

DialectTikTok

The Dynamic Semiotics of Amateur Visual Trends on TikTok

Sarah Edmonds Martin¹

This chapter explores in some detail the design elements of TikTok's specific user interface features which distinguish it from other social media platforms in important ways, and create a mesmeric user experience. Special attention is paid to the dialectical relationship between these features and the user experience; the "prosumer" phenomenon is taken to the extreme so that engagement with the app itself creates new and ever-changing alphabets, vocabularies, and "trends" that subvert, obfuscate, and liberate in equal measure, and constantly encourage more disruption. It concludes with some notes of caution about this mode of engagement.

The signs and symbols developed by users on the social networking platform TikTok mutate in a flash. The visual gags, memes, hashtags, and "trends," as the company calls them, usher forth alphabets of inventive text, emojis, symbols, graphics, closed captions, and sound, all encoded with meaning. Unlike the other social media giants (Twitter, Instagram, etc.), the tools to design one's own media-rich communications are built natively into the interface. Like a cacophony of stimulus, it shatters user experience (UX) and user interface (UI) standards. Additionally, the authorship of this fast-paced and digital semantic is being transformed by a young and amateur design demographic: in the United States, 60% of users are between the ages of thirteen and twenty-four.² This new kind of public square virtually simulates ancient Greek forums in their social heterogeneity.

¹ University of Notre Dame, US.

² Raymond Zhong and Sheera Frenkel, "A Third of TikTok's U.S. Users May Be 14 or Under, Raising Safety Questions," *The New York Times*, August 14, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/technology/tiktok-underage-users-ftc.html.

Compound this multifariousness by the addictive pace at which TikTok's visual semantics evolve and the app becomes a resplendent (if sometimes nauseating) petri dish of new visual codes and cues. This chapter reflects on the platform as a design environment, in general, while cataloging and examining the semiotics of its more popular amateur "trend" languages, both typographic, graphic, and auditory. Embedded in contemporary culture like a hornet's nest just out of reach, the hum of dialogue on TikTok has incited protests, counter-protests, solved murders, whistleblowing racists, witnessed atrocities, promoted hate speech, and even provoked a presidential executive order. Former United States President Donald Trump unsuccessfully tried to ban the app in August 2020.³ It also reinforces echo chambers of information and misinformation. Even as the platform tightens its censorship of critical voices, often African American and queer voices, these "shadow banned" users nimbly evolve. In response, they develop new "leetspeak" homophones. Leetspeak, or "1337," adopts early internet substitutions of numbers with letters (as in the cases of "noob," "@\$\$," and "c3n50red") in order to bypass text filters. TikTok users deploy 1337, double entendre visuals, silenced sounds, and witty graphics in order to share ideas that might normally be suppressed. This blend of type and image has always been at the core of design.

The outbreak of COVID-19 was disruptive. It wrenched people from the normalcy of their respective routines while simultaneously rending new spaces for unexpected experiences. In particular, the pandemic supercharged digital communications. It is within this context that TikTok, with its novel, short video-sharing format design, peaked in the US. Early TikTok content was a mixture of dance moves and humorous clips, similar to the much-loved Vine app.⁴ As its popularity grew, the variety of content on TikTok also exploded. This included vegan recipes, riot footage, sexually enticing posts that ensnare viewers called "thirst traps," pranks, conspiracy theories, "canceling" or online shaming, and the paresthesia of autonomous sensory meridian response or ASMR.

3 Naomi Xu Elegant, "TikTok Banned Trump before Trump Could Ban TikTok," *Fortune*, January 11, 2021, <https://fortune.com/2021/01/11/tiktok-bans-trump-before-trump-bans-tiktok>.

4 John Herman, "Vine Changed the Internet Forever. How Much Does the Internet Miss It?," *The New York Times*, February 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/22/style/byte-vine-short-video-apps.html>.

The wave of engagement might have been due, in part, to TikTok's newness. While established platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube were embroiled in things like Congressional hearings, the banning of U.S. Presidents, and pedophilic content controversies, TikTok was a brand-new bastion of silly, harmless fun.⁵ Another factor could be that the design and content creation tools native to its UX/UI gave a younger audience more creative freedom to play with digital content creation.

Like a pair of spectacles, the UI is designed to be transparent. A clear apparatus, it works by clarifying the images passing before the eyes, capturing a viewer's minimal interactions in order to show them ever more clearly what (it thinks) they want.⁶ The main interface is an endless vertical scroll of singular short videos, one right after another. The videos completely fill the phone's screen and the user's attention with only a simple sidebar of sticky white icons on the right and a three-button navigation on the bottom, all of which remain unchanged no matter what video plays. This minimal UI allows the design of whatever a user has created to take center stage. A user may like, follow, share, and comment. Yet, even while the text-heavy comment section is open, the ever-looping video content is never fully obscured, and one-fifth of the background video is still visible. The pair of spectacles metaphor becomes a pair of bifocals, where the viewer is expected to focus on the text only briefly, their vision compelled back to the moving pageantry above.

Just like other titans in the panoply of social media apps, TikTok affords its user the opportunity to be both content creators and content consumers, fostering what philosopher Byung-Chul Han describes as "communicative reflux" wherein respect hierarchies are destabilized into carousels of impetuous destruction.⁷ On TikTok, switching from viewer to creator is effortless. Tapping the large call-to-action (CTA) "+" button at the bottom center converts the screen to creation mode. By default, the front-facing camera activates, and a smorgasbord of built-in design, video, and sound editing icons populate to the right. Filters, speed adjustments, video effects, voiceover, automatic captioning, emojis, typography, and more appear at the tip of a finger. Viewers and users can also "stitch" one another, creating

5 Sarah Perez, "It's Time to Pay Serious Attention to TikTok," *TechCrunch*, January 30, 2019, <https://techcrunch.com/2019/01/29/its-time-to-pay-serious-attention-to-tiktok>.

6 Patrick Gamez, text conversation with author, May 5, 2022.

7 Byung-Chul Han, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 3.

immediate video reactions that duet alongside the original video in a split-screen design. Dialogue expands into stunted “Parts,” or 150-character comment threads.

However, unlike other social media platforms, experiencing content on TikTok is immediate and hyper focused. The alluring promise of the next, upcoming video, divorced from any decision-making exertion, is part of what makes TikTok so addictive. Only one video may be viewed at a time, with no choice in what video might come next. It is the social media manifestation of Hick’s Law: decreasing the number of choices means a user will make decisions easier.⁸ It also keeps the effort of the viewer’s actions to a minimum while streamlining data input for the algorithm. Additionally, before a major update in late 2019, no videos on TikTok had timestamps.⁹ It was a realm outside of time. Users could never be sure when a post had been uploaded (or re-uploaded), and content flowed in an endless evergreen succession, like what George Bataille describes as “one wave lost in a multitude of waves.”¹⁰ This was all intentionally designed to keep users trapped in TikTok’s thrall.

Behind this front-end UI lies the powerful but occulted algorithm of TikTok: an artificial intelligence system that determines what posts get the widest audience. Having a large following does not guarantee that one’s videos are seen, as the long-scrolling main page of the app is a uniquely generated page for each unique user. Posts that end up on this page are determined by the algorithm. Like Plato’s parapet of puppeteers in his *Allegory of the Cave*, the algorithm determines what shadows are cast on the wall, with a user’s interactions and content being the fire that feeds it. The algorithm shapes what is seen in the false reality of cascading videos. The algorithm will factor a video’s number of likes, shares, comments, watch duration, video duration, music/sound popularity, and hashtag popularity, and blend it all with a unique set of predictive programming. According to leaked documents, TikTok’s algorithm curates content that is optimized to keep you hooked to its infinite

8 Luca Rosati, “How to Design Interfaces for Choice: Hick-Hyman Law and Classification for Information Architecture,” in *Proceedings of the International UDC Seminar* (Classification And Visualization: Interfaces To Knowledge, The Hague, 2013), 125–38.

9 Louise Matsakis, “On TikTok, There Is No Time,” *Wired*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-time>.

10 Mark Featherstone, “The Eye of War: Images of Destruction in Virilio and Bataille,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 7, no. 4 (October 1, 2003): 433–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1479758032000165066>.

scroll for as long as possible.¹¹ Thus, users typically seek to tailor their content to accommodate the algorithm's metric. A number of implications can be drawn from this, but this chapter will focus on the typographic, semiotic, and graphic decisions users make to appease this algorithm.

While TikTok is not the first app to embed design tools into its user interface, it has the most extensive array for native content creation and editing among the highest-downloaded apps: Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and YouTube. TikTok was the No. 1 most-downloaded app of the year on iOS and was one of the most downloaded across iOS and Android combined, suggesting that download trends parallel users' interests in shaping typographic, design, moving-image communication.¹²

It is not just that the means of production are in the hands of young people with a low threshold for design skills. The content that is being produced is further influencing new alphabets. Emerging from TikTok is a fascinating mashup of visual trends and memes that blend sonic, typographic, graphic, and motion design.

Audio has always been a primary component of TikTok. The bottom right-hand (right-thumb) corner features a rotating record icon indicating the sound file associated with each video. Some of these are unique sounds recorded by the creator while some are samples of pre-recorded, copyrighted music. A classic example is the clip featuring The Shangri-Las 1964 hit "Remember (Walking in the Sand)," written by George "Shadow" Morton. Colloquially known as the "Oh No" sound, the setup is 12 seconds of foreboding crooning, "Whatever happened to/The boy that I once knew?/The boy who said he'd be true." This resolves in the music equivalent of a record scratch: "Oh, no/Oh, no/ Oh, no, no, no, no, no!"¹³ The videos that utilize this sound typically showcase what philosopher Thomas Hobbes describes in *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico* as "the passion of laughter [that] is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison

¹¹ The two metrics that TikTok's leaked internal document tailors the algorithm toward are "retention"—that is, whether a user comes back—and "time spent." See Ben Smith, "How TikTok Reads Your Mind," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/business/media/tiktok-algorithm.html>.

¹² Both App Annie and Sensor Tower agree that TikTok scored the No. 3 position for most installs among all apps worldwide in 2018. Perez, "It's Time to Pay Serious Attention to TikTok."

¹³ The Shangri-Las, *Remember (Walking in the Sand)*, Audio Recording, The Best of the Shangri-Las (Mercury Records, 1964).

with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly.”¹⁴ A cat attempts ambitious acrobatics across water only to fall immediately in, a horrifying homemade Easter bunny costume trundles closer to two traumatized toddlers, a teen attempts to open a 50 ML mini bottle of vodka with her teeth only for her tooth to chip in half. Equivalently, just as TikTok creators have recontextualized the meaning of a 1960’s Billboard hit via cultural osmosis, so too has the construction of the meme also broadened. Advancing beyond slapstick or schadenfreude, the “Oh No” sample has also been overlaid on critiques of social, professional, and political red flags. This reframing, produced at the lightspeed of TikTok’s design engine, fosters entire galaxies of new meaning and coded signification.

Tapping the spinning record icon reveals that sample’s entire library of uses, including the designated “Original” or first upload. This index provides an important function in the “meme-ification” of sounds on TikTok: the sonic lexicon is open-source and available for plumbing. A user can scroll through and witness all the combinations of how a sample has been applied previously. It is also an archive of the sample’s own communicative entropy.

The swirling maelstrom of creative invention also affects the deployment of language, typography, and symbols. One example of evolving semantics is “algospeak.”¹⁵ Gen Z’s Aesopian language strategy to avoid sanction from the algorithm. Like the allegorical double-speak of 19th-century Russian satirists before them, creators on TikTok swap in code words for taboo topics. For example, the profession of “accountant” does not actually refer to someone preparing and maintaining important financial reports. On TikTok, an “accountant” is code for someone working in the sex industry. This arguably originated with user Rocky Panterra’s video “I am an Accountant,” in which Rocky sings, “If I am asked by a stranger what I do, I’d rather smile and simply state that I have a full-time job—as an accountant. Nobody asks you questions when you say you are an accountant.”¹⁶ Panterra’s video was quickly co-opted by adult content creators to speak openly about their livelihood online, with

¹⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. Sir William Molseworth, vol. 3 (London: Bohn, IX, 1839).

¹⁵ Taylor Lorenz, “Internet ‘Algospeak’ Is Changing Our Language in Real Time, from ‘Nip Nops’ to ‘Le Dollar Bean,’” *Washington Post*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/04/08/algospeak-tiktok-le-dollar-bean>.

¹⁶ Austin Morris, “NSFW: Sex, Humor, and Risk in Social Media,” *Velvet Light Trap*. Austin: University of Texas at Austin (University of Texas Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.7560/VLT8809>.

the connecting inference perhaps being that both careers can deal out a lot of money.

Also called “Voldemorting,”¹⁷ as coined by Emily van der Nagel in her paper entitled “Networks that Work Too Well: Intervening in Algorithmic Connections,” these popular algospeaks include replacements such as: “unaliving” = “suicide,” “swimmers” = “vaccinated people,” “panini” = “the pandemic,” “cheetoh” = “Donald Trump,” and “le dollar bean” = “lesbians.”¹⁸ In addition to simply replacing words or phrases with innuendo, some users opt for “lexical variants” in order to thwart censorship. A research paper on eating disorder groups on the app found that “one popular technique used by the community is adopting non-standard linguistic variants of moderated tags. These variants include adding or deleting characters in tags (“anorexiaa”), substituting letters (“thynsporation”), or deliberate misspellings (“anarexic”) but keeping the semantics of the tag consistent.”¹⁹ Unlike the leetspeak of the 1980s which simply swapped numbers with letters while still maintaining the original word, the linguistic metamorphosis on TikTok is a radical alteration. It leaves outsiders in the dust. Moreover, this transformation of language only augments the remixing of TikTok’s sonic and visual communications.

The design environment on TikTok affords users a relatively unique opportunity to synthesize type, graphics, moving-image, and sound to shape new meanings. Creators play with emojis and symbols—freely replacing letters and whole words in a text, or simply overlaying floating symbols atop moving-image content—to encode layers of significance into a post. One such example is the corn emoji which, when used on TikTok, almost always signifies “porn” (an alteration of this is the corn emoji followed immediately by the star emoji) and may accompany sex-worker-positive videos that clarify the experiences of those within that community. Alternatively, bookending words between a set of sparkle emojis adds dramatic emphasis and sometimes is used ironically to indicate the overuse and occasional misuse of symbols, for example: “it

17 Emily van der Nagel, “Networks That Work Too Well,” *Intervening in Algorithmic Connections*, *Media International Australia* 168, no. 1 (August 1, 2018), 81–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X18783002>.

18 Lorenz, “Internet ‘Algospeak’ Is Changing Our Language in Real Time, from ‘Nip Nops’ to ‘Le Dollar Bean.’”

19 Stevie Chancellor, Jessica Annette Pater, Trustin Clear, Eric Gilbert, and Munmun De Choudhury, “# thyghgapp: Instagram content moderation and lexical variation in pro-eating disorder communities,” in *Proceedings of the 19th ACM conference on computer-supported cooperative work & social computing*, (2016), 1201.

is almost “Virgo* season.” The app also comes with a series of derivative, default fonts: “Classic,” “Typewriter,” “Handwriting,” “NEON,” and “Serif,” that each connote a flexible array of implied meaning depending on how they are deployed. Users make design decisions determining scale, rotation, alignment, and color of type with the tap or pinch of their fingers.

Trends on TikTok influence the use of video editing techniques like montage, cuts, filters, and other video effects in conjunction with typography, graphics, and music to generate even more novel connotations. The “Slipping Through My Fingers” trend from late 2021, for example, featured montages of a user’s own home-videos, typically of a sibling growing up over a significant number of years, which accompanies the matching, nostalgic 2008 *Mamma Mia!* track of the same name.²⁰ Text overlays state “POV: You are _____,” with the blank filled with a narrative the similar to “watching your brother grow up,” or “watching your sister become an NYC fashion model,” with subsequent text message screenshots or video montage in line with this point of view.

If, on its surface, these design trends appear juvenile, it’s likely because most of the app’s users in the United States are Gen Z.²¹ Thus, the design tastes that succeed are molded mostly by young hands (or fingers). The impact of amateur, impetuous, fear of missing out or #fomo-driven “communicative reflux” is not clear. One thing is certain, though, the churning hum of TikTok can produce incredible experiences, both wondrous and terrible. In Byung-Chul Han’s *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, the philosopher provides an acoustic metaphor for how overwhelming TikTok can be, describing that, “the choices effected by the intendent of power are followed silently, as it were, by the subjects of power. Sound, or noise, provides an acoustic cue that power is faltering.”²² TikTok is a cacophony of loud, reactionary commotion. What users on the app might describe as punching up towards axes of power and institutional oppressions can also be described as “a society without mutual respect” or as an outrage society. From 2019 to the writing of this chapter, TikTok has been the digital exhibition platform for protests, war, witnessing

²⁰ Amanda Seyfried and Meryl Streep, *Slipping through My Fingers*, ‘Mamma Mia! The Original Motion Picture Soundtrack (Polydor Records, 2008).

²¹ Zhong and Frenkel, “A Third of TikTok’s U.S. Users May Be 14 or Under, Raising Safety Questions.”

²² Han, *In the Swarm*, 4.

atrocities, presidential bans, censorship,²³ harassment, doxxing, hate speech, witch hunts, murder, crime sleuthing, and misinformation campaigns—just to name a few. One well-documented example involved a young woman named Gabby Petito, whose disappearance (and later, murder) generated unending speculative content from would-be detectives on TikTok. For weeks, creators debated all possible perspectives on the case, exploiting the murder of a young woman for engagement, popularity, and money. On the other hand, it was a TikTok couple that helped lead authorities to Petito's remains.²⁴ The disproportionate focus on Petito's story, that of a white, affluent, and able-bodied cis-woman, also helped expose the disparity of news coverage not brought to missing brown and black bodies in the United States.²⁵ TikTok has a dual-edge; one embodies possibility, connection, and hope, while the other is a vapid, degrading catastrophe.

Effective design requires space for reflection, a slowness that TikTok may not be able to accommodate as a social media platform. In his book called *Lateral Thinking*,²⁶ philosopher Edward de Bono described a process akin to TikTok's algorithmic mashings that can be utilized to generate ideas. de Bono suggested ideating one particular object by considering a completely random object as a point of departure. He advised bringing both disparate items close together while trying to make the ideas fit together. This process, like the racking of a kaleidoscope where each idea is a random bit of colored glass, aims to couple as many “points of departure” next to one another as possible. Innovative ideas sprout from these unexpected connections. However, de Bono's creative method is just one stage of the design process, and the speed at which TikTok hurtles through topics, trends, and content certainly does not feel right for a flexible, speculative, or meditative design practice.

23 Lily Kuo, “TikTok ‘Makeup Tutorial’ Goes Viral with Call to Action on China’s Treatment of Uighurs,” *The Guardian*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/nov/27/tiktok-makeup-tutorial-conceals-call-to-action-on-chinas-treatment-of-uighurs>.

24 Jesus Jiménez, “Gabby Petito’s Death Ruled a Homicide, F.B.I. Confirms,” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/21/us/gabby-petito-homicide.html>.

25 Katherine Rosman, “How the Case of Gabrielle Petito Galvanized the Internet,” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/20/style/gabby-petito-case-tiktok-social-media.html>.

26 Edward de Bono, *Lateral Thinking: A Textbook of Creativity*, (Penguin, 2010).

The *agoras*, or public squares, of pre-Platonic Athens were physical gathering spaces to share social, political, and philosophical ideas among most members of the public. If social media platforms of the 21st century, such as TikTok, have become the virtual public square, what does it mean that the various communication methods in that square evolve so quickly? On the one hand, this might give more agency to users, as they actively shape the linguistic vehicle of discourse. Alternatively, meme scholar Jamie Cohen ponders the implications of this accelerated change, stating that “on one hand, this may increase our ability to read Internet content better, but on the other, it severs and fractures our ability to communicate collectively.”²⁷ If design communication is about the health and care of people, then perhaps more oversight on the set of machines and algorithms in our virtual *agoras* would produce a kinder social media experience.

²⁷ Jamie Cohen, “Why We’re Creating Language to Hide from Tech’s Censorship Systems,” *OneZero*, April 12, 2022, <https://onezero.medium.com/why-were-creating-language-to-hide-from-tech-s-censorship-systems-ado24f083c89>.