of becoming victims of bullying on the platform, such as people with Down syndrome or so-called "facial disfigurement" (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 183). However, this is not a phenomenon unique to TikTok; similar allegations are regularly made about other platforms as well. It is extremely difficult to obtain reliable evidence on this issue, as it is not possible for outsiders to gain concrete insights into the actual algorithmic functional logic or the sphere of TikTok's developers. However, two articles by journalists are often cited in this context, both of which are allegedly based on leaked internal documents from TikTok employees (Biddle, Ribeiro, and Dias 2020; Köver and Reuter 2020). These documents allegedly show that TikTok deliberately suppresses content from users or groups of people who do not meet certain beauty standards or who are disabled. However, the documents cited as sources in these articles are merely screenshots of Excel spreadsheets whose origin cannot be traced. Despite the fact that these theories are based on extremely vague sources, the platform responds to this type of criticism and tries to improve its image and generate positive headlines. For example, TikTok portrays itself as a platform where educational content plays an important role, and which aims to make BIPoC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) visible and provide an inclusive space for LGBTQ+ communities (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 186–89).

4.8   TikTok and Cultural Hegemonies

One way to examine the prioritization – or suppression – of certain groups of people on TikTok is to look at popularity spikes, i.e., the most successful content creators on the platform in general or in specific segments. TikTok does not publish official figures on the most successful creators and their followers, but it is certainly possible to gather relevant information using the API, and various online services offer such overviews. Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström have compiled a list of the fifty most popular TikTok creators based on such sources, including information on the number of followers and likes, nationality, and year of birth. The data was collected in mid-2021 and is therefore no longer current, but the basic trends in popularization are clear (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 94–96). Due to the dynamic nature of TikTok's development, it is only possible to provide snapshots.

The list shows that the average year of birth of the most successful content creators was 1998, i.e., the average age at the time of data collection was twenty-three, with the youngest being born in 2004. The majority of creators

therefore fall into Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012. Some of the top fifty include so-called "established offline celebrities" (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 97), such as actors Will Smith and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, as well as extremely well-known popular music singers such as Jason Derulo and Billie Eilish. These people, of course, were highly successful before the rise of TikTok, while most of the creators represented in this list are so-called "short-video celebrities" (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 97) who actually became popular through their presence on TikTok or Musical.ly. Two thirds of the people in the top fifty are American. One possible explanation for the dominance of U.S. content creators is that ByteDance has a strong economic interest in targeting the large U.S. market (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 97).

Most of the content creators in this list are *white*, which means that BIPoC are significantly outnumbered. In addition, the content creators who fall into this group are generally not short-video celebrities. While the second-ranked Black Italian creator, Khabane Lame, rose to fame through TikTok, other BIPoC creators, such as Will Smith, The Rock, and Selena Gomez, owe their popularity to their work in other segments of the entertainment industry. Typical examples of creators who have become well-known on TikTok include Charli D'Amelio, Addison Rae, and Noah Beck, who have gained attention primarily through the platform's signature lip-synching and dance videos (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 98). These individuals are *white* and, by normative standards, conventionally attractive "20-somethings" (Boffone 2022, 19), whose success, according to Trevor Boffone, is symptomatic of TikTok's popularization logic: "Notably, these TikTok influencers are all white or white-passing, reinforcing TikTok's racial power dynamics. While the app can be an inclusive, democratized space, TikTok fame mirrors fame more generally in the United States, which privileges whiteness and conventional Western standards of beauty" (Boffone 2022, 19). Boffone refers to the often-used argument, also promoted by TikTok itself, that the platform can, in principle, be an inclusive space. However, the field of popularity peaks is dominated by the so-called "D'Amelio aesthetic – slim, white and normatively attractive" (Ile 2021, 67) – this label being a reference to the most popular TikTok user at the time of data collection, Charli D'Amelio. This aesthetic may be particularly popular on TikTok because of the platform's mimetic logic. We can assume that the content of an enormously popular creator like Charli D'Amelio is displayed in the For You feeds of a large number of users, who in turn often respond to these videos by imitating the D'Amelio aesthetic, thus making their own success more likely and consequently perpetuating normative beauty

ideals in terms of *whiteness*, thinness, symmetrical facial features, clothing, and makeup. This shows that there is an increased risk of perpetuating such cultural hegemonies through the logic of the TikTok platform.

There are now several empirical studies that demonstrate homogenization in terms of the perpetuation of certain beauty ideals, as well as heteronormative and racializing tendencies on TikTok, at least in certain segments of the platform. The fact that the most successful content creators are often young women who conform to the D'Amelio aesthetic was highlighted by Melanie Kennedy in a relatively early academic discussion of TikTok. Kennedy describes the "continuation and intensification of girl culture and the ideals of young female celebrities" (Kennedy 2020, 1071). In doing so, she emphasizes that TikTok to some extent perpetuates stereotypes of femininity that were already prevalent in society in general but may have been exacerbated on or by TikTok. As the author further argues: "It should not surprise us that the most-followed TikTok star is a slim, white, normatively attractive teenage girl (with straight white teeth, long straightened hair and her feminine body frequently displayed via tight fitting crop tops)" (Kennedy 2020, 1072). As Kennedy points out here, content creators display their slender, normatively beautiful bodies and serve as role models for countless, primarily young people who are active on TikTok.

Weight-related videos are also very popular on the platform. Minadeo and Pope show that hashtags such as #weightloss, #fatloss, #whatieatinaday, or #diet and related video content reach sometimes millions of users. Their sample of a total of 1,000 of the most popular videos in this segment is dominated by relatively young, *white*, college-aged people who primarily discuss weight loss and sometimes document their own weight loss process in their videos. The authors summarize: "This analysis found that nearly all of the 1,000 TikTok videos collected had content that was notably weight normative. Key themes included glorification of weight loss, the positioning of food to achieve health and thinness, and the lack of expert voices providing nutrition and health information" (Minadeo and Pope 2022, 9). This shows that even in this niche topic, which nevertheless reaches an enormous number of people, body stereotypes are extremely dominant. Once again, it can be assumed that more and more creators are turning to such videos due to the platform's virality-centric and imitation-oriented logic, and that the homogenization of content on TikTok is being driven forward by the platform logic.

Typically, such research focuses on young women and stereotypes associated with them. Foster and Baker, however, analyzed 200 videos from over

forty of the most popular male creators on TikTok to examine masculine beauty ideals and stereotypical images of masculinity and male sexuality in digital spaces. They also found that people whose bodies do not conform to certain ideals of *whiteness* and thinness have a harder time competing for popularity on TikTok. The authors conclude:

> Importantly, TikTok's most widely followed men, as we have shown, embody a host of social privileges related to their race, youth, and physical appearance and possess masculine capital. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of TikTok's most widely followed men are white, cisgender, heterosexual, and physically fit and often muscular, providing visual evidence of their body work and effortful attention to appearance. (Foster and Baker 2022, 9)

According to Foster and Baker, male creators on TikTok certainly have the opportunity to consciously subvert these stereotypes, even if such content is more likely to reach a niche audience. This makes it clear that at least the most successful TikTok creators represent a binary gender logic. However, there are also copious amounts of videos circulating on the platform that challenge this binary, for example under the hashtag #trans. In an empirical study, Rochford and Palmer examined a total of 450 posts by eight successful trans TikTokers and concluded that such content can achieve significant reach. However, the most successful videos in this segment are tailored to the so-called cis audience, as this niche also caters to stereotypes that are likely to circulate primarily in circles that are not particularly familiar with trans aesthetics. This is expressed, for example, in the fact that the trans creators often use transphobic humor ironically or use TikTok's duet feature to respond to trans-hostile users. According to Rochford and Palmer, users who are familiar with the relevant codes and discourses may be particularly aware of the ironic connotations of such content (Rochford and Palmer 2022, 85–86). This shows that even in niche areas where stereotypes of binary gender images are actually being critiqued, the most popular videos are precisely those that are the most likely to meet the expectations of a cis audience.

The previous explanations also make it clear that success on TikTok is also influenced by intersectional logics. *White*, female creators who conform to certain normative ideals of beauty are generally more likely to succeed in the realm of popularity peaks (cf. Sweeney-Romero 2022). Black creators have complained for years that they are not able to gain as much traction on TikTok as their *white* counterparts. This has been the case, for example, with

expressions of solidarity with the Black Lives Matters movement, and in this context several BIPoC creators have reported a significant drop in their views and likes (Peterson-Salahuddin 2024, 2391). In addition, *white* creators are often accused of appropriating the ideas of Black TikTokers and then enjoying greater success with them than the original creators (Ile 2021, 62; Martinez 2022, 40). In response, in 2021, BIPoC creators uploaded a series of videos under the hashtag #BlackTikTokStrike, declaring that they felt robbed of their ideas and no longer wanted to produce videos for TikTok (Ile 2021, 67–68). This leads to the suspicion that TikTok is also a "white space" (Ile 2021, 68), "fueled by an oppressive algorithm that privileges white, heteronormative content" (Ile 2021, 68).

4.9 Sound on TikTok

Due to the functional logic of TikTok, sound and specifically musical elements play a prominent role on the platform. In light of its predecessor platform Musical.ly, whose name emphasizes the importance of sound, this is obvious, and important platform features of TikTok are inconceivable without the use of music. After all, a key feature – *use this sound* – is based on the "spreadability of sounds" (Kaye et al. 2021, 3209), and on TikTok sounds often function as a mimetic medium, i.e. as an essential basis for the imitation practices that are central to lip-synching and dance challenge videos (Abidin and Kaye 2021, 59). In addition, musical elements are sometimes used to acoustically support the narrative of TikTok videos. For example, a pause in the action of a video may be accompanied by a musical drop. Sometimes musical elements are also used to support the "tonality" of a video, such as a shift from serious to sarcastic content (Abidin and Kaye 2021, 58). And thanks to the duet function, there is always the possibility of recontextualizing the auditory track. In this way, musical elements on TikTok contribute significantly to the dissemination of content and the creation of viral phenomena on the platform (Abidin and Kaye 2021, 61).

Since TikTok videos sometimes have an enormous reach and can therefore be used for marketing purposes, specific music-related processes of professionalization take place in the context of the platform. For example, short excerpts of songs – usually hooks – are uploaded to TikTok before the songs appear in full on other platforms such as Spotify. These excerpts are more likely to become viral phenomena, and it is assumed that professional music creators must learn to produce music specifically for use on TikTok (Radovanović 2022,