, users could showcase personal experiences to wider publics, narrate trivial aspects of their everyday lives, and express forms of everyday activism (Duguay, 2016). One of Vine's key innovations was providing a space where everyday life could be presented as a series of situations, which then could be stored on the platform and algorithmically recommended to other users (McGarrigle, 2014). In this way, the recommendation of Vines for users depended on the platform's recommender system, which determined what content users encountered.

An element that influenced the likelihood of a Vine being widely seen was its degree of virality; viral videos were more likely to be promoted, and comedy played a key role in this process. The Vines that gained traction were often those that involved internet memes, comedy, and humour (McGarrigle, 2014). Users took active roles in the circulation of viral content, sharing trends and memes and through this participating in an Internet culture where humour was both expected and valued (Davis et al., 2018; Phillips & Milner, 2017). Additionally, the emotional reaction that a video produced in a user, or the imagined reactions of future viewers, contributed to it being shared (Serrano-Puche, 2016). As Anderson (2020, p. 8) remarked, "the memes, challenges and trends that appear on TikTok make it into the mainstream in similar ways that they did from Vine". Following Vine's shutdown in 2017, which occurred because it could not monetise user activities and lacked some technical features, various apps attempted to meet the demand for short-video apps, including Musical.ly, Byte, Triller, Zynn, Likee, and TikTok (Klug et al., 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that Vine opened the way for TikTok as a creative and comedic space. This way was marked by a communicative style that relied on the tools provided by the platform, and allowed users to create videos that synthesised content requiring both technical skill and cultural fluency to produce and interpret (Calhoun, 2019).

One way to understand how Vine, and later TikTok, fostered a similar style of engagement and participation wherein users continually (re)interpreted and (re)signified content by sharing it is through the concept of *affordances*. The concept of affordances describes how, during the interactions between humans and technology, the latter provides "the very conditions of possibility for competing accounts to be sensibly made" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 450). Originally introduced in 1977 by the American psychologist James Gibson, the concept refers to the range of action possibilities offered by the physical environment. Gibson referred to a

specific kind of relationship between an animal and its environment, wherein individuals do not perceive an environment as such but perceive it based on its affordances, i.e., the possibilities for action it presents. For example, just as the physical properties of a cycling route — such as its slope, surface type, and the presence of other vehicles — and the cyclist's perception of difficulty inform different styles of riding, different platforms present particular affordances that both enable and constrain the experiences of users, inviting interaction in certain ways (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

An affordances approach acknowledges that objects afford multiple potential meanings and uses for people. However, Beer (2022) cautions us against establishing simplistic distinctions between the technical and the social, arguing that consideration of the affordances of algorithms invites us to reflect on the nature of the social itself, particularly as it evolves through interactions with active, performative, and reactive technologies that are increasingly embedded in everyday life. McDonnell (2016, p. 27) notes that studying affordances means recognising how materiality constrains and enables meaning and use through a "relational approach that values the material and symbolic qualities of objects in conjunction with the cognitive and bodily capacities of people in settings".

As a cultural sociologist, McDonnell (2023) argued that objects are involved in how people make sense of situations. Because of this, both cognition and embodiment help people to make sense of situations. For McDonnell, experiences of objects mediate how people imagine the set of possible affordances to action, and he used the example of condoms to explain how people might experience and make sense of an object in different ways:

> some people develop embodied skill and comfort with condoms. Some experience condoms as arousing because they permit sexual freedom through safe sex—their qualities prevent pregnancy and HIV transmission. Others find condoms clumsy and unsexy because of the ways the material mediates or interrupts. (McDonnell, 2023, p. 203)

This example highlights how objects afford particular meanings that are not fixed, and instead shaped by embodied experience and affective responses. It also reflects how affordances operate within an affective-symbolic domain, wherein material properties, symbolic capacity, and affective experience are deeply intertwined. Moreover, McDonnell invites us to reflect on the role of cultural objects in the stabilisation and destabilisation of meaning. Applied to TikTok, this highlights how

interaction with the algorithm leads to the stabilisation of certain meanings for each user.

The concept of affordances is a good starting point for thinking about how agency is shaped by how technical features make people engage with apps in certain ways, as well as consideration of how algorithms are constrained to act with users in particular ways. Crawford (2016) argues that algorithms are not neutral in relation to users,[11] and that they are instead adaptive and responsive, co-evolving in response to user actions in the digital environment. Bucher and Helmond (2018, p. 29) observe that "rather than thinking of the affordances of social media platform as one-way relationships whereby either the technology affords something to users, (or), users afford things to technology, the presence of algorithms in particular suggests that such unidirectionality does not hold". In this way, affordances on TikTok structure the range of possible meanings and actions on the platform, but do not determine which lines of action are ultimately selected by the users, as these ultimately depend on how the user and algorithm interact. Furthermore, as with other social media platforms, the shift from centralised media to user-driven content circulation highlights the importance of understanding how platforms enable and shape user participation. This mode of interacting with content eroded the control that traditional media had over what became popular. Users thus gained power in determining which content is shared and gains traction on platforms (Sampson, 2012). Such participatory dynamics are in part shaped by how users engage with a platform's particular opportunities for action (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Hence, the perspective on affordances provides a lens through which to examine how TikTok's technical features and algorithmic system shape user engagement, participation, and influences the cultural meanings that emerge on the platform.

3.3 Mindscrolling on TikTok

TikTok is often portrayed in public discourse and the media as a source of social malaise and decay. The algorithmically curated feed has been described as "digital fentanyl" (Millman, 2023), "digital crack cocaine" (Koetsier, 2020), and "the social media equivalent of heroin" (Schlott, 2023). Such descriptions highlight the addictive nature of the app, framing it as a time-wasting machine that distracts

[11] Crawford uses the term "agonistic" to highlight the political dimension of algorithms as they are implicated in struggles over the outcomes they produce.

people from more meaningful activities (Mela, 2024). In the mainstream media there are many examples that frame its potential dangers. For example, the British newspaper *The Guardian* published an article titled "TikTok's algorithm is highly sensitive – and could send you down a hate-filled rabbit hole before you know it" (Taylor, 2024); similarly, the BBC published "TikTok sued for 'wreaking havoc' on teen mental health" (Sherman, 2024), and *The Wall Street Journal* "TikTok Brain Explained: Why Some Kids Seem Hooked on Social Video Feeds" (Jargon, 2022).

These examples highlight some of the biggest criticisms directed against the platform: it is addictive, promotes hateful or harmful content, and contributes to a growing mental-health crisis among young people. Furthermore, critics such as Stjernfelt and Lauritzen (2020, p.44) have argued that online engagements are dominated by emotions rather than deliberation, leading to what they term a "knowledge deficit", based on a critique of how attention-based infrastructures undermine the capacity for reflexive thinking. As a result of these concerns, terms such as "mindscrolling" and "doomscrolling" have appeared to describe how users allow content to flow past them without active thought, highlighting the affective nature of their engagement. Similarly, Turkle (2011) argued that online interactions lack depth, and prevent people from engaging in more meaningful and "real" forms of social connection. Such criticism reflects narratives about the undesirable consequences of TikTok and its potential to disrupt society. However, concerns about technological transformations are not new, and have long influenced how people perceive societal change. Historians like Johnston (2020) described how the introduction of the telegraph in the nineteenth century sparked concern regarding the negative effects of this technology, particularly in terms of the acceleration of life. Similarly, Standage (1998) described the telegraph being linked to a perceived decline in the writing standards of the time, as the demand for brief and concise communication resulted in abbreviations in writing becoming commonplace.

Today, similar anxieties have pushed scholars to investigate the platform's potential negative impacts on mental health, attention spans, and social interaction. This strand of research has focused on the argument that time spent on TikTok is a significant predictor of problematic social-media use, depression, and poor self-esteem. These studies focus on how TikTok's recommender system has turned the FYP into one of the most addictive scrolling experiences on the Internet. For example, Montag et al. (2021) explored the negative relationship between use of TikTok among young people and poor self-esteem. Others have studied the relationship between TikTok and body dissatisfaction: Mink and Szymanski (2022), for example, studied the relationship between body image and exposure to images

of bodies and lifestyles that are unrealistic and idealised, inducing feelings of inadequacy. However, as Pan et al. (2022) noted, if it is used wisely, social media can provide a support network for body-image concerns, with communities based around body positivity existing on platforms like TikTok. Wang and Scherr (2022) studied how scrolling before sleep affects the quality of sleep and rest, finding an increase in cognitive arousal, disrupted sleep patterns, and users feeling fatigued. The main conclusion based on these studies is that scrolling addiction is linked to cognitive deficits (Firth et al., 2024).

A particularly interesting sociological point is that the logic of medical and psychological research has started to appear in everyday language. Two notable arguments emerge in relation to negative views on TikTok. First, the use of the app is often framed in biological terms, i.e. "addiction", "brain rotting", and "dopamine"; these dominate how people discuss and understand the app's use. Second, there is a tendency to conflate this medicalised language with broader moral and social judgements. One could argue that the discourse around dopamine reflects a form of medicalisation that functions, in part, as a medical excuse, exonerating individuals from personal responsibility by attributing their behaviour to brain chemistry. Moreover with regard to TikTok and addiction, Xu et al. (2023) remarked that unhealthy screen usage is not identical to addiction, and argued that the extent to which social media use translates into unhealthy patterns or develops into formal disorders is poorly understood and insufficiently studied. While some studies indicate an association between poor mental health and increased use of TikTok, or social media at broad, the discussion lies in whether excessive use of TikTok leads to poorer mental health, or whether poorer mental health leads people to use TikTok as a way to soothe their emotional state. Another aspect to consider is that medical studies tend to measure screen time, but often overlook the different types of activities users can engage on TikTok. In this sense, an important question is how users experience these discourses when they engage with TikTok, i.e., how users articulate the ambivalence of using TikTok while simultaneously they declare that it fuels dopamine rushes and disrupts their attention spans. this is presented as common sense.

While it is important not to ignore the potential harms of TikTok, the dominant discourses around it show that the platform is a socially and culturally contested object. For instance, Madsen (2022) analysed how moral panics surrounding the use of smartphones, which frame technology as a health risk, often ignore people's agency to appropriate technology and instead portray them as passive victims. The

following section reviews different ways in which TikTok is appropriated and gets entagled in social and cultural processes.

3.4 TikTok Cultures

To understand the cultural dynamics around TikTok, it is useful to examine the growing body of literature that has examined the platform. Given the wide variety of content in the app, TikTok has been approached from many perspectives. Researchers have explored topics such as the spread of hate and radical political ideas (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2024), and the cultivation of connection, belonging, and identity formation among LGBTQ+ youth (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2023). Users employ TikTok to critique and respond to media representations of protests on mainstream news (Literat et al., 2023), and to engage in activism (Eriksson Krutrök & Åkerlund, 2023). Moreover, the platform functions as a primary source of information on areas such as reading (Merga, 2021) and health (Song et al., 2021).

TikTok affords a unique style of self-expression, wherein audio and video features are essential to creative expression, sociality, and virality (Zeng et al., 2021; Schellewald, 2021). Abidin and Kaye (2021) remarked on how the sensuous aura and memetic properties of audio and video enables users to recognise and engage with content. An example is the popular "put a finger down" trend, where content creators prompt users to identify with specific scenarios, promoting participation by creating relatable moments. Rettberg (2017) found that lip-syncing operates as a codified method to express affect, arguing that hand gestures and lip-syncing function in a similar way to text-based emojis, conveying affect and emphasising certain ideas without the need for spoken words. Users often participate in trends, challenges, stitches, and lip-sync videos to convey their messages and engage with broader communities. Vizcaino-Verdu and Abidin (2021) researched how audio challenges are appropriated differently by distinct groups and communities to enhance their sense of belonging.

These practices of using audio and video features are anchored in memetic and imitative processes on the platform. Zulli and Zulli (2022) described TikTok as a platform that is inherently memetic. As such, the affordances of the platform encourage a logic of imitation and replication that connects users. For instance, they use sounds and music to create stitches and duets, creating a form of sociality that Zulli and Zulli (2022) term "imitation publics". While these practices of

re(interpretation) and (re)use of content are central to TikTok as a platform. They are not monothematic. As Darvin (2022, p. 7) notes, TikTok is not a space simply for repetition, as users can participate in a trend "by inserting dissimilar semiotic elements in the video", thus not simply imitating. For Zulli and Zulli the use of audio and video connects users together, building on this premise, other researchers have explored TikTok as a platform for the construction of identities and collectivities.

From a sociological perspective, identity is not a fixed attribute. It is not an essence encapsulated within a person; rather, it emerges during social interaction in the context of societies. According to Stryker and Burke (2000), the self is organised into multiple parts or identities, each tied to specific aspects of the social structure. In this view, identity is constructed through the meanings available to people, and is shaped by the various structural contexts in which people live. For instance, a person might develop one identity if they work as a miner, another if they work as a doctor, another if they are a parent or are single and have no children. These meanings, in turn, allow people to act and navigate social life (Lamont, 2001).

With regard to TikTok, Bandhari and Bimo (2022) theorised that, compared to other social-media platforms, TikTok departs from the idea of the "networked self". They argued that on Instagram and Facebook, a user's identity is shaped by their connections with other users; on TikTok, by contrast, identity is shaped by interactions with TikTok's algorithm. Rather than depending on social networks, then, TikTok users engage in identity performances that are enacted through the content that appears on their FYP. Here we can return to the example from the beginning of this chapter: "TikTok thinks I'm a lesbian!". The task of the researcher is then to study how the user feels and perceives themselves in relation to the content on their FYP

Karizat et al. (2021) analysed this dynamic further by exploring how identities interact with algorithmic processes, arguing that users perceive their identities to be shaped, and in some cases suppressed, by TikTok. In their study they show that LGBTQ+ users feel that their identities are misrepresented or suppressed by the algorithm. In response, these users curate their feeds so as to reclaim control over their identities by aligning the content they see with their individual and collective identities. Similarly, Simpson and Semaan (2020) found that TikTok's FYP constructs contradictory identity spaces that support LGBTQ+ identity work and reaffirm LGBTQ+ identity but also create discomfort by only representing normative queer identities. Civila and Jaramillo-Dent (2022) studied how Moroccan–Spanish mixed couples performed their identities while navigating the ambivalences that come with managing them. In this process, cultural symbols and

meanings become less fixed as creators negotiate and represent their identities. Additionally, creators respond to stereotypes and clarify the merits of their religions in comments, balancing the opposing perspectives from Spanish and Moroccan societies. In this way, as Dyer and Abidin (2022) suggest, the performance of identities online is an open-ended practice that spans online and offline spaces, and is made possible through specific algorithmic affordances.

A close aspect linked to identity is the interplay between social learning, representations and roles, as individuals learn to embody certain roles through the representations existing in their social environment. One of the main tenets of sociology is that people occupy social positions with associated, socially sanctioned ways of being and acting. According to Turner (2001), social positions involve expectations about how to act, which are sanctioned by the rest of society and guide the individuals who occupy the position. Goffman (1959) introduced the concept of *impression management* to describe the work individuals do to present themselves to others in ways that they hope are socially acceptable. On a very basic level, some roles are linked to particular social positions. However, social roles as a concept have disappeared from sociological literature due to their strong association with Parsonian functionalist literature and the idea that they diminish the agency of people to negotiate how they act (Smyth, 2021). A better way of thinking about social learning is the idea of *collective representations*[12], which relate to common ways of conceiving, thinking about, and evaluating social reality (Spillman, 2020).

TikTok researchers have explored how the platform circulates collective representations of how people in different social positions act, or should act. For instance, Tirocchi and Taddeo (2024) analysed the #StayAtHomeGirlfriend trend to study enactments of gender roles. Their research, which focused on women choosing to stay home, showed that this trend is characterised by "women engaged in domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, relaxing, meditating and exercising, positioning themselves as 'girlfriends' who eschew formal employment in favour of relying on financial support from their male partners" (Tirocchi & Taddeo, 2024, p. 400). Rather than simply reproducing traditional gender roles, the authors noted a post-feminist, neoliberal twist in how female agency is articulated. These women are not just passive subjects, and express their empowerment through individualistic practices relating to consumption. Men are assigned an instrumental

[12] Collective representations are rooted in Durkheim's functionalism. However, over time, sociologists have reinterpreted and repurposed Durkheim's ideas, especially cultural sociology, to move away from structural determinism and allow more space for agency, relationality, and contestation.

function, while female agency is expressed through practices of bodily care and the attainment of individual wellbeing. TikTok therefore becomes a space where expressions of femininity are negotiated within the logics self-branding and algorithmic recommendations.

However, TikTok is a space not only for self-representation, but for the representation of other social groups. For example, Zeng and Abidin (2021) examined the #OkBoomer trend on TikTok, highlighting the memefication of generational discourse on TikTok and the ways in which young people combine the platform's affordances and collective representations, i.e., material and symbolic affirmations, to construct an image of Boomers as the *imagined other.* Hence, representations about Boomers, the generation of people born in the post-World War II baby boom serve as an anchor to legitimise the lifestyles of young TikTok users. Similarly, Stahl and Literat (2023) analysed how young people construct a sense of generational identity using comedy, music, and dances. They noted that Gen Z creators use playful ways to distinguish themselves from other generations, and perceive themselves as unwilling to accept inequalities by displaying their political activism and civic engagement.

Stahl and Literat (2023) also investigated how through its affordances, TikTok encourages users to come together around shared experiences, identities, and interests. As Fine (2012, p. 44) remarked in relation to the study of groups: "rather than by cognition or emotion alone, identities develop through ongoing and referential interaction with influential communities". TikTok does not seem to be an exception to this, as it is a space where through algorithmic engagement in the FYP users establish communities. Eriksson Krutrök (2021) showed that grieving people use TikTok to find communities that provide support and a feeling of belonging. These communities help users to experience grieving in ways that escape the social pressures of social networks, and provide alternative ways to manage feelings. As Eriksson Krutrök (2021, p. 9) states, "algorithms also create culture, and specifically, digital community practices which can, and sometimes does [sic], challenge societal norms".

Other scholarship emphasises how TikTok participates in the creation of communities relating to books, for example. Maddox and Gill (2023) rely on the concept of imagined communities to explain how creators and users relate to one another in *sides* of TikTok examining the case of #booktok. Sides describe when a user's FYP receives a high volume of similar content algorithmically selected, as well as the subsequent collectivities that form around this experience. They argue that TikTok curates attitudes toward objects with its algorithmic recommendations,

and simultaneously aligns with the users by reinforcing belonging within a community. In their example focused on books, when TikTok's algorithm promoted #booktok, it was excluding other items or identities that were not being recommended.

Similarly, Vizcaino-Verdú and Abidin (2023) observe that TikTok serves to strengthen teacher–student relationships; using TikTok, some teachers engage with students, (re)inscribing teacher–student relationships. Stein et al. (2022) discussed how doctors on TikTok present themselves not only as professional healthcare providers who share their knowledge and expertise, but as ordinary individuals. This dual presentation allows doctors to communicate with both other doctors and TikTok users, signifying their membership in the medical community. More importantly, it highlights how TikTok functions as a learning space, where medical information, and misinformation, can be shared in accessible ways. However, not all communities on TikTok promote positive contributions. The platform is also a space for harmful content, where hate communities can emerge and spread their messages. Weimann and Masri (2023) found that far-right terrorists are glorified on the app, and that there exist antisemitic trends in these communities: for example, a number of postings encouraging their followers to use filters like "big nose filter". In this case, a technical feature of the application is used in a harmful way. This reveals how affordances can also be appropriated in ways that promote hatred and abuse, and shows the wide spectrum of morality on the app: TikTok can form around positive content, but also around harmful, and racist values.

Of particular interest to this research is how identities, communities and representations are shaped through the FYP. Eriksson Krutrök (2021) observed that algorithmic recommendations play an important role in helping people to connect and interact through shared content, creating community entanglements and a sense of belonging on the platform. She introduced the idea of *algorithmic closeness* to describe how users' experience of grief is enabled by TikTok's algorithm. Abidin (2021) developed the concept of *refracted publics* to study how content creators and subcultural communities rely on specifically curated content to create specific groups, or subcommunities, to use Abidin's term. Refracted publics create rabbit-holes that are difficult to access or decode for outsiders. Abidin names these potential rabbit-holes as *silos.* Silos enable a particular type of sociality characterised by users' shared interests. They are rooted in specific codes, repertoires and understandings made possible by TikTok's features. Using the previous examples, there are teacher silos, medical silos, far-right silos, book silos and so on.

An important point to retain is that silos, (Abidin, 2021), sides (Maddox & Gill, 2023), or algorithmic closeness (Eriksson Krutrök, 2021) are at the centre of algorithmic logic on TikTok and the experience of the app. TikTok's recommender system directs users to niche communities (Gerbaudo, 2024), and without the interaction between users and algorithm, participation in these distinct spaces would not be possible. For example, when Zeng and Abidin (2021) discussed how certain TikTok users are amused by stereotypical representations of Boomers, we have to note the frequency and intensity of these representations depends on how users interact with the platform. It is through watching #OkBoomer TikTok content and liking videos that the platform's recommender system identifies users as being interested in this type of content. Therefore, silos would not emerge without the interactions with algorithms directing users toward particular meaning-making communities. The understanding of TikTok cultures, and how they contribute to the construction of identities, social learning, representations or community building, depends on these interactions with the algorithm. A useful starting point for exploring this dynamic is the concept of *algorithmic imaginaries*. The following section situates this study in relation to existing literature on algorithmic encounters and feedback loops, paying particular attention to Bucher's (2018) formulation of algorithmic imaginaries.

3.5 Algorithmic Encounters

The approach taken in this study can be classified alongside those used in the social sciences and critical algorithmic studies to study how people encounter and navigate digital technologies. This section introduces the concept of *algorithmic imaginaries* (Bucher, 2017; 2018) tracing first a set of related concepts: algorithmic awareness, knowledge, literacies, and folk theories that serve to understand how individuals make sense of algorithms. Furthermore, before delving into the concept of algorithmic imaginaries, I will first provide a brief overview of how algorithms have been studied in this interdisciplinary field that studies the social implications of digital technologies.

Approaches to study algorithms in social sciences and humanities can be loosely divided into two broad categories. The first of these includes studies that use computational methods to investigate the nature of algorithms and how they operate in the world. These approaches rely on digital methods to examine the production of data, undertake research, and use digital trace data to understand online behaviour

(Salganik, 2019). This approach is characterised by Rogers (2013) as *following the medium*, i.e. using the "native" ways that digital platforms generate data to organise information and study individuals' behaviour for research purposes. As people navigate digital platforms, they leave traces of their online activity; researchers use this to gain insights into online behaviour. For example, studies have investigated whether the existence of filter bubbles leads to greater political polarisation online (Bail, 2022), and enlisted bots to examine how algorithms organise cultural fields on music-streaming platforms such as Spotify (Eriksson et al., 2019).

If "following the medium" involves engaging in research from within, the second broad group of studies focuses on the contextual element of studying algorithms. This approach involves studying the situations in which people and algorithms meet, and the practices and discourses around their use. Some theoretical approaches have adopted a macro perspective on the impact of algorithms on society (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021). The idea of *algorithmic power* focuses on the power of computational systems to make populations and individuals knowable (Roberge & Seyfert, 2016) and the idea of algorithms as gatekeepers in the circulation of content, influencing which content people see and engage with (Beer, 2019). Other approaches have examined these dynamics through empirical studies on algorithms. Of particular interest is the work of Seaver (2017; 2019; 2023), who uses the notion of *algorithms as culture* to study the embeddedness of algorithms in cultural processes. In this approach algorithms are not merely technical objects, but exist through the practices, definitions, and understandings of both the developers who create them and the users who interact with them.

The first wave of critical algorithmic studies was particularly interested in opening the black box of algorithms to study the logics that drive their decision-making processes (Pasquale, 2015; Bucher, 2016). Scholars in this wave sought to analyse how algorithms operate, as a necessary first step in explaining their effects on society. However, corporations hide how algorithms work in order to protect their secrets from their competition and diffuse accountability. This has led to a pragmatic shift in research focus, with the inability to access algorithms leading to researchers studying the intersections where algorithms and people meet (Christin, 2020).

In this regard, and precisely because this thesis focuses on people's interactions with TikTok's algorithm, and how these interaction are embedded in the context of everyday life, I am particularly interested on research on the everyday assumptions and theories that people develop through their encounters with algorithms. People understand that algorithms are part of their everyday experiences, and as such

develop assumptions about them. These understandings are how users make sense of their activity, and foundational to how people interact with algorithms.

Initially, people develop varying degrees of *algorithmic awareness* in relation to how different activities are regulated by algorithmic systems (Gran et al., 2021). This awareness is important because those who are aware of the existence of algorithms hold an advantage, as they are better equipped to critically assess algorithmic outputs. Algorithmic awareness typically emerges through practical engagement. Eslami et al. (2015) showed how users' understandings of algorithms are formed through their use; the more a person uses a platform and interacts with an algorithmic system, the more aware the person becomes of its presence. Moreover, Espinoza-Rojas et al. (2023) found that individuals who use multiple platforms, and are therefore engaging with more algorithms, become more aware of the existence of algorithms compared to those who just use a single platform. In this sense, as more activities take place online, individuals are becoming more aware of the existence of algorithms in those spaces.

When it comes to TikTok, Siles et al. (2024) found five activities through which users express awareness of TikTok's algorithm. First, *managing expectations*. Users often approach TikTok with preconceived negative expectations that shape their openness to the platform. In this activity the awareness of the algorithm is low, or non-existent. Second, through *training* users integrate TikTok into their daily routines to adjust the algorithm to their preferences. Third, after some time, users achieve a satisfactory degree of *personalisation*, where they feel understood by the app when it comes to recommendations. Fourth, there are *oscillations* in the relevance or quality of recommendations that shape users' interpretation of algorithms. Content recommendations can feel repetitive or misaligned, which can generate doubt and disaffection. Finally, awareness of TikTok's algorithm is tied to the search for disconnection, as continuous dissatisfaction with it leads some users to the *rejection* of the app. These five activities do not have to be experienced linearly, but they describe processes through which users come to realise that TikTok's experience is organised around an algorithmic system. More importantly, when individuals are aware, they do not only perceive algorithms, but they also develop *algorithmic knowledge* about how algorithmic systems works. As noted by Cotter and Reisdorf (2020, p.747) "basic awareness provides a foundation on which to build an understanding of the criteria by which algorithms rank content."

Algorithmic knowledge refers to the beliefs users form about how algorithms operate, and how this knowledge influences their actions on a given platform. According to Cole (2024, p.2079), "algorithmic knowledge can be defined as the

awareness and understanding that there is a system that collects and processes one's information and behaviour to automatically tailor and recommend personalised content online." In other words, awareness that an algorithm is selecting and presenting information in a specific way leads users to speculate about how such systems work. For example, Hargittai et al. (2020) defined algorithmic skills as the ability of individuals to apply one's awareness and understanding of algorithms to effectively engage with them in their own benefit. Skills provide a "sense of how systems process information about users, and how they can and may use information they have about the user when they present content to said user" (Hargittai et al., p. 711). Building on this, as not every individual has the same level of knowledge and skills, this translates into differences in *algorithmic literacies* (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Neubaum, 2025; Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020). Gran et al. (2021) found that in Norway sociodemographic variables such as gender, education and age influence both individuals' awareness of algorithms and their level of knowledge about them. In this sense, differences in literacies might point to a new source of digital divide (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014), as disparities in knowledge of algorithms, and the advantages that come with this knowledge, can generate inequalities in a world increasingly shaped by algorithmic processes.

Cotter (2024) identifies two perspectives in how researchers have approached the development of algorithmic knowledge. In doing so, she opposes "know-that" and "know-how" to how people learn of algorithms. On one hand, some studies have focused on how users develop operational and propositional facts about algorithms. In this sense, the "know-that" involves reflection on how users think algorithms work, and the underlying causes of these processes. On the other hand, other studies have considered how knowledge of algorithms relies on learning by doing. Here the focus is on how people "know-how" to accomplish different objectives when they engage with algorithmic systems. For instance, that posting at certain times increases visibility. Cotter's aim is to open a third way that integrates both "know-that" and "know-how" approaches to define a practical orientation toward algorithms that takes into account how propositions about them are negotiated in practice in specific social contexts. In her analysis of BreadTubers on YouTube, a community of left-wing content creators, she found that any discussion in the community about how algorithms work, and how to increase visibility of left-wing content was not antagonised to the community's shared values of solidarity and equity. Therefore, Cotter (2024, p.2146) proposes that practical knowledge "captures how people locate and configure algorithms within their social worlds and orient themselves to them accordingly."

At the same time, algorithmic knowledge is limited as individuals generally have incomplete information about how algorithms actually work. As a result, what they develop are informal theories about how these systems work. Some studies have studied how individuals interpret algorithmic systems based on everyday encounters through the notion of *folk theories* about algorithms. Folk theories are collections of beliefs about how systems work. As Ytre-Arne and Moe (2021, p.810) remark, "the perceptions that inform folk theories can be fleeting, inconsistent, only partly acknowledged or articulated, based on limited or misleading knowledge, and revised and developed over time in interchange with a range of experiences." Despite not being formal or precise, they are essential to how users make sense when interacting in algorithmic environments because they organise experience, guide learning, and influence behaviour on platforms.

Moreover, folk theories are contextual and adaptive, as they are created to make sense of events on platforms. DeVito et al. (2017) studied the emergence of folk theories in light of perceived changes in Twitter's feed governance, focusing on how users participated in the #RIPTwitter hashtag to express dissatisfaction with such changes. They found two main groups of folk theories: *operational folk theories,* in which users tried to make sense how algorithms work, and *abstract folk theories,* where users expressed a "sense" that an algorithm was affecting their experience without specifying how they operate. Expanding on this, DeVito (2021) develops a perspective on folk theories that takes into account changes in platform conditions. She identifies four types of folk understandings of algorithms: First, folk theorisations can take form of *basic awareness* where users know that algorithms are involved in how platforms function, but they cannot state how. Second, informal knowledge can revolve around *causal power,* where users recognise that algorithms are responsible for creating specific outcomes, but they lack an understanding of how those outcomes are generated. Third, folk understandings can take form of m*echanistic fragments*, in which users mention specific factors or signals they think algorithms use to weight their outputs. Finally, we have *mechanistic ordering,* here users articulate a more systematic logic or sequence behind algorithmic behaviour as they identify "multiple specific factors/datapoints used to make decisions, but also the causal pathways within this set of factors in the form of either complex rankings/weightings or literal assertion of decision-making pathways." (DeVito (2021, p.15). These four types of folk theorisations represent a progression of users' understandings based on perceived changes in the platform.

While DeVito's (2021) main aim is to connect folk theories to the development and improvement of algorithmic literacies, our interest is in how folk theories

support sense-making about algorithms. Rather than being passive recipients of algorithmic outputs, users attempt to make sense of how these systems shape digital environments. Eslami et al. (2016) show how folk theories are used by users to manifest and correct perceived instances of bias in algorithmic curation in social media platforms. The engagement with algorithmic systems relies on interpretive frames develop through knowledge, allowing users to reflect on how platforms function and what shapes the outcomes they experience. As Siles et al. (2020; p.11) assert, "each folk theory posits that agency is distributed differently between users and technologies such as algorithms." Hence, this distribution varies depending on users' roles and intentions on different platforms.

For example, content creators develop everyday understandings of algorithms and try to implement strategies to achieve visibility on platforms (Cotter, 2019). Bishop (2019) coined the term *algorithmic gossip* to account for the informal theories that content creators develop, share, and deploy to make sense of the behaviour of platforms and algorithms. Gossip serves to mitigate the lack of information. In this way, content creators use knowledge to navigate platform affordances and regulations, which often appear to be obscure and allocate visibility in ways that are perceived to be inconsistent and biased (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Similarly, Savolainen (2022) develops the concept of *algorithmic folklore* to describe how beliefs and stories about algorithmic governance are transmitted informally between content creators amid concerns of perceived shadow banning practices by platforms. However, Savolainen remarks how algorithmic folklore, "does not necessarily correlate with the ability to effectively address or subvert algorithmic logics" (Savolainen, 2022, p.1097). In this sense, she counteracts the idea that developing stories and beliefs about algorithmic systems necessarily increases users' agency to act effectively upon them. Instead, she found that algorithmic systems in Instagram, YouTube and TikTok were experienced as "being prone to error, capricious and tyrannical." (Savolainen, 2022, p.1103). This highlights how algorithmic folklore is used to make sense of situations where users aim for control but are left with frustration and dependence on the unknown conditions imposed by algorithmic systems.

A similar conceptual approach to study how people make sense of algorithms, but with a focus on how users' interpretive frames are enacted through affective engagements with algorithms is Bucher's (2017; 2018; 2019) notion of *algorithmic imaginaries*. Imaginaries describe "the way[s] in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible" (Bucher, 2017, p. 31). When people engage with algorithms, they do not "experience the

mathematical recipe as such but, rather, the moods, affects and sensations that the algorithm helps to generate" (Bucher, 2017, p. 32). These understandings are based on users' own subjective experiences of experiencing algorithms, rather than on technical knowledge. As Bucher (2018, p.117) remarks, algorithms constrain and enable action through "the perceptions and imaginations that emerge in situated encounters between people and algorithms". In this sense, imaginaries are essential in the way users make sense of these technologies as they become a lens through which individuals anticipate and interpret algorithmic encounters. In other words, they allow users to speculate on how algorithms act, or should act, drawing on expectations based on their experiences with algorithms.

A feature of imaginaries is that they situate understandings of algorithms not only within cognitive frameworks, but also within an affective terrain. By emphasizing the affective dimensions of algorithmic encounters, subjective experiences with algorithms lead to a wide range of emotions, from curiosity to frustration. As Bucher (2018) highlights, in the attempt to make algorithms more intelligible, affects orient attention, sustain engagement, and shape the interpretive frameworks through which users engage with opaque algorithmic systems. For example, Bucher (2017) found that users' algorithmic awareness on Facebook was triggered by moments of surprise or consternation when an algorithmic recommendation misrepresented how a given user perceived themselves. The affective encounters that individuals have with algorithms in social media platforms highlight that the power of algorithms is not exercised through direct constraints. Instead, in this case, feelings of being misrepresented create emotions such as frustration or curiosity, which shape how people think about and react to the platform. Lomborg and Kapsch (2020) found that when algorithms act as people expect, they operate in the background without triggering any significant reaction. However, they generate strong negative responses when people perceive algorithms misaligned. In this way, strong affective encounters might lead people to reflect on how algorithms shape experiences.

Other scholars like Ruckenstein (2023) and Swart (2021), while not explicitly theorising algorithmic imaginaries, have also emphasised the importance of affects on how people make sense of algorithms and shape users' engagements with algorithms. Swart (2021) describes how users develop a vague understanding of algorithms through their everyday interactions with algorithms. The experience of algorithms is contingent on three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. First, the cognitive dimension alludes to how people make sense of algorithms. Second, the affective dimension indicates how algorithms make people feel, as the way algorithmic actions make people feel affects how people interact with

algorithms. Finally, the behavioural dimension represents the interactions with algorithms. Again, from this perspective, Swart emphasises how people are not passive when they interact with algorithms; they know that they are participating in encountering algorithmically organised materials. The idea I want to emphasise and explore in this thesis is that these three dimensions, through feedback loops, guide how people act on the platforms. However, they not only guide people but also become datafied as responses within algorithmic systems, which in turn guide future encounters.

Ruckenstein (2023) explores the affective texture of algorithmic encounters through the lens of *structures of feeling*. Her approach allows her to posit the ambivalence that demarcates algorithms, as they can make people feel a wide range of affective registers and emotions: from fear and anxieties to excitement. Emphasising the importance of feeling, Ruckenstein relies on the affective to highlight how "knowing about algorithms" is generated through embodied knowledge. Algorithms, in this way, should not be reduced to one fixed thing or category. Instead, their effects are relational as different feelings depend on the intersections and situations where human and algorithmic agencies meet. This condition of ambivalence is expressed through friction, understood both as an inherent factor constitutive and constituted by the constant back and forth in human algorithm relations. Drawing on Tsing's (2005) idea of friction, Ruckenstein presents how friction unfolds in moments of irritation, discomfort, or misalignment, when algorithms fail to correctly interpret users. These moments should not be seen as simple failures in algorithmic prediction, rather they serve as productive spaces of lived experience for meaning-making, revealing the complexity and affective texture of everyday interactions with algorithmic systems. In this way, Ruckenstein highlights how "attending to affective infrastructure suggests that we explore the generative nature of algorithmic relations" i.e. "how algorithmic culture comes into being in and through the connections people make and maintain" (Ruckenstein, 2023, p. 22).

The focus on affect establishes the basis for reconsidering agency as something that emerges and is negotiated through affectively charged interactions between humans and algorithmic systems. Affective dynamics highlight how agency is not simply possessed or restricted, but negotiated through the ways users imagine, interpret, and emotionally respond to algorithmic systems. Attending to algorithmic imaginaries enables us to frame how algorithmic and human agency intertwine. It is within imaginaries that individuals negotiate both their own capacity to act, as well as the framework within which algorithms act in a specific context. Insofar as

it is possible, users negotiate with the algorithm, respond affectively to its activity, and work with and against it to obtain what they want. Bucher (2018, p. 94) notes how users can play an active role in their interactions with algorithmic systems. Through feedback loops "algorithms do not just do things to people, people also do things to algorithms." Users assert their own interpretive agency while also attributing agency to the algorithm, treating it as an active force that organizes their experience. However, for Bucher (2018) the important question for researchers is not "where" agency is located but "when". By asking "when" something happens or when agency is made more or less available, algorithmic agency is not simply about what is done, but also about when it is applied. The question is not what people or algorithms do, but when they are able to do it. agency as dynamic, temporally situated, and co-constructed in algorithmic encounters. This perspective invites us to think of agency as dynamic, temporally situated, and co-constructed through chains of algorithmic encounters. In this way, as Siles (2023) highlights, algorithmic power is not given but rather constantly negotiated through practices.

In a similar vein, Savolainen and Ruckenstein (2024) conceptualise agency focusing on autonomy in human–algorithm relations. In considering people's autonomy, they emphasise how individuals are not simply autonomous or dependent but rather negotiate their capacity to act through algorithmic relations. Their model highlights the idea that agency is about synchronization, alignment, but also friction and disruption. This conceptualisation of agency is similar to my own framework of algorithmic interaction ritual chains, where repeated encounters with TikTok's algorithm shape and are shaped by affect, anticipation, and platform dynamics.

Finally, Lupinacci (2021, 2024a) remarks the phenomenological dimension of algorithmic encounters, how these interactions enact particular experiential registers in relation to the perceived temporalities that individuals and algorithms produce. Therefore, agency in contingent to the temporalities that algorithmic systems enable and enact. In other words, a sense of perpetually being connected. Bucher (2020) explores how platforms generate temporal structures that are not based in real-time, but in what she labels the logic of right-in-time. As such, content becomes meaningful not because it reflects live events, but because it appears opportunely organised by algorithmic systems. The capacity to orchestrate when something relevant appears contributes to the production of new temporalities shaped by data flows, engagement patterns, and platform algorithms.

Although I do not adopt the framework of algorithmic imaginaries in my own analysis, it remains a foundational effort to link affect to algorithmic experience. Building on previous work, this thesis provides a slightly different contribution.

Where Bucher (2018) focused on algorithmic imaginaries, i.e. how users make sense of algorithmic systems, this thesis considers algorithmic interaction as a ritualised feedback loop, or what I label *algorithmic interaction rituals*. For that purpose, the research combines ideas about algorithmic imaginaries with uses of *interaction ritual theory* to study online spaces. The research combines ideas about algorithmic imaginaries with IRT, which was developed by Collins (2004), to study online spaces. This theory facilitates the study of feedback loops through algorithmic encounters, and considers the intricate relationship between meaning-making and social action, grounding this relationship in feelings and emotions. The work of Johannessen (2023), Anker Naxo and Strandell (2020), von Scheve (2014), and Maloney (2013), among others, has been crucial in informing the adapting of the theory to the study of algorithmic encounters. I propose the model of AIR for studying algorithmic encounters; this is introduced in Chapter Four, and grounded in my analysis particularly in Chapter Seven.

By engaging with IRT to study the interactions between users and algorithms, along with how the resulting feedback loops are sustained in affective material, I also utilise the lens of cultural sociology. This field focuses on understanding meaning-making processes and the symbolic capacity of human beings to represent and act upon social reality (Spillman, 2020). By applying IRT, this PhD thesis intersects cultural sociology and the sociology of emotions. Scholars in the latter field have been cautious about applying IRT beyond its traditional scope of face-to-face interactions between human actors. However, by combining IRT with proven research on algorithmic imaginaries, this research captures the feelings that underpin dynamic feedback loops. As users engage with algorithms, they contribute to shaping outputs. In focusing on this, I explore the concept of feedback loops. Therefore, algorithmic encounters both reflect and shape how people experience and express emotions such as grief, joy, rage, and joy, and show how personal emotions and collective representations are influenced by a platform's continuous circulation of content. As such, the power of recommender systems lies in their ability to generate affective responses in users. These affective impacts prompt users to engage with content, resulting in a continuous feedback loop between the user and the algorithm. Finally, this research contributes to the study of algorithmic encounters by proposing a novel way of framing algorithmic interactions. Algorithmic encounters are an important topic of study for researchers, and this research adds a sociological perspective by focusing on how collective processes and social action are constructed in the digital age. Specifically, it examines how content circulation and feedback loops are negotiated by users through the interplay

of cognition and affect, as bodily experience, thereby revealing the sociotechnical underpinnings of meaning-making and action. As algorithms and generative AI have become increasingly embedded in our daily lives, this thesis seeks to contribute by providing a framework to study algorithmic encounters effectively.

4 Interaction Ritual Theory and Recommender Systems

Early sociologists such as Durkheim, Simmel, Tarde, and Merrell Lynd acknowledged the power of emotions in relation to understanding social relations and collective processes. Even Marx addressed how passions and emotions shape the nature of social dynamics; for him, they were essential to energising and directing human activity (Weyher, 2012). While many classical sociologists recognised the importance of emotions for understanding social action and the social and moral order of society (Barbalet, 1998; Shilling, 2002), their significance was overlooked during a large period of the twentieth century, as there was a tendency among sociologists to privilege cognition at the expense of emotions when theorising about action and the self (Abrutyn & Zhang, 2024; Barbalet, 2002). Slowly, however, this started to change, and today scholars are increasingly using emotions and affect to explain intersubjectivity and how individuals bind to one another (Stets & Turner, 2008). Thus, to understand processes of attention and action on TikTok, and how people interact with TikTok's algorithm, we need a complementary perspective that considers how bodies, sensations, affect, and emotions interact with the development of representations and the establishing of shared symbolic universes.

One proven sociological theory that has been used to study how interaction interactions are anchored in both feelings and mental representations is IRT, which was developed by the sociologist Randall Collins (2004). Building on the work of Durkheim and Goffman, Collins argued that individuals seek out and repeat those interactions that enhance their positive feelings. At the core of this theory is the idea that successful interactions are the glue that sustains most social processes. The aim of this chapter is to use this principle to establish the foundations for the framework used to develop the AIR model. If scrolling is an embodied practice, in which individuals interact with TikTok's algorithm, then we need to understand how to attend human-algorithm interactions considering their features. At the same time, the chapter intends to articulate how vibes, symbolic activity, and attention serve as

entry points for understanding how people interact with TikTok's recommender system through their FYPs.

First, the chapter outlines the importance of understanding social interactions and the implications of conceptualising them as rituals. As Summer-Effler (2026, p. 135) observes "ritual theories assert that focused interaction, which these theories refer to as ritual, is at the heart of all social dynamics." A good point of departure is the work of Durkheim, who theorised about the relationship between emotions, social action, and collective processes, alongside Goffman's contribution to the concept of interaction order. Second, the chapter presents the main tenets of Collins's (2004) interaction ritual theory. I argue that this theory can enhance our understanding of human-algorithms interactions by capturing moments of attention, affective flow, and meaning in the context of content circulation in social media platform. Third, adapting Collins's (2004) theory to the study of algorithmic recommendations presents some challenges, as IRT primarily focuses on face-to-face interactions and human communication. However, existing research has applied this theory to online communication and interactions involving non-humans. The focus of traditional approaches to IRT on physical co-presence would seem to render IRT irrelevant for algorithmic studies. However, I argue that in the case of TikTok, the interaction between user and algorithm through a smartphone screen can be used as a substitute for the physical cues of human-to-human communication. By exploring human-algorithm interaction in this way, it is possible to analyse the most significant characteristics of algorithmic interactions and feedback loops. To study these, processes I will introduce AIR.

The final part of the chapter addresses the relationship between affect, algorithmic imaginaries, and IRT. This section begins by discussing the concepts of affect and emotions. Although these two concepts initially may appear to be similar, they relate to very different research traditions, with distinct ontological and epistemic positions. Separating affect from emotions is not a trivial matter, since when a user scrolls TikTok, what catches their attention is not usually grounded in an emotion *per se*. A user might be angry or happy, but stopping to contemplate a TikTok begins with a sense of [or vibe]. Therefore, it is necessary to define affect and emotions, and the debates surrounding them, which will help me to explain why this work prioritises affect through the notion of vibes. This perspective provides a better understanding of what captures users' attention while they are scrolling. Finally, the chapter concludes by proposing a way to study processes of attention, examining how vibes help to frame what captures the attention of users and consequently create *affective atmospheres* on TikTok.

4.1 Social Interactions, Rituals and Collective Processes

Before delving into the particular qualities of IRT, it is important to consider the relationship between social interactions and collective processes. This discussion is important because this chapter ultimately aims to support the study of social interactions in algorithmic contexts. Therefore, discussing why interactions are constitutive of "the social" provides the framework to approach feedback loops on platforms like TikTok as ritualised forms of user–algorithm interaction. This framing also articulates how interactions are negotiated through sociotechnical means, while also beginning to open a path for thinking about how TikTok produces shared meanings and affective engagements through something as seemingly mundane as scrolling.

According to Cerulo (2009), social interactions are the main unit of analysis when taking a micro-sociological perspective. Social interactions are situations in which the actions and reactions of individuals are influenced and (re)organised in relation to the presence of other individuals. Therefore, analytical interest in them relates to what happens when people interact and why interactions unfold in certain ways. Turner (1988) noted that a focus on social interactions does not translate into a study of behaviour *per se*, as this would be the subject of psychology. Instead, sociology's interest in interactions relates to how the dynamics of situations are socially organised. This is exemplified by what Goffman (1983) referred to as *interaction order*, which highlights how everyday interactions help to maintain the social and moral order of society through social norms and scripts enacted within interactions. The interaction order can be used to explore the rules and expectations that guide how individuals treat other people, and what they are expected to do and say in the presence of others — in other words, what is considered to be appropriate in a given situation. From this perspective, interactions are a matter of identifying regularities, patterns, and sequences that emerge across situations (Emirbayer, 1997). By examining these dynamics, it is possible to understand the (re)production and transformation of "the social" as it is continuously produced through the interplay of actors interacting in social contexts.

Goffman (1961b) identified two types of interactions: *focused interactions* and *unfocused interactions.* Focused interactions are those interactions in which there is mutual engagement with purpose. The term "focused" highlights that the attention of the persons involved in the interaction is directed towards the same topic or activity. An example of focused interaction is a teacher and a student participating

in class,[13] or two friends talking to each other in a café. Unfocused interactions are encounters in which individuals meet but without directly relating to each other. Individuals can become aware of each other, yet they remain engaged in different activities as they do not share the focus of attention. In fact, individuals involved on the encounter may be unaware of their interaction. To illustrate unfocused interactions, Goffman provided the example of pedestrians who avoid colliding in a street crossing by intuitively following social norms and spatial etiquette, despite not directly engaging with one another.

The distinction between focused and unfocused interactions can be unnecessarily dichotomous. As Bergmann and Peräkylä (2024, p. 301) remark: "although Goffman's juxtaposition of focused and unfocused interaction suggests a sharp contrast, in reality there is not a fixed distinction between attention and inattention. People are able to a certain degree to scale their attention." Nevertheless, by introducing this distinction, Goffman highlighted that interactions are structured by socially shared conventions that regulate how individuals allocate and express attention in the presence of others.

Social interactions involve the negotiation of meanings, roles, expectations, norms, and emotional orientations. As Turner (1988) asserts, interactions are sustained by the interplay of symbolic, material, and physiological elements. Through these processes, individuals establish and (in)validate shared meanings, whether in stable groups (Fine, 2012), fleeting encounters, or broader forms of digital participation. Furthermore, as Summers-Effler (2006) notes, an important characteristic to understand social interactions is their capacity to form patterns that repeat over time. For her, interactions in social life have a repetitive character that is characterised by a cycle of interaction emotions symbols interaction, which feed back into further interactions. These patterns, she argues, "constitute the most basic structural force that organises society." (Summers-Effler, 2006, p. 135)

The discussion of norms, expectations, and repeated interactions points to the ritualistic nature of social interaction. Ritualised action reflects the commitment of different individuals and groups to particular forms of social organisation, as they seek to maintain expectations to act in accordance with what is socially accepted within different groups, organizations or entities (Tavory & Hoynes, 2025). Here, the understanding of rituals goes beyond religious or ceremonial acts but refers to patterned, repeated interactions that generate shared affective states and sustain social order. For example, Goffman (1961b) observed how everyday interactions

[13] In this example I am assuming that the student is engaged, interested in the topic and paying attention in class.

also have a moral character that constrains how individuals act. Rather than focusing only on formal ceremonies traditionally associated with rituals, Goffman illustrated how interactions, even brief encounters like greetings, are ritualised. For him, social situations become a space of mutual monitoring governed by cultural norms that arises when two or more individuals are in each other's presence and that governs how individuals should behave (Goffman, 1961b). In this way, rituals should be understood as a set of norms and rules that apply to everyday interactions, expressed through sequences of action and behaviour. They entail repeated, patterned, and symbolically meaningful interactions that helps to produce or reinforce social order, group solidarity, and shared meaning. It is through the observation of rituals that it becomes intelligible how the back and forth processes established between individuals through interactions are involved in maintaining social order in everyday life (Summers-Effler, 2006).

While Goffman helps to establish the arguments for this thesis of how every day interactions are ritualised, the depths of the arguments cannot be explained without Durkheim's theory on how the internalisation of symbols, rules and expectations occurs within rituals through the release of emotions.

Despite his functionalist commitments, a way for us in thinking about how social interactions constitute collective processes is the sociology of Emile Durkheim, whose work significantly influenced Collins. Durkheim offers critical insights into how shared symbols, emotions, and collective practices bind individuals together. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]), Durkheim developed a theory about how shared cultural systems are internalised within each individual. He argued that in "primitive" societies, totemism creates a symbolic universe that binds people together and sustains the social order in social groups. Religion was "first and foremost a system of ideas by means of which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it" (Durkheim, 1995 [1912], p. 227). When Durkheim uses the word "religion" he does so in the sense of its original meaning, the Latin word *religare*, which means "to bind".[14] In Durkheim's theory, symbols are repositories of collective values that construct social solidarities and mark the foundations of social structure:

> Society cannot make its influence felt unless it is in action, and it is not in action unless the individuals who compose it are assembled together and act in common. It is by common action that it takes consciousness of itself and

[14] This also emphasises what is being bound; using the word with the prefix "re-" captures the dynamism of the process, where something is bound over and over again.

> realises its position; it is before all else an active co-operation. The collective ideas and sentiments are even possible only owing to these exterior movements which symbolize them, as we have established. Then it is action which dominates the religious life, because of the mere fact that it is society which is its source. (Durkheim, 1995 [1912], p465–6).

Rituals and their symbols create collective feelings and ideas that materialise the symbolic universes used to categorise social life. Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 114) coined the term *symbolic universe* to refer to the "matrix of all socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings". Symbolic universes are the shared frameworks that bind together and give coherence to societies and groups, and confer legitimacy to individual biographies. Shared symbolic systems mediate how humans perceive, experience, and construct reality, and impose categories of perception by which supra-individual cultural processes create meaning and organise society (DiMaggio, 1997). Hence, perception is a culturally constructed process wherein conventions, traditions, norms, and enculturation processes shape how we see the world (Friedman, 2016). Everything that we perceive to be meaningful can thus only be grasped through a synthetic act of symbolic formation.

Durkheim's works has been seminal to study how understandings of the world are embodied by collective representations that express collective realities. In other words, symbolic capacity is activated through ritual practices. This is to say that the symbolic universe of a society and/or a group is incorporated in individuals through the rituals that bind and synchronise the schemes that people use to navigate social life. Through Durkheim we learn about the dual function of symbols, which bind people together but are also reminders of the (in-)group unity when people are not gathered together. As such, rituals have the aim of making participants develop moral unity, and represent a cultural logic that both constrains and enables action (Emirbayer, 1996). As Mast (2006, p. 118) puts it, collectivities are anchored to the world via cultural systems that render social interactions sensible by structuring lived experiences into coded discourses, myths, genres, and narratives.

In relation to the emotional dimension of social life, Durkheim argued that social interactions have an emotional grounding (Emirbayer, 1996). His theory described feelings and emotions as forces that pull the attention and perception of ritual participants towards collective representations. Symbols do not just represent things; they are emotional repositories in themselves. "The feelings a thing arouses in us are spontaneously transmitted to the symbol that represents it" (Durkheim, 1995 [1912], p. 221). Durkheim asks, in relation to the idea of an individual in a

totemic society participating in a religious ritual: “What does he see around him? What is available to his senses and attracts his attention is the multitude of totemic images surrounding him. He sees the *waninga* and the *nurtunja,* symbols of the sacred beings.” (Durkheim, 1995 [1912], p. 222) Thus, these symbols store sacred meanings, legitimating categories that can be used to understand social life in the totemic society.

In the above-quoted passage, meaning is linked to affective flows, which intoxicate the senses and intensify emotions. “The image goes on calling forth and recalling those emotions even after the assembly is over” (Durkheim, 1995 [1912], p. 222). In this way, there will always be a tendency to focus on sacred symbols, but not just due to the mental representations that participants in rituals possess regarding the symbols. Participants focus their attention on representations that are charged with outbursts of affect and emotions, by means of which “the emotions felt are kept perpetually alive and fresh” (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]).

To understand how the social order is internalised by people, Durkheim developed the concept of collective effervescence. This describes how emotional currents shared by assembled bodies create the potential for the development of the same symbolic universe. Through this, the social order is incorporated into individuals via the collective stimulation of emotions, encompassed by symbols. When the attention of multiple individuals is focused on the same meaningful rituals and symbols, there is a shared state of emotional arousal that is related to the intensification of emotions. Emotional entrainment, which is achieved through the synchronisation of the bodies of those participating in a ritual, leads to collective effervescence and collective consciousness. Therefore, collective effervescence is the base of “the construction of moral orders mediated by collectivities of embodied individuals both cognitively and emotionally engaged with their social world” (Shilling & Mellor, 1998, p. 194). For Shilling and Mellor (2011), the sociology of Durkheim conceptualised the shared symbolic universe, and how individuals are bound together through bodies that have learned, along with culturally specific forms of engaging with the world. We can thus conclude that in rituals, bodily acts are not only automatic responses of the body to the emotional energy of situations; rather, “they encompass a learned, culturally specific, and habitual distribution of attention to ‘inner’ processes of thought, feeling, and perception towards the world” (Scheer, 2012, p. 200). As a result, the affective flows and emotions felt through the body facilitate the possibility of normative patterns of recognition, action, and interaction.

Durkheim helps us to advance the argument that social action is a phenomenon that is sustained on both mental representations and emotions. Therefore, corporeal states and perception are socially contingent, and meaning is attributed in the interaction between body and mind:

> In sum, the various ideals that he has elaborated with others - all these go on living in his consciousness. And by the emotions that are attached to them in his consciousness, by the very special influence they have, they clearly distinguish themselves from the ordinary impressions that his daily dealings with external things make upon him" (Durkheim, 1995 [1912], p. 266).

Although in his work, Durkheim did not provide a clear articulation between cognition and emotions. Nevertheless, he set the foundations for a sociological explanation of how the articulation between cognition and emotional states creates collective effervescence through symbols and practices, which convey the moral and social order of a society. For Durkheim emotions were very important because "without symbols social feelings can only have a precarious existence" and although Durkheim insists on the importance of representation for understanding action, he emphasises that emotions activate both the will and the understanding of ritual participants (Durkheim, 1995[1912], p.330 in Stedman Jones, 2001).

If we apply this perspective to human-algorithm interactions, TikTok's algorithm can thus be understood to be an agent that is constantly engaged in the circulation of symbols and meanings. In negotiating TikToks on their FYPs, users either detach from or create a deeper embedding within feedback loops in order to establish particular courses of action. To articulate how such patterns of interaction produce meaning and emotional engagement, the following section addresses IRT, as a preliminary step to introducing the AIR model.

4.2 Interaction Ritual Theory

IRT is a conceptual framework that was developed by Collins to study how interactions lead to the constitution of social life (Collins, 2004). It examines how collective representations and social solidarity are created and maintained through the emotional forces that bind people together. To achieve this, Collins combined insights from Durkheim, who analysed rituals as sites of collective effervescence

filled with symbolism, with Goffman's symbolic interactionist approach in order to study everyday rituals and the inner dynamics of social situations.

The theory departs from the study of situations as the unit of analysis. This emphasis was important for Collins, as he felt that treating individuals as coherent, fixed entities misrepresented what individuals are and how society is created, arguing instead that it is more fruitful to analyse situations because they entail patterns, rules, motivations, and symbolic representations that shape how individuals act. With this move his aim was twofold: first, to highlight the socially patterned nature of momentary encounters, and second, to overcome the debate between structure and agency by proposing a radical microsociology. In this way, Collins posited that individuals do not exist outside of the situations that they encounter in their lives, and that individuals navigate social life through chains of interaction rituals, wherein the social is constantly being (re)produced and (re)enacted (Collins, 1988). This point will be essential in the next section, where I explain why this theory is useful for studying algorithmic encounters.

For Collins a ritual is not primarily a formal ceremony, but an everyday encounter that can be as banal as a simple conversation.[15] Building on this foundation, Collins draws on Goffman's understanding of the ritual: "a perfunctory, conventionalized act through which an individual portrays his respect and regard for some object of ultimate value to that object of ultimate value or to its stand-in" (Goffman, 1971, p. 62). Collins extends this definition to encompass emotions as the background for rituals. Hence, a ritual is any momentary encounter in which participants mutually focus their emotions and create connections between themselves. In this framework, emotions are materials from which social relations and institutions are constructed (Collins, 2004).

IRT proposes a model that explains how rituals succeed or fail to generate and stabilise group membership and social solidarity. Successful interaction rituals fulfil the following four characteristics, or ingredients (Figure 4.1):

[15] Collins has been criticised for seeing rituals everywhere; a criticism that he himself has addressed claiming that despite being a sinner for ritualising almost everything, it does not reduce the analytical capacity of his theory (2004, p. 15). See also Fine (2005) for a comment on it.

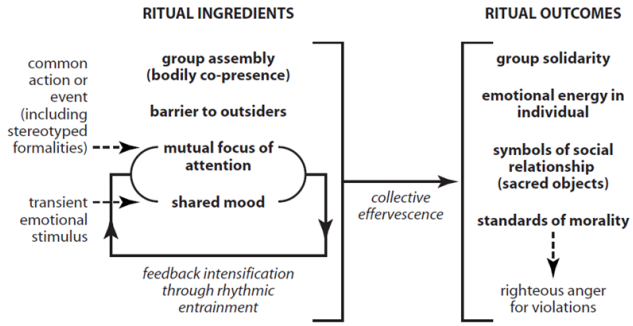

Figure 4.1 Interaction ritual Source: Collins, R. (2004). Interaction ritual chains. In Interaction ritual chains. Princeton university press. Reproduced for academic purposes.

First, two or more persons must be physically assembled in the same space. Second, there must be boundaries erected against outsiders, so that participants know who is included in and excluded from the ritual. Third, participants must focus their attention on the same object or activity. Fourth, the participants must share a common mood or emotional experience (Collins, 2004, p. 48). The ritual is likely to fail if any of these characteristics are absent; when all are present, the ritual is successful, and generates emotional energy and symbols, creating long-term membership and adherence in relation to a situation. Successful interaction rituals create emotional entrainment between participants, and positive emotions that bind people together (Henry, 2021). IRT has been used to describe various social situations. For instance, Collins (2004) applied it to understand solidarity and status recognition among smokers, while Cottingham (2012) examined the solidarity produced among sports fans watching their favourite teams. Pagis (2015) explored interaction dynamics in Vipassana meditation, and Heider and Warner (2010) demonstrated that sacred harp singing produces social solidarity, despite the lack of ideological agreement among participants.

The key element of Collins's analysis is that the dynamics of group experience are inherently *emotional*. "Each situation generates a corresponding level of emotional energy and a degree of symbolic loading, ranging between high and low" (Collins, 1993, p. 208). Thus, chains of successful interaction rituals generate group solidarity, feelings of membership, emotional energy in individuals, and common standards of morality (Collins, 2004, p. 49). Positive emotional energy is responsible for creating social solidarity as it makes individuals feel like they belong to a group, and allows group members to recognise others as co-members who share the same attributes. In other words, it is the glue that binds people together to create

shared symbolic universes. Moreover, positive emotional energy guides the range of choices that individuals can make (Collins, 1993). Consequently, individuals tend to prefer and repeat those interactions that create more emotional energy, and avoid interactions that are more likely to produce indifference or negative emotions. Since individuals prefer rituals that generate a more significant positive emotion, Collins grounds social action in emotional motivation. Importantly, his theory differs from Durkheim's in that it focuses on the repetition of interaction. Collins does not consider the existence of collective phenomena, such as collective effervescence, to be necessary in order for emotional energy to emerge, instead he argues that emotional energy can emerge through a dyadic relationship (von Scheve, 2012).

Emotional energy also enhances the development of moral frameworks. Participants in a ritual develop shared standards of morality that relate to the ritual and the sacred objects that they use. They also react negatively to outsiders who transgress rules relating to the ritual symbols (Collins, 2020). As a result, these standards of morality help the participants to regulate their actions (Shilling & Mellor, 1998). The last consequence of successful interaction rituals is the creation of symbols and objects in which the meanings of the ritual are embedded. Those symbols serve to reinforce the identities of group members and motivate them to act according to what they take to be the group's values (Collins, 2004). Collective symbols can include any element the group considers to be relevant to their identity: ideas, words, slogans, clothing items, or gestures can all be sacred objects that signify group belonging (Collins, 2020). These symbols become signifiers of membership, even when the group is not physically assembled, allowing the participants to extend their sense of belonging without the need for physical gatherings.

It is important to note that, for Collins, emotional energy is a different concept to emotion: the former is "a long-term emotional tone that is durable from situation to situation" (Collins, 1990, quoted in Summers-Effler, 2002, p. 42). An interaction ritual such as Sunday mass, for example, may evoke feelings of joy or catharsis. However, emotional energy is not tied to a specific experience on a particular day, as it can also relate to the positive feelings one anticipates when attending the event again. We can use also the example of friendship to illustrate this: two friends might feel joy or amusement while sharing a coffee and a laugh, but emotional energy refers to the motivation and eagerness to repeat this encounter, and the sense of being emotionally recharged after such interactions.

Collins's theory has received some criticism. A full review of these critiques is beyond the scope of this thesis, so I will focus on the most relevant arguments for

my case. A particularly relevant criticism comes from Kemper (2011), who argued that Collins overemphasises the role of emotions in rituals, and that status-power relations better explain why emotions are created in the first instance. According to Kemper, Collins treats emotions as social cement, i.e., a binding force. However, although rituals involve emotions, they are not in themselves simply products of rituals, but the consequence of the relational meaning of the practices of the ritual. From this perspective, the underlying status–power relations among participants produce different levels of emotional intensity.

Another important critique comes from Boyns and Luery (2015), who problematise Collin's focus on positive emotional energy, arguing that the concept lacks clear operationalisation and empirical measurement. For them, it is too one-dimensional a concept. Additionally, they argue that Collins does not demonstrate how negative emotional energy operates, nor discuss its consequences for interaction rituals. This latter point is important because negative emotional energy "frequently results in negative consequences, creating enduring and potent feelings of disaffiliation and animosity" that bind people together (Boyns & Luery, 2015, p. 165). In other words, people can establish solidarity by displaying negative feelings towards other groups. For example, social solidarity within a group can be expressed not only through positive feelings of membership, but through anger or hatred directed towards other groups. A FC Barcelona supporter can strengthen their sense of belonging by going to the stadium, wearing the team's shirt and celebrating goals, but they can also do so by reacting negatively when Real Madrid wins a trophy or beats them at a derby.

Collins's theory has also been criticised for being overly general. Wellman Jr et al. (2014) argue against Collin's claim that excluding outsiders is a necessary condition for establishing a mutual focus of attention, a common mood, and collective effervescence. In their study of megachurches in the United States of America, they concluded that "having few barriers to ritual participation actually facilitates successful rituals by increasing the number of participants, thereby amplifying the collective effervescence of the experience" (2014, p. 654). These findings suggest that rituals are too complex to be reduced to a single, universal model, as Collins intended, because the outcomes and dynamics of rituals can vary significantly. Finally, Heider and Warner (2010) pointed out that participants in successful rituals may have emotional responses that differ. Their study of sacred harp singing found that the same song evoked different reactions: a person who has recently lost a loved one might experience grief, while another who has recovered from a serious illness may feel joy. This highlights the need for a more nuanced

understanding of emotional experiences in rituals. Thus, while Collins's model provides valuable insights that can be applied social interactions, it should be applied flexibly rather than rigidly, as also argued by Tutenges (2022).

4.3 Can We Apply IRT for Algorithms?

The conditions under which IRT was initially developed have changed. Today, it is impossible to understand what an individual is without understanding the many algorithmically mediated situations a person encounters in their everyday life. Smartphones and computers are part of the everyday, prompting researchers to debate whether IRT can be extended into a digitally mediated world. This debate centres on two main arguments. First, IRT requires the physical copresence of participants, raising the question of whether people can synchronise their bodies when they are not gathered together in the same physical space. Second, participants in interaction rituals must be human (see Johannessen, 2023 for a review of this debate). In light of these points, this thesis explores whether recommender systems, which constantly adapt to the choices made by users, can be considered to be participants in interaction rituals.

Collins argues for the more traditional approach to the use of IRT: that people can only experience flows of positive emotional energy if they are physically in the same place (Collins, 2020). Online communication cannot replace face-to-face encounters and, as such, cannot be a source of emotional energy. In the same way, non-physical encounters cannot replicate the emotional energy and social solidarity generated in face-to-face encounters, as they lack the ability to produce the mutual focus and rhythmic coordination enabled by bodies being together in physical space. Collins (2020) uses the example of the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For him, phenomena such as "Zoom fatigue" are examples of online communication leaving people feeling drained, rather than recharged. "If people are deprived of embodied interactions, we can expect they will be more depressed, less energetic, feel less solidarity with other people, become more anxious, distrustful, and sometimes hostile" (Collins, 2020, p. 496). Similarly, Vandenberg (2022) found that the experience of watching a livestream of a large music event failed to replicate the collective effervescence experienced by those there in person, showing the importance of physical copresence in creating emotional energy. While Vandenberg does not dispute the existence of online interaction rituals, she circumscribes them

for small events not large, big events. This approach concludes that human bodies in physical proximity to one another are necessary for rituals to be successful.

While the traditional approach to IRT argues that face-to-face interactions are essential for emotional energy, recent studies challenge this by exploring how digital interactions can also produce successful interaction rituals and emotional energy. For example, DiMaggio et al. (2018) found that real-time video communication is able to create successful interaction rituals, despite the lack of physical copresence. This is on the basis that the participants in the ritual project the dynamics of physical copresence through online communication. People use culturally shared frameworks that lead them to imagine and project shared expectations, and interpretive frameworks that guide their actions and help them to interpret emotional cues when interacting with other users online, without being physically present. DiMaggio (1997) defined how people act based on culturally embedded shared frameworks, which constitute the logics of action and assumptions about social life. With regard to online communication, expectations and anticipations regarding how people behave compensate for the lack of physical presence in online communication by providing similar social cues. However, in their study DiMaggio et al. (2018) were cautious about the extent of online IRT due to the limitations of their research framework.[16]

Other researchers have used IRT to describe the nature of online communication. For example, Anker Nexø and Strandell (2020) examined how online interactions, in the form of synchronisation of emoji usage, produced emotional energy on dating apps. Users interpreted different usages of emojis as indicative of a person's character qualities. When there was an attunement in emoji usage patterns between interacting users it was perceived as a sign of romantic interest, which lead to positive emotional energy. In this way, the synchronisation of emoji usage between two users became a means of assessing romantic compatibility. Similar to DiMaggio et al. (2018), the authors found that shared cultural frameworks, i.e. using emojis, and the ability to decode these signifiers compensated for the lack of physical presence. Maloney (2013) studied online "pro-ana" communities in online forums, the members of which encourage anorexia and eating disorders as lifestyle choices. Maloney (2013) argued that the online identities of members of pro-ana communities affect and are affected by their offline identities and behaviours,

[16] Interestingly, Collins moved from a total rejection of the idea of digitally mediated interaction rituals in 2011 to a more nuanced, hierarchical view in 2020, conceding that digitally mediated interaction rituals can produce some degree of emotional energy. However, this was supposedly because they serve and reinforce face-to-face rituals.

showing that the two are continuous and should not be divided. Jodén and Strandell (2021) found that the key to the success of streamers on online platforms is their capacity to create emotional energy through inclusive interaction rituals. Finally, contrasting with previous studies that used text analysis, Mizrahi-Werner et al. (2024) studied interaction rituals among players of the video game World of Warcraft (WoW). WoW players use avatars in a manner similar to face-to-face interaction, leading players to synchronise their behaviour and participate in successful rituals.

These studies challenge the assumptions embedded in Collins's traditional view of IRT, particularly regarding the lack of physical copresence in online interactions. Collins's traditional view on IRT conflates two arguments. First, it assumes that online interactions are replacing face-to-face encounters, while simultaneously equating online and physical interactions. Dismissing online interactions because they do not hold the same conditions as face-to-face interactions overlooks exploring the emotional gradient that supports online engagement. The argument to be made is not whether online interactions substitute face-to-face interactions, or hold the same ontological status, which obviously they do not, but about how digital technologies enable or constrain the structure and possibilities of social interactions. The key question is whether in a world increasingly mediated by digital technologies, online or algorithmic interactions can generate emotional energy. To illustrate how digitally mediated interactions can produce emotional energy, not in the same way as if two persons were interaction face-to-face, but in their own distinctive form, I will use the example of sex relations.

Sex is a type of interaction ritual that Collins has paid particular attention because according to him sex is one of the most intense rituals. For Collins, two lovers having sex lose themselves to the passions of pleasure and develop emotional energy because the skin of their bodies touches, their breathing synchronises, and (if successful) the rhythmic movements of their bodies ecstatically conclude the ritual (Collins, 2004). Neustaedter and Greenberg (2012) studied how couples used videochats in long-distance relationships. They found that sexual intimacy was difficult to achieve without physical touch, as in online sexual encounters, but that people in long-distance relationships still used virtual hugging, nudity and sex as an extension of intimacy. Of the fourteen participants in the research only two engaged in regular online sex acts, and for one of the couples "cybersex became so important that it was necessary to see the remote partner to be sexually satisfied." (Neustaedter and Greenberg, p. 8). Therefore, at least for one couple, online sex was a source of positive emotional energy. Caesar (2023, p. 104) studied sexting, i.e., the practices

of "sending and receiving of sexual images, and exchange of explicit texts, as a way to flirt and form intimacy with partners" among young people. She found that sexting is viewed differently according to age. Young adolescents found it fun, while older youth used it to express romantic feelings and establish romantic intimacy. In this way, digitally mediated technology enables a form of communication that, although not equivalent to face-to-face sexual practices, is nonetheless capable of generating positive feelings. Finally, Kaufman et al. (2024) found that more than half of online sex cam users establish some emotional connection with online sex workers. In this sense, it is important to study the specificities of online interaction rituals and the intersections of online and offline rituals (DiMaggio et al., 2018).

Second, studies that have rejected the capacity of online interactions to generate emotional energy have developed their research design framing online activity as merely a substitute for face-to-face interaction. In doing so, they consistently find that online interactions are less likely to produce emotional energy and social solidarity. Using Collins's (2020) analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is certainly valid to note that online interactions during the pandemic often generated reports of fatigue and dissatisfaction. However, it is important not to overlook the specific context in which such interactions took place. During lockdowns, people used online communication as an alternative to complete social isolation. These interactions were often underpinned by the unfulfilled desire to see others in person. However, they have not specifically studied interaction rituals from the perspective of activities that can only take place online.

For this reason, I share Campos-Castillo and Hitlin's (2013, p. 182) reconceptualisation of copresence: they argue that, with the expansion of digital technologies, copresence "detaches from a strict analysis of human actors who are physically collocated". Being copresent thus involves a perception of entrainment with other people, wherein an individual senses the presence of others subjectively, rather than physically. Therefore, the question is: in what instances can online activities produce emotional energy, when they are not perceived as substitutes for face-to-face encounters?

The second argument concerns the (in)ability of digitally mediated interactions to produce successful rituals and emotional energy when one of the actors is non-human. Research in fields such as media and communication studies, human–computer interaction, digital anthropology, and STS has already started to unpack the ways in which people interact both through and with technology (Johannessen, 2023; Airoldi, 2021).

A body of scholarship to support the idea that human–algorithm interactions are possible can be found in Science and Technology Studies (STS). STS have long studied interactions between humans and non-humans (see e.g. Callon, 1984; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). From this perspective, materiality has the ability to make people act in ways beyond the intentions for which they were originally designed. A popular perspective that draws on STS is Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Primarily developed by Latour, Callon and Law, ANT studies the associations established between human and non-human actors (Latour, 2005). Both human and non-human actors form assemblages in which they become actants. A sociotechnical assemblage is a heterogeneous system composed of diverse actants. The web of relations that composes an assemblage determines the usages and meanings circulating within it, and reorganises the various elements that are connected between them (Bousquet, 2014). Non-humans "might authorise, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on" (Latour, 2005, p. 72). An assemblage perspective has the objective to look across the set of interdependencies between actors to understand what elements and relations the assemblage mobilises and with what purpose (Ananny and Crawford, 2018).

This perspective radically revised human perspectives on agency as ANT opposes the ontological separation between the social, and the material. However, from an ANT perspective, the agency of algorithms, or any other actant, lies in the assemblage, which determines what operations do occur and which do not, therefore, as such, algorithms do not have agency outside the assemblages in which they partake with other actants (Neyland, 2016).

While ANT has been challenged from many perspectives (see Hacking, 1999; Cerulo, 2009), as Airoldi (2021, p. 3) argues, ANT contains a fruitful idea for the social sciences: namely "that what we call social life is nothing but the socio-material product of heterogeneous relations, involving humans as well as non-humans." Analytically there is much value in considering the agentic properties of materiality. As McDonnel (2023) suggests, when we frame material objects as more than passive carriers of meaning that are subordinated to people's attributions, we can regard them as contingent participants in meaning-making and social action (McDonnell, 2023). This perspective is relevant in the context of algorithmic systems, which affect people's perceptions, and enable certain types of objects to evoke a sense of intersubjectivity in humans, encouraging individuals to respond to such entities in fundamentally social ways (Cerulo, 2009). My position is that even if humans and algorithms possess agentic capacities in the sense that their actions

have consequences; however, human agency cannot be equated with algorithmic agency. As Rose and Jones (2005, p.27) indicate "human agents have purposes and forms of awareness that machines do not." Similarly, Suchman (2007, p. 269) asserts the "agencies of such artifacts do not inhere in the prescriptions themselves but rely on the skilled practices that bring them into alignment with a given case at hand" (p. 269). Suchman notes that the agency of algorithms emerges through entanglements that must acknowledge, rather than erase, the culturally and historically constituted different opportunities for agency of humans and non-humans.

A way to think about agency is through the work of Bucher (2018). Although she anchors her conception of agency in Latour and ANT's relational ontology, she introduces a formal distinction that will help us to think about the agency of algorithms. Bucher argues that what matters is not where agency is located, i.e., who has the power to act upon something, but rather when, in certain situations, different actions are mobilised. In this sense, we can think of agency not as an intrinsic property of algorithms, but rather as something that emerges through their integration into situated sociotechnical practices (Suchman, 2020). From this perspective, algorithmic agency is based on a relational and situated understanding of algorithmic interactions.

Furthermore, Cerulo (2011) presents another interesting avenue for thinking about the agency of algorithms. For her, a social shift has occurred in recent years, whereas people before did not recognise the agency of non-humans, there is now an increasing acceptance of interactions with non-humans. The increasing presence of algorithms and bots in people's everyday life has resulted in that "non-humans are viewed as quite central to the process [social interaction] … and quite equal to humans in their legitimacy." (Cerulo, 2011, p. 786). In this sense, the agency of algorithms lies in the recognition of these systems as legitimate algorithmic agents. If we return to Chapter Three, concepts such as algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2018), or autonomous agency (Savolainen & Ruckenstein, 2024) have shown how people anticipate the actions of algorithms, and also engage in reflexive and adjustive practices in response to algorithmic systems and their imagined effects.

To situate this debate within the frame of social interactionism, from this perspective, social action is rooted in what is meaningful to actors (Blumer, 1969). Individuals use their symbolic capacity to make sense of situations, and situations are structured by institutionalised meanings and expectations. Spaces can structure agency, although never outside the interactions that actors inhabit (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, when we study interactions, it is adequate to study the structures of

interactions, even when they involve humans and objects (Fine, 1993; Cohen, 1989). Moreover, non-humans participate in situations both as agents and as structurers of situations, shaping how human action unfolds. According to Cohen (1989), people engage meaningfully with non-humans through symbolic projection, anticipation, and interpretation. An important element for such interaction to occur is the presumption of mutuality on the part of humans.

From a traditionalist IRT perspective, the key rejection of non-human actors relates to whether non-humans can emotionally synchronise with human actors and produce emotional energy. von Scheve (2014) used IRT to explore the role of robots that provide social support and affect. Using insights from psychology and the sociology of emotions, von Scheve theorised that non-human actors can produce strong ritual outcomes in participants. The mechanism behind this is the ability of these actors to provide emotional gratifications and fulfil certain transactional needs. If artificial companions succeed in creating these conditions, human actors will tend to seek interactions with them. For von Scheve, the impression that an artefact is emotionally responsive (communicated via e.g. facial or verbal expressions) can generate outcomes in the form of emotional energy. Similarly, Skjuve et al. (2021) established that people can develop emotional connections with chatbots by empirically studying how users develop emotional connections with Replika, an AI companion. The key element for the researchers was trust: the participants developed trust in the AI chatbot after concerns about how the company stored data had been resolved. Most interestingly, however, this trust was established because they felt that the AI was sincerely interested in learning about their thoughts and feelings. This emotional gratification led to disclosure of personal and intimate information. Similarly, Laestadius et al. (2024) found emotional underpinnings to relationships between humans and AI bots. The development of emotions relied on the different roles and purposes that users saw in their relationships with AI, and the emotional dynamics of dependence established.

Finally, although traditionalists reject the role of technologies, face-to-face rituals involving bodily presence are permeated by technologies that are often overlooked by researchers using IRT. As Johannessen (2023, p. 97) argues, IRT studies often fail to account for "the role of drugs for effervescence at rave parties (Vandenberg et al., 2021), the importance of stadium design for the atmosphere at football matches (Hill et al., 2021), or the use of cameras to project images of audience members on large screens in megachurches (Wellman Jr. et al., 2014)". For Johannessen, co-present bodily rituals are permeated by technologies that often go unnoticed, yet all of them contribute to the production of ritual outcomes in

mundane and often taken-for-granted ways. In this sense, this should prompt further reflection on the role of materiality in participating in interaction ritual theory (IRT).

All things considered, IRT can contribute to the study of feedback loops. If sociology's job is to explain under what circumstances interactions are socially and culturally shaped, it is crucial to consider how algorithmic feedback loops mediate this action. While there is an undeniable tension between IRT and materiality studies, acknowledging the role of algorithms in interactions in digital spaces provides a more refined understanding of the relationship between technology and encounters in digital spaces (Johannessen, 2023). Furthermore, in this research users do not equate nor project human qualities and feelings onto algorithmic agents, as in the case of the Replika AI discussed above. Regardless, combining IRT, algorithmic interaction, and non-human actors highlights the evolving nature of social interactions in a technology-mediated society.

I thus propose a model for studying algorithmic encounters: algorithmic interaction ritual *(*AIR). The model is similar to Collins's model, but has several unique elements due to the unique qualities of interactions between humans and algorithms:

1) Situational copresence.
2) Boundaries to outsiders.
3) Mutual focus of attention.
4) Synchronisation of moods on the FYP, and pressure towards social solidarity.

The unique qualities and specificities of the model will be analysed in depth in Chapter Seven, where I analyse the scrolling experiences of young TikTok users. While it could be useful to describe the different parts of the model here, in this part of the thesis, it would then appear that AIR is solely the product of a deductive effort — that I had prior a strong theoretical assumption that IRT could be helpful for studying algorithmic encounters. The various steps and unique qualities of each element of the rituals have been incorporated into the model by means of scrolling with and listening to the research participants. Thus, I felt that it is most helpful to introduce the model here, and delve deeper into it in the empirical chapters, where I aim to describe how AIR helps us to study the interaction dynamics between users and algorithmic agents on TikTok. T

The reader will notice that in my attempt to extend my own model based on Collins's theory, I do not address the concept of collective effervescence. The concept's has a strong emphasis on intersubjectivity, which makes it inapplicable to

algorithmic interaction rituals. This is not to say that people do not experience emotions in response to what the algorithm does (Ruckenstein, 2023). However, incorporating the concept would undermine the ontological and epistemic conditions of this type of ritual.

4.4 Affect and Emotions

In the mid-1990s, *the affective turn* in the social sciences and humanities revived interest in the concept of *affect* as a central element for understanding human experience and social action. Affect, or affect theory, is particularly relevant in the study of digital spaces (see e.g. Bucher, 2017; Hautea et al., 2021). When users scroll through their feeds on TikTok, they are immersed in a constant stream of TikToks; as such, users generally make split-second decisions regarding whether TikToks are worthy of their attention. In this sense, affect is a relevant theoretical framework for studying those moments of attention.

The renewed interest in affect has been paralleled with a new wave of sociological studies that have recast the role of *emotions* in explaining social action (Barbalet, 2001; Bericat, 2016). However, there is a lack of consensus on how affect and emotions are defined, and even whether they should be used together (Avner et al., 2023). To understand scrolling practices on TikTok, it is necessary to use the concept of affect to examine what draws users' attention. At the same time, choosing affect also presents two main challenges. First, affect theory has tended to exclude sociological concerns, and has left sociology — and more specifically the sociology of emotions and the body — unsure about how to use affect theory (Barnwell, 2018; Abrutyn, 2025). In choosing between affect and emotions, or affect theory and the sociology of emotions, one must choose between very different scholarly traditions, with very different theoretical and ontological points of view. To build a better understanding I will discuss what each concept — affect and emotions — can contribute, and how they have been employed in research. Second, a significant challenge emerges in how to articulate affect within IRT. To bridge the gap between affect theory and IRT, I build upon the work of Barnwell (2018), which in turn draws on Durkheim's concept of social currents. The next section, *4.5 Attention, Vibes and Affective Atmospheres*, will discuss the relationship between vibes, attention, and affective atmospheres as a way to frame the circulation of content.

There are multiple definitions of affect (see Wetherell (2012) for a review). The most popular use of the term in the humanities and social sciences is rooted in

philosophy and cultural studies (Massumi, 2002; Tomkins, 2014), and conceives of affect as biological, pre-discursive, pre-cognitive, and pre-personal. In contrast, emotions are psychosocial, conscious, social, and discursive (Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2008). Affect is thus a dynamic force that operates beneath or before emotions, energising bodies, and relates to the intensity of experiences; it is bodily preparation for action, adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of experience (Shouse, 2005). "Affect" thus refers to embodied experience, and is tied to the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected. As such, it relates to the flows of intensity that circulate between bodies. Yet, Wetherell (2012) cautions against reproducing the idea that affect is biological and unconscious and emotions are conscious, reflective, social, and cultural. The articulation of affect as separate from emotions promotes false dichotomies between the mind and the body, and between cognitive and autonomic processes. As Pile (2010, p. 17) notes, "affect as excess" divides "affect from thought and thought from its representatives. In so doing, it constructs affect as a non-representational object." However, "it cannot be known, grasped, or made intelligible", rendering it opaque and difficult to research.

Wetherell (2012) has led efforts to develop a theory that allows affect to be studied as a practice. Her concept of affective practices draws attention to the entanglement of embodied states and meaning-making, and the roles of routine and habit. For her, patterns of affect can be more or less fixed, highly repetitive, and pervasive, and convey feelings of being unstoppable or determined, inevitability, or urgency (Wetherell et al., 2020). Affect is not a preconscious force but a performative, practical accomplishment which mobilises the ongoing senses of being in the world (Wetherell, 2012). It is created by body-selves acting in relational ways (Burkitt, 2014). For Wetherell (2015) there are no clear boundaries between physical affect and meaning-making processes: "Rather, very complicated and mostly seamless feedbacks occur between accounts, interpretations, body states, further interpretations, further body states, etc. in recognisable flowing and changing episodes" (Wetherell, p. 152). In this way, affect originates within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts, and is the matrix that explains how an object or situation impacts a person (Koskinen, 2024). Whereas Massumi privileges affects as non-representational, I follow Wetherell in conceptualising affect as patterned, social, and context-bound, which is more appropriate for interpreting an algorithmic environment like TikTok.

When we talk about affect, we denote the potential of bodies to affect and to be affected by external circumstances (Schmitz & Eckert, 2022). Focusing on affect allows us to examine how TikTok's recommender system affects users, thereby

guiding their initial engagement with content. In this way, affect is the gateway to interactions on TikTok, allowing for an immediate response to content such as cats and dances, along with more polarising content. When users scroll on TikTok, they generally do not reflect on the content that appears on their FYPs; as a result, affect is perfect for understanding these moments. Everyday language now includes terms such as "mindscrolling" and "doomscrolling", which describe how users allow content to flow past them without active thought, highlighting the affective nature of their engagement. Furthermore, while the sociology of emotions has traditionally focused only on human interactions, studies of affect have explored how bodies and materiality interact, with a particular emphasis on how materiality has the potential to affect the bodies of those involved in encounters (Seyfert, 2012).

As an initial attempt, I articulate affect following von Scheve (2018). Affect is a continuous and bodily mode of being that is implicated in feelings and emotions, in the sense that one is moved and prompted to act by someone or something else. Therefore, affect leads to feelings and emotions. By applying the lens of affect to study feedback loops on TikTok, we can expand our understanding of social life (Barnwell, 2018; Threadgold, 2020; Koskinen, 2024) and enrich our study of the practices and feedback loops of TikTok.

While affect and emotions are deeply intertwined, emotions have a distinctive quality in how they relate to social action. The main mission of the sociology of emotions is to address the misconception that emotions lie inside the self. Emotions are complex relational phenomena, and ways of relating to others and the world (Burkitt, 2014). They are not universal, biologically fixed responses to external stimuli that are identical across all humans and societies. Instead, they possess an inherently intersubjective nature, and are influenced by social and cultural contexts that set the possibilities for subjective experiences (Hochschild, 2008). If affects refer to positive and negative evaluations — to liking or disliking an object, behaviour, or idea — emotions can be viewed as culturally delineated feelings or affects (Thoits, 1989). Unlike affects, emotions are episodic and can be categorised, reflecting their more structured nature (Turner, 2007). They represent the structures of feeling that provide meaning to our experience of the world. Thus, although emotions are tied to particular bodily feelings and our reflexive consciousness of them, they would not make sense without the specific relational contexts and situations in which they emerge, forming our interconnection with other people and things (Burkitt, 2014). In conclusion, emotions rely on an affective core, which gives an affective tone to emotions in relating to the world (Kringelbach & Berridge, 2017).

In this discussion, extending von Scheve's (2018) sociological understanding of affect; he argues that while emotions often capitalise on brief, intense outbursts in subjective experience, affect reflects a more general, ubiquitous, and embodied mode of being. Affect, therefore, is a relational aspect that is closely tied to feelings and emotions, as it reflects how individuals are moved and prompted to act by external forces — whether these forces are exerted by others or by one's surroundings (Burkitt, 2014). Contrasting with the categoric and episodic character of emotions, affect represents a continuous and bodily mode of being in the world. While affect is involved in emotions, it is a broader, more fundamental category that is not conceptually restricted by the episodic and categorical nature of emotions (von Scheve, 2018). As a way of interpretation, affect is the sensing body capturing the world it encounters around itself. The distinction between affect and emotion is contested within both the human and biological sciences (Stark, 2019).

Abrutyn (2025) criticised sociology's continuing reliance on the Cartesian distinction between mind and body. By dismissing what is non-representational or pre-conscious, sociology overlooks affect as a fundamental source of motivation for action. Abrutyn rejects this dualism, arguing in favour of incorporating affect so as to be able to consider how it makes people sensitive to the environment and objects around them through social conditioning. On the other hand, a key sociological critique of affect theory is that it overemphasises the individual as a starting point in affective processes. In doing so, social structures and meaning are ignored, and thus so too is the broader social and cultural context in which affect is shaped and expressed.

Barnwell (2018) has precisely developed an interpretation of affect grounded in social processes. She revisited Durkheim's concept of *social currents*[17] to explore how affect can be understood as a collective, social force rather than an individual phenomenon. Durkheim argued that while moral rules, dogmas, and laws shape social action, individual actions cannot be fully understood based on these, and that collective emotional forces also play a significant role in shaping social action. He noted that at gatherings there is often excitement, indignation, or pity that does not originate in the private consciousness (Durkheim, 1895).[18] Barnwell builds on this notion to suggest that the origins of collective conscience or social facts lie in the

[17] "Courant sociaux" in French.

[18] In french: "dans une assemblée, les grands mouvements d'enthousiasme, d'indignation, de pitié qui se produisent, n'ont pour lieu d'origine aucune conscience particulière. Ils viennent à chacun de nous du dehors et sont susceptibles de nous entraîner malgré nous." (1895, p. 55).

capacity of individuals to be affectively aroused by social situations. In other words, the emotions experienced in collective rituals have a beginning in the ability of crowds to attune to the affectivity underpinning a situation. Social currents are the intensities or energies that circulate within a group — feelings of excitement, tension, or anticipation. Barnwell's (2018, p. 29) conception of affect suggests that it can be pre-personal but not pre-social, because "perception and sense(s) are already part of a social system rather than the point at which the social coding of affect begins". For Barnwell (2018), then, contemporary definitions of affect, as a force that pulls our attention and perception, resonate with early sociological accounts of collective agency.

Although they lie outside the scope of this research, studies of online affective contagions have established that synchronisation of affective states can occur without the need for in-person interactions. Kramer et al.'s (2014) famous large-scale contagion experiment on Facebook examined how emotions expressed by some users influenced the affective states of others. The study found that when users encountered fewer positive expressions, people created less positive content and more negative content. Conversely, when users were exposed to more positive posts in their feeds, they tended to post and like more positive content. Guadagno et al. (2013) demonstrated that when social media users experience strong emotional reactions to videos, they are more likely to share them. Chmiel et al. (2011) used sentiment analysis to study message boards and found that affect plays an important role in shaping interactions between members of online communities, potentially leading to the emergence of collective emotions.

Utilising affect as a framework can offer valuable insights that can be used to develop a nuanced sociological understanding of algorithmic interaction rituals on TikTok. A key ingredient of IRT is the shared focus of attention of participants during an interaction. Collins's theory assumes that there is some form of more or less automatic or involuntary transmission of shared focus of attention, but the mechanism by which people come to focus their attention on the same object is, in my view, taken for granted. Collins (2004, p. 80) did not expand on the affective patterns that lead to shared attention; if anything, attention for him is cognitive, and relies on mental representations. This idea that attention has cognitive underpinnings is striking, because Collins's work is full of references to how people sense social atmospheres. For instance "the momentary sense of solidarity may become quite strong, insofar as the crowd takes part in a collective action—clapping, cheering, booing." to "being in a crowd gives some sense of being" (2004, p. 82). ow then do participants establish shared attention? Do they use mental

representations to define these sensing experiences, or are sensing and representing enmeshed in each other? This point is particularly critical when studying digital environments, because people scrolling make decisions very fast.

So, understanding what people pay attention to based solely on descriptions in purely cognitive terms does not seem to provide enough information to explain why a user enjoys a TikTok with "Gigi and Romi", two cats who live together but have not yet cuddled, for example. Including affective practices when unpacking how people scroll opens up for the study of collective processes in digital spaces.

4.5 Attention, Vibes and Affective Atmospheres

Affect is an important concept for studying TikTok feedback loops, yet incorporating it into research presents a challenge relating to the difficulty of studying and capturing it (Barnwell, 2018). To articulate affect, and examine how affective states such as indifference and engagement drive the attention of users to relevant content, I take inspiration from Lupinacci's (2024b) conception of *vibes* and *moods*. By using vibes, rather than affect more broadly, it is possible to analyse how users on TikTok allocate their attention to specific pieces of content from the constant stream circulating on the platform.

Attention has become a growing topic of interest in relation to the role of digital technologies in society (Pedersen et al., 2021; Vaswani et al., 2017). From a psychological point of view, human attention is sustained on limited resources, and an abundance of information creates in individuals the need to allocate attention efficiently (Simon, 1986). However, attention depends on how individuals perceive and feel about their surroundings, as well as the meaning-making activities that mediate how individuals represent the world. In this sense, studying attention is relevant because, above all, attention is a social process, wherein discerning what is relevant and irrelevant is an intersubjective, culturally embedded phenomenon (Zerubavel, 2015). Vibes are thus the entry point for understanding what captures the attention of TikTok users, and why people stop scrolling and choose to engage with particular TikToks.

Vibes are the affective tones that people use to make sense of and evaluate their environments. The word is an abbreviation of "vibration", which has its origins in the Latin "vibratio", signifying "brandishing", "shakings" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). The concept of vibes began to be incorporated into everyday language through popular culture in the 1960s, where it was used to refer to the

vibrations that music transmitted to listeners (Zhou, 2024). While the concept has today been appropriated and commodified by capitalist logic, it was closely associated with countercultural underground culture in the 1980s and 1990s in the USA. During this period, vibes were understood as "that form of energy that collapses the boundaries between individual and collective musical experience" (Garcia, 2020, p. 28).

As a concept, vibes are a combination of symbolic, aesthetic, contextual, and taste-related elements (Brown et al., 2024), which are combined with the sensations that people receive from their surroundings. Vibes are moods, atmospheres, collective feelings, or personal dispositions (Garcia, 2020), and encompass a double logic that reflects both how people experience a particular space and how that space was constructed to evoke a particular experience. People evaluate the vibe of a place, person, object, or piece of content in order to determine whether it aligns with their aesthetic, affective, or stylistic expectations. Therefore, vibes are intersubjective, because spaces and objects also possess vibes; these, in turn, are used to ascertain the qualities of persons and objects (Witek, 2019).

The term has strong roots in the music and arts scene, and is often used in descriptions of parties, raves, and clubs. In his ethnographic study of the experiences of Filipino-American DJs, Wang (2015) highlighted the importance of vibes for interpreting the affective experience of a space, as well as producing and reinforcing shared group identities and collective representations among Filipino-Americans. Wang described how DJs use the word vibe to make sense of the energy of the dance floor. The DJ's goal is to get everyone "locked in," in other words, make the vibe of the dance floor resemble an experience of collective effervescence. But as Wang points out, vibes are not unidirectional, DJ's have the power to define the vibe, but at the same time, the crowd also influences the vibe, if they disapprove the vibe they can leave the dance floor and kill the vibe. In this way, vibes work not only as a decoding mechanism, but as a collective process of meaning-making; they are not restricted to individuals, as they rely on collective experiences and definitions. The term helps to interpret sensations by using affective meanings developed within particular social and cultural frameworks (Miles, 2023). Furthermore, vibes possess the quality of resonance, as they help people to resonate with particular spaces, collectives, people, or objects by aligning people with desired environments. Resonance involves active engagement between individuals and the objects of vibes, causing the former to become malleable and able to transform situations, persons, and objects such that they meet particular definitions. In this way, vibes

and their resonances propel social action through the interactions that they encourage (McDonnell et al., 2017).

While vibes are not used to examine the total range of possible affects, they allow us to explore the relationship between affect and meaning. More importantly, the shift to vibes means that affects are not floating forces; they appear as a result of the discursive practices of sensing individuals. Similar to the idea of affective-discursive practices that Wetherell (2012) proposed, vibes allow us to develop a shared knowledge and understanding of the ways in which people make sense of their sensing experiences. For Wetherell et al. (2015), the study of affective-discursive practices allows patterned forms of action that articulate, mobilise, and organise affect alongside discourse to be identified. These practices combine the embodied affective experience of an event with the process of meaning-making, thereby overcoming the distinction between affect and emotion.[19] By examining vibes, it is possible to explore the affective dynamics that capture the attention of TikTok users and the ways in which their affective states lead them to scroll in search of particular vibes.

Vibes are closely connected with the idea of *affective atmospheres*. Similar to vibes, affective atmospheres describe the role of space in conveying certain affective meanings. This concept is introduced here to account for how users respond not only to individual pieces of content but also to the broader affective tone of the digital environments they navigate. Affective atmospheres provide the structural backdrop, while vibes reflect subjective, situated interpretations of those atmospheres. Andersson (2009) introduced the idea of affective atmospheres into cultural geography to account for the emotional and sensory experience of a specific environment. Affective atmospheres aim to explain how the subjective experience and perception of a place shape how individuals feel, behave, and interact within it. In other words, the concept is used to consider the affective tonality that prevails in a space, and how this affects individuals who enter and interact in it.

Atmospheres also encompass the relationships between people and objects. However, they do not afford the same feelings for everyone, as they can be qualitatively apprehended in different ways (Ahmed, 2004). Bille and Simonsen (2021) argue that atmospheres risk reifying and essentialising the role of spaces triggering affect. While the concept of atmospheres was originally intended to be

[19] Affective-discursive practices preserve the continuum of affect, rather than separating it from emotion.

They approach emotion, meaning, and culture as concepts that are already embedded in affective practices.

used to tackle the original critiques levelled against affect theory, atmospheres ultimately tend to see affect as a free-floating force, a property of a space. In contrast, atmospheric practices combine the notion of affective atmospheres with practice theory: As Bille and Simonsen (2021, p. 305) indicate that "attending to atmospheric practices beyond atmospheric perception is to see human bodies and materiality as attuned with affective potentials, where the resulting atmospheres are affective forces". Hence, atmospheres affect bodies through bodily interactions in spaces with determined meanings and affordances, which can elicit emotional responses. This understanding of atmosphere is very close to the notion of vibes, and allows us to advance the idea that digital spaces, like physical ones, possess particular atmospheres.

The unique quality of vibes, as compared to affective atmospheres, lies in the function of the former as a mechanism to construct and deploy atmospheres, while the latter focuses more on the contingent characteristics of spaces. With the introduction of these concepts, this chapter has established how vibes can be used to help us to understand how TikTok users scroll, with particular attention being to attention itself, as well as to moods, the sensory meanings associated with particular types of TikTok, and the affective cues that users utilise.

Lupinacci (2024b) associates vibes with moods. Moods refer to prolonged emotional states that are less intense than emotions but last longer, often influencing individuals for extended periods of time. Moods are more diffuse and less specific than emotions, as they are not necessarily tied to particular events or stimuli (Davidson 1998). As De Chuodhury et al. (2012) among some of the things moods do, is to arouse people to action and direct and sustain that action. Moods demand that individuals use their sensory and cognitive resources to pay attention, reducing their capacity to notice other stimuli that are less salient or emotionally relevant (Siemer, 2005). People tend to make positive judgements when they in positive moods, and negative judgements when they are in negative moods (Schwarz & Clore, 2003). This affects how people use social media; just as some individuals use certain music genres to regulate or enhance different moods (DeNora, 2000), TikTok users adjust their practices on the platform to regulate particular moods and/or emotions (Bengsston & Johansson, 2022). This suggests that the moods of users shape their scrolling practices and how they make sense of their FYPs, influencing not only what they watch but how they make sense of the content they encounter.

5 Researching Feedback Loops

The research design of this thesis has been elaborated following Trow's dictum, which prescribes that the research problem dictates the research method (Trow, 1957). The research problem of this thesis relates to how users experience and make sense of their interactions with TikTok's recommendation system. Guided by this principle, and with the objective of studying feedback loops and interactions within their context this research adopted a digital ethnography approach.

Digital ethnography aligns with the sociological tradition of ethnography, which emphasises the importance of studying people where the action unfolds (Goffman, 1959), in this case a digital platform. The increasing entanglement of digital platforms has placed digital ethnography as a popular methodology among researchers studying the increasing enmeshment of social life with digital technologies (Hine, 2015; Orton & Prior, 2013). This methodology is intended to consist of multiple methods and invites researchers to develop self-reflection as a way of analysing the cultural and social contexts in which the digital is embedded (Hine, 2015).

The methodology for this research was designed with the aim of identifying and interpreting participants' experiences of feedback loops — that is, when they became aware of the recursive nature of algorithmic interaction, and described how it shaped their engagement with TikTok and how it made them feel. In this way, an important aspect of the methodological rationale involved determining how to gather data and which participants' experiences could be meaningfully captured and used to answer the research questions.

The chapter begins outlining the methodological approach and rationale used to study feedback loops and the collection of methods to respond to the research questions elaborated in the introduction. To do so, I combined interviews, online observations, scroll back and autoethnography, to triangulate my understanding of how participants experience and make sense of feedback loops on TikTok. Second, I will introduce who the participants are and how I recruited them. Then, I will describe how I collected the materials for the search. After that I will describe the analytical strategy to approach and analyse the materials. Finally, I will consider the

ethical implications of the research and reflect about my positionality as a PhD student at Lund and the implications for how data was produced.

5.1 Methodological Approach

The rationale that has guided the methodological decisions of this research has been based on the premise that any methodological decision needed to be aimed at answering the research questions. (Groenewald 2004). The departure point was to understand how people experience and make sense of feedback loops. This required being close to participants, following the tradition of ethnography as it is an inductive qualitative approach that theoretically acknowledges the complexity of the social world and seeks to represent it in ethnographic writing (O'Reilly, 2012) In a world increasingly mediated by algorithmic processes, a significant part of social life is entangled in digital space, where interactions are mediated by platforms and algorithms. In this way, to be as close to participants as possible, I conducted a digital ethnography.

Pink et al. (2015) defined digital ethnography as a form of ethnography that takes into account what it means to live in digital societies, where people and processes rely on digital technologies. They argued that ethnography is "iterative–inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods […] that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher's own role and that views humans as part object/part subject" (Pink et al., 2015, p. 3). Because of this, digital ethnography recognises that digital technologies are embedded in the everyday lives of individuals. In this context, digital ethnography was one approach for capturing the shape and nature of such digital communicative practices (Varis, 2014), which aligned with my aim of studying how digital technologies are integrated into everyday life.

Researching how people experience feedback loops start with the premise of determining how to capture their sense of ephemerality. Airoldi (2018, p. 2) notes that some digital experiences occur in volatile environments, such as algorithmically curated feeds. They are "volatile environments […] crossed by the everyday micro practices of individuals, who constantly scroll through social media feeds, query search engines, employ tags and interact in "placeless" communicative stream." In response to this volatility, Airoldi introduces the concept of liquid "meta-fields," in contrast to "solid" digital sites. Meta-fields are fleeting engineered spaces merged with users' social practices. They establish fluid associations among persons, often

strangers, mediated by the platform's affordances and shaped by affective currents (Airoldi, 2018).

Thinking about TikTok as a meta-field invited reflection about the role of the algorithmically curated FYP, and its ephemerality, in understanding how people experienced the platform, and how that experience could be apprehended. As a generative metaphor to reflect about where to study feedback loops, I borrowed the concept of following the algorithm (Airoldi et al., 2016), With the logic of following the encounters between users and the algorithm, I constructed my methodological approach, with a focus on following the feedback loops. In other words, to find instances where it was possible to grasp how users talk about their experiences of TikTok's algorithm.

To operationalise my theoretical framework into a viable methodological approach, I began from the assumption that it was necessary to understand the dynamics of feedback loops. I drew on Schellewald's (2021) approach to make sense of TikTok's ephemerality. He combined immersion in his own FYP with interviews to capture the experience of TikTok, aiming to develop a deep and contextual understanding of the platform's role in people's lives. This understanding had to take into account the reciprocal influence between the algorithm, as an object, and user practices. In this way, studying feedback loops involved examining how people made sense of their encounters with technology and how these encounters evolved over time (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015).

In practical terms, the most appropriate method identified to grasp the back and forth between users and TikTok's recommender system was a digital ethnographic approach that included interviews, online observations, scroll back method and autoethnography.

Interviews were a suitable method to capture and elicit the experiences of persons participating on research. To help to unpack the underlying lived experience the research has to be committed to listening (Groenewald, 2004). Listening how people talk about their experiences of feedback loops acknowledged also that an important aspect to capture the back and forth between algorithm and user required to attend to the feelings that successive chains of interactions produce. Furthermore, interviews allowed to study how digital spaces are enmeshed within the social (Hine, 2015), which allowed me to get a better understanding of how feedback loops were embedded in users' everyday lives.

In this regard, the interviews followed Kennedy and Hill (2018) work on the role of emotions in everyday encounters with data. As they assert "engaging with data is not just about reason and cognition. Emotional responses are also evoked by a

number of factors and in a number of ways when a person engages with data" (Kennedy & Hill, 2018, p.841). The interviews were based on this understanding and aimed to address the affective and emotional aspects partaking in feedback loops. The design aimed to allow emotions to emerge as reactions in response to discussing feedback loops. Moreover, the interviews had a situational dimension: the goal was to position participants within meaning structures in relation to the meaning structure of their social life. In this way, thinking in situations as situated interactions partially structured by past definitions but open into the future (Knorr-Cetina, 1981), this approach positioned the interviews as a space where participants could articulate both the emotional aspects and the situational contexts of their encounters with TikTok's recommender system, offering a richer understanding of how feedback loops are embedded into everyday life.

Together with interviews, I drew on the scrolling back method (Robards & Lincoln, 2017; Møller & Robards, 2019), which consists of following participants in their ritual of scrolling. As Møller and Robards (2019, p. 96) observed in a digital world "the meaning of what constitutes presence and action is changing with the fast pace." Understanding this change is essential to make sense of the entanglement between human action and algorithmic systems. The method aimed to use scrolling as a form to understand the engagement of the participants with their phones. The timeline, or in this research the FYP, as a memory object confronts the participant with earlier versions of their mediatised life, functioning as a representation of prior user inputs. By using scrolling back, it was possible to elicit personal histories and discussions between the researcher and the participants on the scrolling ritual. Walking through the users' FYP, the researcher was able to get a sense of how participants scroll on TikTok, how they enact their agency, and how they reorient the stream of recommendations. While the scroll-back method conceives feeds as a memory object. I approached the FYP both as an object shaped by habit but also able to orient towards the future.

Alongside scrolling back, I also used digital observations to get a better understanding of scrolling habits and algorithmic logic of following feedback loops required. The aim was to capture the social and cultural contexts in which TikToks circulate. Digital observations were combined with autoethnography, which was used as a rich method that allows researchers to develop self-reflection as a way of analysing cultural, political, and social contexts. In this approach, the researcher uses their first-hand experience to reflect on the connections between the online and offline worlds (Hine, 2015). Personal experience becomes the locus of the research in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography thus

serves to connect the personal experience of the researcher with key theoretical debates, as a way to reflect on processes and structures in society (Wall, 2008). Autoethnography has been used as a successful method to explore content creation and algorithmic visibility (Are, 2022), along with algorithmic encounters (Brown, 2019; Cerretani, 2023). In the context of this thesis, autoethnography was used as a sensitising lens through which understand the types of experiences that emerge from interactions with TikTok's recommender system.

The methodological approach involved an interplay of the methods enacted in an ongoing and adaptative way. Although the interviews represent the main body of data, moving between interviews, scroll back method, digital observations, and autoethnography allowed me to attend not only to what participants said about feedback loops, but also to how these dynamics were enacted in interaction.

5.2 Research Participants

The development of the research design, apart from the methods and techniques used to generate and analyse data, required another important decision: determining who the research participants would be. In this section, I will detail the process of selecting and recruiting the participants for the research. The primary inclusion criterion to participate in the research was that participants had to scroll actively on their TikTok's FYP, as this practice was central to experiencing the platform's algorithmic recommendations and, consequently, feedback loops. The second criterion for participant selection was that they had to be between 18 and 29 years old. This particular group of the population was chosen because they represent one of the main demographics that use TikTok (Montag et al., 2021). For many young people social media not only represents a form of entertainment, but platforms like TikTok have become integrated into almost every aspect of their lives. They have become a lens through which to look at the world, connect with others and develop their identity. Furthermore, TikTok is a platform where this age group, commonly known as Generation Z, feels particularly comfortable interacting and communicating (Cervi, 2021; Stahl & Literat, 2023). Therefore, it was expected that the scrolling rituals for this age group would be more significant in terms of identity, cultural participation, or collective mobilisation compared to other population groups.

The participants were recruited in the Öresund region, which is a transnational metropolitan region that encompasses Region Skåne in southern Sweden, the

Capital Region of Denmark and Region Zealand in Denmark. The region is connected through the Öresund bridge, which connects the cities of Malmö and Copenhagen over the Öresund Strait. While Skåne constituted the primary recruitment site, the sampling process was extended to the Öresund region to capture a broader range of experiences within a culturally and economically interconnected cross-border area.

The final sample comprised 20 participants between 18 and 29 years of age (*see Appendix A: Profile of participants*). In terms of gender, the sample was composed by thirteen women and seven men. In terms of locality, the sample presented a similar number of local citizens and international citizens (9 Swedish/ Danish, 11 international). The sample composition was diverse; it included high school students, young people taking a gap year before attending university; two of them were attending a Højskole, a folk-high school, in Denmark. Attending a Højskole is a common experience in Denmark among students who have finished high-school and take some gap-time before attending higher education. They generally offer four to six-month residential programs with a focus on self-discovery and personal development through various subjects chosen by the student. They do not have formal grading. The sample also included undergraduate students, master's students, and young workers. Some participants combined work and studies, — either working to support their education, or in other cases, being full-time employees pursuing education as a side activity. Moreover, there was a couple who were digital nomads and had chosen Malmö as their temporary place of residence. One notable subgroup within the sample was that of international students who were residing in the region for their studies.

The research participants formed a group that I would qualify as mobile, urban, and highly educated. Participants were characterised as mobile because a big group of them had moved across regions or countries for study or work; urban because all resided in metropolitan areas within the Öresund region, thereby enjoying greater access to activities available in the city; and highly educated because the majority were university students or graduates. This research does not examine inequalities or aims at any generalisation in how people engage with algorithms and experience feedback loops. However, it is necessary to highlight that the accounts presented here reflected the perspectives of a group of participants characterised by being young, mobile, urban, and highly educated. Hence, I acknowledge that this recruitment sample had an impact on my data, results, and discussion.

The participants were approached and contacted via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok. I created a flyer with information about the

project that I posted and circulated regularly on these platforms. I wrote in online university student groups as well as other social and cultural groups on the aforementioned platforms. I also contacted high schools and university teachers to enquire about presenting my research in classrooms as an opportunity to recruit potential participants. I also contacted organisations that work with young people and relied on word-of-mouth. Once I recruited a participant, I used snowball sampling (Flick, 2017) to identify potential participants and approach those who would meet the criteria.

The sample presented a gender bias, with a majority of women: 13 participants were women, and 7 were men. The selection bias was unintended, but it would seem that women were more inclined to express an interest in participating in this research. This has two implications. First, the experiences of feedback loops could be skewed by how women are socialised to sense and feel in particular ways (Young, 1980). Second, it restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalised. As the sample does not represent a broad population, thus no conclusions can be made about all TikTok users.

As the research focus was the experience of scrolling, rather than how different sociodemographic groups encounter algorithms, the representation bias does not affect the research question (Siles, 2023), which was to study how feedback loops are embedded in the lives of users. The research aimed to represent the experiences of the participants, rather than to attempt to generalise or specify the conditions under which feedback loops exist. The formulations encountered in the study apply to situations in which algorithmic encounters occur, rather than to how other users (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Following receipt of approval from The Swedish Ethical Review Authority to conduct my research, I started to collect data at the end of November 2022.

5.3 Data Collection

The data collection process in this study involved assembling different types of materials on how TikTok users experience feedback loops. The term data collection may suggest that data exists in a raw, pre-given state simply ready to be captured. In practice, it requires the active role of the researcher in producing the datasets of interest and in making sense of these data in a situated and contextualised way (Moore, 2006). I began the data collection process with two goals in mind: to understand how other people interacted with TikTok, and to use my own TikTok

FYP as a field site to understand how interactions with the TikTok algorithm affected the platform experience.

The main source of data of this research were semi-structured interviews since they gave me access to understand participants' subjective experience in their own words. Interviews are one of the most widely used methods to collect qualitative data in social sciences (Seidman, 2006). The underlying rationale for their use is that they facilitate an understanding of the phenomena of study from the participant's perspective (Seidman, 2006; Groenewald, 2004). They are valuable because they help participants reflect on their personal stories by selecting relevant information to construct their narratives, which turns their stories into meaning-making experiences (Seidman, 2006). Therefore, interviews were used to explore how TikTok users described their experiences with the feedback loops they established with the platform's algorithm, and the meanings they attached to and constructed through those feedback loops.

Within the range of interview formats, there exists a continuum ranging from highly structured questionnaires to unstructured, open-ended interviews (Flick, 2017). The study employed semi-structured interviews because they provided openness and flexibility to adapt to the dynamics that emerged when speaking with a participant, while at the same time provided structure through predefined key themes that helped to guide the conversation if it began to digress (Brinkmann, 2013). Furthermore, through semi-structured interviews it was possible to obtain during the conversations an account of "the body language, the atmosphere, and other non-transcribable features of the interaction" (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 29). Having selected semi-structured interviews, I prepared an interview guide that covered different themes that I was interested in exploring in relation to my research questions. The interview guide underwent several iterations over the course of the research, adapting to changes in the research questions emerging from the ongoing data collection and analysis. Moreover, during the interviews, I did not follow a specific order of questions or themes, instead I approached the interviews as conversations with their own rhythms.

Most of the interviews were conducted during summer of 2023 and spring of 2024. They were conducted face-to-face, generally in public places such as cafeterias, parks and classrooms. The interviews lasted between 40 and 75 minutes, with the majority being around 60 minutes. Before the interviews, the participants were informed about their rights as participants in the research. They were instructed on how their data would be handled and processed. They were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time and request the removal of any

information they had provided. They were also assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that all data would be anonymised in the thesis research or any related publications. Participants were also informed that the interview, along with any other information resulting from their participation, would be stored in a secure, locked location at Lund University premises accessible only by the researcher. All of the participants gave informed consent to participate in the research. They were also informed about their right to withdraw their consent at any time, during or after the interview, and to have certain parts of the interview be removed at any stage.

An important consideration when conducting interviews was how to begin them, build trust and empathy, and conclude them (Ostrander, 1993). Building rapport with research participants is an essential consideration when using qualitative methods. Creating a comfortable environment was key to the success of the interview, which requires attentiveness and understanding from the researcher's perspective. The interviews did not begin when the recorder was switched on as the researcher had to remain attentive to the situations that led to the interview (Diefenbach, 2009). This started from agreeing on the interview time and location to the meeting itself. I gave participants the freedom to choose the location of the interview, or I suggested several options from which they could select. At the meeting itself, I tried to manage any possible discomfort by being as transparent as possible about the process. I also shared information about myself, from how I scrolled or what my FYP. I made these decisions based on my readings of the situations. The initial apprehension phase is characterised by a mutual sense of uncertainty, as both the interviewer and interviewee navigate the unfamiliarity of a new context and relationship.

During the interviews, I relied on verbal and nonverbal cues to demonstrate understanding and reassure participants that there were no right or wrong answers and that their stories were valued (Nguyen, 2015). To create a space of trust, it was important to be transparent, since, as Belina (2023) points out, neutrality is an impossible ideal to achieve. The researcher holds a monopoly on the interpretation and representation of data about the participant (Kvale, 2006), which challenges the notion of a neutral, non-interventionist, and nonexistent interviewer (Diefenbach, 2009). Thus, one way to build trust is through reciprocal actions that serve to demonstrate a researcher's trustworthiness (Harrison et al., 2001). In this sense, I regarded participants as co-constructors of knowledge, as for example, they helped me to clarify abstract conceptual ideas of feedback loops. Furthermore, I did not consider the interview in itself to be the end of the interaction as participants shared

interesting remarks during the informal small talk afterwards, which I would note down or captured by turning on the recorder again. I also made notes during and after each interview about participants' responses, their nonverbal responses, or comments that elicited me to think about concepts beyond their immediate response. Afterwards, all interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim. Interviews (co)produced a rich data corpus.

Every method has its own flaws, and the biggest weakness of semi-structured interviews is the lack of direct observation about people's stories (Diefenbach, 2009). Interviews rely on participants' self-reported accounts and consequently they fail to capture action as it unfolds naturally. In the early stages of the research, I envisioned screen-recording as a method to access the interaction ritual between user and algorithm first-hand. The rationale for this approach was based on an analogy between scrolling on TikTok and a human conversation, where one person interacts with another. While there are clear differences between human conversations and scrolling, I wanted to capture the intricacies of liking and skipping TikToks. As Tang et al. (2006, p. 480) note, screen-recording "unobtrusively collects rich, empirical data on users' interactions with their computers without physical video equipment in participants' work environments to intrude in their normal work practices and interactions with others." On the one hand, this method raised important debates around the implications of asking participants to record their phones, particularly in relation to privacy and perceptions of being tracked. On the other hand, while the method was inherently invasive, participants' initial awareness of being recorded often dissipated quickly (Heath et al., 2010). After assessing the pros and cons with my supervisors and obtaining prior approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, the decision was made to proceed with screen recording as a complementary method.

The recruitment conditions for this method were communicated alongside as those for the interviews, as screen recording was designed to serve as a complementary technique. For this reason, here I will only comment on the specific instructions I provided participants for this technique. Alongside the interview, I invited participants to take part in screen-recording, which involved capturing their scrolling activity on TikTok during five consecutive TikTok sessions. The recordings were then uploaded to a Lund University secure server for storage. Potential participants were informed about the storage procedures, privacy implications and assured that only information related to TikTok would be examined. Moreover, I provided participants with detailed instructions on how to conduct the screen recording and how to upload the materials to Lund University

server. Once the materials were received any potential identifiable feature were deidentified to guarantee privacy.

Five participants engaged in screen-recording their TikTok ritual, although one dropped out of the research after two sessions. In total I collected 253 minutes of video materials. The contents of TikTok were analysed to look for patterns in the nature of recommendations. When it comes to how participants experienced the method, they expressed that while they were initially aware that their TikTok scrolling rituals were being recorded, particularly at the moment they pressed the record button, it only affected their awareness in the initial moments of recording. The data materials produced a rich body of videos that I coded trying to identify any thematic patterns in the stream of recommendations. I would annotate on topic, time, captions, likes and other features of the TikTok. The TikToks were analysed before the interviews, which provided a rich terrain to guide the interview as it allowed me to specifically ask about what users were scrolling, and any perceived shifts in the nature of recommendations. For instance, I saw to you were watching X topic and suddenly changed to Y topic, why did that happened, why did you stopped wanting to watch this type of content…

However, I stopped conducting this form of data collection mainly for three different reasons. First, consistency, participants were sending TikTok sessions at random times rather than during five consecutive days. Second, the method was resulting in a low rate of participant recruitment for the study, with some dropouts occurring as a consequence. Initial concerns about associated with screen recording acted as deterrents to participation in the research. Third and most important, this method produced a blurry and confusing stream of unconnected TikToks but was not producing the materials I aimed at to respond to my research questions. Screen-recording was an excellent method for elicit participants' responses but not a good method to have direct observation on how people scroll. Two elements were missing, first, physical observation on how people scrolled, as screen-recording captured the screen of the phone, the method missed the corporeality of the practice (Tiidenberg et al., 2020). For example, Pink et al (2016) video recorded the hands of research participants in their study to understand how people use their smart phones. In their study they found hand acts in culturally patterned ways and accompany the gaze towards the haptic screen of these devices. In my own research I was missing these subtle embodied cues — shifts in posture, finger movements, frowns, smiles, and pauses. I was missing how these embodied cues could be interpreted as emotional reactions to how people made sense of content, and how

users synchronised with TikTok's algorithm through the FYP, which were the type of data that would be necessary to respond to my research questions.

As an alternative, I turned to the scrolling back method (Robards & Lincoln, 2017) as part of the interview process. Generally, towards the end of each interview I asked participants to show me how they typically scrolled through TikTok. They had been informed about this procedure in advance during the recruitment stage. During this activity, I usually sat next to them and watched them scroll. I reminded them they could remain silent or comment on anything they wanted. At times I asked follow-up questions about why they had skipped a particular TikTok or what had caught their attention. While they scrolled, I also noted my interpretations of their reactions to the content. The aim was to gain insight into how participants interacted with their For You Page (FYP). The rationale was to turn participants into co-analysts of their own TikTok ritual they consumed and produced (Robards & Lincoln, 2017). While scroll back differed from screen recording in that the research was present during the scrolling ritual, it offered significant advantages. The scroll back method would elicit meaningful memories of scrolling in the participants. It allowed immediate access to their reasonings, emotions, and interpretations that would have been absent in a purely observational record while they were scrolling. In this sense. establishing rapport included building trust in scrolling together, if I perceived unease from some participants regarding what might appear on their FYPs. I developed different strategies to create rapport, from sharing stories about embarrassing content that I had found while scrolling to taking my phone out and scrolling with them, comparing what appeared on our respective FYPs.

Two observations about this method: first in the interviews in which I scrolled back with participants in public places like cafeterias, I sensed that some of them were more uncomfortable in that setting than for example the participants who used screen-recording. I noticed that for some participants scrolling in public limited their familiarity and comfort as compared to scrolling in more intimate places, such as would have been at home or more secluded space. For instance, I noticed a couple of participants closed the app abruptly after a short period scrolling signalling that they did not want to continue scrolling. I attributed this to the fact that they had to scroll in front of a stranger (i.e. me, the researcher) in a public setting surrounded by other people in proximity. Moreover, scrolling in public seemed to disrupt the scrolling rituals of some participant, because they described scrolling without audio negatively impacting their engagement with and interpretation of TikToks. The social norm of not disturbing other people with loud sounds affected their TikTok engagement. However, more than half of the participants did not feel any obstacles

nor discomfort and indicated that they were comfortable scrolling during the interviews. This indicates that scrolling is an intimate act. People felt uncomfortable showing what was on their FYP to others, hence the use of this technique must take into account the context in which it occurs. Second, this method is effective in encouraging participants to describe how they scroll on TikTok. However, the researcher needs to consider how the context of scrolling affects the scrolling ritual.

Another way of collecting data was through observations. If the previous method and technique were oriented towards learning participants own recollections and stories, observations had the aim of learning about how TikTok's algorithm worked, how the affordances of the platform participated in producing specific streams of recommendations, how users on the platform commented on their encounters with the algorithm, and how particular streams of recommendation were generated.

Following Divon and Eriksson Krutrök (2024), I used my FYP as my ethnographic site. Inspired by Schellewald's (2021) digital ethnography on TikTok, my aim was to "get a sense" of how the affordances of the app affect how content circulates on it. This included taking notes and screenshots of instances where I perceived the recommender system to be creating distinct streams of recommendations, as well as documenting how other users created, commented on, and liked content in ways that interacted with these streams. I tried to understand how my FYP evolved over time and observed the opinions of other users in relation to how users talked about TikTok, and how the algorithm affected their recommendations. In other words, I explored how users of the platform talked about algorithmic recommendations.

The initial digital observations helped me to understand how TikTok's algorithm worked, and how TikTok users enact moral frameworks, and establish solidarities through algorithmically curated content for them. Understanding the social and cultural dynamics that underpinned TikTok provided an understanding of how the research participants established their own feedback loops, and allowed me to study how other users on the platform expressed and described their relationship with the algorithm. Furthermore, at the beginning I developed the research strategy of trying to influence the algorithm (Eriksson et al., 2019). The intention behind this was not to explore what the algorithm does per se, but to explore its reactivity and resonance to people's understanding of the content they consume. My interests emanated from the desire to understand what mutual focus of attention could mean in the context of TikTok.

Initially, I considered studying only one particular TikTok space. I explored the idea of focusing on how therapeutic cultures (Illouz, 2008) circulated on TikTok.

However, following Airoldi (2018), I recognised that scrolling implies the aggregation of different TikTok spaces as the user is presented with more than one defined community of users. A user can be interested in a particular topic one day, but this does not mean that their activity will always be limited to that space. For example, a user's attention can be captured by make-up trends, but on their feed, they will also encounter humour, travelling, chemistry experiments, fashion, culture shocks, and fighting partners. In this sense, to capture the collection of algorithmic fragmented pieces of identity I scrolled without a limited space. This involved different practices such as establishing a particular course of recommendations in one topic such as performances of masculinity and then study how it took the algorithm to present me with alternative versions of masculinity. Other strategy was to access content on topics that participants reported during the interviews. I navigated the interactions with TikTok's algorithm using features such as liking, saving, pressing "not interested". However, it is also important to note that my digital ethnography was shaped by my own engagement with the app (Eriksson Krutrök, 2021), my FYP was shaped by my personal interests in travelling, cats, and cooking, and my research interest was shaped by how users on the platform talk about their engagement with the algorithm and content. Thus, the content on my FYP was thus affected by the interactions between these engagements.

An essential element of my digital ethnography was the decision between using my personal TikTok account or creating a new one. After careful deliberation, I decided to use my personal TikTok account rather than create a separate account as a blank slate. Since my aim was to understand TikTok's algorithmic environment and changes in recommendations, using a separate account would have required to deliberately privilege certain content over others in order to shape my FYP. By contrast, using my personal account allowed feedback loops to emerge connected to my own feelings and personal stories in a meaningful way, which adapted better to the research questions guiding this thesis. Using my personal account reflected my tastes and habits possibly limiting exposure to other content worlds. Nevertheless, my aim was not to capture every possible experience of feedback loops, but to understand how recommendations connect and make sense within a specific, situated FYP. Even if my viewing habits influenced to focus on a particular space of TikTok, the users within that space were themselves engaging with and interpreting the algorithm's dynamics.

Finally, I combined online observations with autoethnography in order to understand how my moods and emotions shaped the vibes that captured my attention, and how this influenced subsequent feedback loops with the algorithm.

When I stopped to read comments, write notes, and take screenshots, TikTok was a way to escape from being a PhD student, soon it became embedded in my everyday life in a similar way as some of the participant were describing. I would find myself scrolling in the morning, as a break from work, or when sitting on the toilet. To document this, I kept a notebook in which I wrote about how seeing content affected me, and how those feelings and moods shaped the engagement that I developed with the algorithm. The underlying idea was to understand how feedback loops developed through and in relation to my everyday interactions — as a PhD student, as an individual who was dating, and as a person living abroad. However, even if I consider autoethnography to be a very well-placed method for exploring and making sense of feedback loops, writing autoethnographic notes soon became a very intimidating task.

During the production of my autoethnography, I experienced persistent worries about how I was representing myself, wondering how much I was sharing about myself. As Wall (2008) asserts, autoethnography as a method might seem very accessible, but it creates anxieties around the sense of identity and self-understanding that the researcher establishes with themselves and how others perceive them. This level of vulnerability felt daunting. Although vulnerability can be a valuable asset, as recognising one's own vulnerabilities opens up for being able to recognise those of other people (Tilley-Lubbs, 2016), I have not overtly used my autoethnographic notes. Instead, I have used it as a sensitising approach (Blumer, 1969) to guide me in establishing the interconnections where the relevant thing is happening. In this way, autoethnography served me as a sensitising lens that shaped my interpretations, even if not directly cited in the analysis. This allowed me to explore in detail ideas that could be too personal or intimate for participants to disclose during interviews.

5.4 Analytical Strategy

In the previous sections, I argued that the aim of this thesis was not to generalise or provide any exhaustive account of TikTok use, but rather to identify patterns in human–algorithm interactions that would help to develop concepts capable of capturing the dynamism underlying feedback loops. In this way, the analysis of data was not simply a question of managing and manipulating data, as the researcher must use it to create new insights, explanations, or concepts (Bryman & Burgess, 2002). The process requires to move between the data, examining and reassembling

it to address the research questions. Within this process, coding played a central role. My coding strategy started from the idea that "coding is the process of analysing qualitative text data by taking them apart to see what they yield before putting the data back together in a meaningful way" (Creswell,2015, p. 156).

The data materials in this research were coded using thematic analysis, with a hybrid approach (Fereday & Muir-Cohrane, 2006). This method facilitated the identification, analysis, organisation, and description of patterns (or themes) detected in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is considered a versatile framework that can provide a useful and detailed description of patterns within the data and be used in different research approaches and paradigms (Braun and Clarke 2006). The hybrid approach combined different deductive and inductive moments to analyse the data in order to understand algorithmic encounters on TikTok. This proved to be beneficial for the research because, although I had a strong conceptual toolkit derived from interaction theories that I considered that could serve to model human-algorithm interactions, the lack of literature on the specificities on applying IRT to study algorithmic processes from a sociological perspective meant that no model existed for articulating this relationship. Therefore, the iterative process where "induction and deduction are in constant dialogue" (Erickson, 1986, p. 121) provided clarity when reading throughout the data. In other words, abduction allowed me to move between theory and data in order to answer my research questions.

All the transcribed interviews were imported into an NVivo file where they were organised and coded. Coding entailed an iterative process that required different rounds. The first round of coding was open and exploratory. For example, to address my third research question: "How do affective responses influence user interactions with TikTok's recommender system and contribute to the formation of feedback loops?" I created basic emotion codes like "joy", "boredom", "happy", or "angry". The aim of this stage was to capture how the participants described their feelings about the recommendations that they received on TikTok.

This first round of iteration allowed me to familiarise myself with the data, capture a broad range of affective expressions without imposing predetermined categories, and identify preliminary patterns that informed the development of more focused codes in subsequent rounds. I followed the same strategy with the observation materials and the field notes. For example, in the case of TikTok observations, I started coding content paying attention to the affordances, and indicators of algorithmic patterns before moving toward more focused codes that linked these elements to user engagement and feedback loops. Among them were

codes I used to capture the moments when participants referred to the algorithm in the context of their recommendations. I interpreted such talk not just as descriptions of the algorithm by the participants, but also as revealing how participants understood and interacted with TikTok's recommender system, and the successive feedback loops these interactions generated.

The initial round of coding was largely specific to each data source, capturing the different ways in which the data materials represented different aspects of TikTok's experience of feedback loops, the affordances of the app. In subsequent iterations these codes were integrated and aligned to form a unified set of themes. This integration served as a form of triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. In this way, I ensured that I could examine TikTok users' subjective experiences as one of the advantages of using thematic analysis was its capacity to highlight the meanings around subjective experiences (Attride-Stirling 2001). Autoethnography materials were not coded as data but they informed the interpretive process.

The process of coding was not developed in isolation just sitting with the codes but relied on exchanges of ideas within the academic community. For example, I had problems articulating the affective nature of scrolling and what captures people's attention. However, when I attended the Global Digital Intimacies conference, Lupinacci (2024b) discussed the similar problems that I was experiencing articulating affect and its opposition to emotions. Her idea of vibes and moods helped me to articulate what held participants attention, and under which circumstances. Although finding the right language to capture affectivity is not a new problem, a means of accessing how users felt made it easier to code it. In other words, the analytical vocabulary evolved through collaboration, it was informed by dialogues with other scholars and in this case existing conceptual frameworks that addressed the same challenges that I was facing. By integrating different data materials through thematic analysis and anchoring the coding process in both the empirical materials and theoretical and conceptual debates and scholar dialogues, I developed a set of themes capable of capturing the dynamics of feedback loops. These themes represent the basis for the analysis presented in the following chapter.

5.5 Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

Studying feedback loops in digital spaces posed several ethical challenges. In this section I introduce key ethical considerations that emerged during the research. I

will offer a detailed explanation on the limitations of the research and reflect on these circumstances alongside my positionality as a researcher. Reflexivity is key because as Christin (2020, p.13) notes:

> Through reflexivity, ethnographers try to make their own biases and blind spots as explicit as possible, discussing how these may have shaped their research question and data, and more broadly seeking to understand the role that they play as observers and participant observers in the field sites they study.

In addressing these issues, I start by highlighting one of the most significant considerations regarding research of online spaces, which is what is private and what is public online (Nissenbaum, 2011). This question raises issues relating to consent and confidentiality when researching digital spaces, as interactions can occur in spaces that are ambiguously "public" or "private". Moreover, ethical considerations are entangled with various definitions and risks, including the fact that TikTok can be conceived of as a public space, a semi-public space, and a private space (Cera, 2023).

One way to think about the question of whether digital spaces are private or public is to consider how the information is shared and whether it was intended to be public or private (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). This approach suggests that if someone writes a comment on TikTok we assume intentionality of others seeing it, that comment could be used for research purposes. Digital spaces such as TikTok represent spaces where users might reasonably anticipate being observed by strangers. However, similar to the issues encountered in traditional ethnography, most individuals who comment on social media do not do so with the intention of having their comments be used as research data. Moreover, they have not given consent to being researched.

Ravn et al. (2020) propose a way of thinking about this by considering the context and affordances of each platform. In digital spaces, debates around public vs. private content, perceived privacy, and user vulnerability should collectively and contextually shape ethical approaches. Similarly, platforms should be conceived of as spaces consisting of publics, where users feel that the traces of their activities are shared but in a way that is actually defined by the various actors. Users may hold diverse views on how their online activity might be used, as well as differing understandings of their impact on these spaces. To make ethical decisions, we need

to understand what users see and intend as their public and how their posts are addressed to this public.

I acknowledge the complexity of the public vs. private data debate in digital research. While I understand the importance of protecting users' identities, I also feel that content creators, particularly those that use TikTok as their living, intentionally expose their identities online. Therefore, in cases where I have included screenshots from content creators, I have not blurred identities. To consider what constitutes a content creator I followed Bishop (2019), who considered a content creators to be someone with more than 10,000 subscribers — the requirement to start monetising content on TikTok. However, when I have collected sensitive data through online observations, I have not used screenshots where users could be identified. I have used a similar approach for user comments, avoiding images of comments when they can be classified as sensitive data according to the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. In such instances I have used generic descriptions of the content creators or users, and aliases. I have not directly asked any content creator nor user who wrote a comment for their active consent to participate in the research. With millions of TikTok users, it would have been difficult to ask participants for their consent.

Another concern is how the research participants described encountering sensitive content on TikTok or discussed sensitive data during the interviews. As Kennedy (2018) indicate there is a culture of oversharing on social media. Users overshare details of their lives that they would not share and discuss in the presence of a researcher. To address potential concerns, I have only used potential sensitive data as it related to interactions with the algorithm, specifically connected to how algorithmic interactions contributed to generating particular streams of content, and how the participants felt about these experiences. In this way, did not include any potentially sensitive data beyond what was directly relevant study algorithmic recommendations. With regard to ensuring the safety of the research participants, this point was not trivial. Since I was interested in feedback loops, the type of content that might appear on the FYPs of users could not be anticipated. We often moved from talking about cute animals to war in the space of a single scroll. Therefore, I exercised exceptional caution when approaching sensitive topics related to the algorithm's role in circulating content, even if this meant potentially sacrificing data. As mentioned above, data were anonymised to ensure the privacy of the participants, and to mitigate any potential harms of interview content reflecting negatively on the participants in the future.

Finally, I want to address the concern that analysing interactions between humans and algorithmic agents legitimises this type of interaction. While I do not want to engage in discussions relating to theology and determinism regarding the future of social interactions, I do want to acknowledge that studying them runs the risk of legitimising or reifying them as natural occurrences in society. We are witnessing people beginning to rely on AI companions to fill the gaps that they feel in affectivity in their everyday lives (see e.g. example Merril Jr. et al., 2022). This research does not address such interactions, but does delve into how algorithmic agents are entangled with human interactions and construct particular presentations of reality through the feelings and emotions produced when they provide users with content that aligns with their preferences and desires. This research contributes to our understanding of the integration of algorithmic systems in society, by emphasising that the lives of individuals are increasingly intertwined with algorithmic systems. However, I want to point out that nothing is inevitable.

The research design was successful generating detailed accounts of TikTok' users experiences of feedback loops. However, it included some limitations that it is necessary to acknowledge. The decision to switch from using screen recording to the scroll back method influenced how participants' scrolling practices were represented in the dataset. Both methods aimed to develop an understanding of how participants scroll, yet the nature of that understanding was different. In the screen-recording technique, the ritual of scrolling was used for later discussion in the interview; in the scroll-back method, the observation was embedded within the method itself, enabling immediate discussion of participants' actions and choices. Equally significant was my decision to use my FYP as a starting point for observations. This choice shaped the TikTok spaces I encountered. Following Liliequist's (2020) distinction between insider and outsider positions, I became an insider to TikTok because my lived experience brought me closer to forms of vulnerability articulated through my interactions with the algorithm. When my FYP served me videos that moved me, I felt a strong sense of alignment with content; when participants described moments of alignment or disruption, I could relate and understand their accounts. This insider connection allowed me to understand what it means to have an alignment between user and algorithm. In this sense it allowed me a direct understanding of what I was interested in studying. However, this could have led me to (re)produce certain ideas and assumptions about how the algorithm works and the experience of TikTok. Here my position as a researcher situated in the tradition of reflexivity acted as a counterbalance to this risk. I interrogated the origins of my reactions and treat my experiences as one possible situated position

rather than a universal account. In this way, reflexivity became a methodological protection against reifying my experiences as representative of all TikTok users on the app. One way I reflected on my research practices was by writing down my reactions and moods, both concerning the interviews and changes in my FYP. These reflections served me to establish a greater awareness of my TikTok scrolling patterns. Furthermore, while my presence inevitably shaped the data collection, documenting and analysing them made it part of the interpretation, rather than just a source of bias. Finally, data collection in a digital ethnographic study required attentive decisions about participation and the researcher's identity. Therefore, as an immigrant who is not fluent in conversational Swedish, I cannot reject the hypothesis that my nationality, social position as a PhD researcher and gender may have affected my ability to recruit and retain participants. This could be reflected in the people who ultimately participated in the study, in the data I was able to collect, and, consequently, in the analysis that I produced

6 Situating Scrolling: Contexts of TikTok Use

Situations are fundamental to interaction theories, since any understanding of social life begins by unpacking the contexts in which social dynamics unfold (Goffman, 1961b; Tavory, 2018). Collins (2004) argued that one of the main tasks of any interaction ritual is to capture how every person moves from one situation to another situation, chasing those that produce higher levels of emotional energy. This first empirical chapter is based on the premise that any analysis of algorithmic interaction rituals must start with an examination of the situational backgrounds in which users scroll on TikTok. As Bucher (2016, p. 11) states, "the sites and situations through which people encounter and experience algorithms arguably shape ways of thinking, talking and feeling about them".

Van Dijck et al. (2018) argue that platforms succeed when they are able to attract and accommodate the needs of users, and TikTok is no exception to this. TikTok's popularity lies in its capacity to create a space for personal entertainment where, through scrolling, users experience emotions such as excitement, joy, anger, and indifference towards the content that TikTok's recommender system suggests. Yet the situations in which people interact should not be understood as either isolated or static. As Tavory (2018) observes, any understanding of interactions needs to take into account temporalities, i.e., how past interactions and future anticipations affect how people navigate situations. In the following pages, I describe the situations in which users employ TikTok, and the initial conditions that shape its use. This provides an understanding of the moments in which users enter feedback loops. By analysing patterns in the conditions and expectations that lead to use of TikTok, I clarify how the distinctive interactions users develop with TikTok's algorithm are shaped by what users anticipate from the platform.

First, the chapter begins with an overview of what users see when they open the app and a discussion of how the research participants scrolled. This first section aims to explore what it means to scroll on TikTok, particularly for those readers who may be unfamiliar with the practice. Moreover, it describes the FYP, which is

the site where users and TikTok's algorithm interact. Second, the chapter continues with an analysis of a theme that emerged in the interviews: the perception that, compared to other social-media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok does not require an active effort on the part of users to curate representations of themselves.[20] This passive approach to TikTok is anchored in a perception of the platform as a place to go for entertainment, to overcome boredom and provide escapism. Third, the chapter continues by analysing how TikTok is used to provide a demarcation between activities in the everyday lives of users. For that reason, algorithmic encounters on TikTok cannot be viewed as separate from users' everyday experiences; rather, they are interwoven with the rhythms of everyday life. I used the idea of transition acts, inspired by the work of Nippert-Eng, to describe how TikTok is used between daily activities.

Finally, I describe how boredom and escapism lead participants to anticipate algorithmic interactions as transformative of emotional states. TikTok provides more than just a distraction and means of overcoming boredom, instead being a way to manage feelings and moods throughout the day. In short, in this chapter I explore how the ways in which users approach the app in transitional moments — along with their initial conditions for reorienting the absence of "meaningful" meaning — shape the feedback loops that users develop with the platform, highlighting how TikTok's affordances shape the intertwining of the platform and the dynamics of everyday life.

6.1 The FYP as the Site of Algorithmic Interaction Rituals

Usage of TikTok generally starts with unlocking the screen of a smartphone, and using the fingers to navigate via the screen of the device and open the app. One of the main characteristics of TikTok is that when users open the app, they are immediately immersed in their FYP. Being on the app thus means being immersed in a constant stream of short video after short video, and it is on the FYP where users engage with a continuous series of TikToks. For each video, users can like, share, accelerate the spread of, comment on, like other users' comments on, save to personalised lists, tag other users in, skip, or tell the app that they are not interested

[20] For any reader who feels challenged by this statement, I clarify it later, but want to emphasise here that it refers specifically to users who do not actively create content.

in a particular TikTok, among other things. When I asked the participants how they use TikTok, most stated that they only navigate through their FYPs. Although they follow user profiles, they rarely navigate using the "Friends" or "Following" tabs, nor do they use the search-engine function. Moreover, while they share TikToks with friends, family, and significant others, the recommender system on their FYP is their main point of encounter with content on the platform. Therefore, every individual's use of TikTok is characterised by a constant interaction with a recommender system, targeting content "for you". As Greta, a 26-year-old Lithuanian working as a shift supervisor in a museum described: "I didn't really use the Friends tab on TikTok. Almost never. It was always the FYP. So, I never would see what my friends have liked. So, it was very much like, what TikTok wants me to see". This idea of "what TikTok wants me to see" outlines the FYP as the site of the algorithmic interaction ritual. This will be discussed in depth in Chapter 7, but it is important to note here that the ability of the recommender system to, using the user's reactions to content, shape the stream of recommendations that each TikTok user receives on their FYP is the core of the user's interactions with the recommender system, and shapes the feedback loops that determine what content each user sees.

The circulation of TikToks often appears random, with seemingly unrelated videos appearing on FYPs. In one sequence from my digital ethnography I observed three TikToks that demonstrate this apparent lack of connection, shown in Figure 6.1. In the leftmost image of the figure, we see a still from a video showing a content creator in his car. The name of the content creator is @CreatingWonders.[21] This creator specialises in short narrations where he delivers platitudes, as a way to help users to reflect on their personal experiences and improve their wellbeing. @CreatingWonders often films himself in a stationary car in a car park, dressed casually in a hoodie or a t-shirt, a backwards cap, sunglasses, and a gold chain, with his arms fully tattooed. His videos are accompanied by calm, instrumental music, creating a relaxed and soothing atmosphere that invites reflection and self-growth. With his deep, compelling voice he talks about self-reflection, drawing on everyday symbols to establish a connection with viewers based not on expertise but establishing a sense of relatability. By filming himself sat in a car he creates a sense of authenticity, as the car park functions as a central and recognisable (new) public space in the suburban city (Tonnelat, 2010). Similarly, his car symbolises the everyday, the journeyman, and increased freedom for young people in the context

[21] @JesseJPedigo when I took notes; he has since changed his profile to @CreatingWonders.

of the United States of America, particularly among working-class young people (O'Dell, 2001). In this particular TikTok, the content creator shares a lesson he learned over the past year: that one should not try to fix someone else if doing so drains one's own energy.

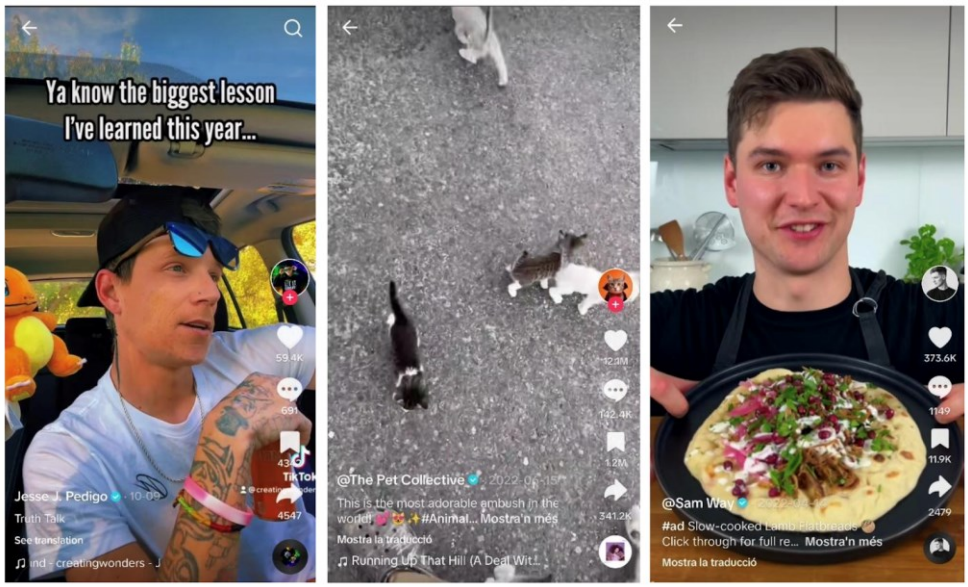

Figure 6.1. Example of TikTok stream (2022)

TikTok 2, in the middle of Figure 6.1 was made by @The Pet Collective, which uploads animal content, generally showing cute domestic animals. In this TikTok, a man stops in the middle of the road to rescue a stray kitten, only to be surrounded by a large number of stray kittens emerging from all sides of the road. While the previous TikTok encouraged introspection and self-reflection, this one evokes joy and warmth through the cuteness of the kittens, who surround and meow at the man. By combining two opposing concepts – an ambush, and the warmth of kittens – the TikTok constructs a playful mood, using cats to create a sense of wellbeing and fun through an "aw" moment (Maddox, 2022).

TikTok 3, to the right of Figure 6.1, features @SamWay, a content creator who specialises in cooking. In his content he prepares dishes from scratch, often in a minute-long format. Each video comprises multiple shots per second where he shows the different steps of the dish. The noises accompanying the TikTok — sizzling, vegetables being chopped, lids being opened — function as a form of autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR), appealing to users' audio senses.

In these TikToks users enjoy a combination of visually appealing dishes, precise editing, and the authenticity conveyed by from-scratch cooking.
These three examples would initially seem to be not connected to one another, but the argument I wish to present throughout this thesis is that the seemingly random and fragmented stream of content begins to make sense when we consider the contexts in which users scroll on TikTok, and the moods and affective states that they bring to the app. To study such processes, it is essential to first explore and understand the situations in which people scroll through their feeds. To begin this process, we need to look at the FYP.

Table 6.1. TikTok situations (2024)

Type of Situation	Description of the Situation	Common Mood
Spare time	Being at home with nothing to do	Boredom, meaninglessness
Commuting	On public transport, walking	Boredom, detachment
Before bed	Lying down in bed/sofa, resting	Fatigue, passive, rest
Study/work breaks	Short pauses in focused activity	Mental restlessness
Doing chores	Multitasking while engaged in household activities	Distraction, detached focus
Social downtime	Alone time to recover from every day activities	Disconnection, escape, recharge
Waiting	Waiting for class, persons, appointments…	Impatience, low engagement
Feeling sad or low	Moments of emotional vulnerability	Seeking distraction, low mood
To avoid responsibilities	Procrastination or escape from tasks	Avoidance, guilt, fatigue
Checking phone	After waking up, after activities	Need to be updated

Table 6.1 summarises the most common situations in which the 20 research participants report opening TikTok and scrolling through their FYPs. These situations are varied but can be clustered around the following situations: in the morning, being at home having just woken up, in bed having just opened their eyes, having a morning coffee, or sitting on the toilet. In the evening, being at home after a long day of study, work, or both, comfortably sitting on the sofa or lying in bed. There was also a common pattern of TikTok use at home when there was nothing more important to do. The participants described using TikTok on public transport such as taking the train to university or the bus to work. Other situations included during breaks or pauses during work, class, or study sessions, and when waiting for an appointment or to meet someone.

With regard to motivation to use TikTok, we can form clusters: the need to be distracted, to relax, or to be entertained and escape boredom. For example, Mikel and Serena are a couple of Greek digital nomads who live in Sweden. Their case is particularly interesting because, instead of each having an account, both use Serena's. Serena signed up for an individual account when she was living with her

parents in Greece; however, after she met her boyfriend and they both moved to Sweden, they started a ritual of scrolling together using her phone, at night before going to bed. Scrolling became part of their everyday sleep routine, and was incorporated into their bedtime ritual.

> Most of the time when we are watching TikTok, we are already in bed. We are laid down, we are covered with a blanket, we are light sleep, and we just scroll through TikTok for half an hour until one of us gets too tired to hold the phone." … "In order to get a bit more tired, to get more like sleepy. (Mikel, 25)

The initial engagement with TikTok often begins with a desire for entertainment, as the platform occupies a space relating to leisure in the lives of its users. For Mikel and Serena, TikTok functions similarly to reading or watching TV before bedtime, as a way of relaxing. Scrolling on TikTok marks a transition, with the platform part of their sleep ritual and a particular mode of preparation to transition to bed (Schwartz, 1970).

If we consider what these situations and states have in common, we see that TikTok is embedded in the daily routines of everyday life, as a recurring practice during in-between situations. These in-between situations are defined by their "low potential for emotional energy", to borrow a term from Collins (2004), and characterised by a lack of enthusiasm, involvement, and motivation. TikTok fills a liminal space in the lives of the participants, fitting in between activities and stages of their everyday existences. By helping users to demarcate transitions between work/study and home, being awake and asleep, and from one social situation to another, TikTok becomes more than just a mere distraction: it is embedded in and shaped by the rhythms of everyday life. Scott (2009) argues that the routines and repetitions that characterise everyday life, far from being trivial, are important in the (re)production of social life, as they enable individuals to create and sustain a sense of order, stability, and predictability in their local worlds. The logic of being entertained and distracted places TikTok users as individuals who search for a degree of pleasure, and wish to direct their attention away from "more serious" tedious daily activities such as study and work. Scrolling on TikTok can thus be understood as casual leisure: "an immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it." (Stebbins, 1997, p18).

However, the way in which the participants use TikTok varied significantly. Initial engagement with the platform may involve seeking diversion or fun, but it does not necessarily follow that the entertainment obtained is trivial in terms of its impact on lives, as entertainment is an important source of significance and meaning-making (Stomberg, 2009). The significance of the FYP as the site of the algorithmic interaction ritual cannot be separated from the contexts in which TikTok is used. The participants described consistently using TikTok within their routines, at transitional moments, and these situations are the core of how interactions with TikTok's algorithm unfold. The need to distract oneself through something entertaining, as we will see later, actually creates the conditions needed to engage with deeper, more personal, social and cultural dynamics. In the following sections, I explore two elements that clarify how these situations establish the conditions for feedback loops: the perceived lack of self-presentation on the app, and the structuring role of transitions.

6.2 Affordances and (Non)Self-Presentation

The participants often contrasted TikTok and Instagram, highlighting some of the distinctive affordances of each. Such comparisons are useful for understanding what is unique about the experience of consuming content on TikTok. Johan, is an 18-year-old Swedish high-school student who likes football and is unsure about whether he wants to pursue a university degree or not. He described TikTok as primarily an entertainment platform, in contrast to Instagram, which he characterised as more of a social network. In fact, for all of the research participants, entertainment was one of the main reasons they gave for engaging with TikTok. The initial motivation to use the app is often rooted in a desire to seek entertainment and fun, overcome feelings of boredom, or disconnect from everyday pressures. For Johan, the distinction between Instagram and TikTok is as follows:

> I don't really follow anyone on TikTok cause I like the kind of anonymity, cause it gets tiring for me, at least for a while where you have every social media where everyone can see exactly what you're doing. Cause on Instagram. I post a lot of... You know, a lot of friends, followers, people I know following me, so they see what I'm doing. But [on] TikTok it's kind of being able to do whatever you want without other people looking what you like. (Johan, 18)

Social-media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook are based on public or semi-public profiles, and the establishing of connections with other users. On these platforms, users connect through known social ties and actively manage their self-presentation (boyd & Ellison, 2007). User profiles are accessible to others, and users tend to reflectively curate their online presence to present idealised representations of themselves (Baker & Walsh, 2018). Such efforts are often intended to project certain ideals in relation to widely accepted norms in society, in order to appear successful and authentic, for example. In exchange for presenting a curated version of themselves, users receive social validation in the form of comments and likes, i.e., symbolic capital. Yau and Reich (2019) demonstrated that the efforts of young people to carefully consider how to share content so as to appear both authentic and interesting can result in degrees of fatigue. Because of this, the affordances of TikTok, with its algorithmic personalisation and emphasis on content over interpersonal connections, reduces the pressure for visibility and self-presentation for users who do not upload content. As Johan stated, the perceived anonymity, the sense of not being evaluated by a social network, enhances for some the feeling of being themselves on the app.

Although TikTok retains the characteristics of a social network platform, participants tend to prefer scrolling, and algorithmic interaction is the primary means of engaging with the platform and accessing content. Participants described their use of TikTok as not revolving around promoting a personal profile to display what they do, nor following what others are doing. It is important to note, however, that Instagram and TikTok share similar features. For instance, Instagram introduced "Reels", its own version of short-video content, in response to the growing popularity of TikTok. Conversely, TikTok offers many of the same functionalities as Instagram. In this sense, the participants do not necessarily draw a distinction between the platforms, but between the practices that they perform on these platforms. As Hilal, a Turkish Master's student living in Copenhagen, noted:

> If I see what my friends posts, I need to, like, comment at it and stuff like that, and on TikTok I can be just like: "oh, I'm just going to look at a couple of videos." And I don't need to do anything because I don't have any friends on there. I'm anonymous and stuff, so I don't do anything other than maybe sending a couple of videos. (Hilal, 25)

The practices and experience of Hilal with the app, contrasted scrolling through content on the one hand, and posting and viewing and reacting to friends' stories on

the other. As Barta and Andalibi (2021) argue, the anonymity that users experience on TikTok, combined with the platform's personalised recommendations, create a sense of social acceptance and a "just be you" attitude that, in turn, supports feelings of authenticity in their engagement. Soledad, a 23-year-old Bachelor's student in radiology who spent a big part of her free time on her phone, or playing video games expressed this, emphasising that TikTok is a space for disconnection:

> Well ... I mean, Instagram is really a bit more about showing off, honestly. Like: "Okay, I check out the few things my friends did over the weekend and then I close it" or "I post a picture of my cat, show off a bit, and then I'm done." And Twitter [Now X], I use it in a more personal way... like reading what people have to say, sharing my own thoughts, or maybe catching up on more serious news. TikTok, on the other hand, is less serious in that way. It's more about disconnecting from the news, all the crap that's going on. (Soledad, 23)[22]

Soledad contrasted her use of Instagram, X, and TikTok; she described Instagram as a platform where people curate an idealised representation of their identities and everyday lives, X as a space for serious debate and news, and TikTok as a place for entertainment and disconnection. This sense of disconnection allows her, like many of the participants, to engage with TikTok without any pressure, which is fitting given she uses TikTok specifically for entertainment.

The distinction between scrolling and posting can be further articulated by Goffman's (1959) idea of *impression management.* In his dramaturgical approach, Goffman used metaphors adapted from theatrical performance to study how people develop techniques of self-presentation to manage how they are perceived by other people by selectively emphasising certain scripts and facts while concealing others, depending on the audience for whom they are "performing" (1959 p. 65). As a result, in situations where individuals are more aware of the images they present, they actively work to convey particular identities in ways that align with socially accepted norms and expectations. Managing impressions allows individuals to actively construct shared lines of action in order to maintain social relationships and present themselves as competent actors (Fine, 2021).

When participants such as Hilal, Johan, and Soledad described TikTok as feeling relatively relaxed, they conceptualise the platform as a place that does not require

[22] Appendix D: Original Quotes

active managing of self-presentation. Related to this, boyd (2010) introduced the concept of *networked publics* to describe how people interact in online environments that are characterised by a lack of physical presence. One of the characteristics of networked publics is that people establish their identities using the projection of imagined collectives, which emerge at the intersection of people, technology, and social practices. These imagined collectives affect how self-presentation is enacted on social-media platforms through the construction of user profiles. By creating a profile, users engage in acts of impression management that are intended to negotiate their identities in relation to their social connections and anticipate how they will be perceived. Through their profiles, users construct a coherent digital self that is aligned with the perceived norms of the media environment (boyd, 2008). However, for the participants of this research, TikTok functions as a space where users are less concerned with managing impressions and performing identities than on platforms that are based on networks and self-presentation. Furthermore, this reflects a mode of use that is characterised as aimless or passive. Lupinacci (2021) argues that passive scrolling, even if based on brief and fleeting interactions, is grounded in a continuous stream of TikToks that is constantly updated based on how users engage with the platform, creating an overall atmosphere of connection. Therefore, scrolling in these situations provides a familiar, low-effort affective environment without the demands of self-presentation.

While TikTok is a social media platform that involves creating, sharing, and exchanging information and ideas within virtual communities and networks (Couldry & Van Dijck, 2015), the research participants use it in a way that reduces the importance of the social-network aspect. Sociality is thus modified, from curating one's self-identity to precisely establishing and negotiating with the algorithmic agent in terms of what content is shown, and this content can then be shared with others. Gerbaudo (2024) argues that the growth of TikTok reflects a shift from what he terms the first generation of social media, characterised by networked publics, to a second generation that is defined by clustered publics. In these new social-media dynamics, users are no longer grouped through social ties, but algorithmically clustered based on shared interests. This does not imply that identity, collective processes, and social scripts are less relevant; rather, as Bhandari and Bimo (2022) suggests, in a space dominated by scrolling practices, interactions with TikTok's algorithmic agent are essential to the generation of these processes. If people's anticipations on Instagram when posting, or interacting with friends, were about other people's reactions and perceptions, in the case of the participants in this research who do not create content, it is about anticipating what they

algorithm will present. Therefore, on TikTok, the circulation of social representations during scrolling shifting toward the dynamics of interaction with the algorithm, making an analysis of these interactions and feedback loops relevant.

The argument I advance is that, in order to consider the situations that enable algorithmic interaction rituals, we must consider how interactions with TikTok's algorithm are potentially shaped by the idea that users often feel anonymous and relaxed, and that they do not engage with the platform with the intention of keeping updated about their friends. Scrolling on TikTok is an activity that is detached from any imaginary audience, and as a result the FYP is a site to express or explore different aspects, without any perceived direct scrutiny from a social network.

6.3 Situations and Transitions

An important idea that is presented in this chapter relates to the participants' descriptions of how they scroll on TikTok when between situations. Tavory (2018) argues that an interactionist understanding of social action needs to attend to how interactions unfold in the spaces between situations. For him, symbolic interactionism has tended to conceive of meaning as emerging solely in the context of interactions, ignoring how people's past habits and future anticipations affect the development of situations. Tavory exemplifies this with the case of a jazz musician who regularly plays in a small bar,[23] and whose performance might change significantly if they know that a recording studio agent is going to be in the audience. The important insight, in Tavory's view, is that temporalities — anticipations and habits — are shaped by culturally patterned understandings of what certain situations mean and what is at stake in them. Therefore, for Tavory it is crucial to analyse how meaning and action are temporally oriented. As such, any account of a situation that ignores these shared patterns fails to capture the dynamics of the situation.

Table 6.1 shows that the participants do not see TikTok as a standalone activity that is done for its own sake with the aim of enjoying the experience, similar to going to a jazz concert; rather, the app is used in a variety of situations throughout the day. Because it serves different purposes at different times, TikTok's use becomes entangled with the rhythms of everyday life. By rhythms, I refer to the

[23] Tavory's use of a jazz musician in his example is a nod to Howard Becker's work on jazz, and social interactions.

temporal structuring of social life through the spacing of routines throughout the day, which, as Zerubavel (1985) notes, creates expectations about the structure of people's environments and contributes to a broad sense of order. These rhythms are articulated through chains of actions that give everyday life its shape. Understanding the conditions under which TikTok is used can help us to outline the underpinnings of algorithmic interaction rituals, which are not confined to one situation but instead extend throughout the day. To illustrate this, let us consider how Anna, a 25-year-old Swedish informatics student who also works as a systems administrator. A systems administrator is an IT worker responsible for the setup, maintenance, and reliable operation of computer systems and networks. She uses TikTok frequently, and when I asked her about the situations in which she uses the platform, she replied:

> Usually when I wake up in the morning, just I don't know…, wake up kind of. In the evening, before I go back to bed. It's either that or reading and then during the day if I'm on the bus and I'm not listening music, I'm watching TikTok or if I'm just sitting waiting for somebody and I have my headphones on, I open the app. So, I have small moments during the day. (Anna, 25)

Anna uses TikTok during different parts of the day, beginning with her morning routine. Her engagement with the app is embedded in the rhythms of her everyday life — or, as she described it, in "small moments during the day". At night TikTok is part of her transition from the pressures of the day to rest, similar to that of Mikel and Serena discussed earlier in the chapter. She also uses TikTok when she is taking public transport to get from one place to another, and when she is waiting for someone. This suggests that TikTok is not just a source of entertainment, but shapes how she transitions into different situations and routines during her day, filling gaps and offering a sense of continuity from one situation to another. Georgia, a 21-year-old Dane attending a Højskole/ folk high school[24] during a gap year, described a similar use:

> In the evening before I go to bed … if I have time in the morning, I also use it in the morning. If I don't have any messages to answer when I wake up and check my phone, I check TikTok instead. But I don't use it every single

[24] Højskole schools offer four to six-month residential programs with a focus on self-discovery and personal development through various subjects chosen by the student. They do not have formal grading. Attending a Højskole during a gap year is a common experience in Denmark after finishing high school and before attending higher education.

> morning, and if I have, like, if I have to wait for 30 minutes or something, then I also use it. (Georgia, 21)

This response highlights how TikTok is tied to routine. In the morning she checks messages, or, if she has none, she checks TikTok, and so the latter is a habit for passing the time when there are no more important tasks for her; hence, scrolling represents a passive form of engagement. This lack of direct intentionality in terms of the use of TikTok might suggest the app's insignificance in daily life; however, the act of opening it after more important tasks have been completed reveals how embedded it is in Georgia's morning rhythm. TikTok is an activity for filling spare time until the next situation arises, and although her interaction with it is initially passive, the fact that the practice is made routine in these intermediate moments highlights its role in structuring daily life. Anna describes scrolling in the morning in a similar way, where TikTok is a habit that is not necessarily intentional, but one that she performs as part her morning ritual. When I asked her why she scrolls on TikTok in the morning, she responded:

> I have never really thought about it. Before TikTok it was Twitter or maybe it was another app. It was always something that I look or maybe I read the news. So, I automatically I take my phone and I go through it in the morning, and now I'm mostly using TikTok. then it's I don't know… cause I get, it's also that's instantaneous, you get short clips and it's fast so the gratification level is higher than any other app. (Anna, 25)

The affordances of the app, with its constant scrolling and algorithmic personalisation, make the platform a compelling instrument for maintaining continuous engagement, in order to mark the start of the day. This use of TikTok is not only shaped by individual routines, but by temporal structures that are enhanced by the platform as it helps to shape the rhythm of morning routines. As Lupinacci (2021) argues, social-media platforms like TikTok synchronise with users' everyday rhythms through the designed features of the platform. These affordances actively fill and structure morning routines. Hilal described how her preferences change depending on her activity: "If I'm in bed, I prefer shorts, shorter ones, then when I'm doing my makeup, I find myself looking for the longer ones so I can put my phone aside, and like, do my makeup or do the chores that I need to do." Affordances like notifications and streams of algorithmic recommendations cultivate a mode of being that enhances a sense of continuous connection, in which

connection is no longer merely pleasurable but coordinated through a sociotechnical environment that interacts with users to establish the rhythms of everyday life. As Anna mentioned, it is "instantaneous, you get short clips and it's fast, so the gratification level is higher than any other app." TikTok's ability to create satisfaction through algorithmic recommendations makes it an effective tool to adapt to routines and regulate the rhythm at which these routines are undertaken. Hence, observing in what situations users open the app offers insight into how TikTok is embedded in defining and adjusting social routines.

The embeddedness of TikTok within everyday rhythms becomes more visible when we examine the role of the platform during transitions. Within the rhythmic frameworks that structure everyday life, people rely on transition rituals to facilitate the passage from one situation to another. Nippert-Eng (1996) developed her theory of boundary work to study how people establish boundaries between the domains of work and home, to differentiate the identities and roles that they develop within each. The part of her theory that is particularly relevant to this research is her argument that, when people physically move from work to home, or from one situation to another, their physical bodies change location, but this physical movement is accompanied by a mental and emotional transition that demarcates the two situations. These movements are labelled transitions and function as rituals, as they prepare people in advance to move from one situation to another; they are activities and habits that help people to establish a mental distance between work and non-work time. In this sense, the transition acts help people to cognitively and emotionally manage the transition from one role to another. The liminality between roles represents a state of in-betweenness — from one ordered symbolic structure to another — that requires one or more rituals to accompany the transition (Turner, 1967).

While Nippert-Eng's work focused on work-life balance, researchers such as Van Steenbergen et al. (2018) and O'Mahony and Jeske (2019) have found that students make similar efforts to establish a distinction between studying and their personal time. The idea that I want to use from their research is that people use transition acts to demarcate and move from one role to another, and from one social setting to another. Nippert-Eng focused on how people establish boundaries between work and home. My aim is not to offer a detailed account of how TikTok use becomes ritualised to navigate these two domains and identities, but rather, on a modest scale, to show that it is used as a tool for navigating them. Although these boundaries are often invisible, they are essential to how individuals structure their environments (Zerubavel, 1993). By emphasising the act of using TikTok to demarcate different

situations, we can study how young people organise their realities by using TikTok as an entertainment source in the spaces between the tasks of everyday life. This use of TikTok can be seen as transition acts because it is used in parts of the day when there is a shift in the contexts being navigated. For example, Ewa, a 24-year-old Polish Master's student in nutrition living in Copenhagen, explained how during her Bachelor's degree studies she took the train to university:

> I was commuting by train to university, so I would spend like twenty minutes on train and when I didn't want to listen any podcast or read or I don't know, study for anything, I just wanted to chill and not think about anything. I would go on TikTok and watch some TikToks on my way. (Ewa, 24)

This use of TikTok while commuting creates a liminal space between home and university. By using TikTok to entertain herself and relax, Ewa does not use the time productively to study or listen to podcasts. TikTok thus affords her a more passive way of navigating in-between situations. Interestingly, she defined the situation as " just wanted to chill and not think." On the one hand, TikTok serves to manage and soothe her emotional state. On the other, it also shows how TikTok is used to avoid choosing. However, there is an algorithmic system making choices for the user. As Seaver (2022, p. 48) indicates, platforms use predictive analytics to make accurate decisions; "the filtering imposed by algorithmic recommendation, by contrast, appears as a form of care for overloaded subjects who, freed from the bad filters, find themselves in need of some good ones." Behind Ewa's intention to "not think about anything", TikTok's recommender system is suggesting content, i.e., she is delegating the task of finding suitable content to commute home tired from university to TikTok.

Similar patterns emerge in other transitional moments throughout the day, such as taking breaks during work or study. Scrolling during a break from studying or work creates a space where time is reclaimed as personal, in other words as private. Samantha, a 23-year-old American Master's student in anthropology who also works as a part-time barista in a coffee shop, described her use of TikTok as follows:

> At work, I'm using it kind of just pass the time on my break. I feel like I'm just mindlessly scrolling for a quick entertainment just to get me through that short window. While at home I'm kind of easing at more to relax and like, kind of distract myself from thinking about my thesis and stuff that I need to do. (Samantha, 23)

Samantha uses TikTok to cope with the tiresomeness of work, and to recharge some of the energy spent interacting with customers face to face, as a barista. The app provides a form of entertainment that functions like white noise, helping her to decompress without demanding any emotional work. By *emotional work* I refer to the work that people have to perform to manage their emotions and generate feelings that are appropriate to particular situations (Hochschild, 1979). This requires a purposeful effort to induce or suppress emotion — in the case of a barista, they must manage their emotions in a way that pleases customers. Samantha thus uses TikTok to mark structured transitions, from conducting work to focusing on herself. As Fonner and Stacher (2012) observe, work breaks enable workers to leave their work roles and enter personal roles within their workday, with the plan to re-enter the work role within a certain timeframe and manage the emotional dimension of their role

It is important to highlight that use of TikTok to delineate situations is not limited to transitions from work to home. Although TikTok can be used to re-orient users away from work routines and towards the private sphere, and vice-versa, it also facilitates other transitions, such as rituals relating to sleep or the morning, or between public and private settings. TikTok users rely on the app to establish and negotiate transitions between different spheres, roles, and routines, between obligations and desires. Many participants reported using TikTok to help them navigate transitions between tasks or emotional states. TikTok allows users to transition between roles or tasks using a device that requires minimal investment. The particular significance of TikTok in these in-between situations does not lie in its use as a transition ritual *per se*; many practices and activities — listening to music during a commute, having tea before bed, or watching TV lying in bed before falling asleep — constitute transition acts. What distinguishes TikTok is not the fact that it helps to structure transitions, but the way in which the algorithm personalises content for users during these transitions.

6.4 Pursuit of Emotional Transformation

One of the intentions of most of the participants when they scroll on TikTok is to manage and transform their emotional states. These initial conditions shape their expectations and ways in which they scroll, and the anticipations they form in relation to their interactions with TikTok's algorithm. To understand the feedback loops that users establish with TikTok, it is necessary to first understand the

departing conditions that shape them, and how users access the algorithmic interaction ritual.

A way in which TikTok is used in between situations is when the platform is used to detach from the expectations and demands of a given situation. Cohen and Taylor (1992) developed the notion of *free areas* to understand those situations in which individuals escape situations in which they would rather not be embedded. This concept is useful for understanding the relationship between entertainment, escapism, TikTok, and the rhythms of the everyday. According to Cohen and Taylor (1992, p. 112), a free area is a space or activity that provides "a genuine escape, a flight to an area in which we can temporarily absent ourselves from paramount reality, find ourselves out of play, and assemble our identity in peace or with new and more powerful symbolic resources". Therefore, free areas are essential to the structure of everyday life, because they are attempts to manage the pressures of the everyday. For Johan, TikTok works to create a bridge between social situations, and more specifically between his public and private personae:

> When I have like a lot of things to study, or maybe like there's some social event I have to go to, and I really don't want to go to… then I just look at my phone and I kind of forget about it for a second. So, you know, you have to do something about it later on. Yeah, but you can escape it a bit. (Johan, 18)

When Johan attends a social event that he does not really want to be at, he relies on TikTok to regulate his feelings. In these social situations he uses the app to self-regulate and manage tasks and activities by consuming content that is relatable to him. TikTok, being an easily accessible app that requires minimal effort, provides quick engagement that captivates users' attention. This is in contrast to activities that demand extended focus to establish a meaningful connection with the source of entertainment. In this case, scrolling on TikTok serves as a free area for Johan to balance and manage different situations and emotions, stitching and navigating the areas of work/school, which are no longer perceived as places of self-expression. Moreover, TikTok is used in anticipation of situations perceived negatively, whether it is the boredom of studying or attending a social event. Johan's daily rhythm leads him to contrast TikTok to moments of unrest or unease. This use of TikTok as a free area should influence the type of content that appears on Johan's FYP once he starts scrolling, and consequently, the feedback loops he establishes with the app.

From this perspective, TikTok helps users to create free areas by balancing the emotional requirements of obligations with escape routes, providing an experience that is more meaningful though personalised recommendations. Scrolling helps users to momentarily escape the social constraints associated with particular tasks or roles. For example, in some situations Ingrid uses TikTok in an escapist way:

> I use it for when I need a break but not a break where I need to like, uh, sleep or take a walk. But when I just, if I've been doing the same thing all day and then I need to get some other input." (Ingrid, 22)

Similarly, one of the ways Serena uses the app is also as a form of escape:

> You want something to numb and make you stop thinking about stuff. So, you can maybe chill and relax and do something absent minded. So, I would also add that. For when I want to relax. (Serena, 25)

Both participants reported that TikTok helps them to manage moments when they need to pause and disconnect. Escapism works as a coping mechanism to manage negative emotional states such as stress, anxiety, and frustration. In this way, the FYP, with its personalised recommendations, provides a space where users can pause. Because TikTok provides the user with short videos, the form of escapism is especially well-suited to managing micro moments throughout the day. Using TikTok as escapism helps users to relax and disconnect from their responsibilities — to unwind and enjoy themselves, because being entertained by TikTok is a pleasant experience. This enjoyable aspect helps to explain why so many people seek out entertainment so frequently (Vorderer, 2001). In engaging with TikTok, Serena's objective is to reorient her mood towards a more relaxed state. She wants to "stop thinking about stuff" to transition into a "chill and relax[ed]" state. These personalised "free areas" create a reordering of experience, allowing users to embody a version of the self that exists beyond the structured routines of work or study. The potential to transform and/or regulate emotional states is one of the key characteristics that draws TikTok users into the algorithmic interaction ritual. Knorr Cetina and Bruegger (2002) observed how objects also develop an important role organising temporalities by configuring and coordinating interactions and anticipations. In this sense, imaginaries about algorithms should not only account for how people think, and feel about them, but also in the different situations in which imaginaries arise.

Hilal described a similarly escapist use of TikTok. During the interview, she mentioned that her use of TikTok had changed since moving from Turkey to Denmark:

> Hilal: It's like the purpose of looking at TikTok is to get entertained and stuff like that. But now I find like it's the first thing I do in the morning, the last thing I do in the day. It's, I think it [has] increased drastically, and I think it's due to the situation, like my mental situation.
>
> David: It's because you feel you moved to a new country?
>
> Hilal: Yeah … it's stressful to be a master student.

Hilal explained that when she lived in Turkey, her use of the app was more relaxed. However, her Master's programme in Denmark was causing her stress that affects her daily rhythm. In this sense, she draws a distinction between scrolling simply for entertainment in the past, and as a form of avoidance in the present. The latter causes her to spend more time on the app, because, as a free area, TikTok has become entangled in the conditions of her everyday life. In this way, more intense feelings leading to a desire for escapism translate into more intense usage of TikTok. In our conversation, Hilal continued reflecting on how scrolling on TikTok is a response to activities she does not want to engage in because they cause her some form of discomfort:

> Since I changed the countries and moved it's more of a escapism form, and I don't really like it, but it could be because, like, I'm looking for something to escape too. I don't want to do the chores; I don't want to go to lessons. Sorry, I got TikTok. (Hilal, 25)

The question was to understand what role TikTok plays in opposing or resisting those activities that caused her discomfort. When I asked Hilal what then TikTok gives her in these situations, she replied:

> I enjoy the content. I really like seeing different fashion ideas and different makeups. And I enjoy, uh, stories on there … hearing other people's stories. And I think I actually enjoy the content [that] is on there. (Hilal, 25)

TikTok can thus be used to escape from reality by engaging with other symbolic forms, presented to users through their FYPs. Through algorithmic curation and feedback loops, TikTok and the user negotiate content that aligns with the users' needs for self-regulation and escape. In the construction of her algorithmic imaginary Hilal anticipates that she will find content aligned with her interests. One characteristic of escapism that is particularly relevant to our analysis is its capacity to provide individuals with new meanings (Thumala Olave, 2022). Hence, the platform functions as a tool to manage and reorient her emotional state through the expectations of encountering personalised content.

Similar to the use of TikTok as a free area, boredom is one of the reasons the participants gave for engaging in algorithmic interaction rituals. Through repeated scrolling, the participants express their desire to be entertained and transform how they feel. Boredom and escapism share certain similarities, but are not the same. While escapism implies a desire to avoid a particular reality, boredom reflects an absence of meaning. As such, boredom is not merely a trivial moment in everyday life, but redirects attention, prompting individuals to look for meaningful engagement. Boredom is an emotion that registers as an absence of meaning, and leads people to act towards what is meaningful to them (Barbalet, 1999). Therefore, scrolling on TikTok is related to the absence of meaning. Ewa's experience illustrates how the desire for entertainment is connected with a need to challenge boredom:

> I don't wanna say no one, but I wouldn't use TikTok, a lot when I'm happy with my friends, somewhere, doing a lot of stuff, like, in general watching TikTok is like when you're sitting in your home, bored doing nothing, or trying to do something else, like taking a break from studying, like not in exciting times. (Ewa, 24)

Ewa uses TikTok to cope with boredom when there is nothing meaningful happening in her life. she anticipates that TikTok will be able to counteract her boredom. Whereas Johan previously described TikTok as a way to escape social activities not perceived as pleasurable, Ewa presents a view where she does not believe anyone would use TikTok in joyful situations with friends. As Tavory (2018) notes, understanding any situation requires an understanding of both imaginaries of the future and anticipations of what would happen next. Thus, imaginations of what TikTok is or does, are generated in contrast to other situations in everyday life.

The experience of boredom is shaped by the way it is socially constructed. Boredom tends to be treated by society as a failing of an individual, a personality trait that suggests an inability to focus due to the overstimulation of post-modernity, rather than a consequence of the social environment in which we live (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992). However, when people open TikTok to escape boredom and access entertaining content, they do so in a specific cultural context. Cohen and Taylor (1992) assert that the daily experience of boredom appears when people fall into patterned routines and rituals in their everyday lives that are not fresh and novel. Boredom is thus a functional state that reenergises people to (re)establish meaning by pursuing new activities, and works as a catalyst for action (Finkielsztein, 2023). Sociologically, boredom is best understood as a constructed emotion that is embedded in cultural contexts, and that influences the interactions and situations that people experience as meaningful, as well as the opportunities and tools with which they act on them (Ohlmeier et al., 2020). The distractions that TikTok provides are central to navigating and managing emotions, as well as maintaining momentum between tasks. A central question, then, is: what are the conditions that allow TikTok users to experience and navigate boredom differently as compared to other forms of entertainment? Sofia, a 24-year-old, sustainability consultant who spends more than an hour a day commuting on the train offers some insight:

> If I don't have to spend time looking for things I like but I just get them in front of me. I'm like: "Why not?"" … "I'm using TikTok not to get information but to do something when I'm extremely bored. I'm very happy if I just get stuff I like and I don't have to look for things I like because if I'm using it in that moment it feels like I don't have to look for things I like. (Sofia, 24)

Sofia argues that the ability of TikTok to deal with boredom lies in the relevance of its recommendations, which provides entertainment without requiring much effort from the user. Boredom involves an absence of meaning, and TikTok's recommender system directs users towards meaningful engagement. As Sofia put it: "If I'm opening [the app] it means that I'm really really bored and I don't have anything better to do." TikTok, and the experience of interacting with it as an algorithmic agent, thus has a central role in redirecting users during moments marked by a lack of meaningful engagement. Sofia continued by contrasting TikTok with other, more serious, forms of engaging with information, and expressed an awareness of filter bubbles and how algorithmic recommendations can reinforce

specific worldviews. She views her use of TikTok as unproblematic since TikTok is primarily a source of entertainment for her, i.e., it functions as a banal means of escaping boredom. Moreover, in a similar case to Ewa's train commute described in the previous section, she is satisfied delegating her choices to TikTok's algorithm, because she knows she will get content that she likes.

Ewa and Sofia use TikTok when nothing exciting is happening, and so TikTok is a means to find joy or become curious about or interested in the content they are recommended. When users turn to TikTok for entertainment they are looking for meaningful experiences, and whether this involves novelty, fun, or relatability, they expect it to fall within the scope of their symbolic universes. In contrast to the thinking of some modern scholars, who see boredom in society as a result of the overstimulation of modernity (Biceaga, 2006), for young TikTok users TikTok's "overstimulation machine" is used to look for meaning when meaning stagnates.

Precisely, a reason to lose attention is content that is deemed repetitive. For instance, Sofia—one of the participants who screen-recorded her TikTok algorithmic interaction ritual before her interview—encountered several TikToks about the Titanic tourism submarine implosion that occurred on June 18, 2023. In reviewing her recording, I noticed that she initially watched a full TikTok explaining the accident. However, after this first engagement, she began skipping subsequent TikToks on the same topic indicating a sharp decline of interest in the incident.

> David: Do you feel that receiving certain content like the Titanic one make you close the app?
>
> Sofia: No because I was in the train and I was still more bored and I… hahaha… I kept watching the app. But I was a bit. I didn't feel entertained I was also bored using TikTok. Because after two videos always about the submarine … Then, ok I got the information I don't want another video always repeating the same things.

This capacity to transform boredom into another emotional state defines the potential of interactions with TikTok's algorithm to transform emotional states. Moreover, it highlights how situational conditions of use sustain the dynamics of interaction. A way to understand Sofia's boredom is starting to unpack the concept of algorithmic ritual interaction (a topic explored in full detail in the following chapter). In that situation, Sofia was scrolling on the train, and some of the content became repetitive, that repetitiveness generated boredom in her. In this way,

TikTok's inability of generating entertainment was creating undesired friction (Ruckenstein, 2023) in the interaction between Sofia and TikTok's algorithm. Novelty turned into a sense of repetition; once this happens, if TikTok continues to recommend the same content without creating a connection, rejection and boredom occur, leading to a failure to capture the user's attention. In María's response to my question about whether she closed the app highlights that, in order to understand how users interact with TikTok, it is also necessary to consider the situations in which they do so. In this case, the boredom of being on the train outweighed the repetitiveness of TikToks explaining why a submarine had imploded.

Studying TikTok as a platform that people turn to in search of entertainment requires a focus on the mechanisms by which the sociotechnical sources of meaning come into action. The dynamics of meaning are formed when young people want to be entertained and escape boredom. The potential of TikTok to transform boredom or provide escapism, leading users towards more pleasant — or at least less intensely unpleasant — emotions is key to understanding why users open the app at different moments throughout the day. Personalised recommendations on TikTok are essential for constructing curated social meaning for individuals. The feedback loops generated through interactions on the FYP create a continuous cycle in which user preferences and algorithmic recommendations drive users to scroll, negotiating the potential to transform emotional states.

6.5 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter we have explored the integration of TikTok in users' daily routines and emotional landscapes. This section has provided a contextual foundation for the idea that algorithmic interaction rituals do not emerge in a vacuum. Different platforms offer distinct affordances, hence the relationship between the user and algorithm is shaped by expectations, practices, and affective dispositions that are specific to each context. Just as different rituals, such as parties (Tutenges, 2022), sexual encounters (Collins, 2004), and church services (Draper, 2014), can produce collective effervescence, the underlying conditions, motivations, and social norms that shape these interactions vary. Algorithmic interaction rituals are context-dependent and shaped by TikTok's affordances and users' motivations, and this allows us to describe the interactions that users have with TikTok's recommender system. In this sense, although collective effervescence, understood as an intersubjective phenomenon, is not present in algorithmic interaction rituals,

studying the moments in which TikTok manages to reverse these initial situations — the very conditions that bring people to the platform— highlight the capacity of the ritual to produce positive feelings.

While TikTok is often perceived as an app that is focused on light entertainment, such as dances and silly trends, the platform's affordances and the contexts in which users engage with it shape much more complex interactions than this picture would suggest. Unlike other social-media platforms, TikTok places less emphasis on self-presentation and curating a self-image. The "be yourself" attitude encourages users to scrolls without thinking about how they will be perceived, and to focus on content that interests them rather than on managing their self-image. This distinctive focus on users' interests instead of manufactured authenticity contributes to the app's transitional role in the daily routines of users, particularly in moments that fall between activities. Users particularly appreciate the low effort required to scroll through TikTok, which makes it a helpful tool for managing daily shifts in mood and social roles. Hence, any analysis of the interactions that users have with the app must take into account the situations in which users rely on the platform. These transitions are marked by underlying feelings of boredom and escapism, which contrast with TikTok's capacity to entertain and temporarily redirect users away from moments that are empty of meaning. TikTok serves as a free area where young TikTok users escape disaffection, stress, and the pressures of work and studies. The platform also helps users to reorient their attention in situations of boredom. Here, novelty is relevant provided it aligns with the expectations regarding novelty of the user; if not, novelty turns again into boredom.

The situations that lead to algorithmic interaction rituals are characterised by the following conditions: lack of pressure about what others might think, a desire to manage everyday routines and transitions, and the transformative potential to reorient affective states. Bengtsson and Johanssen (2022) found similar findings regarding the ways in which social media becomes embedded in the everyday routines of Swedish young people. Social media is used in ritualised way in a ritualised way to demarcate different moments of the day, to fill empty slots and to foster and to regulate certain desired emotional states throughout everyday situations. Their research highlights the importance of understanding how people imagine and interpret social media use through their everyday life by incorporating it into their daily rhythms. This condition is important for understanding human–algorithm interactions.

We have thus outlined the conditions that shape how TikTok users interact with the platform; the next chapter establishes the foundations of the algorithmic

interaction ritual. Algorithmic agents are increasingly important in participating in the circulation of content. Since algorithms (re)act, at least in part, to human inputs, understanding the specificities of human–algorithm interactions can explain how the sociotechnical sources of meaning come into action when young people seek to be entertained, to escape, or to overcome the boredom that emerges in their everyday lives.

7 Algorithmic Interaction Rituals: Attention and Vibes

In an overpopulated digital space, platforms, influencers, advertisers, and content compete for the scarce attention of individuals, creating a new attention economy (Pedersen et al., 2021). To succeed, platforms use algorithmic recommendations that are designed to attract the attention of users. TikTok is no different in this, with its endless stream of videos, in response to which users constantly make decisions regarding what content they want to see. To understand how a trend such as "very mindful, very demure",[25] a compilation of football goals, or a TikTok about makeup tricks capture attention, we must analyse the ongoing interactions between users and TikTok's recommender system. In this chapter, I discuss in detail the concept of the algorithmic interaction ritual (AIR). This provides a way to unpack the structure of patterned interactions between users and algorithmic agents on TikTok, and to explore how the ways in which these interactions unfold influences both the content users engage with and their experience of the app.

This chapter has two primary aims: first, to use the lens of AIR to examine feedback loops on TikTok. Users and the algorithm continuously negotiate regarding which content captures their attention. This negotiation is guided by the "vibes" and resonances that content conveys to users. In using this lens, I highlight that, in an economy filled with constant stimuli, users rely on vibes as situational cues to anticipate and decode the meanings of TikToks. These affective resonances and symbolic dynamics create spaces of attention within the feedback loops between users and TikTok.

Second, I outline a model that details the various stages involved in scrolling on TikTok, and the resultant feedback loops. Describing the contours of AIRs enables us to study how users and TikTok's recommender system — the algorithmic

[25] This viral TikTok trend created by @joolieannie emerged by surprise in the Summer of 2024. The trend appeared as a response to "Brat Summer." Whereas "Brat Summer" suggested a carefree, party-girl attitude; "very mindful, very demure" conveyed restraint and modesty; being demure is being is reserved, modest, and shy. The creator displays in an ironic way a performance of femininity and a soothing voice to question the obsession with luxury.

agent— develop a mutual focus of attention, and synchronise through the FYP. By developing this model, I examine each part of the process and account for the contingencies and variations that influence whether scrolling is a successful or unsuccessful activity. The conditions for a successful AIR are similar to those for human interactions in Randall Collins's (2004) theory: *copresence*, *boundaries to outsiders*, *mutual focus of attention*, and *synchronisation*. However, the relationship between algorithmic agents and humans requires certain unique conditions; when these are met, users tend to remain on the platform for longer, as the interactions provide the best emotional energy payoff for them.

The chapter is organised in the following manner. First, I define how vibes function as the meeting point for the AIR between user and algorithm. Second, I begin to describe the different elements of AIR, starting with how users recognise TikTok's algorithm as a legitimate agent for discovering content. Third, I analyse how cultural capital is key to establishing boundaries. I then describe what mutual focus of attention between user and algorithm entails. Finally, I conclude by examining what synchronisation between user and algorithm involves, as well as cases in which the ritual is disrupted.

This approach prompts us to consider whether traditional sociological theories are capable of addressing new realities. To explore this, I expand on traditional topics of interest for symbolic interactionism — interactions, expectations, anticipations, norms, cultural capital, and meaning-making — in order to study what captures and maintains user attention. Hence, this chapter demonstrates the value of AIRs for understanding algorithmic feedback loops in the context of algorithmic societies.

7.1 Vibes as Entry Point

If most users start using TikTok as a source of entertainment, to overcome boredom and provide escapism, this does not explain how TikTok manages to capture their attention, or how users scroll on the app. From an outside perspective, looking at someone else's FYP means seeing a continuous stream of random and disconnected TikToks, which can be challenging to interpret and make sense of. In the constant stream of TikTok after TikTok, and topic after topic, users generally spend only a short time deciding whether to engage with or skip any given TikTok. Soledad, who screen-recorded and shared her TikTok sessions with me, at one point had the following stream of TikToks: the first was a clip of a popular streamer discussing

and defending the use of gender-neutral pronouns in response to a controversy in Spain, following one of the country's largest streamers making a negative comment on the topic. This was followed by a stitch with a man exasperatedly saying "Leave me alone, not again" swearing in response swearing to another TikToker's question of "What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear this song?" while playing the first few bars of the song using a guitar.

The next was a TikTok featuring a restaurant scene where a waiter, dressed as a killer clown, playfully dragged a customer along in her chair, to the amusement of her friends and onlookers. The restaurant was run by a team of waiters dressed in horror costumes, and so the TikTok combined comedy and horror with the restaurant experience. The stream continued with a nostalgic clip from a series of late 1990s cartoons, with the caption "Who remembers this?"

Finally, there was a TikTok showing a woman recording her young daughter having breakfast. While the daughter drinks a glass of milk with apologetic but funny eyes, the woman laughingly narrates that her daughter had to bring a "Calamardo" to school as part of her homework. "Calamardo" is the Spanish translation for the character Squidward from *Spongebob Squarepants*. So, the woman printed a couple of images of Squidward out. However, the daughter actually had to bring a "calamar" — in English, a squid — to class.

This example shows how TikTok exposes users to a wide variety of content, often unrelated, prompting rapid, affective responses as users decide whether to engage with or scroll past each TikTok. If we consider these five TikToks, each conveys different emotions: the first combines anger about misgendering with validation and satisfaction, three have a fun and playful tone, and the fifth evokes nostalgia. In this sense, the platform fosters a sense of immediacy and ephemerality which, through the algorithm, connects users, trends, and affective responses, rather than linking users to existing social connections, as other platforms do (Hurley, 2023). A way to understand how users engage with TikTok is through the vibes that a particular TikTok generates in a user. As Soledad summarised:

> Once my boyfriend asked me: "How do you decide which TikTok to watch?" And I said, I don't know, I know when I'm watching it, but there's no pattern like saying, "Oh, if the video starts this way, I watch it, and if it starts that way, I don't." So, it's more like the vibe it gives me... It's more like the feeling I get when I see the video, but it's clear within one or two seconds sometimes. So, I guess it depends on how it starts, on what the description is like

> sometimes. But I don't know, I really don't know what it depends on when I decide to watch it or not. (Soledad, 24)[26]

We can thus see how difficult it is for users to verbalise why they engage with, or what captures their attention in, a particular TikTok. A "vibe" is a combination of symbolic, aesthetic, and contextual elements (Brown et al., 2024), and in Soledad's case influences which content attracts her attention. Users skip those videos that do not immediately resonate with them, seem random and arbitrary, or where the impression or affective response, such as a small laugh or frown, quickly fades away. Soledad's thinking is not unique; when I asked other participants why they liked particular TikToks, they generally expressed their preferences based on a kind of "sense". This sense-making process is less about explicit reasoning and more about a felt, immediate reaction. As Georgia said, "you have to catch my attention within the first two seconds." TikTok is a fast environment, not just because the videos themselves are short, but because users are aware that the next TikTok could be more engaging. Georgia continued by saying that "sometimes I've just been scrolling, hearing the first two seconds, scrolling again." In this sense, scrolling is guided by vibes, because there is no time to evaluate and reflect on the content of every TikTok.

Vibes work by providing a sense of direction for users on why they like something. When I asked Georgia to define what a "vibe" represents she said "it has to be like nice to watch, like the aesthetic, I like the lighting." She defines something with a good vibe as something nice to watch, emphasising in the aesthetics. In this sense, vibes encapsulate the (elusive) feelings or instincts that inform users whether a TikTok is relevant or boring, and the sensory elements that shape their online experiences and responses.

Figure 7.1 shows two different captions with two different affective atmospheres. The image on the left is from a TikTok in which a woman prepares a cup of coffee as part of a peaceful morning routine after a September rainstorm. The creator describes enjoying their cup of coffee and the smell of fresh grass and the drops of water still dripping from the leaves. One of the most popular comments reads: "Such cozy vibes 😍Meanwhile it's still 30° here 🥵😩". The image to the right is from a TikTok in which a party of people are dancing, jumping, and singing a song at very loudly. The most liked comments read "Put down the cellphones and feel the vibe" and "If this was the vibe in every club I would go out every weekend".

[26] Appendix D: Original Quotes

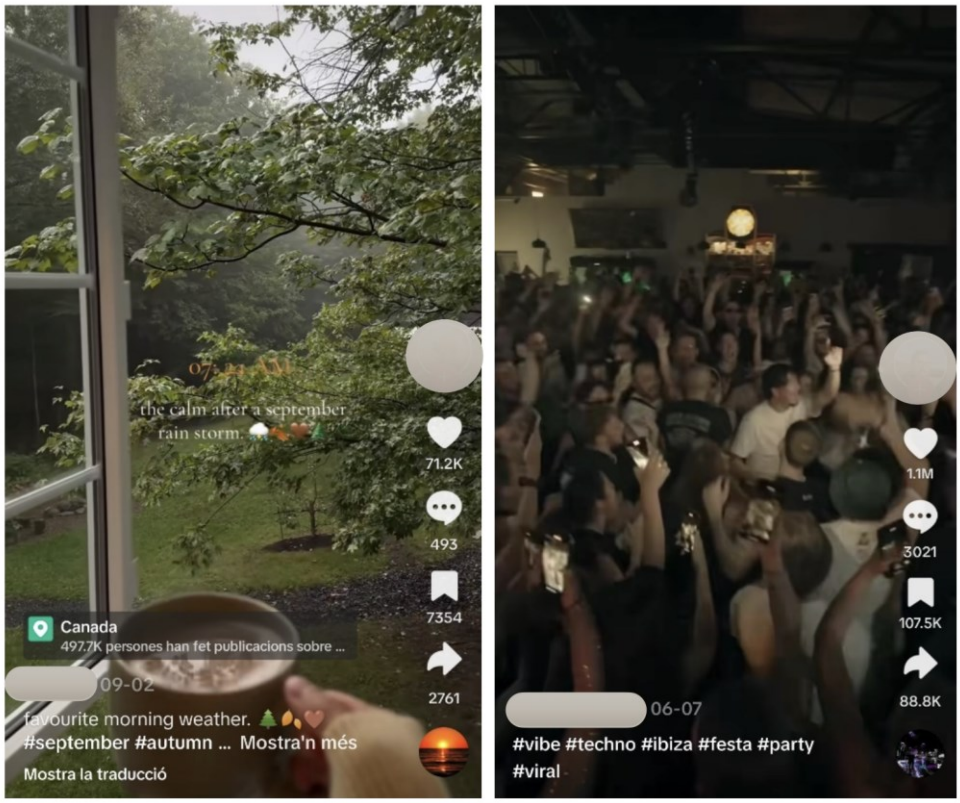

Figure 7.1. Vibes comments (2024)

Vibes connect with collective meanings and feelings. They are shaped by collective definitions, rituals, and cultural references that people and groups engage with. For example, the vibe of a coffee after a storm is connected with ideas of coziness and slow life. Slow life is a movement that has gained traction among the urban middle class, and involves taking time to savour life, valuing personal relationships, destressing, and avoiding the pressures of modern life (Lamb, 2019). Thus, enjoying a cup of coffee after a storm contrasts with the fast pace of life in cities, promoting feelings of coziness, warmth, and calmness. In her comment, the user seems to make reference to this. Interestingly she contrasts the vibe of the TikTok with a complaint regarding the temperature where she lives. The vibe that the coffee cup evokes relates to a particular positive mood which the user seems to desire. The comments on the other TikTok refer to vibes as a desire that is embraced by the effervescence of the situation, and the idea of a good party (Tutenges, 2022). Vibes are thus connected to collective definitions of situations and represent a sense, gut feeling,

or intuition that serves as an automatic means of classifying content and directing attention towards particular TikToks.

Vibes are not, however, limited to video features, and can extend to audio. During the interview with Ewa, I asked her to show me how she scrolled on TikTok. However, that particular interview was held in a crowded coffee shop, with very loud background noise. While Ewa was scrolling, she highlighted the difficulty of engaging with content due to the importance of audio on TikTok:

> David: Could you keep scrolling until you see something you like?
>
> Ewa: It's hard, like I can't hear the music
>
> David: So music is important for you?
>
> Ewa: …or hearing people's voices and how it sounds, if it's grabbing your attention or not, sometimes someone's voice can be annoying so I'm not wanna watch it.

For Ewa, as for Georgia (who said "Sometimes I've just been scrolling, hearing the first two seconds, scrolling again,"), sound is important in determining the relevance of a TikTok, and guides her attention by intersecting with visual elements. An annoying voice results in rejection because it generates a sense of irrelevance that does not correspond to her assumptions. As Zeng and Abidin (2021) found, the continuous flow of videos across a variety of content genres and topics requires that users be attuned to very specific audio memes, by quickly learning their templates and applying this knowledge in order to identify the various viral trends. Audio is essential on the platform because it enables users to recognise and engage with content immediately. When a sensory cue such as sound is inaccessible, it is difficult to discern whether a TikTok is relevant to a user [in terms of capturing their attention].

Having explored how users engage with TikTok, it becomes clear that vibes are important for understanding what captures the attention of users and subsequent interactions with the algorithm. Scrolling requires vibes, which can manifest as a particular sound, a familiar image, aesthetic style, a mood, in short, anything that potentially can capture attention. They function as entry points for user engagement with TikTok content. In a way, they make content "feel right." Any information that a user perceives is qualified through vibes as TikToks are filled with affective

meaning (Hautea et al., 2021). As such, senses act as an entry point into interaction. When vibes do not resonate and users only skip TikToks, a person could close the app. In the following sections, I will describe a model that incorporates the necessary components to understand users-algorithmic feedback loops, where vibes serve as key elements in capturing attention and navigating such interactions.

7.2 Users and Algorithmic Agents

As a ritual, scrolling on TikTok combines various elements, or ingredients, that produce distinct levels of intensity and result in different outcomes as regards emotional energy, moral frameworks, and solidarity. The use of the AIR model enables us to examine each part of the scrolling ritual, and how the techno-social underpinnings of intersubjectivity develop during algorithmic encounters. By supporting this theoretical perspective with empirical evidence, I illustrate how AIR helps us to study human–algorithm interactions.

Copresence is the first element of Collins's theory that has been adapted to algorithmic encounters. A user engaging in an AIR with a TikTok involves the algorithm tailoring content based on the predicted interests of the user. Copresence, as an initial requirement of the ritual, depends on the existence of an interaction between the user and the algorithm, and on the mutual awareness that they are engaging with each other.

Feedback loops between the user and TikTok's algorithm are at the root of content recommendations. Although the algorithm has no physical presence, users engage with or skip content in relation to the circulation of content that the algorithm enables. Users are not blind to the nature of algorithmic recommendations; they know that their interactions with TikTok's recommender system influence what content they see. The Oxford English Dictionary defines copresence as "presence together; the state or fact of being co-present." (OED, 2024). Every participant acknowledged and recognised the agentic role of the algorithm on the platform. For instance, Sofia possesses algorithmic awareness that she is interacting with an algorithm, and she is conscious that her engagement influences the type of content she receives, altering in one way or another her TikTok experience. She understands that TikTok's algorithm sometimes recommends her content in a repetitive way, saying "I guess it's less trained on my TikTok and on things I do like, and I want to watch." I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by "less trained", and she continued:

> According to what I watch and how much time I've spent watching some kind of video, or if I liked it or if I shared it. I guess the algorithm knows if it's something I like or it's something I don't like. I guess if I get something and I pass to the next one immediate, I guess the algorithm know "Ok, she doesn't care about this kind of videos." (Sofia, 24)

During the interviews, the participants frequently referred to "the algorithm" or "TikTok" to make sense of their interactions with the platform and the circulation of content. While some participants, such as Serena and Mikel, who work in computational fields, demonstrated higher levels of algorithmic literacy than others, there were no participants without a basic awareness that, in an abstract sense, an algorithm is determining the content they see. In this sense, participants' algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2018) revealed a form of algorithmic knowledge, generally consolidated through scrolling practices. Precisely, the active recognition of the algorithm's presence is what makes scrolling on TikTok a ritual. Despite the algorithm's lack of "human" bodily presence, its presence is felt on FYPs through the interactions with the smartphone's touchscreen. My argument suggests that an AIR occurs not merely because the user and TikTok algorithm are present in the same interaction space, nor just because of the theoretical insights into the computational workings of algorithms. In other words, the algorithm is understood as a legitimate agent which users engage with to receive relevant content.

In Mikel's case, the data analyst that shares the TikTok account with her girlfriend, we can observe how he is also aware that he is interacting with an algorithm. Mikel recognises how since he moved with his partner Serena, TikTok has started acknowledging his presence on the platform.

> Definitely it's a joint account. The more time we spend living together the more her algorithm and the content adapts to things that I also want to see, [things that] we do use… (Mikel, 25)

Mikel expressed that the longer he uses his partner's TikTok account, the better the algorithm understands his interests. Here we see also a degree of recognition regarding the presence of the algorithm; not only is Mikel visible to the algorithm, in that the algorithm is able to pick up the data points indicating the new presence, but Mikel recognises the presence and role of the algorithm in the circulation of content. Furthermore, he recognises that the algorithm is, in turn, recognising him in his partner's account. To users, algorithms are visible when they act over them or

through them (Lomborg & Kapsch, 2020). Even if users do not know how algorithms technically work, "they relate to them and incorporate them into their daily lives through specific sets of practices, actions, and skills" (Siles, 2023, p. 5). User recognition of the roles of algorithms in shaping the nature of recommendations clearly shows that copresence is an element of AIRs. Users acknowledge that entertainment on TikTok requires interaction with an algorithm. This acknowledgement of the role of TikTok's algorithm is a form of social legitimation of it, as a social agent that circulates content. This on the basis that when an agent becomes socially visible, its role is recognised (Brighenti, 2007).

Anticipations and expectations regarding the algorithm are translated into how users interact on TikTok. One of the biggest debates around technology and IRT is whether digitally mediated technology can produce successful interaction rituals. The main point of contention is the idea of copresence, in that the presence of other actors shapes and influences individual behaviour (Collins, 2020). The debate centres on two main arguments. First, IRT traditionally requires the physical copresence of participants in the encounter, and second, those participants must be human. In Chapter 4, I presented the main arguments the two sides use to support and deny the ability of algorithms to participate in successful rituals, with much of the debate relating to whether successful rituals need face-to-face encounters between interacting humans. However, even when there is lack of human presence, intentionality, and any type of human awareness, algorithms are perceptibly present to TikTok users.

The participants described an awareness of their interactions with the algorithm, and how this affects their experiences on the app. Maria, a 29-years.old Master's student in organisations, shared that she enjoys content about dogs, but not just any type of dog content; she only engages with content featuring cute dogs such as puppies. She explained that content with a "sad vibe" prompts her to skip those videos.

> Watching puppies makes me happy. Why? Because, if you notice, I watch videos of puppies, but I don't see any videos of shelter dogs or rescue cases, because I can't handle it! That really depresses me. So, I've got used the algorithm. So no, I don't watch anything that makes me sad. I only watch things that make me happy, and if not, I skip them quickly. (Maria, 29)[27]

[27] Appendix D: Original Quotes

Maria is positively affected when content featuring cute dogs appears on her FYP, and negatively affected when content featuring abandoned or stray dogs does. More importantly, she is aware that this distinction is directly related to how she engages with the platform's algorithm. As a consequence, her interactions guide the algorithm towards her desired outcome; she has essentially trained it to recommend content featuring cute dogs that makes her happy, and not recommend depressing stories about dogs in shelters. This awareness implies a recognition of the algorithm's influence on her content consumption. Campos-Castillo and Hitlin (2013) have theorised that the old definition of physical copresence, as a product of a person's entrainment to another and that person's perception of reciprocal entrainment, has evolved. They propose that copresence now encompasses the extent to which individuals perceive themselves to be engaged in social interactions, whether that interaction is with another human or with a computer. What is crucial here is the degree to which a person perceives mutual entrainment, as this can occur in a physical space or be mediated through digital technology.

This bidirectional awareness also translates into how TikTok users interact on the app. During the periods I have been immersed in the app, I have noted the tendency of other users to comment on TikToks and express sentiments such as "my algorithm knows me better than myself", "algorithm brings me back with update", i.e., "bring" as an imperative - an instruction to the algorithm to update them, "OK algorithms. Show me the colosseum cats! 🐈". For instance, on a TikTok is a TikTok about having a good partner but wanting to breakup because there lacks connection, on user wrote: "How does my fyp know98".

These comments reveal that users recognise the FYP as a point of encounter with TikTok's algorithm. Users deploy their reflexive capacity by subjectivising algorithms, and negotiating their own agency in relation to the perceived qualities of the algorithm and its functioning in shaping content circulation (Swart, 2021), by showing that they expect the algorithm to respond. Moreover, they represent instances where people recognise algorithms not through the disruptions they cause, but through the desire to stay connected.

If copresence is a prerequisite for successful rituals, my research shows that users are affected by the actions of the algorithm. TikTok users express an awareness of the fact that the algorithm actively shapes their viewing experiences. Whether awareness of the algorithm leads users establish successful interactions with the algorithmic agent, frictional ones, or ignore its influence is the focus of AIR. The next section discusses the second element of the ritual: the establishment of boundaries to outsiders.

7.3 Personalisation as a Boundary

The second element, or ingredient, of successful AIRs is the establishing of *boundaries to outsiders*. Boundaries are a central element of sociology, since they determine how groups demarcate and define themselves and others. Barriers can be physical, such as those inside a church to distinguish who is attending a service from those outside the building, but they can also be symbolic. Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorise people, practices, and even time and space (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). For example, a man and a woman attending a Catholic church service wearing a tank top, shorts, and a miniskirt, would likely be ostracised during the church service, even if they were physically inside the church, due to not adhering to the norms related to dress (Hammond, 2005).

In order to function successfully, rituals require the construction of an "us vs. them" feeling. On TikTok, this sense of inclusion and exclusion is achieved through personalisation, wherein the platform's algorithm tailors content based on the user's preferences. In doing so it creates a boundary between the user, and their curated experience, and other users, who do not enjoy such content if it does not align with their interests. This personalised feedback loop helps to define a user's digital space, reinforcing their participation in a specific AIR while excluding irrelevant or undesirable content. One of the main appeals of algorithmic recommendations for platforms is personalisation (Seaver, 2017), as this establishes a unique centre of attention for each individual, allowing the platform to monetise user engagement. By default, engaging with TikTok implies that any user will receive content tailored to their interests, and conversely, personalised content to another person would fail to attract the former user to the app and capture them. Thus, personalisation is the basis for defining the algorithmic interaction ritual of scrolling, as it sets boundaries that delineate the user's curated experience, in terms of the distinction between content that does and does not attract them.

In the case of Mikel and Serena, the couple sharing a TikTok account, personalisation implies barriers to outsiders. Their case starts to illustrate how personalization functions as a boundary, as it describes the tensions that emerge when two people share an account who, although they may have affinities, do not share the same tastes and interests. Mikel and Serena portray themselves as a couple with a deep affinity; during our conversation, they expressed similar political views and interests. For example, when they were showing me how they scroll on TikTok, both laughed at a TikTok combining images of Taylor Swift with a metal song, and

at another of the video-game character Pikmin dancing to a Blink-182 pop-punk song. They share similar cultural and humour cues, and convey that they are a couple with enough trust to share a TikTok account. Nevertheless, throughout our conversation it was clear that Serena's account was populated by content that was not entirely relevant to her:

> I mean we've discussed it lately. I was like, because I would watch something and he'll be like "ohh I'm not interested in that, let's scroll to a car" … this is not my TikTok account anymore. I feel it has more stuff that you like (Mikel) and I don't spend enough time on the content that I prefer. So yeah, we were chatting about that … and I mean … It has made TikTok a little less interesting, having to see content that is not meant for me, but it's not like that big of a deal. You can just ignore it and go to the next thing that would probably be more interesting. (Serena, 25)

When I asked Serena about sharing an account with her boyfriend, she said that the presence of a second person, Mikel, in her account had transformed her recommendations, and that they had become less interesting. This shows that in order for users to enjoy recommendations, successful interactions between user and algorithm depend on sharing the same cultural references such as lifestyles, humour or aesthetics taste. Personalisation "involves rendering something personally relevant to an individual" (Kant, 2020, p. 59). Therefore, despite their closeness, what is relevant to and interesting for Mikel is not necessarily for Serena. A barrier is constructed based on the simple logic that content tailored to User A will not necessarily engage User B. While there are no restrictions for users to engage with content that is not for them, without some degree of symbolic stock and shared cultural alignment, users will not become involved participants in scrolling. The boundaries established through the personalisation of content create an insider relationship between the user and the algorithm based on relevance, interests, and taste.

> Once, my TikTok I think reinstalled itself and it became, it started giving me this Hungarian stupid people on TikTok all the time, and I'm like: "What happened to my for you page? just give it back!" hahaha (Emma, 26)

Emma, a 26 years-old Hungarian unemployed architect who recently completed a master's degree in landscape architecture, described the consequence of disruption

of her FYP as frustration, because the specific elements that made her FYP interesting and engaging disappeared. Moreover, she defined this uninteresting content as involving "Hungarian stupid people", setting an explicit boundary regarding content not aligned with her cultural capital. The construction of the ritual is not solely defined by the logic of personalisation, as shared cultural dispositions, aesthetics, and symbols play an important role demarcating "us" vs. "them".

Cultural capital, a concept that was developed by Bourdieu (1984), helps us to examine the meanings and symbols that distinguish a successful ritual from a failed one. While Bourdieu focused on the relationship between cultural capital, lifestyles, and the symbolic struggles around legitimate forms of taste, my focus is on how a shared vocabulary creates a boundary between the user and the algorithm on the one hand, and everyone else on the other. A broader conceptualisation of cultural capital understands the concept in terms of "inculcated familiarity and ease with abstract, valued modes of knowledge, that is, intelligence or culturedness" (Atkinson, 2010, p. 45). This includes learned and embodied propensities and dispositions, such as mannerisms, postures, accents, and language, which also translate into preferences relating to lifestyle, aesthetics, and taste. Davies and Rizk (2018) have described cultural capital as essential for successful participation in any set of interaction rituals. Cultural capital is the resource that facilitates interactions within any group, through shared knowledge of basic vocabularies, concepts, styles, and sacred objects. They illustrate this with the example of a Christian sect, where cultural capital is translated into the ability to recite the scriptures, and of an inner-city street gang, where it involves an ability to code-switch, signal toughness, interpret gang emblems, and convincingly engage in "street talk" when necessary.

In the context of algorithmic encounters, personalisation is successful when feedback loops allow the user and the algorithm to negotiate and converge on a shared language. This language is built upon similar levels of cultural capital. The algorithm thus provides content that aligns with the cultural capital of the particular user, while the user possesses the cultural knowledge needed to decode and engage with specific memes, aesthetic styles, humour and cultural references. For instance, when Emma's account was reset, all the cultural capital circulating in her feedback loop disappeared, and her not being able to recognise herself in the content presented on her FYP created frustration. In describing her content as "stupid Hungarian people", she did something common among those who perceive themselves as having a highbrow taste. Friedman and Kuipers (2013) indicate how people with higher education may use humour to classify those who enjoy lowbrow cultural forms harshly "as idiots" to manifest their lack of cultural awareness. The moment

of disruption not only reaffirmed her commitment to certain cultural forms—by confronting her with representations she deemed inappropriate—but also revealed how human-algorithm interactions articulate around the circulation of meanings that align between them. This also happened to Samantha, who was puzzled when her FYP suddenly stopped providing her with recommendations that were interesting for her:

> It'll be like really, really, curated. But now it's like, it'll just throw in like random stuff, like american football, or like football, random sports that I'm not interested, handball, sometimes random Danish children's TikToks (Samantha, 23)

She contrasted the usual rhythm of personalised recommendations, which she felt were curated for her, with generic and random ones. American football, football, and handball do not align with her tastes, therefore the aesthetics and knowledge encompassed in the content on her FYP related to something strange, which generated negative feelings in her. The recommender system, as an algorithmic agent, is thus a cultural intermediary through which cultural capital legitimises and translates particular forms of culture into everyday cultural encounters (Gaw, 2022).

The interpellation that algorithms generate is not a unidirectional relationship; rather, it relies on negotiations around a shared language to orient the feedback loops. Through their interactions, users are also able to guide TikTok's algorithm, participating in the creation of feedback loops imbued with desired cultural capital. Shared symbols on the app, such as liking and skipping, function as indicators of successful rituals. During the interview with Johan he mentioned that he enjoys music and fashion, and his FYP reflects these interests. More importantly, he noted that his music and fashion preferences had recently changed:

> I would say if my style changes, my clothing style, my music style, then I would start to not like those sorts of posts that I used to like. And then I would, you know, press like on the new post that I like, and then they would very quickly, quickly change that. (Johan, 18)

Thus, the recommendations on Johan's FYP help him to cultivate his lifestyle, and by liking and skipping posts, he signals to the algorithm his disinterest in a particular style of fashion. This illustrates the core of an AIR: as Johan experiences lifestyle changes, he skips posts that do not resonate with his evolving tastes, while actively

liking ones that do. Consequently, TikTok adapts to these new feedback loops, adjusting its recommendations to better reflect Johan's tastes. This process creates boundaries defined by cultural capital and the symbols that guide user interactions, such as likes, shares, and skips. The process of boundary-making is a necessary component for a successful algorithmic interaction ritual. This process is not monolithic; on the contrary, it involves a constant back-and-forth between alignment and misalignment, grounded in how both agents are able to capture each other's attention.

7.4 Attention, Vibes and Relatability

The third element of AIRs is the process by which participants develop a *mutual focus of attention*: shared reality between the user and the algorithmic agent. When both direct their attention towards a common object or activity, they begin to align their expectations regarding the content that appears on the FYP. However, it is crucial to first explore the concept of attention from the perspective of both the algorithm and the user. In this section, I examine what it means for an algorithm to pay attention, and how users employ attention and vibes to navigate feedback loops.

Computational attention is a concept that is gaining momentum among professionals who develop algorithms in computational fields (Seaver, 2023). Technology and scientific fields have tended to draw parallels to the natural world, to give some objectivity to the development of computational frameworks (Dhaliwal et al., 2024). From a computational perspective, attention refers to a selective mechanism that tells a computer where to look for relevant data patterns in its input in order to generate output (Seaver, 2023). Computer scientists, software developers, and computational professionals in general started to discuss this attention when they realised that the long-term preferences of users evolve over time. Therefore, static representations of user interests and tastes do not reflect the dynamic character of user preferences (Ying et al., 2018). Attention thus became a mechanism for considering which data patterns are relevant to any given user, through the ongoing feedback loops that the user establishes with the platform.

Technologically speaking, computational attention is an essential condition for the successful functioning of algorithms. This is based on the premise that attention is tightly integrated with a user's ongoing interaction with the platform. Hence, the role of the platform is to infer the state of the user, and to provide them with content that satisfies the platform's goal of captivating users (Bruineberg, 2023; Seaver,

2019). The constant surveillance by the algorithm using the continuous data generated by the user's interactions is the focus of attention of TikTok's algorithm. The algorithm is constantly focused on the user, on how they scroll, what content they skip, for how many seconds they engage with something. This focus of attention drives the continuous process of updating the recommendations that the user receives.

Figure 7.2 illustrates TikTok's algorithmic responsiveness to changes in the dynamics of an ongoing interaction with a user. It provides a visualisation of a user's engagement with TikTok's algorithm. As part of my digital ethnography, I spent time trying to drive and "game" the algorithm. In this example, I opened TikTok and scrolled through my FYP to see how the algorithm interacts with the user. I focused on #therapyTok, which is a space within TikTok that is characterised by videos about wellbeing and mental health. Content creators focus on improving wellbeing, sharing experiences, and learning about mental health. I tested two strategies: first, actively liking each #therapyTok video. This strategy consisted of viewing the entirety of every #therapyTok on my FYP, liking them, and skipping all other content. The second strategy consisted of the same protocol, with the modification that I did not like the #therapyTok content. The aim was to test whether TikTok's algorithm was attentive to my desire to watch #therapyToks, and to investigate whether use of the like button produced any difference. The underlying rationale was based on the assumption that liking is an indication of interest that the TikTok algorithm would register — and that not liking would signal the opposite (Aggarwal, 2016).

I stopped scrolling when I had flooded my FYP with #therapyToks. Every dark pink line in Figure 7.2 represents a #therapyTok appearing on my FYP, and every light pink line is a different type of TikTok. The upper sequence illustrates my use of the like button, and the lower sequence no use of this. The algorithm quickly adapted to this change, showing its capacity for real-time response to shifts in user behaviour, and confirming the flexibility of TikTok's recommendation system.

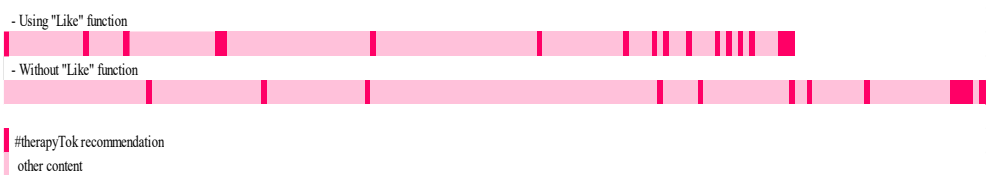

Figure 7.2. Frequency of recommendation of #therapyToks

In both cases TikTok's algorithm was attentive, and recognised my thematic interest in #therapyToks. However, liking was a faster indicator for TikTok of the type of content that I wanted to watch. Watching the entirety of the #therapyToks without liking them did produce the same outcome, but it took longer for the recommendations to saturate my FYP. For example, the large gap in the middle of the lower sequence consisted of 50 TikToks on topics unrelated to #therapyTok. This highlights the possibility that, if a user is deeply invested in a particular subject, they might disengage from the app if it fails to align with their interests for a long period. What we can assert, however, is that TikTok's algorithm is responsive to user interactions, adjusting recommendations based on perceived preferences and content demands. Furthermore, the "like" button acts as a symbol of interest, enabling the algorithm to determine a user's interests more rapidly.

From the user's point of view, is articulated differently. Not every TikTok that appears on the user's FYP is relevant to them. Users generally skip through a string of TikToks before engaging with those that grab their attention, often making these decisions in split-seconds. For example, in the case of #therapyToks, the attention of a user might be focused on content that resonates with their mood, how they experience certain emotional triggers, or the everyday struggles of their particular stage of life. If a user feels introspective, the vibe of a TikTok with soft music and thoughtful messaging might resonate with their mood. However, their interest in emotional work is also shaped by contemporary therapeutic cultures that prescribe working on oneself as the remedy for everyday struggles and the key to wellbeing (Illouz, 2008). In this way, the cultural matrix of therapeutic cultures shapes how user attention is directed towards "good" ways of taking care of the self.

Among my participants, attention was primarily driven by two factors: relatability and vibes These are the basis of a mutual focus of attention between the user and the algorithm. For TikToks to be relevant, they need to capture the user's attention, and this interpellation is contingent on the symbolic-affective universe of the user. Relatability leads to identification; when users recognise themselves in content and it resonates with their emotional states or interests, they are more likely to engage with that content (Schellewald, 2023). In contrast, the vibe of a TikTok is what might cause a user to pause the stream of content to engage with it. Audio, visuals, and mood combine to create a first impression, establishing a "vibe". These initial vibes signal to users whether they will resonate with, enjoy, or not enjoy particular types of content. Therefore, relatability and vibes articulate together to capture user's attention to their FYP.

To illustrate how relatability and vibes help to capture users' attention, I will start with the case of Anna. During our interview, she explained that when she has a difficult day, facing the obstacles that many of us face in our everyday lives, this affects how she scrolls on TikTok: "sometimes, I'm a bit, like feeling down and I might get things that are a little bit sad." Her mood affects the type of content she engages with on her FYP and how she experiences the app. It is common for users to rely on scrolling to distract themselves, manage their emotions, and seek relief from everyday problems (Paasonen, 2016; Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022). On days where she experiences low mood, she engages with content that addresses and manages that particular mood:

> Maybe a page of a book that somebody post with a nice text that is also relatable to your situation and you're like: "oh well, it feels that you're not alone" and then you read the comments, and you see other people also that are also relating to that and your like: "ok, I'm not going through it on my own. (Anna, 25)

Feelings and moods are important drivers of social action (Adler et al., 1987; Burkitt, 2014). Consequently, when people act, they do so in relation to how their feelings and moods prompt them to, in ways that are attuned to the demands of situations (Silver, 2011). Users have emotional states when they are scrolling that affect how they scroll, the content that captures their attention, and the feedback loops they establish with the platform. When Anna scrolls and wants to soothe her low mood, she is inclined to engage with content that features "more sad music, I would say, or indie music that is maybe lower in rhythm, or I don't know, the sound of the rain and then they have like a darker vibe." This "darker" vibe helps her to recognise content with platitudes and messages that helps her to manage her emotional state. Audio and music are thus used to understand whether or not a TikTok is interesting. At the same time, sad or dark vibes are based on cultural assumptions: the sensations that the weather generates are not just biological and atomistic, but culturally and socially organised (Vannini et al., 2012). Rainy weather has different symbolisms: in the context of the city it symbolises liberation from nature, but when it rains daily life is disrupted. In agrarian societies, feelings of happiness and fertility are replaced by low mood, melancholy, and a sense of the obstacles that one must face alone (Diaconu, 2017). Rain mirrors internal uncertainties and invites reflection. The meanings attached to rain and self-reflection thus create a mutual focus of attention where, through feedback loops,

TikTok's algorithm delivers content that aligns with Anna's mood. Moreover, reading comments from other users experiencing similar emotions gives her a sense of relief and community, further helping her to manage her mood.

Another example of how vibes capture attention is ASMR, which operates as a sensory and affective experience. Soledad had some ASMR TikToks on her screen recording data collected during her TikTok session. Watching such content results in tingling sensations across the body due to a range of audio-visual, triggers such as whispering, tapping, and hand movements (Poerio et al., 2018). ASMR content has expanded as a result of the affordances of social-media platforms (Maddox, 2021). Such content is generally created with the intention of promoting relaxation, reducing stress, and managing anxiety (Andersen, 2015). Pleasure and relaxation are enhanced through such sensory experiences, and it is common for users to encounter this type of content on social-media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube.

> I find it so curious that people put so much effort into making everything so fancy, nice, and organised … I also like it when they do it well—when it's well-edited and everything is so... everything just flows nicely, without any jarring sound mixing or anything like that, so it's actually kind of relaxing. (Soledad, 24)[28]

Soledad ASMR's TikToks consisted mainly of fridge restocking videos. Because ASMR videos are focused on bodily sensations, and on creating a relaxing ambiance (Mahady et al., 2023), the vibes of such TikToks help users manage their mood as they are comforting to watch. Anna also engages with ASMR TikToks by watching cleaning TikToks. Daily tasks such as cleaning and restocking the fridge generate an affective response through ASMR, guiding users in chasing a sense of wellbeing (Smith & Snider, 2019). Anna described herself as a "clean freak"; when she has not cleaned at home, this type of TikToks produces in her a similar, although presumably shorter-lived, effect to actually cleaning:

> I find it very satisfying cause I'm kind of a clean freak and sometimes I don't feel like cleaning every time. So, watching others doing it's kind of a relief" … "most of the time they have very calm music while doing it fast. I don't know it's a mix, it's a good mix. (Anna, 25)

[28] Appendix D: Original Quotes

TikToks with cleaning vibes capture her attention, as her affective and sensory reactions to them are aligned with her emotional needs. Vibes thus act as "moderators" of the information processing of atmospheric cues on TikTok. Even if Anna is not the one doing the cleaning, it is natural for her to want things to be clean and orderly. By watching such content, her affective state moves her from a sense of untidiness to one of tidiness. Hence, when she is scrolling, this content captures her attention for as long as TikTok's algorithm provides her with it and she keeps repeating the loop.

Cleaning also has cultural and moral connotations. Cleanliness is generally related to order and sacredness, while dirt is seen as matter that is out of place and profane (Lizardo, 2012). The biological determinants of ASMR, such as pleasure, are thus entangled with cultural conceptualisations of cleanliness as orderly and sacred within TikTok's entertainment stream. This entanglement seems to affectively translate and moderate a sense of order in the everyday lives of TikTok users. As atmospheric cues, vibes work by aligning content with mood, helping users to reject content that does not match mood. Therefore, vibes mediate the interaction dynamics between the user and the algorithmic agent, establishing a mutual focus of attention that facilitates the cultural dynamics of TikTok by constantly adjusting content based on the mood and situational needs of the user.

Mikel described the opposite effect: when vibes and his mood do not match. He sometimes receives content that does not attract his attention because it does not match his mood:

> Sometimes I get content that I would be happy with but not at that specific time because, it was not what I want to see. I want to see something more active and, I get like… I don't know, social recommendations, something and it's coming like for three, or four, or five TikToks. So maybe you could say that sometimes when I get like four or five TikToks I don't like, I will close TikTok because I don't get the content that I want. (Mikel, 25)

Mikel's statement has multiple salient elements. When content and vibe do not align, even if the content is something that the user would enjoy at another time, the AIR fails. Sometimes, after skipping four or five TikToks on his FYP and attempting to match his mood with the content recommended by the algorithm, he decides to close the app. In this case he wanted an active vibe, but was getting social recommendations. Based on this conversation, I interpret "social recommendations" to be TikToks about politics and social debates about how society works. TikToks,

vibes, and moods must be synchronised in order for a successful interaction to occur, because when TikTok and the user are entangled, the user will stay on the app for longer. If the content does not match what the user wants, the user will either continue scrolling or close the app. In other words, the algorithmic interaction ritual fails. This tension shows that scrolling is a situational act that is affected by mood. The state of perpetual friction is key to understanding the experience of interacting with algorithms. Through friction, people not only deepen their understanding of algorithms, but also engage in meaning-making and emotional processes that unfold within a sociotechnical context — not as separate phenomena, but as inherently intertwined in the act of capturing user's attention.

The last step of the ritual, rhythmic entrapment, depends on the ability of feedback loops to reorient and align mood, vibes, and content. If we dissect an algorithmic encounter, the interaction can be seen to mirror a regular conversation between two individuals: if they vibe they will continue engaging in the conversation; if not, one or both will awkwardly find an excuse to leave (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, synchronisation with a user's mood or affective state is essential for a successful AIR It is not enough for the algorithm to prescribe relevant content; the content must be relevant *and* appear at the right time (Bucher, 2020). In other words, context is essential. For TikTok to capture users' attention, it must become integrated in the everyday lives of users, which it cannot do without relying on computational attention. In turn, the affective states of users shape sense-making, through which vibes function as social and cultural cues to guide the selection of TikToks. Then, mutually co-constitutive feedback loops are what anchor mutual focus of attention.

The other factor that directs the attention of users is relatability. Even if vibes and relatability are intertwined, they still make reference to different processes. Relatability involves personal identification with content, extending beyond the vibes it generates content on users. Johan, who according to him, spends an average of three hours a day on TikTok, illustrates how relatable content captures his attention on the platform:

> I would say the thing that gets my attention most it's a thing that seems interesting, something that's like … football cause I play football as well, or music, it might be some interesting fact about football or music or something I recognise" … ""Oh, I recognise this clip" and then I get invested into it, and then I watch the whole thing. It can also be in music. In general, is mostly like: "Ok, I know what this but I don't fully know everything about it, so I watch it. (Johan, 18)

His interest in music, fashion, and football shapes the circulation of content on his FYP. If interests and cultural capital operate by establishing boundaries, in this case they do so by aligning with the user on his FYP, which is what captures his attention. This is a good moment to emphasise that the four elements of the AIR are not experienced in a linear fashion, but are continuously interwoven with one another. With this in mind the above quote is unsurprising, because it simply reflects the logic behind recommender systems: to recommend content to users that they enjoy. As interests are important drivers of behaviour, it is reasonable to expect that what captures the attention of users is what is interesting to them. Following this reasoning, we can explore how relatable content provides the means for engagement with and appropriation of TikToks.

Johan used the term "recognition", and noted that he enjoys TikToks about football and music on his feed, and this recognition fuels his interest in viewing them. Since he plays football, such TikToks resonate with an activity that he participates in in his everyday life. Attention operates by focusing on those things that integrate with the everyday interests of users. Therefore, discerning and decoding particular cultural forms tied to his activities, interests, and cultural capital directs his attention to such TikToks. Conversely, his cultural capital redirects the attention of feedback loops to provide cultural forms that align with his interests. The cultural capital that delimits the contours of the ritual that takes place between Johan and the algorithm succeeds when it secures cultural alignment between them. Through feedback loops, the user and algorithm communicate with each other that they each aware of the other's focus. This shared attention creates a mutual point of attention that, through synchronisation, regulates the successful circulation of content through interactions. Samantha described a similar experience of her attention being driven by content that is relatable to her everyday interests:

> I was doing a trip to Italy and I was looking stuff from Venice, and talking to my friends and all of the sudden, my algorithm was all about Italy and Venice and things to do… while other apps were just like, other stuff. (Samantha, 23)

In every ritual those who lack shared cultural capital may find themselves excluded or on the periphery of groups, unable to fully participate in discussions about expertise, taste, or even local gossip (Collins, 2014). Establishing feedback loops that circulate similar levels of cultural capital between user and algorithm is essential for capturing and retaining the attention of the user. As such, lifestyles and cultural capital anchor the establishment of successful rituals, and common cultural

references, shared values, and recognisable symbols circulate through those feedback loops. When successful, they reinforce and circulate aligned cultural capital, which consequently become symbols of membership within the algorithmic personalisation regime. Samantha noted that TikTok was attentive to her interest in learning about Venice, in a way that other platforms were not. By aligning content with the evolving interests of users, TikTok as an algorithmic agent forms a ritual by creating a sense of relevance. Ewa shared a similar experience, but described not engaging with content relating to travelling when she cannot travel: "I'm maybe not angry, but I don't wanna see that much when I know that I don't have time to book any travels, or I have a lot of work to do and then I'm seeing people booking trips and seeing all the places." Ewa thus creates a boundary with travel content based on her responsibilities and her emotional responses to seeing others do what she cannot. However, her relationship with travel content changes when she has the opportunity to travel: "but then if I have something to book or I already booked the trip, I would just go there on TikTok." This shift makes her interact with the platform in a way that causes the algorithmic agent to adapt: "then they like start appearing in my FYP." From that moment, recommendations relating to her particular travel destination appear on her FYP, but not every travel TikTok is useful. For her to enjoy the content, it has to be content aligned with her type of traveling, the activities she enjoys, and the culinary experiences that define how she travels: "What I get? Like inspiration, maybe some new ideas. I feel the inspiration is [the] most." The FYP becomes an interaction space that circulates TikToks that connect her vibes, i.e. potentially good travel recommendations, with her personal preferences regarding travelling and the cultural capital of such relationships.

Attention is not only articulated through the user's personal interests, but also through user's projections about other persons within their network. Emma also uses vibes to direct her focus and attention. However, she does not align the vibes with her mood, but instead uses them to engage with content to share with her best friend:

> So, if I think that a TikTok has the same vibe or life stage as her, then I send it. Let's say, she's single. She's dating and is "oh look! these men with red flags!", and I'm like "okay!" [laughs] things like that […] I don't know how it catches my attention. It might be something that she said the day before: "Oh, this applies to her". (Emma, 26)

Emma thus matched the vibe of a particular TikTok to her friend's dating life, connecting her knowledge about her friend with her sense-making. This shows that

vibes are not only cognitive and affective, but collective and social (Witek, 2019). When a TikTok has the same vibe as her friend with regard to her life stage, Emma combines her sensing with contemporary dating ideas. “Red flags” are culturally mediated signs that express that a dating partner might be unsafe or untrustworthy (Albury et al., 2024). However, they are also connected to wider societal discourses about patriarchy, contemporary dating culture, and casual sex, in that people constantly analyse potential partners and compare them to other prospects (Illouz, 2019). In this context, vibes function as an embodied collective cultural matrix that is used to make sense of environments. However, this matrix does not need to be connected to the user’s mood *per se*. Vibes also act as a shared lens, through which people appraise individuals and content. For instance, Emma's attention to a TikTok on her FYP that aligns with her friend's dating life does not simply produce a reaction based on the video's explicit meaning. That is, Emma does not see the TikTok and consciously decides to watch it because her might be interesting for her friend. Rather, her attention is guided by a 'sense of' — an intuitive feeling that the TikTok resonates with her own perception of dating, red flags, and her understanding of the life stage of her friend.

Finally, relatability captures attention by connecting users with past memories. Soledad, the radiology Bachelor’s student from Spain studying in Sweden, recounted what prompted her to send a TikTok that caught her attention to a friend:

> With my friends it’s usually something more absurd, like “haha, yes we are, yes I am”, or “wow this reminded me of when we did something like that!” […] maybe a video like “eleven-year-old dancing now, and me when I was eleven years old”, and I sent that video to my friend saying “yes, we had a similar choreography! (Soledad, 24)

To Soledad, a TikTok triggered a memory of a school dance. A user paying attention to a particular TikTok creates an attachment with their biography. TikToks are thus circulated by creating attachments that produce a sense of intimacy and shared history; successful TikToks are able to encompass the affective load of memories and the relationships that underlie these (Berlant, 2008) — in this case, the relationship between Soledad and her friend. The anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000) considered memories to be formed along paths of movement, where a person whose perception is refined through previous experiences continually adjusts their movements in response to their surroundings. Similar to this, attention on TikTok is enacted through interactions between the platform’s affective potential and the lived

experience of the user. Soledad's expression — 'haha, yes we are, yes I am' — underscores this point. These emotional attachments facilitate connections between personal narratives and the circulation of content, guiding users who use vibes as a decoding mechanism towards themes and moments that resonate with them.

Attention is different from a computational point of view as compared to that of a user. The goal of the algorithm is to anticipate the needs of and captivate users; for users, the goal is to find meaningful content for themselves. The mutual focus of attention emerges when the user's focus is used to guide the algorithm in presenting the right content by the latter detecting the former's activity, while the user is simultaneously focused on their FYP and assessing how good or bad the algorithm is at providing content. When these moments of mutual attention are able to repeat, it gives place to the synchronisation between user and algorithm.

7.5 Rhythmic Synchronisation

The final element of the AIR is *rhythmic synchronisation.* When user and algorithm develop a mutual focus of attention, the scrolling behaviour of the former becomes synchronised with the suggestions made by the latter. Synchronisation is the basis of solidarity for the algorithmic ritual, as the mutual focus of attention between TikTok and the user translates into a FYP that aligns, in certain degree, with the interests and expectations of the user. In the case of Anna discussed in the previous section (p. 177), she mentioned that she tends to engage with content that soothes her mood when she feels sad. Such content is characterised by darker vibes and platitudes that are intended to help users to manage their affective states. When I asked her whether this type of content made her feel better, and whether she wants to watch such content all of the time, she responded:

> To a certain point, like I maybe watch a few and then I'm like "okay, yeah, I'm not sad any more". I don't want to keep watching this but then you keep getting those, so you just have to, not press not interested, because then you never get them again kind of. But just scroll fast through them and then if you see happier TikToks then you just watch the whole thing, and you do that for a few TikToks and […] the algorithm like understand[s] what you need or what you want. (Anna, 25)

There are two elements of this that relate to the idea of synchronisation between humans and algorithmic agents on TikTok. First, the algorithm provides content to help Anna manage her low mood. However, as her mood shifts and she begins to feel better, this same content loses its affective appeal. Second, as her mood shifts, #therapyToks do not have the same affective potential. Anna, who is aware of her interaction with the algorithmic agent, skips those TikToks, signalling to the algorithm that she now seeks a different type of content, with a more cheerful vibe. Through feedback loops, the algorithm adjusts its recommendations, delivering content that aligns with Anna's current mood, thus encouraging her to stay engaged on the app for longer. Synchronisation involves a flow of interaction, with anticipation on the part of both agents to try to "keep the beat" (Collins, 2004, p. 77) in the ritual. It is where algorithmic predictions and users' anticipations meet. Furthermore, in this example we observe a degree of emotional entrapment: Anna experiences a low mood, which causes her to scroll to look for content to manage this. TikTok responds with TikToks with a darker vibe on her FYP. As her mood changes and becomes more positive, she desires TikToks with a vibe aligned with her new state. Thus, through her interactions with the app, she creates the conditions to receive TikToks that align with her needs. In other words, the feedback loops create the conditions necessary to be recommended happier TikToks.

By defining the contours of algorithmic interaction rituals, we can understand that users are not only passively consuming content where they simply wait for the algorithm to provide suitable content. They participate in a cultural exchange where their experiences and preferences are validated and reflected back to them through algorithmic feedback loops. Users actively participate, liking, skipping unwanted content quickly, because the recommender system's effectiveness depends on the interaction between both agents—human and algorithm.

Synchronization refers to the capacity of feedback loops to adapt to the rhythms and fluctuations in users' everyday lives. Samantha, who started to work part-time as a barista to support her studies, noted that since she started working in her job her FYP became to display TikToks of coffee influencers:

> Samantha: Since I worked at the coffee shop a lot of coffee stuff with a lot of coffee influencers
>
> David: Were you interested in coffee stuff?
>
> Samantha: Not really, it just really popped up and I was like "That's fine"

> David: I mean, I find interesting that you start working at a coffee place and you start to get TikToks about it
>
> Samantha: I think it's nice, I think it's good information … and the routines are like people's morning routines I think they are a little ridiculous. They have like very expensive coffee setups and little things, little gadgets, that's cute, it's coming…

When TikTok recommends content that is related to the daily activities of users, it is able to capture their attention. However, we should not think of this as a unidirectional process: TikTok does not actually "know" that Samantha works as a barista in Copenhagen, but we can hypothesise that she watched a TikTok from a coffee influencer because it resonated with her new experience. This interaction triggered a feedback loop, signalling to the algorithm that she enjoyed this content and would thus watch more, leading to increased personalisation of her feed. Thus, Samantha's FYP became synchronised with her new job. This response captures the dynamics of AIR: when Samantha scrolls through TikTok, she encounters content that aligns with her new circumstances in everyday life. This alignment occurs through knowledge, skills and aesthetics related to her new profession. It catches her attention because it resonates with her current reality. Synchronization should not be seen as something driven solely by the algorithm, but rather as a mutual process shaped by both sides in these moments of interaction. This type of entanglement shows that there is a degree of interconnectedness between user and algorithmic agent, as synchronisation lies in its ability to elicit relatable content based on the experiences, memories, activities, and challenges a person encounters in their everyday life.

Synchronization extends as long as the user engages with a form of content, and as long as that aligned content remains relevant to the user in their everyday. Emma discovered different hobbies and had started to practice trampolining, pyrography, and jewellery crafting.

> For some reason the algorithm showed that to me, this trampoline stuff, trampoline and street workout and whatever, and I was like "shit, this looks very exciting." At the time I was in Hungary so I didn't have any facilities to try […] I kept seeing it on a regular basis and I'm like "this really interests me". So I came to Malmö and I found out that you can do adult gymnastics

here, and then later I found out that you can do parkour and the trampoline and I'm like "I'm going all in." (Emma, 26)

Emma found something exciting that motivated her: trampolining, and more specifically trampoline wall, an activity with trampolines where the person jumps off a wall and bounces back onto it, performing acrobatics over and over again. The emotional imprint she perceived through the vibes of trampoline TikToks transferred into her practice of the activity when she was able to access the necessary facilities, creating a lasting excitement that became ingrained in her relationship with the algorithm. These feelings drove her to try the sport when she moved to Sweden and had access to adequate facilities. When I asked her whether she still sees trampoline TikToks, she responded:

David: And how do you feel about them (trampoline TikToks) now that you practice the sport?

Emma: Still amazing! There are so many things more to learn like, I'm still not on that level. There are so many more things I need to try. It challenges me to move forward!

Emma still sees trampoline wall TikToks, which still create a sense of wonder and astonishment in her. Every time she watches a TikTok, the excitement synchronises with the feedback loops that keep recommending her such content, turning the scrolling ritual into positive emotional energy that enhances her interaction with the platform. These TikToks motivate her to keep training and improving her skills, creating a techno-social scenario in which her trampoline wall activity is entangled with her FYP, which reflects her progression in the activity.

During my digital ethnography I identified various ways in which users express instances of their synchronisation with TikTok's feedback loops. Some TikTok users refer to an *alignment* with the algorithm in terms of their recommendations, which occurs when users appreciate recommendations aligning with their moods, affective states, or cultural capital.

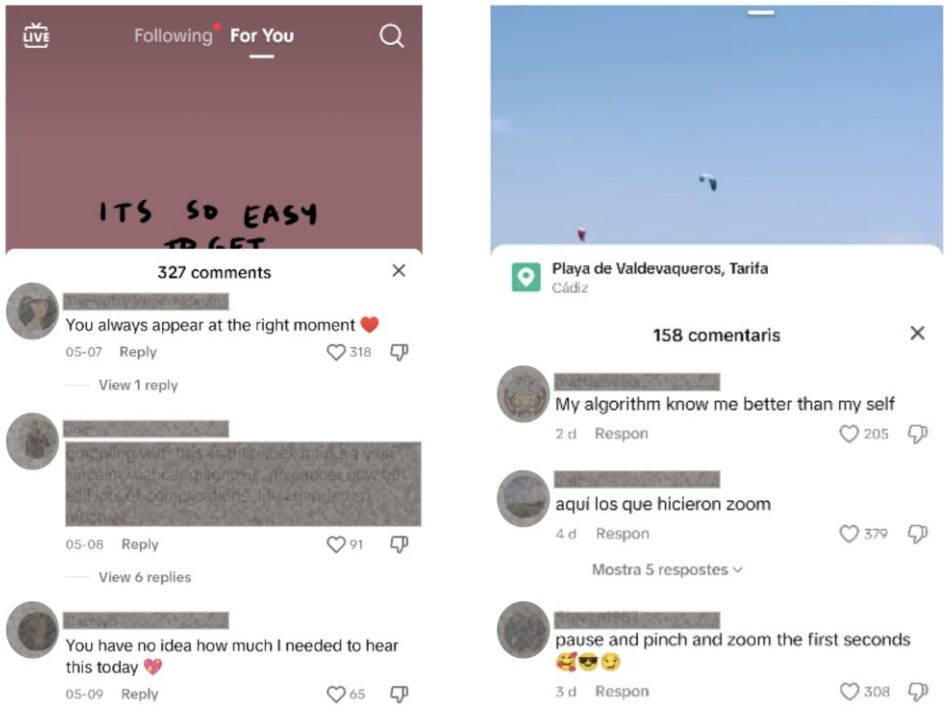

Figure 7.3. Alignment feedback loop (2024)

This is where we would situate many of the participants' experiences described in the previous pages. This alignment is evident in comments such as "I feel called out", "You always appear at the right moment," and "the FYP really fyping". These expressions reflect a feedback loop wherein users feel that content is highly relevant to their current interests and affective states. While not limited to a single topic, as this form synchronisation is the most common, I have commonly observed this type of reaction in response to #therapyTok recommendations. In these instances, users are often seeking content that resonates with their desire for a healthier, less anxious life (Milton et al., 2023). For example, in the comments on a TikTok in which a psychology researcher discusses attachment styles and challenges common theories, one user expressed the idea of the TikTok describing completely his situation: "This real specific FYP". Such content thus resonates with users because it explains the emotions and symptoms they experience, creating a mutual focus between user and algorithm and synchronising their FYP for as long as the user engages with such content.

The second way in which users experience synchronisation relates to a desire for the algorithm to continue informing them about a particular topic or tend. This *cliffhanger* feedback loop is summarised by the examples shown in Figure 7.4:

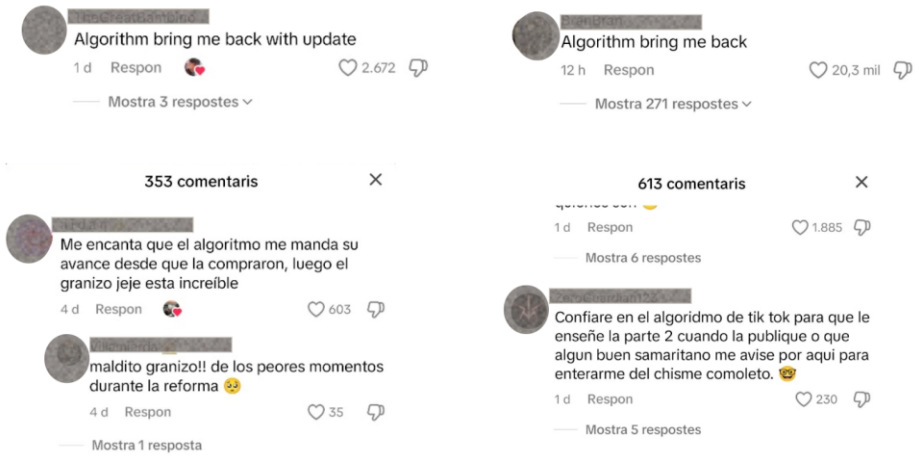

Figure 7.4. Cliffhanger feedback loop (2024)

This form of synchronisation is characterised by users expressing their wish for the algorithmic agent to inform them about ongoing narratives. Users post comments such as "Algorithm bring me back", "Algorithm bring me back with update", "I love that the algorithm sends me its progress since they bought it, then the hailstorm, haha, it's amazing", and "I'll trust that TikTok's algorithm will show me part 2 when they post it, or that some good samaritan will let me know here so I can get the full gossip 🤓". Synchronisation is thus expressed as a projection into the future, through the expectation that the algorithm will update users regarding further developments. For instance, in the comment at the bottom right, we read the sarcasm of a user who remarks how TikTok is keeping them informed about the renovations in a house, including a hailstorm. A particularly interesting point is how the user emphasizes that it is the algorithm itself that keeps them updated on the situation—attributing to it a certain degree of algorithmic agency in anticipating future recommendations. This way of framing the interaction with the algorithm fosters a sense of anticipation regarding feedback loops. Here, synchronisation within feedback loops is activated through anticipations of what could happen next. Users, therefore, anticipate a scenario in which the algorithm will calibrate to this anticipation. Whether this anticipation becomes reality depends on the complexities of the AIR.

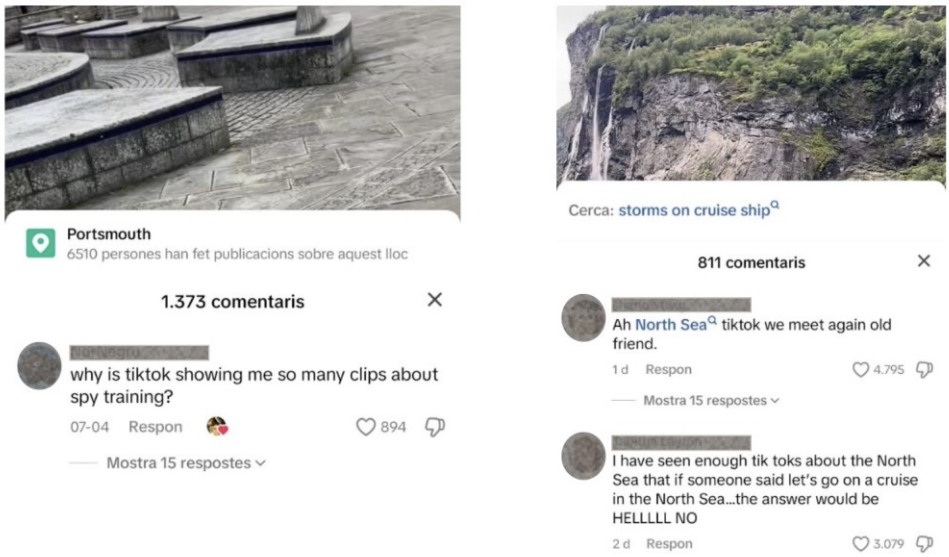

Figure 7.5. Incredulity feedback loop (2024)

Another way of defining the ongoing interactions with TikTok's algorithm is through what I term *incredulity*. Unlike the case of alignment, where users feel that content is highly relevant to and aligned with their affective states, cultural capital, or everyday experiences, here users are surprised by their FYPs — the unexpected nature of the recommendations catches them off guard. While this form of misalignment could theoretically lead to a rejection of the recommendations and a failed ritual, the cases I observed reveal that users often respond with humour instead. Rather than disengaging from the app, users embrace the surprise, participating in TikTok's culture of humour. An example of this dynamic can be seen in Figure 7.5, which shows a comment from a user who is surprised because TikTok is sending him TikToks about spy training. The user ironically interprets the recommendations as contrasting with their persona, causing amusement. Expressing this humour, which is the result of their interaction with the algorithm, approximates the algorithmic encounter to rhythmical attunement with a successful, high-energy interaction that generates laughter. This use of humour is typically a sign of social closeness (Kuipers, 2008, p. 390), which in this case is better understood within the logic of algorithmic closeness (Erikson Krutrök, 2021). In another example, two users comment after watching a TikTok about storms in the North Sea. Despite the unexpected nature of these recommendations, both users respond with curiosity and amusement, rather than disengagement, reinforcing the incredulity feedback loop.

These expressions of synchronisation have emerged from my analysis, but they are not unique. For example, Cotter et al (2022) found that users attribute a kind of divine or mystical power to feedback loops and the algorithm. This relationship is shaped by the belief that the algorithm delivers content that has personal significance. In these instances, users interpret the algorithm's recommendations to be meaningful messages or guidance, elevating the content of feedback loops to a "religious" experience.

7.6 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have outlined the contours of AIRs on TikTok. The idea that algorithms currently mediate most social processes does not mean that we are doomed to a dystopian future where they will entirely dominate human action. While discussions about moral panics often highlight the disruptive potential of algorithm-dependent technologies, the reality I observed among my participants is far more nuanced and mixed. Interactions with algorithmic agents carry both risks and benefits, with users either benefiting from or struggling through these interactions, depending on their positionality and the interactions that they have with the algorithm. Ultimately, everything begins with the recognition that algorithms are agents that shape how users receive and engage with content. On TikTok, the ability of personalisation to culturally align with a user's dispositions enables a tailored circulation of content, allowing users to manage their engagement in ways that resonate with their interests and emotions and establish boundaries to other users.

An understanding of the interaction dynamics of AIRs allow us to study how users acknowledge that, in TikTok's digital environment, they are interacting with an algorithmic agent that affects their experience of the platform. With regard to personalisation, interactions between the user and algorithm demarcate the boundaries of rituals. FYPs circulate content that establishes a common language with users, relating to everyday experiences, cultural capital, and affective states, which constitute the boundaries of FYPs. These barriers do not exist to prevent other from accessing FYPs, but because the cultural stocks and symbols that circulate through feedback loops might not appeal to others. In this sense, the FYP is a space of mutual attention where the user and algorithm negotiate the flow of interactions. Users rely on the vibes of content, as aesthetic and affective cues, to efficiently determine whether or not a TikTok is interesting. When user and algorithm align to

produce shared cultural and affective stocks, they synchronise their activity through the FYP. The task of the following chapters is to explore what successful AIRs on TikTok entail.

It is important to remark that interaction ritual theory places a particular emphasis on explaining those interactions that promote order, stability and cohesion. In the articulation of the AIR model, this may suggest that user–algorithm interactions tend toward stability. Nothing could be further from the truth. If anything defines human–algorithm interactions, it is constant friction in these interactions. For example, as Mikel (p. 180) described, he sometimes receives interesting content at the wrong time due to his mood, and what he would actually like to see at that moment. These moments of disruption should not be only interpreted as failed rituals, but rather as a normal part of interaction. These moments of friction help to disentangle how user autonomy unfolds in scenarios where sociotechnical relationships prevail. Collins (2004, p. 51), when addressing human–human interactions, acknowledges how unsuccessful rituals are important "we would not expect ritual intensity to be the same everywhere." He implies that disagreements and failures are necessary because they provide the benchmark against which successful rituals are compared. This also holds true in human–algorithm interactions.

This interactional perspective on human-algorithm relations aligns with Savolainen and Ruckenstein (2024) definition of autonomous agency, which connects users' possibilities for action to a notion of autonomy that is shaped by the perceptions and judgements about algorithmic processes. This notion of autonomy has a double edge—both constraining and enabling—when it comes to engaging with algorithmic systems. My intention with the AIR model is to outline the contours of the relationship and how the interactions between both algoritms and humans unfold. The types of algorithmic encounter, as experienced by my participants are grounded in a practical reality, in which a form of entertainment like TikTok provides tools that continuously adapt, suggest, surprise, or even irritate within the context of everyday life.

8 Types of Emotional Energy on TikTok

In the previous chapter, I outlined the elements required for the development of algorithmic interaction rituals. The result of successful chains of algorithmic interaction rituals is the creation of emotional energy between the participants in the interaction. According to Collins (2004), emotional energy functions as the social glue that holds individuals together in interaction. In his project of radical microsociology, the debate between agency and structure disappears, since "the social" is nothing more than endless chains of interaction rituals. Collins goes so far as to claim that the interest of interaction rituals does not lie in agency, as it only exists — and can only exist — through interactions. Therefore, in his view "agency, which he would prefer to describe as the energy appearing in human bodies […] arises in local, face-to-face situations, or as precipitates chains of situations" (Collins, 2004, p. 6). Emotional energy is felt as an individual feeling "of confidence, elation, strength, enthusiasm, and initiative in taking action" (Collins, 2004, p. 49). I have repeatedly stated my position that the aim of algorithmic interaction rituals is not to establish direct comparisons with interaction rituals. Human–human interactions are ontologically distinct from human–algorithm relations. However, using IRT can help us understand how people live with and experience feedback loops; the focus of this chapter is to explore what does the concept of emotional energy signifies in the context of algorithmic interaction rituals.

The chapter begins by developing what it means to talk about emotional energy and feedback loops. If emotional energy is the glue that holds people together, this part explores its implication for sustaining feedback loops on TikTok. Second, emotional energy is an umbrella term that can encompass different ways in which long-term positive feelings sustain interactions. I present three types of emotional energy — *hedonic*, *eudaimonic*, and *intimate* —which I identified during my analysis. Hedonic emotional energy refers to the emotional energy that emerges within feedback loops as a result of the pursuit of fun and amusement. Eudaimonic

emotional energy, on the other hand, describes a condition in which feedback loops are based on content that invites introspection, empathy or helps users regulate moods. Intimate emotional energy is rooted in a sense of intimacy, as users scroll and bring their everyday experiences, recommender algorithms get to "learn" the everyday struggles, occurrences, interests, and dreams of users. These three types of emotional energy should not be taken too rigidly; rather, they represent different forms that emotional energy can take through feedback loops. Scrolling can cause the experience of emotional energy to shift from one to another depending on the feelings and content encompassed by feedback loops. Finally, the chapter presents a description of the many situations in which interactions with algorithms generate negative feelings. These disruptive emotions can contribute to consolidating particular forms of feedback loops through their capacity to reorient the scrolling ritual

8.1 Feedback Loops and Emotional Energy

To address how emotional energy helps us to study interactions between users and TikTok's recommender system, it is first necessary to address how long-term feelings are important for understanding algorithmic engagement. From the perspective of the user, content personalisation on social media affects users in particular ways through "the moods, affects and sensations that the algorithm helps to generate" (Bucher, 2017, p. 32). A characteristic of human experience is that we are continuously appraising the world through our bodies and senses. The experience of involvement in the world entails a continuous appraisal of the objects of attention, along with emotional responses to those objects (Barbalet, 2011). Since our bodies are constantly sensing and making sense of what is around us, we can assume that this also occurs when people are scrolling on TikTok.

Users are constantly evaluating algorithmic recommendations, whether consciously or unconsciously. These evaluations rely on the interconnection of both cognitive and emotional processes. Whether a piece of content that has been recommended is appraised positively depends on its ability to affect users to the extent of provoking a cognitive response (Wetherell, 2012). Users have to make sense of algorithmic recommendations as a result of their ongoing interactions with the platform. Beyond debates about humanising algorithms, it is clear that users develop anticipations about how algorithms will act, and these anticipations involve feelings and affects. These anticipations are dynamic, based on trajectories of

interactions and past experiences. Recommendations promote user engagement that is constantly adapted to the environment and context; therefore, how different interactions have made feel a given user serve as the basis for their expectations about future engagements. Personalisation, therefore, is constructed on the basis that different types of content create different affective reactions in users (Kalpokas, 2019; Ruckenstein, 2023).

A TikTok can create an acute affective response in a user, but this does not explain why a user will scroll through fifty different TikToks. Put another way: a TikTok about a stray dog being rescued can generate a moment of warmth and joy, but this one moment of joy will not suffice to engage the user with the platform. To explain how a user becomes captivated by TikTok, it is necessary to account for the sum of (generally positive) feelings that anchor the sum of small moments of joy. As Anna stated when I asked about her relationship with recommendations:

> David: So how would you define your relationship with TikTok when it comes to recommendations?
>
> Anna: Love–hate relationship [laughs], because when it works well, it works very well, it's really entertaining and you can easily scroll for hours, but when it's not working you keep getting things that are not interesting at all. Then it's, it takes a while, it takes effort as well which is not something that you go on an app like TikTok to do. You don't go there to make an effort. You just go there to relax or disconnect. So, it's annoying when the algorithm thinks that you like something. It's like, "no, I don't want more of this".

When personalisation results in the algorithm providing what Anna wants, she can be on TikTok for hours. The AIR is successful because the algorithm enhances positive emotions, and she can endlessly scroll because she achieves her goal of relaxing and disconnecting. Her description resembles the idea of time flying by during a conversation with a friend (Collins, 1993). When, however, recommendations fall outside of the scope of Anna's interest, they become annoying and enhance negative feelings. She gets annoyed because the recommendations are inadequate, and because she has to invest effort to signal to the algorithm that the content she is receiving is not of interest. Hence, she associates good recommendations with positive feelings and bad recommendations with frustration and negative ones. Most importantly, the value she ascribes to TikTok as a platform, and to algorithmic personalisation, is not the result of finding a particular TikTok

funny or annoying, but of the feelings that are created as a result of her relationship with the recommender system. As Collins (2004) argues, emotional energy is not a short-term display of emotional arousal: it is a strong, steady flow that gives direction to individuals. Emotional energy is the outcome of a successful buildup in the ritualistic coordination between user and recommender system on TikTok. As such, the concept of emotional energy helps us to grasp the long-term dynamics of feedback loops on TikTok. Emotional energy functions by generating anticipations about what users expect to obtain through their interaction with the algorithm. It is therefore both the result of successful algorithmic interaction rituals and the driving force that guides and generates imaginaries to sustain future engagements.

Maria is a TikTok user whose interactions with TikTok I observed via screen-recordings made over the course of five sessions on five consecutive days. She described a point in time when she became invested in TikToks about the 2022 Johnny Depp–Amber Heard defamation trial. She initially became interested in the topic and watched every TikTok on the trial that appeared on her FYP, but after three days of watching TikToks on the matter she started to develop negative feelings and skip every TikTok about that topic on her FYP:

> I ended up super fed up and I think that this trial is super harming women because it is creating the possibility of not believing victims of domestic abuse … I don't know, I ended up super saturated, and I went back to dogs … and I said this happens me for going out of my TikTok, which is #dogTikTok.

When I asked her to explain why she liked #dogTikTok she answered:

> They give me … I don't know oxytocin, immediate love… I love it. It cheers me up … But if you see, I don't watch any TikToks of dogs in shelters or rescued dogs because I can't … that makes me super depressed. Therefore, I have trained … I don't watch anything that makes me sad, and if I do I skip them very fast (Maria, 29)[29]

Maria's initial curiosity about the topic turned into negative feelings regarding how Amber Heard was being portrayed and the connection of the trial to gender-based violence. This shift in how engaging with the content made her feel led her to

[29] Appendix D: Original Quotes

express that she should have stayed in her niche TikTok space, #dogTikTok. According to her, #dogTikTok increases her oxytocin or love; in other words, it provides her with positive emotional energy. She acknowledged that these positive feelings are a result of her particular interaction with the platform, i.e., a deliberate practice of choosing happy dog stories, rather than a random or passive result. Although it has not yet been explored, the feedback loops dominated by #dogTikTok that Maria has established interacting with TikTok's algorithm — which she associates with the release of oxytocin—are sustained in hedonic emotional energy. This emotional energy motivates her to keep engaging in TikTok's algorithmic ritual. This stands in contrast with her experience with the case of the Amber Heard trial, where the emotional energy payoff eventually diminished. Therefore, emotional energy is produced when users experience successful AIRs. Users know that TikTok will provide the type of content that they expect or want to see, and in the case of Maria develop positive feelings towards TikTok as a result of their use of it.

These findings suggest that users are not loyal to TikTok because of watching any given TikTok, but because the personalisation negotiated with the algorithm is successful in developing positive emotional energy. Successful algorithmic interactions leave users with feelings of amusement, intrigue, excitement, relaxation, or comfort; conversely, unsuccessful interactions may result in feelings of anger, frustration, or disconnection. Scrolling on TikTok involves both types of feelings: positive and negative. However, when scrolling achieves rhythmic coordination between user and algorithmic agent, emotional energy is generated, leading to more algorithmic interaction rituals.

In the following pages I present in detail the three types of emotional energy that have appeared throughout my analysis. Again, it is important to highlight that the focus of emotional energy does not emanate from feelings regarding the algorithm. When Anna described a love–hate relationship with the algorithm, this did not imply that she loved TikTok's recommender system. Instead, interactions involve anticipations and expectations about potential outcomes. Emotional energy, therefore, emerges as a result of anticipated outcomes of interactions. It is generated from the ways in which content makes users feel through chains of algorithmic interaction rituals (AIRs). In this sense, emotional energy is sustained by, and sustains feedback loops. More importantly, the way in which Anna described her interactions with TikTok should remind us that interactions involve a constant back and forth between smooth moments and disruption ones (Savolainen & Ruckenstein, 2024; Tavory, 2018). Regarding scrolling as always a smooth

experience would overlook how the user and algorithm continuously challenge each other's perceptions and definitions of a situation, prompting ongoing recalibrations of each other through their interactions.

8.2 Hedonic Emotional Energy

The first type of emotional energy identified emerges from the interactional dynamics elicited by the pursuit of fun, pleasure, and enjoyment — feelings that TikTok's algorithm is able to produce through interactions with users. Entertainment is one of the main reasons people give for using TikTok. The use of TikTok for entertainment purposes aligns with the cultural orientation of the platform that, initially, positions it as a space for the creation and consumption of goofy culture and fun content (Schellewald, 2021). All of the research participants described distraction and entertainment as one of the main reasons for their use of TikTok, to varying degrees. The use of TikTok as a source of entertainment falls within the logic of social media being one of the main sources of entertainment globally (Cunningham & Craig, 2016). A hedonic approach to entertainment assumes that the primary aim of entertainment is to provide fun and pleasure (Vorderer et al., 2004). As media psychology has demonstrated, hedonic motivation to find pleasurable experiences is one of the main reasons to undertake entertainment activities such as watching films (Oliver & Raney, 2011). The fact that young people use TikTok primarily as a source of fun, pleasure, and relaxation should not be surprising, since the platform is framed as an entertainment platform. As Soledad recounted:

> TikTok is more like "let's see what comes up, maybe I'll have a laugh" … Mainly I'm looking to have fun. … everything is entertainment in the end, but yes, some things are more fun, others are more relaxing, and some are just pure gossip. (Soledad, 24)[30]

For Soledad, the main motivation for using TikTok is the enjoyment derived from fun and absurd content. Engaging with the app produces moments of amusement, which she expresses in terms of "having a laugh". Johan shared similar ideas about the platform:

[30] Appendix D: Original Quotes

> It's in the entertainment sense. It's fun … There's a funny video, it takes 10 seconds to watch, then you go to the next one, you watch it in 10 seconds … You want to watch things that are funny, interesting, or that make you happy. So, you know, you kind of, mostly focus on the happy videos. So, if a sad video comes up, you're like "I don't want to watch this. Next video." (Johan, 18)

Both participants see TikTok as a source of enjoyable content, which sustains their continued engagement with the app. They describe TikTok in terms of wanting to watch fun, enjoyable, and pleasurable videos. Hedonic emotional energy is what leads them to the app repeatedly. Soledad's response illustrates how the possibility of encountering fun and enjoyable content is delegated to the algorithm. This delegation is conditioned by the possibility of "having a laugh", i.e., possibility is an anticipation grounded both in hedonic emotional energy generated by past interactions with TikTok's algorithm, and an imagined emotional payoff that future interactions may produce a fun experience.

Users thus rely on TikTok to provide a break. As Johan says: "you can just shut down your brain and just take it easy. Just get entertained." Soledad shared a similar idea: "I'm just not going to think about how I feel […] I'm just going to watch a few TikToks."[31] The similarity of their responses highlights the initial conditions of hedonic emotional energy. Scrolling on TikTok creates feelings of enjoyment, fun, and distraction; when users encounter content that produces this effect on their FYPs, they experience hedonic feelings. Users tend to feel more humorous and detached from their problems when they engage with entertaining content, at least for the duration of the AIR. As participants have emphasised during the interviews, scrolling allows them to engage with content without much effort into it. In this sense, the positive feelings developed scrolling are rooted also in the affordances of the platform and the role of the algorithm.

Soledad and Johan both stated that they skip sad or serious TikToks because their interactions with the platform are directed towards positive feelings. Scrolling past sad content follows the logic of avoiding any barriers to fun and pleasure. As Bartsch (2012) notes, users who primarily pursue fun and thrills in entertainment tend to avoid challenging content that can involve experiencing difficult emotions or challenges to self-regulation. Although they claim that scrolling requires no effort, they also state that they skip sad content. Therefore, they actively participate

[31] Appendix D: Original Quotes

in shaping their FYP into a space of entertainment to protect the generation of hedonic emotional energy.

Hedonic emotional energy supports how users navigate through different social situations and roles. When people use entertainment to regulate their affective states, they tend to choose entertainment forms that have strong hedonic qualities (Zillmann, 1988). This type of emotional energy is connected to the cultural dynamics that promote TikTok. This use aligns with the analysis presented in Chapter Six, where we established that escapism and boredom serve as the conditions that lead users to engage with the app. As the situational contexts leading to interaction are important in defining the types of feedback loops users establish, this is precisely what drives them to construct feedback loops aimed at counteracting conditions such as escapism, boredom, as previously described. Hedonic emotional energy is thus a key to, and expected outcome of, successful rituals that use entertainment to define the interactions between the user and the algorithm.

The short-video format is a key aspect that was identified by the research participants to explain why they have fun and feel entertained on the platform. Feedback loops establish AIRs that combine one cultural form after another. TikToks can vary, yet are all closely tied to the emotional and cultural profiles of users. The short-video format delivers rapid bursts of entertainment, keeping users engaged and emotionally connected by combining excitement, novelty, and fun. The constant scrolling from one fun video to the next creates hedonic emotional energy. As Anna said: "You get short clips and it's fast, so the gratification level is higher than any other app." The short cycle of instant gratification tends to reinforce the development of hedonic emotional energy, creating a pattern of quick pleasure in scrolling. The enjoyment of the experience is summarised by Emma:

> I don't know what I want from TikTok because it gives me so much and it's like: "Ok it's every time, it's a different experience! So fun!" (Emma, 26)

Emma states that each AIR on TikTok represents a different experience, which makes scrolling fun. The sense of novelty and exploration is projected as an adventure—when interacting with the algorithm, you never know what will come up, but as she expresses, it will provide a fun experience. The payoff of the AIR lies in this ongoing sense of novelty, which motivates her to keep scrolling, again and again, through successive chains of algorithmic interaction rituals.

Hamza is a 28-year-old Danish Master's student who works part time as a communications consultant. During our conversation, I asked him what he thought about the debates on whether TikTok is a harmful app. His response was:

> I'd say like mainly, my TikTok is my happy space. So, I don't see that many sad videos. Yeah, obviously there's a couple sometimes, but it wasn't like with my friend's TikTok algorithm that I by accident went into, because that just made me so much sad, like sad quote, sad scene from Naruto […] I felt very depressed with the videos. And there was a lot of videos of people being bald and like, how to grow your hair or whatever. And then I suddenly realised, this is not my algorithm. This is my friend's algorithm. That's because he has been very sad or depressed, and he's been watching all of these type of videos, and he is the one who wanted to go to Turkey to get, like, a hair transplant (Hamza, 28)

There are several interesting points in Hamza's response. First, he defines TikTok as his "happy space". As Holmes and McKenzie (2019) indicate happiness is not a fixed property residing inside the individual, rather, it is relational, a condition that each person must prepare for and cultivate. Individuals experience happiness but it is created through relationships with others. Moreover, as Ahmed (2010) notes, happiness is also projected onto objects. Therefore, in order to qualify TikTok as a "happy space", Hamza had to establish feedback loops with content he identifies as happiness. He then contrasts his own experience with his interpretation of his friend's TikTok algorithm. Engaging with his friend's sad content generated low desire and low emotional energy. In other words, it left him with little desire to continue scrolling on TikTok. For this reason, emotional energy is essential in mobilising future AIR on TikTok.

Furthermore, after realising that the FYP did not reflect his own type of interactions with TikTok's algorithm, Hamza developed an interpretation of why his friend had sad content on his FYP, linking it to his friend's everyday circumstances. Hamza associated the negative content on his friend's FYP with low self-esteem in his friend, as he connected being sad with going to Turkey for a hair transplant. In this case, the FYP functions as an interpretative lens through which to make sense of what is happening to another person. After that, I asked Hamza if he could describe what he meant by "happy place", to which he replied:

> I think I distribute my platforms in the correct way, if I want to see what's going on in Iran right now or what's the situation with Palestine, I would more likely go to Twitter [X] I think all like the bad and sad stuff goes there. Whereas I only use my TikTok as a happy space or chill space or to find out. Like again with the food stuff, it's like more like positive things rather than negative things. I don't watch them that much on TikTok. (Hamza, 28)

Hamza described how he compartmentalises the use of different platforms. In this sense, he contrasts negative feelings associated with X with the positive feelings he experiences on TikTok. This separation translates into distinct feedback loops— in the case of TikTok, into one where he knows that his interactions with the algorithm will result in hedonic emotional energy. Nevertheless, this dynamic is actively constructed by users — as indicated by Hamza, John (p. 173), or Anna (p. 170) — when content on the FYP is sad or unpleasant, users make a deliberate effort to skip it in order to maintain feedback loops oriented towards the generation of hedonic emotional energy. This highlights the active work users put to construct an experience that is more likely to enhance their hedonic emotional energy while engaging in algorithmic interaction rituals on TikTok

Hedonic emotional energy is the most accessible and easily produced type of emotional energy in algorithmic interactions, as it requires low barriers to produce. Since it is less dependent on the content itself and more on how enjoyable or fun the experience of scrolling is, it diminishes more easily. In other words, when users' interactions with TikTok produce only this type of emotional energy, the intensity of the algorithmic interaction ritual fluctuates. This is produced because the content circulating in the feedback loops lacks significant relevance to the user, resulting in lower commitment to the meanings produced by these algorithmic encounters.

8.3 Eudaimonic Emotional Energy

The second type of emotional energy identified during this research is eudaimonic emotional energy. This type of emotional energy is created in situations where the dynamics of the interactions between the user and algorithm create feelings that imply or address affective challenges for the user. I argue that eudaimonic emotional energy is generally produced in one of two ways. First, as a result of the consumption of content that involves processing intense or difficult emotions, i.e.

deep reflection or a sense of introspection. Second, when the recommender system serves as a vehicle for psychological growth, wellbeing, and self-awareness.

In the previous section, I argued that pleasure and enjoyment sustain human–algorithm interactions. However, entertainment is not only about pleasure and enjoyment; while a hedonic logic focuses on how people try to obtain pleasure and avoid pain in their social relations, eudaimonia refers to a conception of happiness that is anchored in flourishing, which is achieved through reflexivity and the monitoring of wellbeing (Donati, 2017). This idea is essential for understanding how people approach content that is focused on growth and wellbeing. Some media psychology and communication scholars have studied how entertainment does not only follow a hedonic logic, and argue that people also use entertainment to stimulate rewarding, affective experiences. Oliver (2008) argued that while sad films often depict tragedies, the storylines also convey human experience and narratives that reflect on the purpose of life in a way that audiences enjoy. Similarly, Wirth et al. (2012) argued that audiences feel positively about films that deal with deep reflections and emotions, which feature characters that connect with audience's own lives but also encourage audiences to identify with the lives of the characters depicted in films. Eudaimonic motivations reflect the use of media entertainment as a means of making sense of wider societal issues, even if this comes at the expense of hedonic pleasure (Oliver & Raney, 2011). When I refer to eudaimonic emotional energy, then, I build on the understanding of eudaimonic entertainment, but I also refer to TikToks that reflect on the challenging stories of others.

Social-media users can also follow eudaimonic logic (Oliver, 2022); on TikTok, for example, users are exposed to content that can be profoundly affective. Such content depicts touching scenes of people helping others, or users sharing difficult situations. The eudaimonic appreciation of content combines affective responses with reflections that invite people to provide insights regarding situations that are unfamiliar (De Ridder et al., 2002) Figure 8.1 shows reactions to such content, and the various dimensions of reflective engagement.

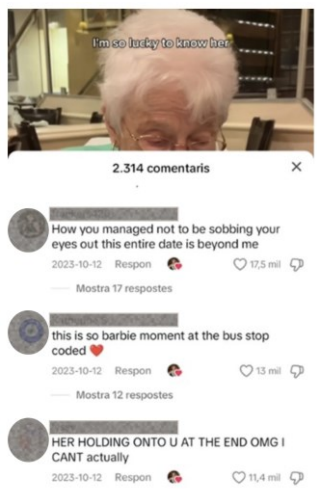

Figure 8.1. Eudaimonic EE (2024)

The screenshot from a TikTok portrays a grandmother who resides in an elder care home. The TikTok shows the grandmother being rescued from her routine, monotony and isolation in the eldercare home to go on a date where she can enjoy herself and have a good time, at least for a short period of time. This small act of solidarity touches some TikTok users and leaves an emotional imprint, at least on the people who commented on the video. The most liked comment, with 17,500 likes, reads: "How you managed not to be sobbing your eyes out this entire date is beyond me"; another reads *"*HER HOLDING ONTO U AT THE END OMG I CAN'T actually".[32] This type of TikTok creates feelings of empathy by developing a sense of positivity, and that the world is a good place in which to live. Empathy is the foundation of relating to others, allowing people to put themselves in someone else's position by imagining that person's feelings or situation (Tan, 2008). If a user engages with this type of TikTok in a eudaimonic way, they do so by connecting with and relating to the story. McCaffree (2020) argues that empathy is shaped by social structures, cultural expectations, and interactional contexts, rather than existing solely as an innate biological mechanism. The TikTok shown in in Figure 8.1 invites reflection on the consequences of and cultural norms related to ageing, and the increasing loneliness of elderly people in Western society (Jylhä & Saarenheimo, 2010). Empathy is also socially constructed in that the situations that evoke empathy rely on clear definition regarding which objects deserve empathy (Ruiz-Junco, 2017). In this way, TikTok is a space where that (re)produces representations that establish the moral basis of society through the feelings they evoke in users scrolling on their FYP by means of algorithmic encounters.

If the eudaimonic approach to entertainment encompasses TikToks that invite reflection, eudaimonic emotional energy refers to the positive feelings that users experience when they periodically encounter emotionally moving content on their FYPs. This type of emotional energy is produced by the combination of such content and the affective response to it, and this makes it continue to appear on their FYPs. Encountering content that describes situations which invite reflection or evoke complex emotions often results in self-growth, emotional warmth, and awareness about dealing with challenges (Gross, 2002).

Figure 8.2 consists of screenshots of TikTok comments that relate to experiences of particularly moving emotions. The screenshot on the left side of figure 8.2 shows comments on a TikTok in which an adopted teenager blows out the candles on a birthday cake for the first time in his life. The young person sobs, and after blowing

[32] Full capitalisation is the equivalent of shouting on social media, and so this comment should be read in that way.

out the candles profusely hugs his adoptive parents. The most liked comments on the TikTok read “anyone else crying” and “All I do is cry for strangers on the internet”. The screenshot in the centre of Figure 8.2 shows a person arriving home after sixteen months living on the opposite side of the planet. Therefore, this person has gone a year and a half without seeing their family in person. The most liked comments on this piece of content are similar to those on the previously discussed TikTok: “Crying on strangers’ videos is my hobby”, “all I do is cry on this app”. The screenshot on the right side of figure 8.2 is of a TikTok about two best friends, one of whom passed away. During the TikTok the content creator talks about how his late friend asked him to teach his son how to ride a bike. The most liked comments are similar to those presented above:[33] “moments where a man cries”, “crying for strangers is my hobby”, and (an exemplar of the combination of this type of emotional energy and TikTok humour) “Crying on the toilet is my passion”.

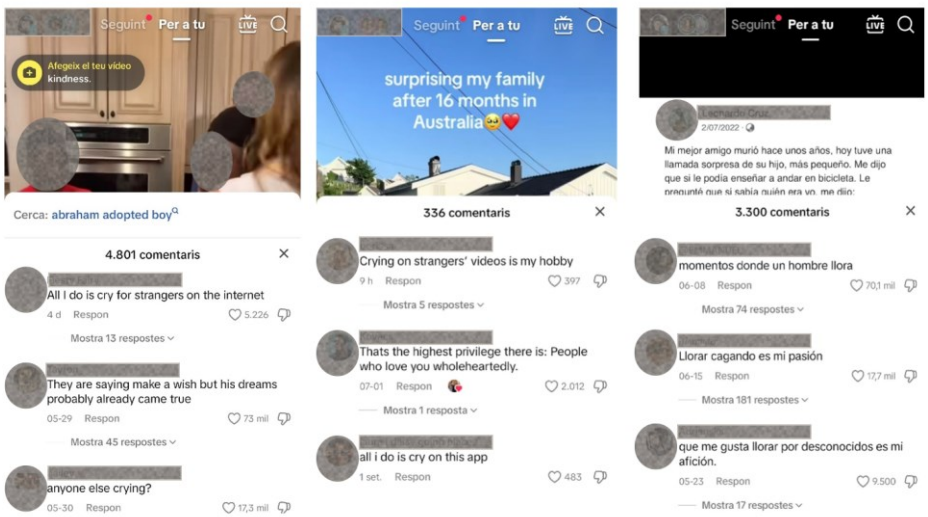

Figure 8.2. Crying for strangers (2024)

The responses of users to this type of content revolve around the idea of being emotionally moved by it. The interactions between the user and algorithm foster feelings that promote wellbeing. In the comments, users describe engaging with such content repeatedly, and we can argue that this is a result of feedback loops. Employing the very language used by one of the comments, the broad idea of

[33] The original comments are in Spanish, and have been translated by the author.

“crying for strangers” exemplifies a way of experiencing positive emotions that sustains user interaction by encouraging continuous scrolling. In this process, emotional intensity is produced during the algorithmic interaction ritual, reinforcing engagement through repeated encounters with emotionally moving content on the FYP. Such content does not emerge in a vacuum: eudaimonic emotional energy is created through feedback loops that lead to this content to appear on users' FYPs. The positive feelings experimented when watching moving content have social foundations. Katz (1999) notes how joyful crying is used to show appreciation for something sacred. People are moved by content that establishes common understandings of morality on how others should be treated. The morality of the outcome of a particular TikTok depends on the moral judgements of users, hence this type of TikTok establishes a moral universe that is negotiated by users and the algorithm through levels of emotional energy that are released during the ritual. The experience of this emotional energy drives users to continue establishing feedback loops where such content appears and that lead to the development of solidarity and shared moral and cultural frameworks.

Another example of eudaimonic emotional energy is expressed in the TikTok space #hopecore. This space allows users to engage with content that addresses the hardships of human existence. Bartsch and Oliver (2016) indicate that witnessing media forms representing negative events such as hardships serves to reaffirm social beliefs and values about how society should function. By engaging with this type of content, users foster emotional responses that promote self-awareness and wellbeing. Johan described engaging with this type of content on his FYP:

> Johan: There's a kind of a trend on TikTok called “hope core” [..] So you have “#corecore”, which is when you show like, very dystopian, like the bleak future of the world. Everything is horrible, sad, blah, blah. You get very depressed watching them. But then you have “#hopecore”, where they may show like, cute videos of dogs, and maybe like, um, people doing good deeds and things, and stuff like that, and you get very happy. So, I would say when I watch those sort of videos, it's very like: “oh yeah”, so I get very happy watching those.
>
> David: Can you remember like a particular example?
>
> Johan: Yeah, just today I saw a sort of #hopecore video where they showed a compilation of people doing good deeds and it was mostly people going to

> the homeless and giving them food and shelter and money and stuff. And that, you know, made me very happy, so yeah.

For Johan, seeing people who experience hardship being helped provides him with a meaningful TikTok experience. #hopecore explores themes of friendship, solidarity, and loneliness, and has a eudaimonic perspective. Johan contrasts #hopecore with #corecore, a trend based on TikToks that combine multiple short clips with sombre music to convey an emotional message. These TikToks often address topics like fear, depression and alienation (Ewens, 2023). Therefore, TikToks featuring dogs and homeless people in need function as affective displays, capturing the attention of users through a focus on providing help to those who need it. When Johan sees this type of TikTok, he experiences happiness unlike #corecore TikToks, which evoke feelings of sadness. This opposition is central for the AIR, as it involves a constant negotiation over the type of content that appears on the FYP. When Johan skips #corecore due to the sad feelings it evokes, and engages with #hopecore for its positive feelings, this—through chains of interaction rituals—leads to the production of eudaimonic emotional energy. In this way, eudaimonic emotional energy serves to encourage users to return to their FYPs in order to engage with more of this type of content. However, this is not a stable process, as users and the algorithm are continually negotiating over what appears on the FYP.

It can be hypothesised that this type of content started to appear as a reaction to doomscrolling and the negative bias of information on social-media platforms. Doomscrolling is defined as "the act of consuming an endless procession of negative online news, to the detriment of the scroller's mental wellness" (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021, p. 1740). The concept originated in the collective imagination during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and describes the effects of scrolling through negative information on isolated people. TikTok spaces such as #hopecore can be read as a reaction to this concept, wherein people consume content that counteracts these negative feelings.[34]

A second way in which eudaimonic emotional energy is produced is the consumption of TikToks about wellbeing and psychological awareness. Such content allows users to learn about and reflect on personal narratives regarding affective and emotional states, and produces emotional energy that sustains users engaged with the platform, because TikTok becomes a space for "shared anxieties,

[34] Here I do not discuss whether there is a performance of solidarity on the part of content creators in exploiting e.g. the homeless in exchange for visibility on the platform and monetisation. My focus is on the reported feelings of users.

discomforts, or sensations about the difficulties to navigate everyday life" (Southerton, 2021, p. 3261). In the case of wellbeing TikToks, the recommender system captures and focuses the attention of users on an affective attunement with their everyday wellbeing. The synchronisation of affect and the recommender system through feedback loops translates into eudaimonic emotional energy.

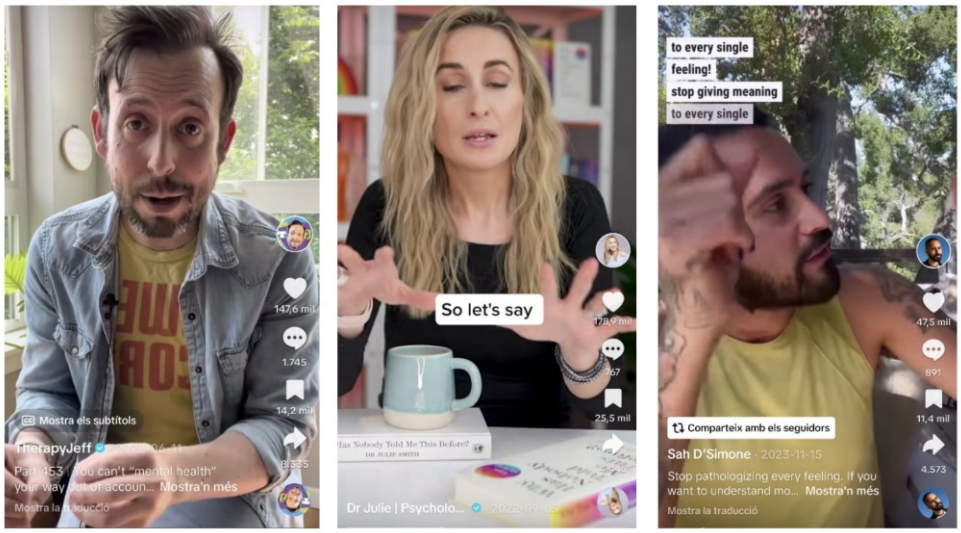

Figure 8.3. Wellbeing professionals (2024)

Figure 8.3 shows screenshots of TikToks made by content creators who discuss mental health and wellbeing, both from a traditional medical perspective and an alternative, holistic perspective. The leftmost screenshot shows @TherapyJeff, a licensed therapist. In this TikTok, he advises against using difficulty with mental health as an excuse for rude or dismissive behaviour. A popular (1291 likes) comment reads “Ugh my exroomie with bdp did this CONSTANTLY and it felt like there was no way to tell how hurtful she was being.” In another TikTok, @TherapyJeff discussed the negative impact of using the “silent treatment” — a punitive action involving ostracising someone after a conflict (Williams et al., 1998). The most liked comment (26,300 likes) reads “How do I avoid giving “the silent treatment” when I have the habit of withdrawing in conflict and being incapable of voicing when I feel hurt?” These responses show that users are interested in learning about and finding better ways to navigate these circumstances.

The middle screenshot shows @Dr Julie, who is another popular mental-health-awareness content creator who combines her professional credentials and visual aids

to explain complex psychological concepts. The most liked comments on her TikToks include: “your videos are always helpful”, “I didn’t come here to be attacked like this julie”, “watching this while procrastinating feeling called out 😳”, and “Nice video, but you don’t show any tips on how to fix the problem?” Many comments thus express the usefulness of the content. Users who engage with these TikToks appreciate the content and express satisfaction, as well as surprise that the information relates to their own situations. The rightmost screenshot features @Sah D’Simone, a content creator who has no professional credentials. His content combines personal experience of medical treatment, holistic and alternative-medicine practices, and a memetic comedic style. In the screenshot shown in Figure 8.3, he discusses how to avoid attaching meaning to feelings. In response, a user commented “I am forever going to remember “BE WITH THE FEELING, DROP THE STORY”.”, gaining 161 likes.

With these examples, I have tried to exemplify how content about psychological wellbeing produces reactions in users, who feel invested in and relate to the content that appears on their FYPs. TikTok is increasingly used to self-diagnose and manage mental-health issues (Avella, 2023).

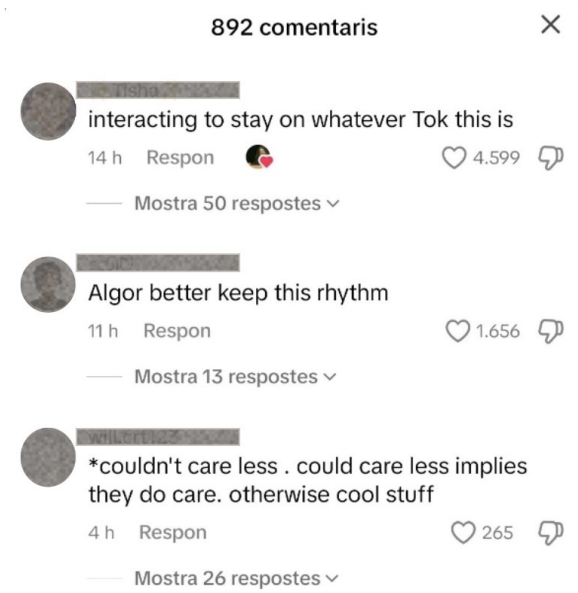

Figure 8.4. Eudaimonic syncronisation (2024)

Finally, in figure 8.4, we can read users' comments in response to a TikTok in which a man in his sixties, with a white beard and long hair discusses concepts to the audience about how people internalise knowledge, and how past events influence future behaviours. The most popular comment (4599 likes) reads “interacting to stay on whatever Tok this is”. Another popular comment (1656 likes) reads “Algor better keep this rhythm” These two comments illustrate the efforts to continue receiving this type of content. Awareness of the algorithm combines with an intentional engagement to achieve this type of recommendations. The TikTok discussed is not purely entertaining, it involves reflection on internalisation of knowledge and behaviour. This kind of content engages users in introspection, a defining feature of eudaimonic TikToks. Hence, eudaimonic emotional energy goes beyond short-term affect regulation, and can provide long-term interactional dynamics wherein the user and algorithm negotiate legitimate forms to address wellbeing and introspection. Furthermore, through eudaimonic emotional energy, TikTok can be used as a meaning-making device to (co)construct experiences and help users to deal with poor wellbeing and mental health through feedback loops that recommend useful content. An important question, however, is why so many users rely on social media, and particularly TikTok, to address their psychological wellbeing.

8.4 Intimate Emotional Energy

The final type of emotional energy identified during the analysis is intimate emotional energy. This is created within feedback loops, and promotes a sense of intimacy between the user and recommender system. I use the word “intimate” because this emotional energy originates from the idea, common among users, that TikTok’s algorithm knows them well.

By intimacy I refer to rituals of scrolling, how users engage with relevant content, and how they receive this content as a result of feedback loops. This type of emotional energy overlaps somewhat with eudaimonic emotional energy, particularly with regard to psychology and wellbeing content. The key difference between the two is that the latter emanates from feedback loops, in that the user and algorithm share knowledge with each other and awareness of difficult affects and emotions; in contrast, the former focuses on the fact that the algorithm “knows” the intimate world of the user very well. This is to say that eudaimonic emotional energy is focused on knowledge and learning about mental health and wellbeing, while

intimate emotional energy is created when interactions with the platform serve to establish personal connections and support.

One way of thinking about intimacy relates to the establishing of emotional connection within close interpersonal relationships (Forstie, 2017). During the interviews, many of the participants described TikTok as part of their everyday activities. A user might fall in love or argue with their partner, and on those days go to TikTok and engage with content about dating, or how to reconcile after a fight. Events in the lives of users are transferred to the recommender system, which through computational attention picks out what is relevant to the user and returns recommendations. TikTok is thus embedded in the everyday lives of users, and mediates their lived experiences. From dreams and fantasies to worries and fears, algorithms mediate personal relationships, to the extent of understanding much of their personal lives. The scrolling rituals characterised by repeated encounters with content that reflects users' personal concerns are the foundation of intimate emotional energy. As a result, users develop intimate emotional energy because they recognise that their FYPs allow them to engage with content that is aligned with their personal circumstances, values, or beliefs.

For example, I interviewed Ingrid, who at the time was taking a gap year. As part of this gap year she was attending a højskole to learn about media processes. Attending a højskole during a gap year is a common experience in Denmark after finishing high school and before attending higher education. A højskole typically offers four to six-month residential programs with a focus on self-discovery and personal development through various subjects chosen by the student. They do not have formal grading. During our conversation, I asked her if she felt that TikTok's algorithm understands her, to which she replied:

> I think it's a question if I understand me, because I like to think that I created this algorithm for me with the videos I interact with (Ingrid, 22)

The first salient part of her response is that she is conscious that she is interacting with an algorithmic agent: she acknowledges that through her interactions with the app, she has developed a FYP that mirrors who she is. In this way, she describes a successful AIR. She continued:

> I used to have a lot of my FYP about making food, cooking food, and I don't have that any more because I've interacted so much with these Palestine videos, so there's not room for them any more, which also makes sense

> because I don't really cook a lot here at my stay here. So that makes sense that I don't really feel the need to watch a lot of food videos, and I suspect that when I go back and stay in my own apartment, I will get them back because then I will need it more and then it will be a part of my daily routine again cooking food. (Ingrid, 22)

For Ingrid the algorithm is really present. She has developed her own understanding of how TikTok's algorithm works, and how it recommends content to her. Ingrid describes an awareness of the fact that TikTok's algorithm adapts to changes in her lifestyle: before she began attending her vocational school she was engaging with food content, looking for inspiration regarding cooking in her everyday life. However, when she started studying and her meals and accommodation were provided, food content disappeared from her FYP. This change did not occur without apparent cause, but because she was not interacting with food-related content as it was not relevant to her. She expected that when she finished studying and returned to her usual routines, food-related content would again appear on her feed due to her need to resume cooking.

According to Siles (2023, p. 35), daily agentic encounters with algorithms have the capacity to convince people that a platform is speaking directly to them, "hailing them in particular ways". For Ingrid, the interactional dynamics represent her persona; hence, there is pride in how she has curated her FYP. This legitimises her feedback loops and generates intimate emotional energy; through the feedback loops she finds content that mirrors her life situation. This is reflected also in moments where TikTok serves as a space for connection.

> We've had a party on Friday or Saturday and [I've] gone to my room and instead of going to sleep I've just been scrolling on TikTok for 45 minutes. (Ingrid, 22)

Ingrid, who resides at a folk high school in Denmark recounts how the last weekend there was a party when she preferred to leave the party and go to her room, where she started scrolling instead of going to bed. We can interpret this moment as her finding a sense of connection through an app which as she said: "I like to think that I created this algorithm for me". On that particular evening, it appears that she preferred scrolling on TikTok over engaging in face-to-face interactions. One possible interpretation is that, since the algorithm has learned so much about her, she experiences TikTok as a space where she can interact with content that reflects

her inner self. In such moments the interaction with TikTok may provide her with a stronger sense of closeness and connection than going to a party. In other words, the connections that she establishes with other persons, content creators, or the connections that her own feedback loops afford her were more desired than the connections with the rest of persons in the school. Therefore, this sense of intimacy with the algorithm underpins the generation of intimate emotional energy.

Ewa's experience highlights how she engages with dating content on TikTok, which is characterised by:

> Girls talking about how they feel about dating and relationships, and just being in your twenties, and kind of trying to explore that and see … Those were TikToks that I kind of identified with (Ewa, 24)

As Ewa navigates the dating landscape, the algorithm suggests content that resonates with her experiences, which I interpret as being related to casual dating, based on our conversation. Consequently, engaging with this content produces positive feelings:

> I felt that it's great to have a representation, to see that people do feel similar and it's not like, I'm like the weird one or something, especially if you have friends that are kind of different and have different experiences. Yeah, I feel like you're feeling, just taking of the pressure of yourself, if you see something that is right resonating with you, and you feel this is representing also who you are. (Ewa, 24)

Engaging with this content provided her with representations of dating that aligned with her experiences, and shaped her dating approach. In this way, TikToks, as media images, participated in constructing her social life (Couldry, 2005). The algorithm also provided her with a different worldview than that of her inner social circle: young adulthood is a life stage that is characterised by exploration of identity and sexuality (Arnett, 2004), and involves identity construction through social interactions (for a review, see Cerulo 1997). Through these interactions, TikTok users highlight how sociotechnical engagements participate in identity processes, driven by the intimate emotional energy produced through interactions with algorithms that circulate content. The interactions between Ewa and her FYP resulted in feelings of relief, understanding, and belonging. In this way intimate emotional energy is established when TikTok users open the app anticipating a

particular pay-off in terms of encountering content aligned with their life circumstances.

Furthermore, this process continues as long as Ewa keeps interacting with this type of content because it is relevant to her. Should her life situation change, for example if she enters a committed relationship, through subsequent AIRs, the interactions will adjust and she will likely stop seeing TikToks about dating due to no longer being single. Instead, she will likely receive TikToks about being in a relationship. This responsiveness highlights how the algorithm is continuously aligning content with the evolving lifeworlds of users, enabling continuous (re)negotiations of meaning. Let us now consider the case of Hilal, in order to understand the intimate role that the algorithm has in her life:

> There are things that I'm interested in, but also, it's trying to convince me that my partner is, like, very bad. It keeps showing me like stories about weaponised incompetence or stuff like that. And I keep hearing the bad stories about people with partners, they give like blanket statements: "Oh, he looks at his phone! Oh, he stays on the toilet so long". but that doesn't mean my partner is incompetent. (Hilal, 25)

First Hilal expresses dissatisfaction with the algorithm, particularly disagreeing with the idea that her partner uses weaponised incompetence. This refers to situations where an individual either knowingly or unknowingly professes an inability to perform certain tasks, thereby causing others to take on more work. Weaponised incompetence is a concept that gained traction across feminist social media to denote a situation in which a person knowingly or unknowingly shows an inability to perform certain tasks, thereby leading other persons to have to do more work (Brouillette, 2023). Her dissatisfaction reflects her frustration with and disapproval of the content being recommended to her. As our conversation continued, Hilal described how that content started to appear on her FYP:

> Maybe I'm interested in them, and I keep looking at them like it was fun at first hearing about people's stories. (Hilal, 25)

Thus, the weaponised incompetence recommendations did not appear out of nowhere; the algorithm was not forcing something totally uninteresting onto Hilal. These recommendations were introduced to her FYP through her own scrolling

interactions. More interestingly, she later remarked while she was showing me how she scrolls that:

> If I have an argument with my partner, I find myself watching all those like relationship problems, kind of things. (Hilal, 25)

Here a new picture emerges: the frustration with a particular type of TikTok being recommended has to be understood relative to how she uses TikTok in different situations. After an argument with her partner she participates in an AIR that provides her with support in making sense of this. The integration of algorithmic interaction rituals in the users' lives is a necessary condition for the establishment of intimate emotional energy. Scrolling is embedded in situations where Hilal seeks support and to make sense of situations and challenges in life; she uses TikTok to manage her emotions, and so the FYP is a place to find support. The platform is immediately available, which is important as responsiveness is a key element in whether people feel that support is beneficial (Maisel & Gable, 2009). TikTok is a source of support for Hilal, and criticises the way her partner acts; it functions as a supportive space for expressing and legitimising negative experiences, helping her to manage difficult emotions. However, her point of view is not entirely legitimised — or at least the outcome of the ritual does not satisfy her. She seeks self-legitimacy, but instead finds herself in a negotiation, wherein the algorithmic agent participates in sense-making of the situation. This scenario mirrors the experience of confiding in a close friend when we have problems, only to hear a perspective that may not align with what we want to hear. However, instead of rejecting content about partner conflict, Hilal continues to scroll and engage with this type of content. The payoff of intimate emotional energy does not leave her feeling recharged, yet she continues interacting with TikToks about "relationship problems" after arguing with her partner. This contradiction points to one of the characteristics of intimate emotional energy, it does not emerge from displays of joy and agreement, but from the simply ability to scroll through content that feels very personal to users. While this emotional energy may not produce the stereotypical displays of joy, it binds the user to TikTok through the circulation of similar stories to their personal circumstances on the app. It also highlights how emotional energy can take different forms, and how emotions can sustain rituals and produce solidarity in different ways, even when they are not overtly positive (Boyns & Luery, 2015)

Intimate emotional energy is not directly created by content, but rather by the supportive space that content helps to establish. It emerges from the feelings

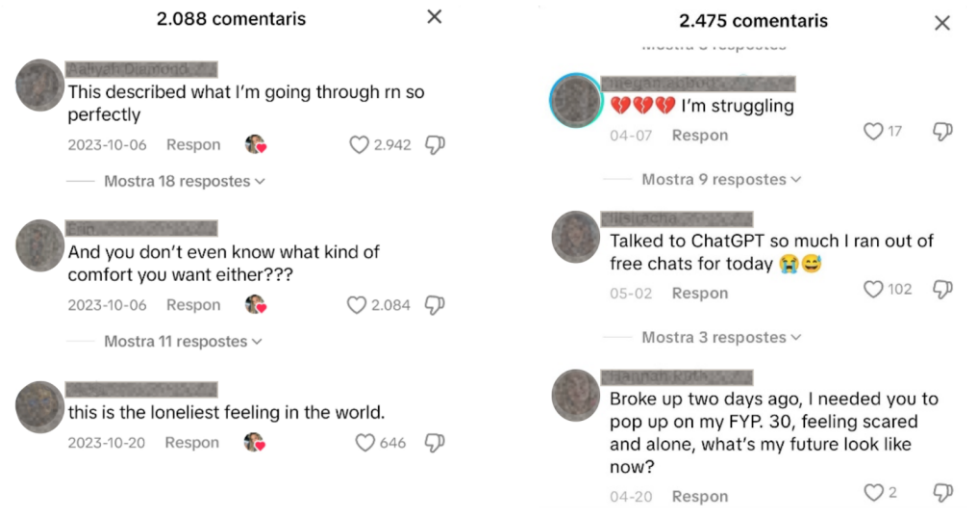

Figure 8.5. FYP comments (2024)

produced in users: feelings of surprise at the accuracy of the algorithm, of belonging or support. For example, if we look at users' comments on TikToks related to wellbeing, we see reactions such as "This real specific FYP". Such reactions indicate enthusiasm, amusement, and disbelief, but also a sense of identification. Short bursts of emotion can be translated into intimate emotional energy when TikTok aligns content with the affective states of users. In figure 8.5 we can observe more example. The leftmost screenshot shows a TikTok describing what the struggles of people with ADHD to regulate their emotions. The most popular (2942 likes) comment reads "This described what I'm going through rn so perfectly" The other screenshot shows comments on a TikTok where a woman describes her experience after breaking up with her partner. One of the comments (2 likes) reads: "Broke up two days ago, I needed you to pop up on my FYP. 30, feeling scared and alone, what's my future look like now?"

Other examples of this type of reaction, are for example, one user reacted to a TikTok illustrating the daily struggles of individuals with ADHD with "HE DID IT HE PUT IT INTO WORDS" (98,300 likes). In another case, a user commented: "Thank you for sharing that… you knew I needed to hear this at this time, because WOW!!" (113 likes). Such reactions highlight the extent to which TikToks resonate with users, contributing to the formation of an affective assemblage of wellbeing. Users seek content in order to make sense of their psychological states, and the recommender system synchronises with their affective states. Thus, the relationship between the affective qualities of a given TikTok and how it resonates with a user's

experiences creates an affinity where users share similar interpretations of events and affective states.

What differentiates the types of emotional energy is not only the content that circulates within feedback loops, but the type of bond that is established between the user and the algorithm through algorithmic interaction rituals. The feedback loops associated with hedonic emotional energy evoke feelings of joy and amusement. Those linked to eudaimonic emotional energy generate emotions through their ability to invite introspection, awareness and values such as empathy, compassion, or personal growth. In contrast, in the case of intimate emotional energy, feedback loops are structured through a sense of closeness: the users perceive that the algorithm "know them very well". This intimacy is built through AIR chains in which the algorithm learns from the user and returns content that reflects their personal experiences.

8.5 Disruptive Feedback Loops

There are many other instances where feedback loops do not produce emotional energy. While the previous sections have explored how emotional energy sustains user engagement through fun, introspection, and intimacy, TikTok also circulates content that generates disruptive or negative emotional responses. This includes content that provokes anger, frustration, or even exhaustion. In these cases, there is no emotional energy charging the user in a positive sense, but these instances nonetheless sustain scrolling through cycles of irritation or confrontation.

Mikel, for example, describes encountering content on TikTok that makes him feel angry. In response to these situations, he states that his strategy is to report it:

> I do report a lot of things actually on TikTok if I don't agree with them to a point where they harm. I don't think that all of my reports are just [fair]. Sometimes I'm just angry and I just report, but it has to be something like really stupid, like a really bad day for me to feel angry with a platform, and it doesn't happen often because I do take actions to not see content that actively makes me feel not like happy, … negative, like too negative of emotions, which is usually content that I disagree politically… (Mikel, 25)

His response to encountering content with which he disagrees is eminently emotional — marked by frustration and disagreement. These emotions even lead

him to report the content to the platform. Reporting such content can be understood as a form of resistance to the content circulated by TikTok's algorithm. It is a way for Mikel to negotiate the tension between the power of platform's logic and his desire to receive content aligned with his preferences. As Collins (2004) suggests, disruptive emotions such as anger or frustration are often linked to a lack of power. As he notes "Truly powerful persons do not become angry […] they get their way without it (Collins, 2004, p. 126). This negotiation of the algorithmic logics reflects Mikel's pursuit of his own agency to determine what is on his FYP. The emotional dynamics experienced by Mikel recycle through the AIR. Since each episode of broken attunement generates misalignment between Mikel and TikTok's algorithmic system, negative emotions serve as a driving force to reorient the stream of recommendations, something which as Mikel explains, happens "because I do take actions to not see content that actively makes me feel not like happy."

Samantha describes how her FYP went from being highly curated to feeling "weird" and "off." She describes a gradual decline in personalisation:

> It was too all over the place, I was like: "Ok, this is weird" […] It used to be very [curated], the more I used it last semester, it'd be like more than an hour, hour and a half a day, and it was very curated, it was like internet references, like music, philosophy, stuff that I like, so, it was very, very curated. Maybe I scrolled on it more, but now that I used it significantly less since the New year, it's been a little bit off (Samantha, 23)

The disruption in the alignment of recommendations in Samantha's FYP leads her to detach from the platform. In contrast to Mikel, whose frustration prompts him to act in order to redirect the stream of recommendations, Samantha experiences the decline in the misalignment of her FYP through resignation. As a result, her use of TikTok decreased significantly. Their responses to disruption by TikTok's algorithm are rooted in different emotional experiences. These different emotions, in turn, translate into distinct strategies of engagement, showing how the dynamics of interaction in algorithmic environments, and their outcomes, are shaped by emotional responses.

Finally, Hilal perceives the disruption in her feedback loops as being related to social stereotypes. During the interview, Hilal described how a content creator she liked disappeared from her FYP:

> Hilal: I would love to hear more about science. And there was this creator that would crush different elements. Like, how crushable are the elements. And I really enjoyed that one [and] TikTok stopped showing it to me, even though I liked everything, and I saved everything so it would show that to me more. I feel like even though I have other interests, fashion and makeup is always like in front of it, and no matter how hard I try, I doesn't show me other things.
>
> David: How does it make you feel?
>
> Hilal: I didn't … a bit frustrated I guess, because I think it's more profiling. I don't know. Since … maybe I'm just reading a lot into it. But since I'm interested in fashion and makeup, that means, like it's my primary interest, and I couldn't be interested in science at the same time.

Hilal, who is pursuing a Master's degree in chemistry and aspires to do a PhD at a later stage, expresses frustration over the disappearance of a particular content creator that she enjoyed from her FYP. Similarly to Mikel, frustration prompts her to assert her agency to counteract the disappearance of the recommendations she enjoys. Although she applies her algorithmic knowledge by liking and saving content to sign interest and revert the stream of recommendations, she remains unable to reorient it. In response to this frustrating scenario, and to the inability to reorient recommendations, her interpretation implies that the algorithm is discriminating against her. Her interpretation of the event is not framed as a technical failure, but as a reflection of social inequalities. Airoldi (2020) describes how sexism can become embedded in platform algorithms through the transfer of existing patterns of inequality into data. In this way, Hilal interprets that the algorithm is (re)producing a sexist cultural logic in which women interested in fashion and makeup cannot also be interested in science. This form of misrecognition asserts the power of the algorithm to (re)produce sexist assumptions.

Greta, a 26-year-old Lithuanian working in a museum in Copenhagen described another instance of a disrupted feedback loop:

> When I start scrolling, I definitely feel happy, because most of the content I consume is, yes, it's meant to make you happy or meant to make you relax. But then, I would go on, like, sometimes on a rabbit hole, on different topics. I don't know if I would say that those topics were meaningful. In that sense, it would be like some YouTube drama, or like, I would get a video where it's

> like, if you know, whatever, Blue Bench theory, and I'm like, oh, what's a Blue Bench theory? […] and I would get another video, and then another video and another video about this topic. And I would like, for some reason, go into this, like, Blue Bench spiral. (Greta, 26)

In this case, when Greta begins scrolling, TikTok initially provides the experience she is seeking, generating positive emotions. There is a clear alignment between the type of content she desires and the recommendations she receives. However, after some time, she finds herself caught in a "rabbit hole." She illustrates this with examples such as "YouTube drama", a form of constant melodrama where, particularly, content creators and influencers get into ongoing disputes. As the name suggests, YouTube drama is original from the platform YouTube. The other example refers to Blue Bench theory, an organisation in the U.S. that supports survivors of sexual assault. These types of content, though initially engaging, evolve into emotionally draining loops where video after video captures her attention, ultimately leaving her with a sense of discomfort or unease. What is particularly interesting is that Greta attributes the trajectory of her experience entirely to the algorithm. She does not consider her own role in ending in the rabbit hole. The reason why Greta created her TikTok was because:

> I want to be a social media coordinator in the future. So I was like, I have to, I have to use it. I have to, like, understand it. And I created a[n] account that was sort of personal, but more like I wanted to create an account about, about immersive experiences. So it was more like a gig, like a side gig, or whatever business, whatever like to call it community. But I started using it just for my personal pleasure. (Greta, 26)

There are two salient elements in here answer. First, she expected the account to be filled with content aligned with her profession, or as she noted elsewhere in the interview, more artsy content. Second, it instead became an account for personal pleasure. This shift had consequences for how she experienced content:

> Tik Tok, was giving me things that I just I can't. I couldn't stop myself from watching. It was something like, like a primal, flashing colors, beautiful faces, flowy dance dynamics, and I just I couldn't stop watching or super scary videos about, like, murders and stuff that also intrigued me, but not because I liked it, but because it was like a fear I had that made me watch it more. And

> I don't know if this makes sense, but it felt like TikTok was more concerned about my watch time and how long I spent on videos and not that I pressed the like button or commented,

The shift was not just in content but in the emotions, she was experiencing watching the content. The algorithmic interaction rituals were not revolving around feelings that increased her emotional energy, but on ones that were reducing it. Here the disruption does not result in an attempt to reorient the stream of recommendations but generates frustration against the algorithm itself.

These examples show how negative emotions are a constant element in the back and forth between user and algorithm. Therefore, it is vital to study how emotions, as a result of disruptions, either reorient feedback loops towards alignment or slow down the dynamics of interactions.

8.6 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we have examined how emotional energy is produced through algorithmic interaction rituals on TikTok, and how it also serves to redirect future interactions. Emotional energy is connected to how users experience feedback loops. Circling back to Collins' original definition, we can say that emotional energy is not felt in the elated way Collins describes human-human interactions. However, the concept sheds light on how people feel and experience feedback loops. It provides us with an interactional lens to understand how people enact their agency against and towards algorithmic feedback loops, and forms the basis for how people orient further engagements with TikTok's algorithm to establish or change the course of feedback loops. The three types of emotional energy developed are not exhaustive and may present some overlap. For example, a person might interpret receiving golf related recommendations as a sign that the algorithm knows them well. Moreover, individuals do not experience just experience one type of emotional energy as the distinct types are shaped by the dynamics of feedback loops. My aim in typifying emotional energy has been to offers a comprehensive view of the interactions that constitute AIR, and how different feelings sustain the experience of feedback loops. If emotional energy were only associated with displays of joy, we would not understand how successful chains of AIR on TikTok can produce feelings of support, belonging, and intimacy. Emotional energy can take different forms depending on the interaction dynamics that develop between the user and

algorithmic agent. These interactional dynamics are demarcated by the expectations of users during their interactions with the algorithm, as well as how their affective states are translated into the content that circulates on their FYPs. Furthermore, emotional energy occurs in different forms and also in varying intensities.

We have discussed how positive feelings of fun and enjoyment result in the production of hedonic emotional energy, and how managing complex emotions and inviting self-reflection generates eudaimonic emotional energy. Here, TikTok emerges as a space where content provides an experience of introspection and empathic engagement. In media psychology, the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic is often based on the opposition between pleasure and meaningful experience. However, these ideas of "meaning" and "meaningfulness" are problematic, and do not add much to a sociological analysis. Goofy dances and memetic trends that mainly produce joy and pleasure are representations of reality and produce meaning. Therefore, our understanding of eudaimonic emotional energy should be framed in terms of how content moves, soothes, and invites users to reflect. Finally, intimate emotional energy relates to how scrolling has become embedded in the everyday. Because some users do not scroll only for fun, they continuously share and negotiate with the algorithm in order to find content that resonates with their emotions and circumstances. This results in the production of emotional energy, as their interactions with TikTok create a supportive space wherein everyday situations and challenges can be made sense of.

Interactions also involve moments of disruption, grounded in the negative emotions that misalignments in feedback loops generate in users. Disruptions are common and have to be conceived as a natural part of the ritual. They imply agentic moments where both the algorithm and the user must reorient and renegotiate the terms of their interaction. This ongoing process of (mis)alignment is shaped by the feelings that disruption provokes.

9 Algorithms, Solidarities, and Moral Frameworks

Collins (2004) holds that successful interaction rituals result in social solidarity, a feeling of membership, sacred symbols and the creation of shared moral frameworks. Feelings of togetherness and belonging, as well as other shared emotions, are a central and even essential condition of group solidarity (Salmela, 2014, p.55). But in the case of algorithmic interaction rituals, who is the recipient of solidarity? The algorithm? In my analysis solidarity takes a collective form. If the previous analytical chapters have focused on the contours of scrolling and human-algorithm interactions, this chapter broadens the focus to consider TikTok users more explicitly. Solidarities are expressed through communities of users that are organised by the algorithm. Consequently, the emotional energy generated through algorithmic interaction rituals serves to reinforce participants' commitment to a particular set of moral principles. Although scrolling on TikTok might seem like an individual activity, users engage in moral work when they navigate the app. The platform serves as a space for the regulation and reproduction of moral judgements, a process that is particularly mediated by TikTok's recommender system.

In this chapter, I first describe how social solidarity is produced through *algorithmic boosting*, the practice of trying to alter the circulation of recommendations by TikTok's algorithm to amplify specific social and political messages. Solidarity is expressed when people who identify with a group or cause attempt to alter how the algorithm works in order to give greater visibility to their cause. By engaging in scrolling rituals, people direct their activity towards establishing feedback loops that reinforce a particular message. Through this process, the emotional energy they experience is transformed into feelings of solidarity among users who identify with a collective or community. To analyse this process, the study focuses on users who attempt to boost the algorithm in support of Palestine. Second, sacred symbols are one of the outcomes of successful rituals. One symbol that becomes significant in a fast-paced environment full of stimuli like

TikTok is “time”. For this reason, I analyse how time dedicated to content represents interest, commitment, and care. Third, I examine how moral work is mediated by the algorithm, as feedback loops between users and the algorithm facilitate moral judgements by aligning recommendations with users’ moral preferences and affinities. Users engage in evaluations by constantly surveilling their own moral commitments, comparing them to the judgements expressed in comments from other users. Finally, the study also analyses the practices of reading comments, and how users use them to (re)interpret and/or validate their own interpretations of the content. Reading these comments allows users to perform moral work by aligning or reassessing their understanding of a given TikTok. Calhoun (1991) argues that moral norms are not simply possessed by individuals; rather, they are continuously constructed and contested within social contexts. On TikTok, users actively shape and challenge norms, as members of broad moral communities. Furthermore, moral judgements are intertwined with humour on TikTok. The cultural logics of goofiness and comedy cause users to reinforce boundaries in comment sections, projecting judgements using humour while at the same time being critical.

9.1 Algorithmic Boosting

One of the consequences of displays of emotional energy is the development of *social solidarity,* which refers to the bonds that enable cohesion among the individuals within a group. These bonds exert pressure to act in ways that signal belonging and commitment to the group. Hence, solidarity is grounded in a shared sense of history and trajectory that guides what is expected to occur among participants who engage in consistent patterns of social interaction. In Collins' theory, solidarity is a felt experience with emotional underpinnings, generated through chains of successful interaction rituals. The degree of solidarity individuals feel fluctuates depending on the intensity and consistency of their participation in ritualised interaction.

One way in which social solidarity is expressed on TikTok is through what one research participant referred to as *algorithmic boosting*: the effort made by users to make a particular type of content more visible. The goal of this engagement is to increase the content’s visibility so that it reaches a wider audience. This resembles the notions of *algorithmic gossip* or *algospeak* which are used to explain how content creators use and share informal knowledge about how an algorithm might work to achieve better visibility on social media and/or bypass perceived shadow

banning (Bishop, 2019; Steen et al., 2023). However, with algorithmic boosting the focus is on the collective and strategic use of algorithmic knowledge within an activist community.

Ingrid has an active interest in TikToks advocating for Palestinian rights. She used TikTok to inform herself about the Israeli war on Gaza that began in 2023 because she believes that the platform offers narratives that are generally not represented by the mainstream media. She asserted that at one point 40% of her feed was content about the conflict. During the interview, she described how she engages with content on the app, and mentioned that she created a group for videos called "Palestine", and another called "Wake up", about the situation in countries such as the Congo, Sudan, and Yemen. At one point she mentioned that creating these groups was a way to "like just to boost their algorithm with these videos." Intrigued by the idea "boost the algorithm", I asked her what she meant by that term.

> David: What do you mean by boost the algorithm?
>
> Ingrid: Uh, when you interact with the video, the more you do, the more the algorithm picks it up and says: "okay, people like this video." So, if I save these videos, the algorithm picks it up and says, okay: "people are liking this video. They're actually saving it. So, then we got to show it to more people."

The idea of "boost the algorithm" refers to conscious strategies to increase the visibility of particular content for other users. Ingrid devised a strategy to "game" the algorithm in order to increase the visibility of videos about Palestine for other users, in the belief that TikTok's algorithm prioritises content based on its popularity, meaning that videos are more likely to be recommended if the platform notes significant user engagement. Based on this understanding, Ingrid let videos about Palestine play in full, causing TikTok to register the relevance of such content to her. In doing so, she hoped to influence the platform to recommend these videos to more users. This strategy sometimes involved leaving TikTok to run in the background while engaged in other activities, all in an effort to boost the reach of content related to the Palestinian cause:

> Sometimes when there's a video when it says "see this video for one minute and then the means [money] of this video that it makes will go to this family or will contribute to this, where all of this will go directly to this" […] I just

> put my phone away watching the video a couple of times and I do something else. (Ingrid, 22)

The idea of "boosting" algorithms is not new. In fact, experts within computational fields devise strategies and techniques to improve or "boost" the predictive power of algorithmic systems. Specifically, the idea of "boosting" emerged in the field of machine learning to devise ways of boosting algorithms. Boosting represents a methodological approach to increase the accuracy of weak classifying tools by combining various instances into a more accurate prediction. Its underlying assumption is to "iteratively apply simple classifiers and to combine their solutions to obtain a better prediction result." (Mayr et al., 2014; p. 2). In this way, the idea expressed by Ingrid represents a folk theory on how to achieve the aim of increased visibility on TikTok.

Ingrid's algorithmic boosting practices highlight how TikTok is increasingly being used as a source of information in armed conflicts, rendering it a contested space where antagonistic actors struggle for visibility in order to establish or subvert dominant narratives (Divon & Eriksson Krutrök, 2023). These practices show how user agency within algorithmic systems is also directed towards and enacted through collective processes. Velkova and Kaun (2018) discuss how people resist algorithmic practices that produce inequalities through media practices of repair, aimed at correcting perceived shortcomings within algorithmic systems. In the case of algorithmic boosting, the practices to resist the algorithm are generated through folk theories aimed at altering the circulation of content within the platform through collective action. This collective action aims to connect multiple people to influence TikTok's algorithm through feedback loops with the aim of reshaping what participants perceive as the platform's content priorities.

Ingrid did not conceive of algorithmic boosting on her own. Pro-Palestine activists have been using TikTok as a platform to raise awareness of their cause (Cervi & Divon, 2023). She learned about these strategies on the platform, where stories about how to "game" the algorithm are shared among users. These methods are communally developed, as part of attempts to decode TikTok's algorithmic architecture. Users thus work to make content visible on the FYPs of other users, and to try to cause it to reach a broader audience. For example, a search of the hashtags #algorithm and #palestine brings up a TikTok in which a woman claims to know that TikTok's algorithm and AI have been labelling pro-Palestine content as hateful and suppressing their voices. On another video, a person claims that virality on TikTok lasts for two weeks, therefore it is necessary to engage with content for

a sustained period of time in order to make it visible. These communal strategies for visibility are key to the activism of pro-Palestine activists. In another video, a woman, shown in a close-up shot and speaking directly to the camera, introduces concepts such as "interesting", "interaction", "likes", and "swiping through", as part of an attempt to teach others not only how TikTok's algorithm works, but how to make Palestinian content more relevant. Other users commented on the TikTok, asking questions such as "Does watching a video multiple times in a row make a difference in terms of algorithms?", "what if I leave a video looping?", and "what if you 2x speed the videos?" These activist strategies are produced to counteract what is seen as "shadow banning" — a difficult to detect form of content moderation that entails a reduction in the visibility of content (Are, 2022). As a reaction to a perceived unfair governance of the platform, users develop speculative folk theories grounded in everyday knowledge to make sense of perceived invisibility (Savolainen, 2022). To counteract the perceived shadow banning, pro-Palestine users actively share strategies to influence their interactions with the platform, seeking to understand how their engagement with the algorithm can impact visibility beyond the rules set by TikTok.

In another TikTok, a user discusses the use of the watermelon emoji as a symbol of Palestinian resistance. In the same close-up video style as the previously discussed video, a woman wearing a hijab speaks about the negative consequences of using the watermelon emoji instead of the Palestinian flag in order to bypass algorithmic censorship. She argues that this diminishes Palestinian identity by allowing them to be labelled "watermelon people". This TikTok created a lively discussion in the comment section: one user argues that "It's to beat the algorithm because the flag gets shadow banned. Honestly no one has said watermelon people", another "it's because the shadow band", and "100% my posts had 0 views because of the shadow ban!!! Like I uploaded new content and no traction". These comments suggest that algorithmic visibility is intertwined with concerns about identity, showing how recommender systems can become entangled in collective action. Users are not blind to the actions of algorithms; instead, they interact with and manipulate them, believing that such actions can influence collective recommendation regimes.

The lack of tangible knowledge about how TikTok's algorithm works places Pro-Palestine activists in a state of uncertainty. Summers-Effler (2006) argues that uncertainty regarding the outcome of interactions tends to intensify participants focus of attention during interaction rituals. Uncertainty requires participants to pay careful attention to changing contexts to be able to negotiate the unfolding

interactions. Therefore, algorithmic interaction rituals that involve conditions of perceived algorithmic invisibility are likely to generate intense focus of attention, intense emotion, and high levels of emotional energy among its participants.

Returning to Ingrid's experience, the emotional energy released in algorithmic boosting leaves her charged with positive emotional energy. Watching TikToks about Palestine made Ingrid develop a reinforced sense of solidarity supporting the Palestinian people.

> I think it actually gives me the feeling of contributing and being a part of something bigger. Yeah, that I'm not just someone on the sideline. I'm not just one who looks and does nothing. I feel like I'm actually doing something engaging, even if it's this small act. (Ingrid, 22)

Because of this engagement, Ingrid described herself as eager to scroll on TikTok again and repeat the algorithmic interaction ritual. For users within this TikTok community, social solidarity circulates within feedback loops that are created between them and TikTok's algorithm. By boosting the algorithm, they feel that they are actively supporting a social cause. As a result, the emotional energy that scrolling produces is transformed into solidarity and shared symbols within the digital space. In this way, social solidarity is not only found in the practices of individuals who use TikTok. We cannot interpret the collective action of pro-Palestinian users on TikTok as something that only involves individuals aiming to challenge the platform's recommendation politics. To understand how solidarity develops, we must also attend to the feedback loops themselves, as the sense of solidarity is articulated through the experience of the FYP. Solidarity depends on the user's attention to the next video — whether they skip it, let it play, like it, or save it. It relies on their attentiveness to how the circulation of content evolves on their FYP, and how, through the videos of other users that appear on their FYP, they imagine that a shift in the circulation of content across the app is taking place. Therefore, how a user feels in relation to their feedback loops lies at the core of solidarity.

While this research focused mainly on human-algorithm interactions, it is important to acknowledge that AIRs are not experienced in isolation. Rather, they are embedded in the platform, and as such encompass the AIRs of other users. Thus, the concept of algorithmic interaction ritual provides a useful lens for understanding how users' agency is collectively articulated through the very feedback loops they want to intervene.

9.2 Time as TikTok Symbol

An important outcome of a successful ritual is the creation of symbols that embody the positive feelings that underlie the ritual. In the case of algorithmic boosting, *time* is highlighted as an essential element, in terms of defining the idea of meaningful engagement with TikTok. For users such as Ingrid, watching a TikTok in full is an indication of caring, morality, and the relevance of the content. Pro-Palestine TikTok users employ symbols such as the watermelon to identify themselves but within the context of feedback loops, time itself becomes a symbol of care. Within this context, the act of letting a TikTok play in full is both an act to try to reorient the feedback loops and a symbol of solidarity. TikTok is often criticised for shortening attention spans and stealing people's focus (Hari, 2023), and so time is a symbol of relevance and interest. Symbols that indicate meaningfulness also include likes and comments; however, time represents users' commitment to a cause and interest in a topic, or that the content captured their attention long enough to fully engage them.

Time has always been a symbol used to represent relationships established by human collectives, and to navigate various orders of change. Arriving late to a meeting or a date not only means making a person wait, but suggests that you do not care or respect the event. Having time off not only indicates a break from professional or personal duties, but is regarded as an opportunity to cultivate oneself. Conversely, having no time for leisure is an aspirational status symbol of a successful professional life (Bellezza et al., 2017). Time is a symbol that gives meaning to the organisation of life.

For the sociologist Nobert Elias (1989), time refers to the human capacity to account for and grasp the experience of change. Time allows people to organise and act on the meanings granted to them. The internet and social media have transformed how people experience time (Castells, 2004); in an attention economy characterised by accelerated dynamics and a high volume of sensory and informational inputs, constant streams of short videos mean that engaging with a TikTok in its entirety can signal belonging and caring. Engaging with a particular piece of content rather than skipping it in some cases means participation in or advocation for a particular cause. Some of the research participants shared these ideas regarding use of time. They stated that watching the entirety of a TikTok instead of skipping it shows its relevance to them. Johan, for example, commented that the dynamics of TikTok affect his perception of time:

> TikToks aren't usually that long, basically, you watch it and then you go to the next one. And then, when you go to a TikTok that's three minutes long, which is actually a very short period of time, you feel like it's so long. Because, you know, you're not used to it. So suddenly this minute, instead of 30 seconds, it's three and a half minutes. It's like "oh, I can't be bothered to watch it" (Johan, 18)

On the platform there is a constant stream of TikToks, and this creates a sense of immediacy that shapes how users perceive and engage with content. Johan reflects on how TikTok's short-video affordances produce an experience of time anchored in immediacy — TikTok after TikTok, skip after skip — against the backdrop a three-and-a-half-minute video can feel like an eternity. Johan continued:

> When you look in the comment sections of a TikTok that is maybe five minutes or longer, there are a lot of people who say: "oh my god, I didn't even know that this video was so long, because it was so entertaining". And it's shocking for some people to watch an eight -minute video, when on YouTube that's maybe like the normal length of a video. So, I guess it's a thing where you get kind of snapped out of the immersive experience of short videos. It's just: "oh that's so long", but if you were to watch it on YouTube it's just another video. *(*Johan, 18)

The participants thus consider time to be a symbol of relevance on TikTok. This significance arises not only because watching a given TikTok requires a degree of attention and thus time, but because, in an accelerated environment, content demanding an investment of time is a signifier of its relevance and status. TikTok users are immersed in their FYPs, where they move between multiple online environments; given this constant flow, a moment of pause or break can be quite unexpected. Ewa recounted an experience of watching a nine-minute TikTok about a book that "was touching upon a lot of stuff", and said that she would never do the same if "it's someone just talking about their day and nothing specific probably not, even if it's really interesting and engaging and very funny". By Ewa "upon a lot of stuff" I interpret that Ewa was pointing to the presence of many topics she found meaningful. Again, we observe how time is grounded in the affective resonance that content generates. Ewa felt engaged with the book discussing how late capitalism shapes our perception of productivity. At the same time, she expressed surprise at

having been immersed in it for nine full minutes. Time is a symbol of caring, as in the case of algorithmic boosting, or of relevance and interest.

Soledad enjoys watching people recount personal stories, and described how she feels when she encounters long TikToks on her feed:

> If from the beginning it's entertaining and interesting, it's like, "Oh, okay, it's fine, you're going to tell me your story for ten minutes? Go ahead!" There are many times when I look at the progress bar and think, "Wow, this is really long, I'll skip it." The other day, I think I was watching one of the recordings where a guy was saying he ordered a pizza and it was a disaster; I think it was about ten minutes long, and I watched the whole thing without skipping, completely delighted. (Soledad, 23)[35]

Time is enacted through the opposition between skipping, scrolling and watching. Soledad describes playing a TikTok in full as something she does when content is entertaining and interesting.

As part of my digital ethnography, I found other instances in which time symbolises care and solidarity. Content creators use varied and imaginative strategies to capture people's attention —for example: using audio or the lyrics of specific songs to tell a story (Abidin, 2021). One strategy used by content creators to capture users' attention is to explicitly ask them to stop scrolling. This strategy can take different forms — from statements like "if you have ADHD, please don't scroll, this is for you" to "if your name start with A and you a BADDIE this is for you" or "this video is for the women, so if you're a guy keep scrolling". These examples illustrate a strategy that aims to produce a direct form of interpellation to capture the viewer's interest. Within this logic of trying to create a moment of pause in the rhythms of scrolling, and prevent users from skipping their TikTok, some people who upload content — often in difficult circumstances, whether economic or medical — request TikTok users to stay and watch their TikTok, emphasising that simply giving some seconds of attention constitutes a valuable form of support. For example, in one TikTok, a woman undergoing treatment for a rare form of cancer asks TikTok users to stay on the video because in that way it helps her to earn money to cover her medical expenses. In another TikTok, a man undergoing dialysis asks TikTok users to stay with him for 60 seconds in order to help reactivate

[35] Appendix D: Original Quotes

TikTok's creator fund and contribute toward his medical expenses.[36] This type of engagement with users is not exclusive to cases where people need financial aid to cover their medical expenses. On another TikTok, a woman sits on the back of her car and asks TikTok users not to scroll during nine seconds because she does not want to live in her car at age 20. Finally, also in the case of Palestine, a woman living in Gaza begs TikTok users not to scroll during seven seconds so she can feed her family.

The underlying motivation for these creators is to increase their viewing numbers on the platform and, by extension, become eligible for financial compensation through TikTok's Creator Next program. This program provides a group of tools, including access to the Creator Fund, Creator Marketplace, Video Gifts, and Tips, designed to support the monetisation of content. To access these features, creators must meet specific platform criteria, such as achieving at least 1,000 video views within the past 30 days (TikTok, n.d.). According to Maris et al. (2025), some TikTok users participate in the redistribution of value towards individuals, communities, or social problems they perceive as vulnerable or in need. The way to do it is through similar practices to those discussed in the previous section, such as watching a TikTok in full. Maris et al. (2025) describe these practices as a form of algorithmic mutual aid, wherein users provide mutual aid and empower people through their engagement with the algorithmic system.

Typically, users who engage with this type of content leave supportive comments and also invoke folk theories about algorithms in the comments to devise ways to enhance the visibility of the TikTok. For example, one user comments, "Fun fact liking and replying to comments boosts more! Also referencing popular things like Chappell Roan, Taylor Swift, and Sabrina Carpenter. Puts the video to the fyp of people who have watched them." Based on the belief that commenting influences algorithmic visibility, users often create chains such as "heart chain 💔 💔" or "fill the jar 🫙 with hearts ❤️ 💔 ❤️ 💔 ❤️ 💔". Another example includes using questions like "what's your favourite colour" to encourage engagement under the assumption that chains of replies translate into more visibility.

In this way, time, as a symbol of involvement and care, becomes an expression that symbolises concern for others. The effort of using time, when skipping was a possibility, becomes one of the ritual symbols. It reflects not only a capacity to care

[36] These examples come from public content on TikTok, however they have been paraphrased to minimise the identifiability of these persons.

for others but also an intentional effort to alter the course of feedback loops in favour of other causes.

9.3 Algorithm and Moral Alignment

Along with increased social solidarity, emotional energy enhances the development of shared feelings of morality and the construction of frameworks of evaluation (Collins, 2004). According to Smith (2003), moral frameworks are systems that help individuals or groups to differentiate right from wrong, prioritise goals, and determine what people should believe and feel. They establish the ways in which individuals and groups understand which behaviours are more adequate within a given context (Hitlin & Vaisey, 2013). These frameworks are essential to navigate social life as they enable people to make sense of the world in socially acceptable ways (Boltanski & Thevenot, 1999).

Scrolling on TikTok can also be a moral activity: TikToks about travel and food include messages about how to travel and treat one's body. Additionally, there is increasingly more content that refers to political and religious topics as well as discussions about gender relations, for example. Users, in turn, engage in moral actions through their interactions on the platform. The most common form of this is feedback loops influencing and mediating user judgements.

AIRs establish boundaries against other users through personalisation between the user and algorithm. Within such feedback loops, cultural capital and meanings circulate that (mis)align the user and TikTok's algorithm. When the algorithm is trying to understand what type of recommendation a given user wants, it attempts to synchronise with their symbolic universe. In doing so, the algorithm shifhts users in distinct moral communities through their interactions. For example, if a politically left-leaning user receives content featuring a far-right figure, the resulting negative emotions might lead the user to skip and keep scrolling or close and stop using the app. Serena highlights how TikTok's algorithm was able to identify her ideals and beliefs, and in so doing create a moral affinity that increased the number of TikToks of a certain type that she was recommended.

> I would see more feminist content calling out patriarchal structures and injustices that happen. Then it was the Black Lives Matter movement that was really blowing out up, and I would [consume] information about it so, the

> algorithm realised that I'm with that side of that conflict, and… so it really shows us more antifascist content. (Serena, 25)

Serena believes that the algorithm understands her political views — feminist and left-leaning — and shifted her recommendations towards that type of content. This perceived alignment simply reflects the aggregation of data points indicating Serena's behaviour on the platform and suggesting an interest in certain topics. However, she asserts how the algorithm "realised". This form of anthropomorphism indicates how Selena attributes human-like capabilities. In this case capacity for recognition, judgment, and even solidarity. Wang et al (2024) indicate how attributing human-like capabilities to an algorithm increases the trust in the system. In this sense, this comment can reflect how the algorithm is seen as an agent noticing and validating Serena's values. Furthermore, the perceived alignment, it is an alignment forged through practices of scrolling, liking, and skipping. Although platform algorithms are programmed to act in specific ways, users are still able to recalibrate recommendations through interactions, within the limits of platforms logics (Airoldi, 2021). As such, this perceived alignment is not lineal, it is rooted in the constant back and forth of scrolling. There are occasions when TikTok shows Selena content aligned within her moral frameworks, but also other instances when TikTok recommends her content that contradicts her moral judgements, which makes her angry.

> I have catched myself getting angry over something that I think is unfair or just outlandish and […] you have (to) take a step back and be like: "This is not good for me now. It's making me upset", so I have like, search for something else. (Serena, 25)

Being angry would produce negative feelings in Serena. She asserts that when something causes her to be upset, she has to step back and search for something else. Hamza, the Danish user with a migration background who in Chapter 8 described TikTok as his "happy space", recounts an instance in which he encountered a racist and hateful TikTok.

H: [The video][37] which I felt was very dumb and sad, because, like no terrorist has any religion in my mind. So I also do experience video[s] which I disagree with a lot,

D: But then when you find this TikTok, then how that contrasts with your happy space?

H: That's the weird thing actually, because it happens sometimes. Like you would see also a lot of videos with [name of racist politician], [racist action]. I will see some videos of them or some other racist politicians, and then that also makes me upset. But again, that's also funny to me to see how dumb these people can be [...] but it's very rare I see videos where I actually feel sad and want to cry from TikTok.

Hamza describes how seeing racist TikTok videos makes him feel sad and upset. He also distances himself from the content by using sarcasm, saying, "that's also funny to me to see how dumb these people can be". Finally, he mentions that it is rare to genuinely get affected by content. One way of interpreting this is that he scrolls to maintain a “happy space”, which is why he avoids engaging with this type of content in the first place. Negative emotions serve him to establish moral boundaries towards “good” and “bad” content (Lamont & Molnár, 2002)

Since, recommender system is committed to keep users engaged with the app as long as possible (Seaver, 2019), the algorithm tends to change recommendations if the outcome of these recommendations is that the user closes the app. TikTok’s recommender system thus tends to align with the user’s moral universe. In this way, negative emotions reinforce moral frameworks of users in two ways. First, as a reaction to content, as negative content produces feelings of disaffiliation or animosity. Content that produces anger or disgust binds users to particular moral frameworks, by resisting the values embedded in the content they encounter, users reinforce their own moral frameworks. Second, negative emotions lead users to skip the content. This signals to the algorithm that the user is not interested in that type of content, which alters the dynamics of the feedback loop. These acts of resistance become a way of constantly updating the degree of alignment between user and algorithm. Therefore, moral and cultural reinforcement are less the result of an exclusive engineered mechanism and more a consequence of users avoiding

[37] This quote has been redacted in places to protect against the dissemination of hate speech or sensitive content. The bracketed text indicates where content has been anonymized

opposing views and negative feelings or discomfort when using TikTok. Rather than being passive recipients of content, users actively curate their experiences to minimise exposure to ideas that make them angry. In this sense, they may engage with opposing views as long as they can manage the affective implications of doing so. For example, in Samantha's case she declares more tolerance towards opposing views.

> I think it depends on the user, … at least from my feed, sometimes it goes super, super right wing, a little too right wing for my comfort. I'm like: "Oh, that's concerning" it also goes super, super left wing. It'll do a mix of both, for me, but I know for other people it'll only be super, super left wing. I'm assuming for others it'll only show super, super right-wing stuff. (Samantha, 23)

However, this should not be taken as an indication that she is indifferent to all types of content. Samantha sets limits to what type of opposing content she receives on her FYP:

> It's fine in terms of things like politics, if it gets too right wing, I'm like: "Ok that's a little, that's too far!" Like, that's fine, I click "not interested" but if it's really, really far, I get a lot of like xenophobic, anti-immigration, Islamophobic, I'm like: "Ok, definitely not interested, do not want to be on that feed, that's too far right" I've seen some like, more, I guess middle, brown, still right wing, stuff like we need to do pay, do less taxes, that's fine, I guess, I'd still scroll, but then I see super left stuff as well, and I'm like: "That's more my line, that's also fine" but If that make sense, so sometimes I click not interested just to get it off my feed. (Samantha, 23)

When content is right-wing, she initially expresses a very low emotional response. However, when it becomes a little more right-wing, she shows greater discomfort. "Okay, that's a little, that's too far!" and uses the "Not interested" option. When content is xenophobic or Islamophobic, her reaction changes to pronounced aversion. This represents the threshold of her affective gradient. She does not want this content in her feed. Therefore, she draws a boundary at hate speech on her FYP.

Tavory and Fine (2020) indicate that interactions are characterised by both moments of disruption and alignment. This tension is inherent to interactions and demarcates the limits of acceptable behavior. In this way, these encounters on the

FYP with content that activates moral frameworks are a way of negotiating the extent of (mis)alignment between user and algorithm. This reflects a more nuanced perspective on how users and recommender system achieve moral alignment. Since they are aware of TikTok feedback loops, they demarcate the limits of what is morally acceptable on their FYPs. Although most participants in the study prefer to avoid negative feelings, users always negotiate the extent of the moral alignment in their feed. For example, Ingrid engages with content that expresses contrary views that contrast with her own but she is curious about them motivations of other users to who hold opposite beliefs:

> There's this phenomenon of trad wives making a lot of videos and all, like saying “I'm not a feminist” ... I always go to see the original video because I'm fascinated by it and then check out the comments and see all of these people agreeing with them and saying the same thing. I like to be reminded that my viewpoint and my kind of people are not the only kind in this society. (Ingrid, 22)

Both Samantha and Ingrid do not avoid necessarily engaging with opposing content. Taking someone else’s perspective to increase interpersonal understandings also needs different degrees of curiosity and/or empathy. However, this does not imply that they have a broader perspective, or their moral frameworks are less rigid. They simply wish to consider different opinions. Nonetheless, they still negotiate what it is in their FYP. When interactions with algorithmic agents are direct, the logic of guiding users away from certain content becomes more of an negotiation, allowing for a dynamic exchange between user preferences and algorithmic recommendations.

9.4 Reading Comments as Practice

A common practice on TikTok is reading and interacting with comments. As previously discussed, users and the algorithm collaboratively construct and negotiate the moral frameworks underlying the content the former encounter, and these frameworks are shaped by moral and aesthetic judgements. Yet, once content appears on their FYPs, users engage in a different kind of work. They also validate their interpretations by reading comments, particularly in situations of ambiguity. During the interviews, all of the participants stated that they tend to read the

comments on TikToks in order to learn about the interpretations or reactions of other users (although some interviewees do this more than others). It is striking that they feel the need to compare their opinions and perspectives to those of others, despite not knowing the people behind the comments. On TikTok, comments are organised by popularity, with the ones with the most likes at the top of the comment section. When users read comments, they thus read those that are most popular first. Ingrid and Emma explained their reasons for reading through comments as follows:

> I start out with reading the most liked comments […] I go to the top, so they are in the top when you open the comment section. I use the comment section also if there's something I don't understand. If there's an analysis that I don't understand, or a song I don't know, a movie I don't know, or if there's a question, if there's an obvious question. It's not like I doom scroll on the comments, it's mainly brief. *(*Ingrid, 22)

> Sometimes I check if they saw the same thing I saw on the video, like point out something. I don't know why, it's just: "uh! I saw something that they also saw and it was so funny" or maybe just find updates if it's something like that, like they do answer videos sometimes (Emma, 26)

Emma describes a practice of going through comments to find out whether what she found funny matches what other users found funny. This practice of actively contrasting one's own thoughts and interpretations with the most popular ones in the comment section demonstrates how the construction of aesthetic and moral judgements is embodied by individuals through their alignment with the collective (Shilling and Mellor, 1998) — or in the case of a TikTok, by the users brought together by the algorithm. Reading through comments produces a back and forth, wherein a user compares their thoughts and ideas with the most liked comments. Going through comments is thus an active approach to shaping one's own judgements and evaluations. Hence, users deploy frameworks of evaluation in practice, rather than through a set of fixed dispositions. However, the participants stated that they rarely post comments themselves on social-media platforms, giving two main reasons for this. First, they wish to avoid dealing with potential hate reactions, which often accompany comments on social media (Schmid et al., 2024); and second, they do not see the value in posting a comment if their opinion has already been expressed by another user.

> I would usually check the comments to see if I agree with them … I don't comment usually, but I check the comments just to see if people agree with what I think. if it's something that like annoys me. Or if it's somethings that's really interesting to me, I would check the comments. If it's something that it is self-explanatory and I don't really care, I would scroll. So if it's like a story-time let's say. I don't really care what people think. If it's something that really pisses me off I'm gonna check the comments to see if they piss me off or not (Serena 25)

Serena reads comments when she finds a TikTok funny, unclear, or enraging. If she feels certain about a video's meaning, she does not read comments. In this regard, reading comments tends to occur in moments of uncertainty, i.e. when Serena does not entirely understand the meanings underlying a TikTok, or when she perceives that something from the original video is attacking their judgements. Soledad approaches comments similarly:

> Yes, sometimes that people think the same thing I'm thinking when I watch the video and it's not misunderstood (laughing) because I don't know if you've seen the girl who's on the cutting diet. She doesn't cut! And I'm like: "I can't be the only person who's thinking that this doesn't make sense, or what are you doing drinking a Monster at eight in the morning with a tortilla "pincho"[38] and also, many times the comments are very teasing and I find the comments very funny sometimes too. (Soledad, 24)[39]

Soledad describes the content of a content creator undertaking a cutting diet, which involves reducing caloric intake in order to lose body fat while maintaining muscle mass. Soledad uses humour to negatively judge the behaviour of the content creator, who shows herself junk food in the morning while supposedly cutting her intake of calories. She notes that sarcastic or mocking comments add to her entertainment experience. Humour and entertainment are often used to establish symbolic boundaries, helping to define what is acceptable or unacceptable (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013).

Furthermore, users frequently communicate their emotions in comments (Schultes et al., 2013). Hence, most-liked comments sometimes guide individual

[38] A "pincho" is a small snack originally from northern parts of Spain, in this case is a slice of Spanish omelette on top of a slice of bread.
[39] Appendix D: Original Quotes

users' interpretations. One topic on which Ewa engaged with reading comments was in the case of content about so-called trad wives. Trad wives is a movement that has gained traction online recently where some women advocate a return to a conservative, traditionalist womanhood (Zahay, 2022). On TikTok, this movement depicts content creators that have become fulltime housewives: they prepare meals for their husbands, choose to be stay at home mothers, dress with modest clothing, and modulate their voice to talk using a sweeter and submissive voice.

> I remember checking the comments and mostly those, the comments were against the movement and against all the statement that the girl was saying so I assume maybe the whole app liberated and less… I don't know, maybe that's just my feed and my algorithm…but still even if that was showing me videos that were not normally something that I would like, it was fill with comments that I liked, so, those were shown to people similar to me (Ewa, 24)

Ewa claimed that when she opened the comments layer, she saw that the people commenting on those TikToks shared similar evaluations about tradwives than her. She ended up hypothesising that the algorithm might have showed those TikToks to a similar type of user to her and whom had a similar TikTok FYP. This generates two different elements in her relationship with TikTok. First, seeing people react like her deactivates her negative feelings and creates the basis to negotiate opposing views. Second, it enhances a sense of community in Ewa:

> I don't see people having very contrary opinions, so that I'm watching that and be like: "Oh why are you thinking like that?! Now I'm angry, I don't want to see it again! I'm going off this app!" It's more like: "Oh yeah, I can relate to that! I want to see more! I want to check what do you think!" and then you can even go to the comments and see that people are having the same thoughts as you have and you kind of connect with them and have this feeling of being in some sort of community. (Ewa, 24)

Therefore, social solidarity is created around the shared moral frameworks to interpret and relate to social life that led to feeling being a part of a community. Then, even if the views expressed in a TikTok violate the moral standards that a user possesses, knowing that the TikTok is evaluated in the same way downplays the capacity to trigger negative sentiments and produces the opposite view.

Therefore, instead of producing disagreement, it reinforces the moral standards of the user. Consequently, the moral engagement that occurs in the comments section is not driven by a confrontation with opposing viewpoints but rather by verifying that users think in a similar way. In other words, that the algorithm has disseminated from TikTok to other users with similar beliefs.

9.5 Concluding Remarks

If the goal of the algorithm is to captivate users, a successful AIR is one that causes users to remain engaged and continue scrolling on the platform for as long as possible. When rituals are successful, they produce social solidarity, shared symbols, and collective frameworks. One outcome of rituals is the development of social solidarity, the social glue that binds individuals together. This is shown through the example of algorithmic boosting, wherein users mobilise as activists to influence the nature of content recommendations in order to increase the visibility of content. Here TikTok users develop strategies through folk theories, interpreting a perceived experience of being "shadow banned" on the platform. To circumvent the perceived algorithmic governance decisions that limit the visibility of certain political content, users adopt strategies such as letting TikToks play in full to affect algorithmic recommendations. By adopting such strategies, users mobilise to try to reverse algorithmic governance. As such, time becomes an important sacred symbol on the platform; in an environment characterised by speed and constant scrolling, the act of spending time on a particular TikTok signals relevance and interest. Investing time in resisting the algorithm through algorithmic interaction requires time. That time embodies interest in a topic as opposed to a constant stream of content. Such time represents interest in a topic, in contrast to scrolling. It reflects care, particularly in relation to activism, or mutual aid.

Another important aspect of scrolling on TikTok is the development of moral frameworks. The algorithm participates in establishing these by (mis)aligning users towards more desired content, particularly when recommendations does not produce the desired affect. Moral judgements within algorithmic environments are not merely the result of users passively accepting the recommendations of the algorithm; rather, the young users interviewed in this study actively seek to shape and personalise their feeds. They align their FYPs with their desired perspectives, often curating them to minimise exposure to opposing views. The practice of commenting is a tool for both interaction and the development of evaluative

frameworks, as users read comments in order to compare and validate their interpretations. On a platform characterised by memetic qualities, humour serves to delineate social norms. Thus, while social-media platforms are often problematised as sources of increasing polarisation in society, analysing AIRs reveals that users, along with algorithms, are active participants in establishing the type of content that appears on users' FYPs based on how content makes them feel.

10 Discussion: Why Feedback Loops Matter

This thesis has presented a conceptual framework for examining human-algorithm interactions, focusing on young TikTok users' experiences of feedback loops. Through my methodological and theoretical approach, I contributed both to the literature on human-algorithms interactions and to interaction theories.

It has been argued that scrolling on TikTok involves a constant process of negotiation between users and the recommender system, where liking, commenting, and skipping are the language that is used to negotiate what is displayed on users' FYPs. Feedback loops not only help the algorithm to refine its performance and define the scope of recommendations, but shape how users interact with the platform. Feedback loops also show how sociality on TikTok is embedded within techno-social relations that structure the production and circulation of content on the platform, and constitute the foundation of its use. Therefore, instead of treating algorithms as technical objects that operate in a domain that is separate from human interactions, I argue that they should be understood as social agents that are embedded in social relations that react — both predictably and unpredictably — to how people encounter them.

This conceptualisation contributes to efforts to challenge traditional distinctions between human and non-human in sociological theory, highlighting the need to account for the specificities of interactions in digital environments. By positioning algorithms as social agents, feedback loops on TikTok connect users to the platform. Analytically, feedback loops represent situations where "the social" unfolds through meaning-making, habit, interpretation, and negotiation. While this thesis has focused on TikTok, this perspective can be extended to encompass a wide range of human–algorithm interactions, where outputs are not merely consumed, but actively shaped and contested through interactions with users.

In the first part of the conclusions chapter, I will summarise the main findings and contributions of the thesis. In doing so, I will return to the research questions outlined in the introduction and discuss how the findings respond to them. From the

specificities of considering TikTok as a free space demarcating different activities during the day, the theoretical possibilities and benefits of using interaction ritual theory to understand how individuals experience human-algorithm interactions, to how the feelings and vibes define the establishment of feedback loops and appear as a source to study social chains of interactions in digital spaces. Second, I will situate the thesis findings in relation to questions on agency on TikTok, examining how users act on the algorithm through moments of alignment and disruption. Questions on how young users access harmful content on TikTok need to take into account the relationality of feedback loops. By recognising a certain degree of user autonomy in defining the contours of feedback loops, users participate in negotiating meaning-making processes. Therefore, any sociological understanding of TikTok must take into account how users negotiate feedback loops that resonate with their everyday contexts and contribute to the process of meaning-making. Third, I will discuss the idea of algorithmic interaction ritual chains in relation to recursive societies (Beer, 2022). If, as Beer claims, recursive data structures represent a pressing issue for scholars of algorithmic processes, then chains of algorithmic interaction rituals provides an interactional lens to think about them. Finally, I will present the limitations of the research and what possible avenues of future research could look like. I will debate whether AIR is a good proposal to analyse feedback loops and what could future research on it look like. Given relations have always been a central interest of sociology, the discipline has a privileged position with regard to analysing the effects and consequences of social relations becoming embedded in algorithmic processes in the twenty-first century.

10.1 Contributions of the Thesis

The aim of this thesis was to contribute to understanding of human–algorithm interactions by studying how users experience and make sense feedback loops. The decision to focus on feedback loops allowed focus to be placed on scrolling as an ongoing process that is shaped by continuous interactions between users and algorithms. Users do not passively consume content on TikTok but participate, actively or inadvertently, in establishing their own feedback loops. If, as some sociologists claim, sociology is the science of social relations, social reality must be understood as dynamic and continuous, and in processual terms (Emirbayer, 1997). Hence, by adopting a relational lens, both algorithms and users appear as agents that take part in a world of relations, which ultimately come to define the digital world.

The first contribution of the thesis highlights how feedback loops have to be studied considering the conditions that shape its use. This relates to the first research question, which examined how young TikTok users experience and make sense of the feedback loops they establish through their scrolling practices. Even before opening the app, user engagement with it is conditioned by the situations in which it is used and expectations that users have regarding this usage. The participants described their AIR evolving in parallel with their moods, problems, and needs in everyday life, highlighting the interconnectedness of digital and nondigital experiences. TikTok is considered to be mainly a source of entertainment; for example, the research participants contrasted it with other social-media apps, seeing Instagram as an app for social networks and connection, and X (formerly Twitter) as an app for engaging in intellectual discussions. The nature of feedback loops thus depends on the initial expectations of users and perceived role of the app. The initial pursuit of goofy content should be understood within this context, as it serves a specific function in users' everyday routines. This is not to say that TikTok, or social media in general, always has a function of escapism. Rather, just as music accompanies people during different stages of their day and helps them to regulate their emotions (DeNora, 2000), TikTok helps users to manage undesirable emotions and affects. Feedback loops need to be seen not merely as algorithmic processes, but as platform that interacts with users' needs, situational contexts. Feedback loops are embedded in the everyday lives and interests of users, and erase distinctions between online content and the everyday, as both are interconnected. Furthermore, this first research question has allowed us to capture how feedback loops in human-algorithm interactions are anchored in lived experience, meanings, and habits. This has implications for how we think about meaning-making in human-algorithm processes, as meaning is constructed through user negotiations with TikTok's algorithms.

The main theoretical contribution of this thesis is the development of AIR. The development of this model addresses the second research question concerning how feedback loops can be studied as ritualised interactions. The adaptation and extension of Collins's IRT to analyse feedback loops offers several advantages: it captures the constant process of engagement with an algorithm through scrolling, liking, and skipping, and allows how these interactions make users feel, and how successful feedback loops align with users' cultural capital, to be examined. The model outlines four steps for successful rituals, and consequently sheds light on why users spend extended periods of time on TikTok. The process begins with capturing user attention. Through the endless stream of TikToks, users rely on vibes as

affective cues to decide which TikToks to watch. Generally, what captures the attention of users aligns with their cultural capital and everyday life events.

The success of the scrolling ritual is related to the ability of the algorithm to align with the interests of the user by presenting content that interests them. As users become more engaged, they develop positive emotional energy as a result of the content they encounter. This reinforces their willingness to return to the app, as they know that they will continue to receive content that resonates with their interests. Emotional energy is created when cultural capital and interests synchronise. The emotional energy released during scrolling is not created between individuals and algorithms, but during situations. Users do not get attached to TikTok's algorithm; rather, they develop flows of affect during interactions with the platform. In this way, scrolling as an action assumes that action is embedded in the interplay between meanings and affects (Alexander & Smith, 2018). By studying interactions as ritualised patterns, this thesis shows how on key elements of scrolling is how meanings circulate through forms of cultural capital that users recognise and decode

One of the initial steps in a successful AIR is the user decoding the vibes of TikToks without consciously reflecting on this. The role of vibes, along with that of emotional energy, answer to the third research question, which addressed how affective responses influence user interactions with TikTok's recommender system and contribute to the formation of feedback loops. The user relies on vibes to get a sense of the content that appears on their FYP. By not dichotomising meaning and affect, and instead taking both into consideration, it is possible to understand how engaging in meaningful action on TikTok is inherently tied to seeking content that makes sense, or makes users feel good. According to Abrutyn and Lizardo (2024), an affective model of action should recognise how actors are motivated by the affectively grounded self who attaches meaning to things and persons that motivates them to act. In this sense, motive is an internal cognitive and affective state causally involved in initiating, continuing, and guiding action. In the last years, cultural sociology has started to use concepts and theories from cognition studies to explain action, and how culture is internalised (Di Maggio, 1997; Lizardo, 2004; Vaisey, 2009). Although cultural sociology now recognises the embodiment of cognition (Ignatow, 2007), the role of affect and emotions in explaining and motivating action is less developed (Abrutyn, 2022). Without contesting the relevance of cognition in mental representations of social life, cultural explanations can provide an understanding of how both cognition and affect are integrated in action. Furthermore, focusing on vibes as an affective lens that drives the attention of users contributes to discourses about how to research affect. From the perspective adopted

in this research, affect, articulated through vibes, becomes a way users use to decode and verbalise their affective perception of things, people and spaces. Therefore, considering vibes, as cultural resources that people use to make sense of the affects surrounding them and to understand the connections between affect and space.

Another contribution of the research is the conceptualisation of different types of emotional energy. Collins (2004) provides a very broad and indeterminate understanding of emotional energy; for him, the positive emotional energy of a ritual was the same whether that ritual is a techno-rave party or a sexual encounter. Moreover, Collins did not conceptualise the role of negative emotional energy in creating and establishing social solidarity (Boyns & Luery, 2015). This research, in contrast, has argued for the existence of different types of emotional energy in relation to TikTok feedback loops, positing three types of emotional energy based on the interactional dynamics and situations that participants create. Hedonic emotional energy is created when they engage with content that is primarily intended to provide enjoyment or entertainment. Eudaimonic emotional energy is developed when feedback loops help users with their personal growth, through processing meaningful experiences or emotions. Finally, intimate emotional energy is developed if the feedback loop relates to a personal issue, as occurred when the FYP of one of the research participants started to show content about problems with partners after they had had an argument with their partner. This research demonstrates that categorising emotional energy can provide new insights into how users establish different types of feedback loops, depending on the projected outcomes of rituals. Moreover, it can help to study rituals by facilitating exploration of not only the symbolic attributes that bind people together, but the social sources of affect and how they operate in different social settings.

The concepts of vibes and emotional energy are central to understanding how users interact with the TikTok recommender system and how feedback loops are established and sustained. Agency in algorithmic interaction rituals emerges in moments of alignment and disruption — moments that can either re-energise the ritual or dissolve it. These moments are negotiated through what users feel within the feedback loops: moments where they feel sad, angry, happy, joyful. is key to understanding how agency unfolds in human–algorithm interactions. As Ruckenstein (2023) argues understanding how people develop a feel for algorithms is essential for understanding how agency unfolds in human–algorithm interactions. It is in these affective responses — whether resonance or resistance — that users participate in shaping the feedback loops they engage with.

Finally, the thesis helps to unpack how successful scrolling rituals produce emotional energy in users which lead to the development of social solidarity, symbols and shared moral frameworks of evaluation among users. This addresses the fourth research question by exploring answering how feedback loops drive social connections. In digital spaces, social solidarities can emerge when a community of people – in the case of this research, pro-Palestine activists – develop collective strategies to counter suppression – in this case perceived algorithmic suppression of their content. Users develop self-produced knowledge about how an algorithm works to try to make content more visible, while at the same time reinforcing their beliefs and a sense of community.

Symbols also play a crucial role in scrolling rituals. In a landscape full of ephemeral, fleeting stimuli, time is a symbol of seriousness and commitment. The act of intentionally spending time — in the case of pro-Palestine activists "gaming" the algorithm to amplify content — shows care and dedication. In contrast, passive scrolling signifies disengagement and irrelevance. Furthermore, moral frameworks are negotiated during interactions between users and TikTok's algorithm through which users encounter other users and TikToks who share similar moral orientations. When it comes to the interpretation of content users rely in other users' evaluations to validate their own interpretations. In this context, comment reading becomes more than passive observation; it emerges as a meaningful practice of algorithmic interaction that contributes to the co-construction of moral frameworks within digital environments.

Ultimately, this thesis argues with that AIRs can be can used to understand how scrolling, liking, and commenting are not merely individual actions, but part of a broader social process. Although algorithms are just lines of code, they function as reactive agents; they shape user experiences by clustering together individuals with similar identities. This interactional process generates emotional energy when the interplay between meaning, affect, and situations connects user and content, underscoring the importance of studying the production of social realities in digital spaces.

10.2 Feedback Loops and Relationality

By focusing on the dynamics of interactions between users and algorithms, this thesis has offered a nuanced perspective on the critique of TikTok as a source of public malaise. The mainstream press and public discourse tend to make TikTok

responsible for a perceived decline in the younger generations. While the use of TikTok has many downsides and potential negative effects, including on mental health and social problems, scholarship remains divided on whether social media is a primary cause of mental-health issues, or merely correlated with them. (Odgers, 2024).

From a sociological perspective, it is notable that public discourse and the mainstream media often construct a romanticised version of the past without social media, while simultaneously highlighting the negative impact of social media on modern society. This framing oversimplifies social processes by blaming social media for contemporary anxieties. In problematising platforms such as TikTok, there is a tendency to overlook other underlying factors, such as class, inequalities, and symbolic struggles for legitimacy, which could potentially account for phenomena such as the rise in far-right ideologies and sexism among younger people. The most pertinent question is not whether social media is inherently harmful, but how social media, and in this case TikTok, functions within, interacts with, and amplifies broader societal dynamics.

Before I address that point, it is important to note that the logic of scrolling is not eminently new. The evolution of television in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in a multi-channel system that affected TV viewing habits and introduced the notion of "channel surfing" and the fights over the remote in many households. Becker and Schönbach (1989) found that daily TV viewing time increased from 105 minutes in 1980 to 140 minutes in 1986 in the Netherlands. This shift was particularly pronounced among younger people. Channel surfing was a way to scan multiple channels, either to escape advertisements or to find new content (Weimann, 1995). At the core of this action was the gratification derived from encountering novel content, which evolved into a cultural logic in itself. Scrolling is thus not inherently new, given people previously "scrolled" for new content on TV. What distinguishes TikTok and similar platforms is the intensification and individualisation of the process: TikTok and other recommender systems circulate content by focusing on providing the user with an individualized feed, as well as how they negotiate it.

It is indisputable that discourses about algorithms are used to advance particular political, economic, and social interests (see e.g. Pasquale, 2015); however, the focus on the technical and political mechanisms of content circulation often means that the contexts and webs of social relations that users inhabit are seldom considered. TikTok has the inarguable capacity to popularise particular political and commercial content; however, users are not simply passive subjects, but active participants in shaping their FYPs — individuals who choose to establish some

feedback loops over others. Therefore, one way to approach how algorithmic encounters affect the development of discriminatory assumptions is to account for how users establish feedback loops with harmful content, how that content makes people feel, and how that connects with their meaning-making processes; all taking into account their ability the act over those feedback loops. Research should study the cultural logics that make particular groups of users engage with racist or sexist content as a way of making sense of their experiences. It may be that, for these users, such content is not just passively consumed, that it appears rational and is appealing because it is the best explanation for the transformations that they see around them. Studying feedback loops could thus explain the processes of meaning-making behind engagement with such content. A user who consumes misogynistic content might not be passively radicalised by TikTok's algorithm alone and may instead be developing conservative and reactionary views in relation to wider transformations in society, which are then reinforced through TikTok. For example, the participants in this research react negatively to political content that does not align with their views, or that could be labelled fake news. In addition, they possess algorithmic literacy, which means that they are aware of how algorithms work and the risk of establishing rabbit-holes. Future research could benefit from taking into account the social conditions and cultural frameworks that users develop. Kreiss and McGregor (2023) showed that people try to make sense of situations around them with the information they possess, and that inequalities, not polarisation, shape their interactions. In other words, the choices made by users on platforms are marked by relations of power and inequality in society.

In this way, it is important to study feedback loops as manifestations of the interconnection of social relations in the 21st twenty-first century, and the role that algorithmic agents play in to them. A relational understanding of society highlights the dynamic interplay between individuals and structures. From this standpoint, people are neither completely free agents nor passive subjects determined by social structures; instead, they are embedded in processes that both (re)produce and challenge these structures (Emirbayer, 1997). Thinking in such terms about TikTok's algorithm, it can thus be understood as to be an agent that is constantly engaged in the circulation of symbols and meanings. In negotiating TikToks on their FYPs, users either detach from or create a deeper embedding within feedback loops in order to establish particular courses of action. Thus, what is negotiated in social interactions involve the negotiation of are meanings, roles, expectations, norms, and emotional orientations.

10.3 Feedback Loops in Recursive Societies

Studying feedback loops between users and algorithmic agents on TikTok requires thinking about the implications of *recursion* for how algorithms function in society. One important characteristic of algorithmic processes is that algorithms do not simply respond to data, but loop through it repeatedly, refining and redefining themselves with each iteration of recommendations. This process is known as recursion, whereby the output of an algorithmic recommendation is used as the input for the next iteration of algorithmic activity. In computer science and algorithm design, recursion is envisioned as a problem-solving strategy for solving computational problems. As such, the outcomes of feedback loops between users and algorithms are not just the result of isolated interactions; they are layered, amplified, and multiplied through the repetition of data-driven processes (Amoore, 2020), which has led some scholars to discuss the notion of *recursive societies* (Beer, 2022).

Far from being exclusive of algorithmic processes, the concept of recursion is a common subject in linguistics, mathematics, biology, and studies of human cognition, among others (Recursion, or similar understandings of it, is also present in sociological understandings of society. If recursion is not unique to algorithmic processes, its relevance relates to how it is enacted. In discussing recursive societies, Beer introduces the concept of data coils in order to unpack recursivity. These are produced when:

> the data being produced are not just a product of actions, practices or behaviours, they are a product of how previous feedback loops have shaped those actions, practices and behaviours, which then produces more data, which then fold back again into social life (Beer, 2022, p. 2).

This highlights how feedback loops accumulate over time. Therefore, rather than treating them in isolation, they have to be situated within broader configurations of the feedback loops that shape and define them. The idea of recursive societies highlights a dynamic wherein meaning, data, and interpretation feed back into the system repeatedly and evolve together, shaping one another. However, it is important to remark that, while the notion of recursive societies might suggest a restructuring of algorithmic logic through repeated feedback loops, platforms such as TikTok do not autonomously alter their algorithmic rules. Instead algorithms

continuously recalibrate rankings, weights, and representations through data on user interactions.

Feedback loops on TikTok function recursively in two ways. First, they shape the iterations that define future recommendations. At this stage, the user is the primary subject of recursion. Every iteration of recommendations, and subsequent feedback loops, will be influenced by initial, previous paths. For example, as I noted in the introduction, TikTok recommended me content that was related to the themes that were relevant to me when I had a Sicilian girlfriend, even when I no longer had a Sicilian girlfriend. This illustrates how past interactions continue to shape algorithmic recommendations, even when they no longer align with current interests. Studying feedback loops therefore requires us to examine how these recursive patterns reinforce certain categories and trajectories for users. However, feedback loops do not just replicate past preferences of users embedded in data; they enact particular representations of a given topic among different possible ones. My recommendations were not just about food, for example, but related to a particular idea of authenticity and tradition, wherein quality is related to the simplicity of good ingredients and inherited techniques passed down from previous generations. Such a representation is not arbitrary, but rather anchored in a construction that associates Italian identity with an authentic cuisine that is rooted in tradition (Parasecoli, 2019). Second, recursion connects to broader social processes. Feedback loops contribute to the establishing of collective patterns that feed into the entire corpus of recommendations based on past understandings. Over time, these recursive patterns influence cultural norms, making it crucial to study feedback loops not just on the individual level, but as structural forces that shape society. These collective patterns can manifest as algorithmic boosting or, more inadvertently, in the form of small shifts in feedback loops that feed back into the broader circulation of content on TikTok.

The concept of recursivity can illuminate how feedback loops, such as recommender algorithms and generative AI, create self-perpetuating networks that influence individual and collective actions within algorithmic encounters. Beer (2022, p. 2) sees a recursive society as one that "emerges when data gathering is so integrated that there is no point of origin. everything is already implicated by loop upon loop of data processing. Contemporary analytic processes are working with data that is at least partly a product of previous analytic steps." The recursive nature of feedback loops relates to how each scroll, like, or skip informs subsequent recommendations, as well as how TikTok's recommender system is shaped by its

code and training datasets, which shape the dynamics of interactions between the user and the algorithm.

This suggests the need to explore the potential for transformation across contesting social categories. Within this context, AIR can contribute to the conversation on the consequences and effects of living in recursive societies. The model's capacity to examine the mutual focus of attention between user and algorithm, and the resulting fluctuations in relation to the production of emotional energy and symbols, makes it a tool that can be used to analyse variations in these dynamics.

Beer suggests that recursivity is one of the biggest challenges faced by scholars examining algorithmic processes. However, there is a variable that remains essential in explaining recursive algorithmic feedback loops: power. For example, in domains like credit scoring or incarceration, the capacity to escape prior data-driven classifications and consequent feedback loops is difficult, if not impossible. AIR enables an analysis of how power is enacted at the level of interaction. Using Goffman's (1961a) concept of looping is useful to think about power differences in interactions. In his study of mental institutions, when analysing the interactions between staff and inmates, looping occurred when staff provoked responses from inmates, and used those responses to justify taking particular courses of action in relation to the inmates. In this context, looping illustrates how an institution controls the sense of self of certain people (the inmates). Similarly, algorithmic interaction rituals can help us to understand power imbalances through the emotional responses of users to feedback loops. By analysing moments of alignment and disruption, and who has the power to define the contours of the recursive feedback, AIR provides a model for understanding how power operates in the micro-dynamics of human–algorithm interactions in spaces delimited by platforms' power.

10.4 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into human–algorithm interactions and feedback loops, it is necessary to acknowledge that it has certain limitations. The study focused on a particular type of feedback loop on TikTok. However, the affordances of different platforms and the internal dynamics of these should not be forgotten. Types of feedback loop and how these are embedded in the everyday lives of users change depending on the type of platform. For example, TikTok's feedback loops are likely completely different to those of a dating app such as Tinder, a social

network such as Instagram or BlueSky, a chatbot like ChatGPT or an AI companion such as Replika. Therefore, the scope of the findings of this research are thus limited to TikTok.

Another limitation concerns the generalisability of the, which is shaped by the composition of the participant sample. This study was intended to explore situations in which users encounter algorithms, rather than to assess sociodemographic differences in TikTok use. However, it is important to note that that no broad generalisations can be made about TikTok users beyond this study. Moreover, the sample consisted primarily of young, educated, and socioeconomically mobile individuals, which may not represent the full diversity of TikTok users. A more diverse sample consisting of people from different classes would have been valuable in order to compare differences in the experience of feedback loops and algorithmic literacy. Surprisingly, all of the participants demonstrated some level of algorithmic awareness about how algorithms work, which suggests that awareness of algorithmic processes is becoming more widespread among younger populations. Future research could address both how sociodemographic differences shape the establishing of different types of feedback loop, and how algorithmic literacy varies across social groups.

Another limitation has come from an overly emphasis on understanding how users interact with TikTok's algorithm at the expense of the connections and relationships between users that TikTok affords. This lack of attention to human-human interactions is attributable to a deliberate focus to understand the contours of the algorithmic interaction ritual, as users described their experience of feedback loops. However, it is important to recognise that feedback loops are not an isolated phenomenon, they are embedded in broader social processes. The findings have shown how feedback loops sustain forms of solidarity. For example, in the case of pro-Palestine activists, or as a channel for organising mutual aid. These instances highlight how the emotional energy generated by algorithmic interaction ritual is generated projected and sustained through interactions with other people. Future research should further examine the entanglements between human-algorithm interactions with other humans.

Studying affects and feelings is inherently challenging, especially when it comes to understanding the experiences of individuals (Wettergren, 2015). The exploration of affect could have been enriched by incorporating additional methods. A more comprehensive account of the affective responses of scrolling and how vibes guide users could have been achieved through the use of self-report surveys, which could have asked users to assess their feelings, moods, and emotions both before and after

scrolling. Additionally, diaries could have allowed participants to document their emotions and reflect on the content that resonated with them during their scrolling experience. While semi-structured interviews and scrolling with the participants provided valuable insights, the complexity of accessing and understanding emotions makes it clear that other methods could have offered a richer, more detailed picture of users' affective and emotional states.

When it comes to future uses of AIR, Future research could take the application of AIR into new domains, this could include studying how collective agency is enacted on social media platforms through feedback loops. AIR could be used to study these social dynamics, particularly by examining how AI can make people feel heard and understood in collective responses to major events in digital spaces. Such research could provide an understanding of how digital platforms influence the courses and dynamics of social events, and how algorithmic interactions reinforce or challenge social interpretations of them. AIR could also be used to study how people interact with chatbots and AI companions, a growing trend where people share personal information with GenAI to make important decisions. In this way, of equal interest would be to further elaborate on the AIR model, specifically in how the main elements or ingredients translate into different algorithmic contexts.

Finally, an interesting element to explore that is not directly related to the study of feedback loops, but rather to the cultural underpinnings of scrolling, is the frequent use of language such as "dopamine" and "attention spans" to describe user engagement with TikTok. Such terminology was frequently used during the interviews. To a greater or lesser extent, every participant problematised their experiences with TikTok in such terms. An intriguing avenue for future research would be to investigate how this language has developed into a cultural script that shapes the ways in which people interpret and make sense of their interactions in digital environments. A potential question to answer would be how terms like "dopamine rush and "attention span" have become cultural tools for understanding scrolling. In other words: if these categories are problematised, what are the sacred opposites.

10.5 Concluding Remarks

To conclude, I want to return to the point of departure: feedback loops. This thesis has examined human-algorithm interactions by paying close attention to how feedback loops are felt and made sense of in the context of everyday life. Feedback

loops are not created in abstraction. They are intertwined with everyday life through seemingly simple actions and practices such as scrolling on the phone. They provide us with recommendations that adapt to the rhythms of the everyday. Even if they seem trivial, these small recommendations have the potential to move us in very different ways. The study of algorithmic encounters benefits from the multiple instances that reveal how deeply intertwined our everyday lives have become with them.

A focus on algorithmic interaction rituals highlights how agency and actions are enacted, reinforced, or disrupted within algorithmic environments. These moments of alignment and disruption remind us that even if algorithms are not human, they move us, and in some ways, are moved by us. Studying society through the lens of human-algorithm interactions allows us to understand how social action is now constrained in new ways. This thesis contributes to ongoing academic efforts to make sense of what it means to live with, through, and among algorithms and feedback loops.

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Appendix A-D

Appendix A: Participants' Profile

Table Appendix A: Participants profile

Participant	Psedonym	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation
1	Maria	29	W	Master organisations	Student
2	Pontus	24	M	Master sustainability	Student
3	Alexander	21	M	Bachelor student	Student
4	Sofia	24	W	Master risk management	Consultant
5	Serena	25	W	Master in computer science	Software developer
6	Mikel	25	M	Bachelor statistics and financial markets	Freelance data analyst
7	Soledad	24	W	Bachelor student radiology	Student
8	Anna	25	W	Bachelor informatics	PT student/system admin
9	Emma	26	W	Master landscape architecture	Unemployed
10	Ewa	24	W	Master nutrition	Student
11	Samantha	23	W	Master anthropology	Student/part time barista
12	Johan	18	M	High school	Student
13	Georgia	21	W	High school	Gap year/Hojskole
14	Ingrid	22	W	High school	Gap year/Hojskole
15	Hilal	25	W	Master student chemistry	Master student
17	Marc	22	M	Bachelor student	Student
16	Greta	26	W	Master student	Museum shift manager
18	Hamza	28	M	Master student	Master student/Part-time worker
19	Erik	19	M	High school	Gap year/Unemployed
20	Amanda	23	W	Master sustainability	Student

Appendix B Interview Guide

Uses: Questions about how participants use TikTok
How often do you use TikTok? In what devices?...
How much time do you spend on the app?
What are you doing/where are you when you are using it?

Content: Questions about the type of content participants consume
What type of content do you generally watch?
Is TikTok good at providing the type of content that you want?
Have you discovered anything new using TikTok?

Affects: Questions about how TikToks make the participant feel
Do you look for specific content when your happy, sad, need to cheer…?
How does it make you feel to receive X content on your screen?
Do you get saturated/drained by certain recommendations?
Does the content you encounter on TikTok changes your mood?
Do you use TikTok to change your Mood?

Scrolling with participants: Questions about the patterns visualized
I see you started watching X content but then you started to skip it. Can you say why?
Do you watch a lot of X content? Why are you interested on it? Is TikTok good at suggesting this type of content?
How does it make you feel watching X content?

Recommender system: Questions about TikTok recommender system
Do you know how TikTok's algorithm work?
Is TikTok good predicting the type of content that you want to see?
How do you know if a recommendation is good/bad/what you want?

(Interview guide used in the first interview of the project. Examples of questions)

Appendix C: Initial Project

Initially, my PhD research project was not focused on the emotional elements of feedback loops and how they shape social action in digital spaces. My original research design aimed to explore how feedback loops (re)produce cultural stratification. Drawing on Bourdieu's ideas I wanted to study how cultural capital and distinction circulated within those feedback loops. To answer my research question, I started to develop mix-method approch designed to study feedback loops on Spotify. Nonetheless, after I conducted the first round of ten interviews during the middle of my second PhD year, I started to get a consistent type of answers. I had been asking participants how they felt about algorithmic music recommendations wanting to understand how they engage with them from a bourdesian lens. However, participants would often elaborate their argument about accepting or rejecting algorithmic recommendations along two registers: "The algorithm does not understand how I feel", or in a contrary manner: "I like recommendations because they stay within my bubble of comfort". While participants still used their cultural capital and draw symbolic boundaries around music recommendations and how others engage with them, it became increasingly clear that an affective and emotional dimension was crucial for understanding the feedback loops people participate in. This realisation started to shift the focus of my project to encompass the emotional underpinnings of the feedback loops people engage with.

Before transitioning from one project to another, I considered the benefits and disadvantages of the move. Bourdieu's (1984, 1990) sociological project was a well positioned to study feedback loops and the role of algorithms as cultural intermediaries and gatekeepers in cultural fields. He developed a relational framework connecting the individual, habitus, and social structures to understand how social structures shape and become internalised in individuals' cognition and experiential matrix (Vandenberghe, 1999). According to this view, individuals are both shaped by and, in turn, shape social structures around them. As a result, social action takes place within social spaces consisting of fields that condition and constrain people. Bourdieu's framework allows the analysis of feedback loops considering issues around cultural capital, fields, symbolic struggles, legitimacy, fields and habitus (mis)match. However, the bourdesian lens was not helping me to make sense of how people were experiencing algorithmic recommendations, as Bourdieu's theories are less suited for understanding the moods and affects generated by algorithmic encounters. Bourdesian proponents will rightly argue that

in his book "The Logic of Practice" (1990) there are hints to undertake such an endeavour. Moreover, scholars such as Scheer (2012), Threadgold (2020), Skeggs (2004) or Crossley (2001) among others, have done very fruitful work approaching Bourdieu's through the lens of affects or emotions. Nevertheless, in line with the data I had collected, a bourdesian framework was limiting the type of questions that I could pose.

In a traditional bourdesian fashion, feelings about algorithms would be explained through the (mis)alignment of the habitus in relation to symbolic games in social spaces. In this vein, Bourdieu's framework was less suited to study those dynamics. As Lahire (2011) would point, habitus is too rigid and does not account for the multiplicity of situations that a person experiences throughout their life. In contrast, Collins's interactional approach would allow me to better study the constant back and forth between user and algorithmic. Despite the relational orientation of both approaches, their epistemic differences were notable in how to study feedback loops. Both inhabit the same relational lens but there are deep differences in how they understand interactions and social action. In Collins (2004), social structures are the sum of infinite chains of interactions. So, for him, to understand interactions, and the macro, it is necessary to attend how individuals interact in situations, Bourdieu, instead would tend to rely on fields and social space as the ultimate explanation for how individuals interact. In this way, to fully understand the feelings resulting from interactions between users and algorithm, ultimately it is necessary to attend to their position in social space. Hence, despite the richness of Bourdieu's theoretical framework, in order to study those affective encounters with algorithms and how people make sense of them I had to say "au revoir" to Bourdieu.

The transition did not originate out of nowhere. On my first year of the PhD, I started to work on the affective dimension of interacting with algorithms. I was interested in using Randall Collins interaction ritual theory (2004) to study the constant back and forth that involves scrolling on TikTok. Therefore, what started as an interesting idea that I wanted to explore as a side project during my PhD, turned out to be central to understanding how algorithms and humans intertwine, shaping both individual and collective experiences.

Appendix D: Original Quotes

Chapter 6 (Soledad, 23)

> Buah … o sea Instagram si que es como un poco mas de postureo realmente. Tipo: “bueno pues veo las cuatro cosas que han hecho mis amigos el finde y lo quito” o “subo una foto de mi gato, presumo un poco y me voy”. Y Twitter yo lo uso de forma más … personal, leer a gente sobre sus cosas, contar yo mis cosas o alguna noticia quizás más seria. TikTok es como menos serio en ese sentido. Es más desconectar de las noticias, la mierda que este pasando

Chapter 7 (Soledad, 23)

> Una vez me decía mi novio: “Como decides que TikTok ver?”, digo, es que no lo se, yo lo se cuando lo estoy viendo pero no tiene un patron de decir. “ah, si el video empieza así lo veo, si el video empieza así no”. Entonces, es como la vibe que me da…
> Es que es como la sensación que me da al ver el video pero es claro uno o dos segundos algunas veces. Entonces, supongo que es depende de como empiece, de como es la descripción algunas veces. Pero no se, no se tampoco de que dependede que lo veo o no

Chapter 7 (Soledad, 23)

> Me da mucha curiosidad que la gente se moleste tanto en tenerlo todo tan tancy, bonito y ordenado y todo tan así. Y también me gusta cuando lo hacen bien está muy bien editado y es todo muy … ay … todo como muy seguido pero bien, que no se hace una mezcla de sonido o así entonces es un poco como relajante. No los busco para relajarme pero si sale me interesa, tanto para ver que compran. Porque el cotilleo esta siempre. Como eso, ver algo tambien un poco diferente.

Chapter 7 (Soledad, 23)

> Con mis amigos suele ser algo mas tipo absurdo de, el tipo jaja, si somos, si soy, o buah esto me ha recordado a cuando hicimos tal cosa… igual un video de … en plan, “los niños de once anos bailando ahora, y yo cuando tenia once

anos" y ese video mandárselo yo a mi amiga de "si, nosotros teníamos un coreografía parecida"

Chapter 8 (Soledad, 23)

A ver todo es entretenimiento al final, pero si, una cosa es mas divertida, otra es mas relajante, otras más es mas cotilleo puro. Porque a mi una chica diciéndome lo que ha comido en el día no me afecta en mi día a día, pero oye me interesa, me puede servir para sacar alguna idea, a veces simplemente para verlo.

Chapter 9 Soledad, 23, Bachelor student

Si me engancha la historia me da igual, sí que hay muchas veces que miro la barra y digo: "uh es muy largo y lo paso." Si desde el inicio se me hace entretenido, interesante, es como: "Ah vale, no pasa nada, ¡me vas a contarme tu video diez minutos, cuéntamela!" sin embargo otras veces como: "no, es que el otro día" mmm, no, muy largo y paso" A veces hasta lo digo en voz alta y paso y mi novio en plan … y yo: "Es que no me interesaba!" yo los veo en voz alta, o sea yo estoy sin cascos ni nada. Entonces el escucha sonidos de canción, sonidos de video. Entonces el a veces a mí me da el feedback: "Sabias que?" y lo paso "pero si sabia que?" y yo: "espérate que vuelvo y te lo pongo a ver si te lo sabias." Cosas así

Chapter 8: Maria, 29, Master student

Pues me genera así como, no sé, oxitocina amor inmediata. Entonces, pues, pues me encanta, me anima … Porque, porque si te das cuenta, veo perritos, pero no veo ningún perrito que esté en shelter, en casos de rescate de perritos, porque no puedo! eso me super deprime. Entonces he acostumbrado. Entonces, no, no veo nada que me entristezca. Veo puras cosas, eso si, si no me las paso rápido.