

with the hashtag #doctorsoftiktok had a total of 428 million views at that time, while videos tagged with the hashtag #nursesoftiktok had as many as 1.8 billion views (Southerton 2021, 3250). Zeng, Schäfer, and Allgaier show that videos focused on science communication are extremely popular on TikTok and that presenting such topics is also compatible with the logic of the platform. However, this requires a specific framing of the scientific content, including in particular targeted juxtaposition with humorous elements (Zeng, Schäfer, and Allgaier 2021, 3230).

Young people's political awareness, for example on the topic of climate change, is also documented in countless TikTok videos (Basch, Yalamanchili, and Fera 2022; Hautea et al. 2021). According to Pomerantz and Field, TikTok has even become the platform par excellence for political activism among young people. Many TikTok users claim that videos with political content shared on the platform have helped them to learn about politics and social justice issues and to develop political awareness (Pomerantz and Field 2022, 63). By focusing on the sharing and editing of existing content, TikTok's functional logic can also foster issue-centered communities, which is why the platform is often used for the political activation and mobilization of young people (Sadler 2022, 4). Clearly, the functional logics or affordances of TikTok also influence how young people articulate and communicate their political attitudes and messages. For example, Zeng and Abidin show that the duet feature in particular allows TikTok users to directly reference other users' political statements, articulate approval or disapproval, and express alternative opinions (Zeng and Abidin 2021, 18). In this way, the platform ensures a low threshold for the articulation of political positions, which presumably makes it easier for young people in particular to access political debates.

4.7 Controversies

TikTok has been controversial from the start for two main reasons. The first is the potential influence of the Chinese government on the operations of the platform company ByteDance and thus how data trails generated by users are handled. The second is content moderation on TikTok, which is often subject to criticism. This is based on the assumption that certain content and certain groups of people can achieve greater visibility on the platform than others. As a result, the main critique goes, well-known cultural hegemonies based on cate-

gories of social difference such as gender and *race*, as well as normative notions of beauty, are perpetuated on TikTok.

The digital platforms that dominate the platform market in the Western world – Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and X, for example – are run out of Silicon Valley. Although China has a large and differentiated platform market, especially in the short-form video platform segment, TikTok is a special case in that other platforms developed and operated in China are typically unable to compete with established platforms in the Western market. Much of the skepticism about TikTok stems from the fact that internet companies in China act as part of the Chinese government’s surveillance apparatus. If the government suspects problematic content on the platforms, the operators must provide access to the relevant user data. ByteDance repeatedly claims to act independently of the government, but users and politicians remain skeptical. For example, TikTok was banned in some countries very soon after its launch (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 174–76). In this context, it is clear that internationally operating platform companies face the challenge of complying with the heterogeneous regulations regarding permitted and prohibited content in different countries without completely changing the way the platforms function on different regional markets.

Over time, critics have raised suspicions that TikTok’s content moderation deliberately ensures that certain topics reach only a few users, while problematic content is sometimes allowed. Moderation on digital platforms typically involves defining a range of content that is not allowed and can therefore be deleted if discovered. TikTok does not differ significantly from other platforms in this regard, prohibiting, for example, the sharing of pornographic, violent, and discriminatory content (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 172–73). However, the platform’s algorithmic moderation is regularly criticized, as content that does not meet moderation guidelines continues to gain popularity. In recent years, videos with problematic content, involving for example cyberbullying, misogyny, racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, are said to have become popular on several occasions (Radovanović 2022, 53). The proportion of so-called “hate videos” with anti-Semitic content is said to have increased by more than 900% within a few years since TikTok’s market launch (Divon and Ebbrecht-Hartmann 2022, 48). There are also repeated accusations of shadow banning. This refers to the allegations that the content of certain, often marginalized groups is deliberately not popularized on the platform. For example, there is a journalistic discourse that suggests that TikTok deliberately suppresses content posted by groups that may be at risk

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