ready available on the Smule app, which was launched on iOS in 2012, and Musical.ly, TikTok's predecessor, also had a duet feature. However, it was not possible to record new audio tracks as part of a duet on Musical.ly. The feature was designed for lip-syncing and dance videos, and recording additional audio tracks was thus neither intended nor necessary. The duet feature was added to TikTok in 2019 and updated a year later to allow users to add their own audio tracks (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 65).

It can be argued that creative mimetic practices, in which users build on existing content from other users in individual ways, are central to the functioning of TikTok. The platform initially gained prominence for lip-syncing videos and dance challenges, which are based on the creative imitation or editing of existing TikTok videos (Kaye et al. 2021, 3196–97). The *stitch* and *use this sound* features are also integral to mimetic practices. The stitch feature enables users to extract a segment from an existing video and insert it at the beginning of their own video, maintaining both the original video and audio track, as well as the visual effects and on-screen text. TikTok users can ascertain which video a given audio track was initially used in and the number of subsequent videos created by other users based on that track (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 66). Another feature designed for interaction with other users is *video reply to comments*, which was officially launched in June 2020. This feature enables TikTok users to record new videos in response to comments made by other users in the comments section of one of their videos. The corresponding comment is then displayed in the video window of the newly produced clip (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 67).

4.4 Algorithmic Curation: The For You Page

Another key feature of TikTok that underscores the importance of algorithmic moderation to the platform is the *For You page*. This is the landing page that is automatically displayed when the app is opened on a smartphone. On this landing page, each user is presented with an algorithmically curated and individually personalized selection of videos. In this way, users are theoretically offered an "endless scroll of new videos" (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 58), because if they don't like a video, they can simply swipe it away and the next one is immediately displayed. Musical.ly already had a similar scroll feed, and it was one of the first features to be adopted on Douyin based on the Musical.ly model (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 51).

It is not clear to TikTok users why they are seeing certain content on their For You pages. TikTok's website does explain how the platform's algorithms work, but only on a very superficial level. According to TikTok, there are three factors that determine which videos appear in a user's feed: individual usage patterns, information about the videos a user has watched, and data about the user's devices. TikTok thus collects information about a user's interactions, such as which videos they have liked, shared, and commented on, and which accounts the user follows. In the video information category, TikTok collects information on which sounds and hashtags are used. And for devices, this information includes the device type, language settings or geolocation information (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 58; Bhandari and Bimo 2022, 5). In addition, according to official information from the company ByteDance, natural language processing techniques are used to classify text and audio elements, and computer vision technology is used to classify (audio)visual objects (Klug et al. 2021, 85). Taken together, it can be assumed that all of this information is used to present TikTok users with individually personalized video feeds that best match their personal interests. Because the specific workings of TikTok's algorithmic system (and digital platforms in general) are trade secrets, this information is admittedly not very specific.

While on platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram, users' personal network of friends and followers has a significant impact on what content is shown to them, TikTok's focus is on algorithmic filtering that is largely independent of such networks. When the app is opened, the For You feed takes up almost the entire smartphone screen, while the buttons for news, comments and other functions are much smaller and relegated to the edge (Bhandari and Bimo 2022, 5). The user experience is, or at least appears to be, inherently dependent on the For You page and the corresponding algorithmic filtering logic. While algorithmic moderation is important for digital platforms in general, albeit as only one element among many, TikTok stands out from other platforms in that it is the core element in terms of user experience. Bandhari and Bimo state: "Of the major social media platforms on the market, TikTok is the only one to position its algorithm at the center of the social experience it engenders; the algorithm determines the type of video content the user is exposed to, and viewing this content makes up the majority of the experience on the platform" (Bhandari and Bimo 2022, 2).

Empirical studies of how the platform is used show that TikTok users consider the For You page and the algorithmic moderation that underpins this landing page to be a key feature of the platform. For example, several members

of the JazzTok community emphasize that the For You algorithm is unique and that this is what differentiates TikTok from other (short-form video) platforms (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 112). Based on interviews with U.S. college students, Bandhari and Bimo show that TikTok users particularly appreciate the fact that the For You feed suggests content that actually matches their own interests and meets their individual quality standards. This provides a more satisfying user experience than, for example, the video streaming platform Netflix, whose recommendations one of the interviewees reported as generally not matching their actual interests (Bhandari and Bimo 2022, 7).

Observations of the TikTok user experience show that the adaptation of algorithmic recommendations to individual user interests is unusually fast. The TikTok algorithm learns quickly, which means that after a short period of time, only very specific content is displayed to individual users. This homogenization of content tends to be viewed positively by users, at least according to Bhandari and Bimo's findings. In particular, the accuracy of TikTok's algorithm has led some of its users to remain active on the platform over the long term. At the same time, several interviewees stated that some variety in the suggested content would certainly be desirable (Bhandari and Bimo 2022, 6). When it comes to algorithmic recommendations, there is also a tendency to anthropomorphize the TikTok algorithm, so to speak. This is particularly evident when respondents report experiences where they believed that the algorithm had understood them and the suggested content was highly relevant to their individual needs (Bhandari and Bimo 2022, 5). This is an example of a relatively close connection between human and non-human actors in digital spaces. The functional logics of the For You page thus produce a specific form of algorithmic culture in which users enter into a very close and intimate relationship with the platform.

Of course, it is typical of algorithmic cultures in the platform context that users do not know exactly which criteria are used to display or hide certain content – as is the case with TikTok. Because the use of TikTok is so strongly oriented toward engagement with the platform's algorithms due to the functional logic of the For You page, the platform literally induces the development of algorithmic imaginaries. Countless theories about how the algorithm works circulate among TikTok users, and one of the core concerns shared by many users is how to train the algorithm in favor of their own individual interests. For example, some users report experimenting with hashtags to understand how they can be used to increase their own visibility on the platform, without being able to develop reliable concepts. Other users monitored their For You

pages for several months without posting anything themselves. This was done with the goal of identifying specific patterns in the use of hashtags and, more generally, recipes for success (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 62–63). There is also a widespread assumption among TikTok users that any form of interaction on the platform can help increase one's visibility. This means, for example, that users are constantly engaged in liking, commenting, and sharing content, and that content creators encourage other users to not only passively watch their videos but also actively respond to them using the available features (comments, etc.). Such hypotheses are also discussed in journalistic discourse. For example, there is an assumption that new videos are initially only recommended to a small group of users and, if they trigger lively interactions from users, are then further disseminated and displayed to more and more users on their For You pages (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 77). Other hypotheses posit that posting videos at certain times may lead to higher viewership. In an empirical study, Klug et al. compare such assumptions made by TikTok users with corresponding data on trending videos that TikTok makes available via an API (Klug et al. 2021). Among other things, they show that users believe that a large number of comments can contribute to the success of videos, which is reflected in the number of likes, shares, and views. The available data shows that such correlations do indeed exist, and that posting videos at certain times of day also seems to have a positive effect, while on the other hand no correlation can be established between the use of certain hashtags and the success of TikTok videos. However, it remains unclear whether, for example, a video has become successful because of the comments or whether many users comment on it because it was already popular beforehand (Klug et al. 2021, 89–91). Although users cannot be sure about the algorithmic logic, it is clear that hypotheses about what platform algorithms *might possibly* do can develop a power that should not be underestimated – after all, the behavior of TikTok users is to some extent guided by these algorithmic imaginaries.

4.5 Platform Affordances and Vernaculars

Due to the features of the platform that promote various actions (duet, etc.) and the core role played by the platform algorithm, TikTok strongly elicits specific user behaviors. As the cited empirical studies show, the platform's affordances have a strong impact on users, often leading to platform-specific behavior. This can in turn lead to the development of platform-specific norms of content pro-