

An Analysis of the TikTok Platform as a Digital Subculture

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Abstract

The concept of culture has undergone a profound transformation with the rise of digital technologies. In digital environments, cultural production, circulation, and representation increasingly take place through networked platforms that reshape social interaction and everyday cultural practices. The representation and reproduction of culture in cyberspace fundamentally differ from previous forms in terms of norms, practices, rituals, values, space, and time, thus moving toward a new phase referred to as digital culture. Within this framework, the study explores how individuals negotiate cultural meanings and social identities within media-shaped digital environments, focusing on TikTok content. The primary reason for including TikTok in this study is its social reality in representing subculture, as it is the only application with 1.59 billion users that does not belong to major technology corporations such as Facebook or Google. When the content, actions, and characters displayed on TikTok are evaluated, it becomes evident that this social environment functions as a carrier of a culture of banality. Accordingly, the dichotomous debate that emerges here can be formulated as follows: Does the structure of the platform guide individuals in producing such content, or do individuals, through their content, become the constructors of the platform's very structure? Employing a qualitative research design based on netnographic observation and content analysis, this study aims to understand and interpret the cultural dynamics of TikTok within the framework of digital culture. The findings suggest that TikTok functions as a representational arena where subcultural identities, everyday cultural practices, and banal forms of expression gain visibility within the digital attention economy.

Özet

Dijital Alt Kültür Olarak Tiktok Platformunun Analizi

Maddi ve manevi tüm bileşenleriyle sosyolojik anlamda derinlik taşıyan kültür nosyonu, dijitalleşmenin çok boyutlu yansımaları ekseninde reel dünyanın anlam sınırlılığında kendini soyutlamıştır. Kültürün siber uzamda temsili ve yeniden üretimi öncekilerden norm, pratik, ritüel, değer, mekân ve zaman açısından kökensel olarak

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farklılaşmakta dijital kültür diye adlandırılan yeni bir evreye taşınmaktadır. Bu bağlamda çalışma, medya tarafından şekillenen dijital ortamlarda bireylerin kültürel anlamları ve toplumsal kimliklerini nasıl müzakere ettiklerini TikTok içerikleri üzerinden tartışmaktadır. Bu süreçte dijital platformlar, kültürel üretim, dolaşım ve temsil biçimlerinin gerçekleştiği yeni kültürel ortamlar haline gelmektedir. Facebook ya da Google gibi dev teknoloji şirketlerine ait olmadan 1,59 milyar kullanıcı sayısına sahip olan tek uygulama TikTok'un ilgili çalışma kapsamına dâhil edilmesinin temel amacı, alt kültürü temsil etmedeki sosyal gerçekliğidir. TikTok'ta sergilenen içerikler, eylem ve karakterler bağlamında değerlendirildiğinde bu sosyal ortamın banallik kültürünün taşıyıcısı konumunda olduğu anlaşılmaktadır. Dolayısıyla burada doğan dikotomik tartışma şu şekildedir: İlgili platformun yapısı mı bireylere bu içeriklerin oluşturulması için yön verir yoksa birey mi içerikleriyle bu platform yapısının inşacıdır? Netnografik gözlem ve içerik analizine dayanan nitel araştırma tasarımına sahip bu çalışma, dijital kültür çerçevesinde TikTok platformunun kültürel dinamiklerini anlamayı ve yorumlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Elde edilen bulgular TikTok'un dijital dikkat ekonomisi içerisinde alt kültürel kimliklerin, gündelik kültürel pratiklerin ve banal ifade biçimlerinin görünürlük kazandığı bir temsil alanı olarak işlediğini göstermektedir.

1. Introduction

Digital culture has generated a profound transformation across all spheres of social life with the widespread diffusion of the internet and digital technologies. In this context, digital culture should not merely be interpreted as the technological extension of existing cultural practices. Rather, it represents a transformation in the very conditions under which culture is produced, circulated, and experienced. The digital environment reshapes the temporal, spatial, and symbolic dimensions of cultural production by enabling instantaneous communication, algorithmic mediation, and participatory interaction among users. As a result, cultural meanings are no longer transmitted solely through traditional institutions such as family, education, or mass media; instead, they increasingly emerge within decentralized and networked environments. These environments allow individuals not only to consume cultural content but also to actively participate in its production and circulation. Online platforms, social media networks, and digital communication tools exert influence across a broad spectrum—from the ways individuals express themselves and establish social relations to patterns of cultural production and consumption. From a social sciences perspective, digital culture offers a critical field of inquiry for understanding how individuals construct their social ties, how collective identities are shaped, and how everyday life practices are redefined.

The primary aim of this study is to understand, through a qualitative approach, how digital culture shapes individuals' practices of social interaction. In this context, the study seeks to address the following research question: How does TikTok function as a platform that enables the representation of subcultural identities and banal cultural forms within digital culture? Accordingly, the study aims to reveal how digital culture restructures social dynamics at both the individual and collective levels.

In pursuing this objective, particular attention is given to the platform TikTok as a prominent example of contemporary digital media environments. This study provides a sociological examination of the position of the phenomena of elitism and banality—considered here as subdimensions of culture—within the cyber realm, as well as their manifestations within Turkish society. By placing digital culture at the center of the analysis, the study seeks to contribute to the examination of the relationship and tension between elitism and banality. Although there is a growing body of research examining TikTok as a digital platform, relatively limited attention has been paid to how the platform operates as a representational space for subcultural identities and banal cultural practices within the framework of digital culture. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to analyze TikTok as a cultural environment in which subcultural expressions, banal cultural forms, and class representations are produced,

circulated, and normalized. By examining TikTok through the concepts of subculture, banality, and digital cultural production, this study aims to contribute to the literature on digital culture by offering a sociological interpretation of how contemporary social media platforms reshape cultural hierarchies and taste cultures.

This article argues that TikTok should not be understood merely as an entertainment-oriented social media platform. Rather, through its algorithmic structure, attention economy dynamics, and memetic circulation mechanisms, the platform functions as a cultural arena in which banal cultural expressions, marginal identities, and unconventional performances gain visibility. In this sense, TikTok simultaneously operates as both a representational space for digital subcultures and a mechanism that transforms everyday cultural practices into circulating digital spectacles. This study contributes to digital culture research by offering a netnographic analysis of how banal cultural expressions function as representational forms of subcultural identity within algorithmically structured platforms.

2. From Culture to Digital Culture

Culture, used in various senses ranging from art and creativity to traditions and customs, and from values to standards, is a multifaceted concept with deep roots. The concept of culture encompasses many aspects of everyday life. It shapes our identity as well as our ways of thinking and behaving. Moreover, culture is never static; it is in a constant state of flow. According to Güvenç, when the most commonly known historical trajectory of the concept of culture is considered, a large part of humanity's journey has unfolded through evolution, while its most significant stages have occurred through revolutions. In this sense, although it may be relatively easy for us to identify where and how a cultural revolution begins, it is far more difficult to determine when such a revolution reaches its final stage (Güvenç, 2023, p. 29). This is because one of the most widely recognized characteristics of culture is that it functions as a living organism. The fundamental component that ensures and sustains this continuity is human beings themselves. Indeed, the structural tools that humans have developed through their interaction with nature have not only served as a means of making sense of their existence but have also had a decisive influence on their lives.

Eagleton, on the other hand, describes culture as an implicit form of world knowledge. For him, culture provides the framework through which individuals learn how to adapt to different environments and how to act within them. Much like what Aristotle referred to as practical wisdom, culture is oriented less toward knowing the reasons behind things and more toward knowing how to act (Eagleton, 2016, p. 50).

While transforming their relationship with nature, individuals have shaped their cultural values through this interaction by advancing through technical knowledge and using technology as a tool. Yet technology itself also develops within the framework of cultural elements. It embodies a transformation that responds to the needs of societies; in other words, societies guide technology in accordance with how and in what direction they wish to transform nature. Within this perspective, Baynes does not view culture as a static collection of valuable objects. Rather, he considers culture to be more of an instrument, in a sense likening it to a tool that humans create and use until it becomes worn out. Consequently, when moving from the individual to society at large, culture can be understood as a dynamic network to which every member of society contributes and which, in turn, shapes each member of the community. Culture is not an abstraction but rather refers to a totality that exists within a particular place and time. However, it becomes real and actualized only when it is animated through human actions and representations (Baynes, 2002, p. 15).

When evaluated through its material and immaterial components, culture contains a highly complex structure. One of the elements that fundamentally nourishes this structure is technology. From the past to the present, the relationship between culture and technique has resulted in transformative effects that place culture into new forms. In the era we experience

today, shaped by information and communication technologies, culture appears to undergo a kind of metamorphosis, continuing its existence by acquiring a new embodiment within human actions in the cyber world. Nevertheless, the technological form of culture does not evolve independently of real life or belong solely to cyberspace. The traces of technological culture pass through the garden of real life, feeding from it and developing in interaction with it.

Throughout history, technological innovations have transformed cultural practices. Indeed, the spark that triggered cultural changes such as the Renaissance and the Reformation following Gutenberg's invention of the printing press was technology itself. Technology has produced profound transformations in many aspects of social life. In the contemporary era, technology—one of the elements that constitutes the phenomenon of culture—has gained the capacity to generate a culture of its own. Digital culture represents one of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon. The term digital culture refers to the values, standards, behaviors, and modes of operation shaped by the use of new digital technologies. Today, digital culture forms the backbone of every process of digital transformation. The production and consumption of knowledge have been reshaped through digital technologies. For instance, in today's world, forms of cultural production and cultural sharing have been reconfigured within the framework of digital technologies. Undoubtedly, within the context of new communication technologies, we witness not only the preservation of our cultural heritage but also the deconstruction of the very notion of culture itself. This situation reveals technology's dual capacity to both preserve and transform cultural heritage. Thus, while technology assumes an instrumental role as a permanent component of cultural functioning, it simultaneously creates a transformative effect by offering new forms of communication and production.

Lull argues that describing the extraordinary developments of our era with terms such as the "Information Age," the "Digital Age," or the "Internet Age" distances us from the vitality that lies at the core of the era and misplaces the emphasis. According to him, the internet has undoubtedly become an indispensable tool of information today—but why? The "complex connectivity" facilitated by advanced technologies and grounded in symbolic representation is, in essence, a contemporary elaboration of the fundamentally simple activity of human communication. Although information technologies have advanced and offered humanity new methods of interaction, the fundamental motivation that drives human beings to construct their social and cultural worlds has remained unchanged. Through the concept of the "Communication Age," Lull refers not merely to the efficient transfer of digitized bits and bytes from one location to another but to an intertwined communication structure that makes the full diversity of material and symbolic resources available to humanity. In doing so, he approaches the issue through the lens of traditional and less-mediated cultural influences that constitute the most unquestioned aspects of everyday life, rather than limiting his analysis solely to tele-mediated or computer-mediated symbolic forms. This is because, as he notes, values and ways of life remain fundamentally tied to local contexts and influences. Unlike previous historical eras, cultural forms today circulate far more widely and are even employed in innovative ways (Lull, 2018, pp. 9–10).

3. TikTok with Its Structural Dynamics

The short-video platform Musical.ly, founded in 2014 by Alex Zhu and Luyu Yang, was acquired by Beijing-based technology company ByteDance in 2017 and later integrated into TikTok. Following this acquisition, the name Musical.ly was replaced with TikTok. At its core, the TikTok platform is structured to enable users to create viral content accompanied by various trending and popular songs. With its technical architecture, TikTok distinguishes itself from other social media platforms. Through its unique advanced algorithms and user-centered features, the platform transforms the user experience into something distinctive. The TikTok ecosystem is not limited to the application itself; content creators, viewers,

advertisers, algorithms, filters, music databases, and even other connected applications are all part of this ecosystem. The cultural expressions observed on TikTok cannot be understood solely as the result of individual creativity. The platform's algorithmic structure and recommendation system also play an important role in shaping the visibility and circulation of content. As the platform encourages viral interaction, engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares influence which cultural forms become more visible within the digital environment. Therefore, the representation of subcultural identities and banal cultural expressions on TikTok should also be interpreted within the logic of platform-based visibility and attention economy.

Fundamentally, TikTok is built around the creation of short-form video content. Videos must be at least three seconds long, while previously recorded videos can extend up to sixty minutes. This flexible format has been designed partly to compete with video-based platforms such as YouTube. As a result, TikTok has rapidly gained global popularity and now operates in 155 countries and 75 languages.

Structurally, one of the most prominent features of TikTok culture is its association with creative and performance-based modes of expression among users. Undoubtedly, this performativity corresponds to Goffman's (2014) dramaturgical notion of "self-presentation", which in this context manifests as the act of displaying oneself on the platform. Through short videos, TikTok users perform various forms of self-representation, including dancing to music, lip-synchronization, storytelling, and humorous sketches. The performance exhibited in this environment should not be evaluated solely in terms of individual creativity. TikTok, through its algorithmic structure, also plays a determining role in shaping user actions. The platform thus creates a form of collective participation and encourages individuals to engage in this participatory culture.

On the other hand, Collie and Wilson-Barnao draw attention to the dissolution and redistribution of the spatial organization of creative labor on TikTok. Digital platforms such as TikTok are often presented as environments that appear to democratize cultural production and distribution processes, since anyone can produce and share content. However, this situation simultaneously integrates creative labor into the data-driven logic of the digital economy. According to Collie and Wilson-Barnao, TikTok transforms everyday creativity and play culture into a form of unpaid digital labor, and this labor frequently operates through young users in ways that resemble digital child labor. TikTok delegates functions such as the ranking and classification of users, content, and ideas to algorithms designed for commercial purposes. As a result, a system emerges in which the value of creative labor is determined not by aesthetic or cultural contribution, but rather by its capacity to generate engagement and data production. Collie and Wilson-Barnao suggest that this transformation will profoundly affect future forms of creative work and raise questions about who ultimately benefits from the value produced (Collie & Wilson-Barnao, 2020).

Continuously changing viral content constitutes one of the fundamental characteristics of the TikTok platform. At the core of these contents lie the sounds, dances, and visual elements that users incorporate into their videos. All these components are repeatedly reproduced by users almost like templates, thereby constructing the platform's cultural structure. Sounds, dances, and visuals function as TikTok's memetic productions. The concept of the meme, introduced by Dawkins, is explained through culture and establishes an analogy between cultural transmission and genetic transmission. Although culture possesses a fundamentally conservative structure, it generates its own evolutionary dynamics. In this context, Dawkins suggests that a new type of replicator has emerged in recent times, and the environment that hosts this replicator is human culture itself. Although the term mimeme would be etymologically appropriate, Dawkins proposes the shorter and simpler word "meme", which also echoes the concept of the gene. Memes may appear in various forms, such as melodies, ideas, slogans, or fashion trends. While genes spread through the gene pool by jumping from

body to body via reproductive cells, memes spread through imitation, jumping from brain to brain and continuing their existence within a cultural pool. The habitat of memes is the human mind. The mind offers a limited resource for the spread and persistence of memes; much like the processing capacity of a computer, it becomes a space of intense competition (Dawkins, 2006, pp. 189–201).

According to Abidin, memetic production is deeply intertwined with the algorithmic structure of the TikTok platform, since the platform's "For You" page recommends content based on users' interests and thereby accelerates the dissemination of memes. While visually oriented social media platforms such as Instagram place images at the center rather than text, TikTok foregrounds sound elements rather than visual imagery (Abidin, 2020, p. 80). Schellewald argues that TikTok differs from other video-sharing platforms such as YouTube in two fundamental ways. First, TikTok content is characterized by its brevity and ephemerality. Although content creators address specific aspects of everyday life in thematic ways, documentary communication formats do not position the video producer as a clearly defined content creator identity. According to Schellewald, this becomes even more apparent through a second distinction: the "memefication" of everyday life. On TikTok, numerous formats and trends allow individuals to express their identities and current moods through pre-existing scripts and templates (Schellewald, 2021, p. 1446).

Finally, Abidin notes that on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, long-term and lasting fame traditionally relied on constructing a consistent persona or online identity, or establishing a memorable online brand that followers could admire. Followers could subscribe to these influencers, continuously follow their updates, invest interest in their online and offline personal lives, and be persuaded by the (often sponsored) messages they shared through long-term communicative proximity. This was the era of persona-based or profile-based fame. On platforms such as TikTok, however, the nature of fame and virality has changed and now largely depends on the performance of individual posts rather than the sustained visibility of a single online persona (Abidin, 2020, pp. 79–80).

4. TikTok as a Representational Space of Digital Subculture

Structurally, TikTok differs significantly from other social media platforms. For instance, while Twitter's 280-character limit encourages discursive brevity, Facebook allows for more detailed posts; Instagram requires visual communication in posts, whereas Twitter permits text-only content (Zulli & Zulli, 2020, p. 3). Within the TikTok platform, however, the diversity of content has enabled the representation of many different social situations that had rarely been encountered on other platforms until now. Consequently, these social phenomena have also made TikTok a frequently discussed topic on other platforms such as Instagram, X, and YouTube. Roose argues that public opinion often confines TikTok within reductive interpretations that view it merely as a "childish" or "simple" form of entertainment. Known for its viral dance and music trends as well as short and seemingly "silly" videos, TikTok is frequently perceived as a platform lacking depth and complexity in the eyes of society (Roose, 2018). In this regard, Chatfield adopts a critical stance toward content creators by stating that "the quality of digital publishing should be far more than catering to a rabble audience" (Chatfield, 2013, p. 90).

Within cultural studies, subculture is generally understood as a form of cultural expression developed by social groups that position themselves outside or at the margins of dominant cultural structures. Subcultures often emerge through shared symbols, language practices, aesthetic preferences, and everyday performances that differentiate their members from mainstream cultural norms. Rather than functioning as entirely separate cultural systems, subcultures interact dynamically with dominant culture, sometimes resisting it, sometimes transforming it, and sometimes being incorporated into it. In digital environments, however, the formation of subcultures acquires new dynamics. Online platforms enable geographically

dispersed individuals to gather around shared symbolic practices and cultural preferences, thereby facilitating the rapid emergence and circulation of subcultural expressions.

Gans maintains that contemporary critics, driven by impulses not very different from those of earlier periods, argue that the increasing dominance of entertainment, infotainment, and an emerging tendency toward “dumbing down” is replacing people’s capacity to comprehend the real world. In this sense, Gans questions the distinction between the elite and the banal in order to understand the public of taste. Rather than approaching non-elite segments of society as a homogeneous mass—as some sociologists have done—he conceptualizes them in terms of classes and strata. From this perspective, popular culture is not homogeneous; rather, it consists of multiple cultures shaped around different aesthetic values and criteria of taste. Gans refers to these cultures as “taste cultures,” including high culture among them, because each provides structures through which individuals unite around shared aesthetic values and standards. According to him, aesthetics extends beyond a mere conception of beauty; it also encompasses the emotional and intellectual needs individuals satisfy when selecting or expressing a culture. All taste cultures—from high culture to lower cultural forms—operate according to their own distinctive criteria. When explaining high and low taste cultures, Gans does not imply that one is superior to the other; instead, he emphasizes that they differ primarily in terms of their aesthetic orientations. The terms “high” and “low” are therefore not intended as moral judgments but rather as indicators that broadly reflect positions within the socio-economic hierarchy and their cultural manifestations.

In popular discourse, taste cultures are often categorized as “noble,” “middle/ordinary,” and “uncultured.” In Gans’s classification, however, there are five categories: high culture, upper-middle culture, lower-middle culture, and two forms of lower culture. High culture is shaped largely by upper-middle-class cultural professionals who influence the public of taste. Although the upper class provides material and symbolic support for high culture, its preferences often overlap with those of upper-middle and lower-middle cultures. Taste culture, in this framework, is treated as an abstraction independent of the individuals who produce and consume culture; such an abstraction is legitimate only for analytical purposes, since culture does not exist independently of individuals outside physical spaces. For this reason, Gans does not sharply distinguish between the creators of taste culture (artists, writers, actors) and its users (typically audiences). He also refers to “cultural providers”—firms and institutions that deliver taste cultures to their users. Individuals who share similar aesthetic preferences, even if they do not form an organized community, constitute “taste publics,” and these publics exhibit clear class-based differences (Gans, 2020, pp. 8, 22–23).

Bourdieu, on the other hand, argues that although classes and class fractions form the ground for different cultural styles, the cultural patterns existing within each class fraction tend largely toward uniformity. Taste, in his view, constitutes the foundation of everything we possess—people and objects alike—and of every expression we project in the eyes of others. It determines how we position ourselves and how others position us within systems of classification. According to Bourdieu, taste—that is, expressed preference—represents the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. When tastes are forced to justify themselves, they tend to validate themselves negatively through the rejection of other tastes. In matters of taste, every definition is simultaneously a negation, perhaps more than in any other domain. Tastes frequently manifest themselves in relation to the tastes of others through reactions of disgust, intolerance, or revulsion—often described metaphorically as “sickening.” The well-known phrase “there is no accounting for taste” does not imply that all tastes naturally exist in the world; rather, it reflects the fact that individuals experience their own tastes as natural, almost as if they were part of a habitus. This perception, in turn, encourages individuals to associate other tastes with a sense of unnaturalness or shame. Aesthetic intolerance can sometimes evolve into a powerful form of social pressure. Disgust toward different lifestyles constitutes one of the strongest barriers between classes,

a fact clearly observable in patterns such as marriages occurring primarily within the same social group. For those who consider themselves possessors of legitimate taste, the most intolerable situation is the inappropriate coexistence of different tastes within spaces where taste is expected to function as a marker of distinction (Bourdieu, 2015, pp. 90–91).

From Gans's perspective, TikTok—considered as a cultural provider—possesses characteristics that distinguish it from other platforms and simultaneously shape its own public of taste. In terms of representing taste, the cultural perception surrounding the platform often frames it as viral, youth-oriented, banal, or low-quality. In this respect, when TikTok is compared with Instagram, it becomes possible to speak of Instagram as embodying a more elitist, sophisticated, and prestigious cultural perception. The nature of the content produced on Instagram typically reflects an aestheticized and curated lifestyle. Content shared on Instagram often emerges as part of a long-term process of identity construction, and extremes are rarely encountered on this platform. In fact, the very extremes that appear commonplace on TikTok may sometimes circulate on Instagram as events with news value. TikTok's user-centered inclusivity, compared to Instagram, enables marginalized groups to make their voices heard more visibly within this environment. Conversely, content on Instagram is often carefully polished, well-prepared, visually appealing, and professionally designed before being shared. The spontaneity inherent in TikTok's narrative structure, therefore, produces a more raw and unrefined appearance compared to Instagram content. Moreover, the fact that many individuals perceive TikTok as a potential source of income foregrounds the creator's actions within the framework of the attention economy.

On TikTok, individuals generate meaning through visual images and contextual cues while performing in various ways as proof of authenticity. In doing so, objective reality is frequently manipulated and deconstructed. This dynamic resembles the logic of freak shows, where forms of otherness situated within a seemingly naturalized context are exhibited. Garland-Thomson notes that freak shows historically functioned as spaces that rendered identities and bodies perceived as outside societal norms visible as "abnormal." However, as these exhibitions became widespread and gradually transformed into objects of curiosity and entertainment, they contributed to the normalization—or banalization—of the abnormal. What was once extraordinary eventually becomes an ordinary form of entertainment. According to Garland-Thomson, freak shows have always been associated with popular or low culture. They function as mechanisms through which society draws the boundaries of what is considered "normal." The bodies and lives displayed in such performances represent the non-normative; yet as these representations become banalized, they simultaneously serve to reproduce and reinforce the notion of normality (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 75).

5. Analysis of the TikTok Platform

The changing face of culture—identified as the specific focus of this study—is examined through the TikTok platform and the outputs produced by its operational structure. In this context, it is essential for the research to address the following questions: Does digital culture create opportunities for the formation and representation of subcultural structures? How does TikTok grant representational visibility to different cultures? Does the platform democratize cultural production? How does TikTok make different social groups visible and banalize what is considered unusual? Does TikTok provide an environment that facilitates cultural homogenization on a global scale? Does the platform mediate the construction of temporary cultural formations, and does this generate a particular speed of cultural change? Does TikTok produce hybrid cultural forms through the interactions it enables? Does TikTok contribute to the superficialization of digital culture? Finally, within the framework of the attention economy, how does TikTok cultivate a culture of banality?

This study employs netnography, one of the qualitative research methods. Netnography is a methodological approach used to understand cultural phenomena and interactions

within digital environments and online communities. Accordingly, in order to clarify the contextual framework of the study, passive participant observation and content analysis techniques were utilized. Netnography, as an adaptation of ethnographic research to digital environments, allows researchers to observe cultural interactions that occur within online communities without interfering with their natural flow. Unlike traditional ethnography, which requires physical immersion within a specific field site, netnography enables the analysis of cultural practices emerging within digitally mediated environments such as social media platforms, forums, and online communities. Through systematic observation of user-generated content, communicative practices, and performative behaviors, researchers can interpret the symbolic structures that shape digital cultural life.

According to Güvenç (2023, pp. 37–38), groups hold considerable significance in the human and social sciences because they reflect, to a substantial extent, the qualities and characteristics of the cultures to which they belong. Although it is not possible to observe and examine an entire society, culture, or subculture in its totality, properly selected groups approached through appropriate methods can be studied in a sound and reliable manner. In the social sciences, research is typically conducted not on entire populations but on sample groups assumed to represent that population. In this regard, TikTok—the focus of this study—also encompasses a very large population. With the aim of ensuring representativeness across communities within the TikTok universe, a purposive sample was created and the following 23 TikTok accounts were selected: @cilgindondurmaci, @yasincengiz38, @derecesiz0101, @ercan51zarife, @arifiskilipofficial, @semoss_51, @azize.live.2, @alaaddinbildirici_27, @welat_kirac63, @canyakan787878, @ayseniz.arici, @havhavhav07, @serdargorel, @kader_ablanizzz, @kandiraliferdi, @tostcu_yakupusta1, @fidanh0ca, @ali.kahya0707, @asslidemir07, @blue_dunya34, @kadiirhocatv, @koyaligulsen, and @tiktokbayram_04. The selected accounts were chosen because they represent widely recognized figures within Turkish TikTok culture and frequently circulate across both digital and traditional media environments. In this sense, these accounts provide a representative window into the cultural dynamics of TikTok in the Turkish context. In addition, these creators were selected because their content styles and public visibility reflect dominant perceptions of TikTok culture in Turkey, making them analytically valuable for examining the relationship between subculture, banality, and digital visibility.

In determining content creators for the research, the author took care to include TikTokers who play a role in representing TikTok culture—particularly those whose presence reflects prevailing perceptions of TikTok within the interplay between traditional and digital media. At this stage, an attempt was made to establish a representational range by selecting accounts with markedly different audience sizes, from a profile with 19.6 million followers to users with 1,765 followers. The point at which themes derived from these accounts began to repeat was taken as an indication that data saturation had been reached. In other words, once recurring cultural patterns and performative styles began to appear repeatedly across different creators, additional accounts were not expected to generate substantially new analytical categories. At the same time, differences in follower counts introduced distinct dynamics into the field. It should also be noted that during the period of research, some accounts were deleted on the grounds that they violated TikTok's user and content policies.

In addition, from the initiation of the study until its completion, the author continued to examine the actions of this sample group through passive participant observation. Both the overall integrity of the content on the profiles and users' follower-exclusive live broadcasts were periodically monitored. Indeed, this process was highly influential in the formation of the sample group. For each creator included in the sample, the five most popular videos on the platform were subjected to content analysis, resulting in a total of 115 videos examined within this framework. Videos that consisted solely of adding sound to a shared photograph were excluded from the scope of analysis. Moreover, in the context of TikTok's

sanctions, some content creators initially planned for inclusion were removed from the platform for reasons such as community guideline violations, spam, or suspicious activity. Additionally, the demographic characteristics of the users included in the study were not treated as central within the research design; rather, the analysis focused primarily on their performative identities as articulated through the content they produced. The observation process was conducted over an extended period during the preparation of the doctoral dissertation on which this article is based. During this period, the platform was repeatedly examined through passive participant observation, allowing the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the platform's cultural dynamics and user practices.

The population of the present research consists of TikTok users in Turkey. In this respect, as a global platform, TikTok's usage practices may differ across countries, which may limit the study's capacity to claim the existence of a singular global TikTok culture. The most fundamental limitation is the impossibility of examining all accounts within the TikTok universe. Thus, the study faces significant constraints related to both sampling and time.

At the beginning of the fieldwork on TikTok, impressions were recorded in order to understand the platform's existing structure. Proceeding through an exploratory approach, the study sought to grasp the nature and logic of the content formats identified on the platform. In a sense, the author engaged in a form of "lurking," observing the functioning of the environment and attempting to analyze user practices accordingly. At this stage, attention was paid not only to TikTok content itself but also to the reflections of TikTok content across other platforms. Once saturation was achieved in terms of the data, the process was concluded. Within the scope of passive participant observation, the author repeatedly visited creators' profiles and attended their live broadcasts as a way of exploring the motivations underlying their production processes. Live broadcasts constitute a particularly important stage for recognizing and understanding individuals who do not employ their own voices or speaking styles within their TikTok videos. Many users included in the sample both cultivate interaction with their follower base through live streams and generate income through these broadcasts.

In this study, the productions of users representing lower-class identities are examined through content analysis. An analytical coding scheme was developed to interpret recurring cultural patterns observed in the data and to understand the broader dynamics of digital culture. Proceeding with a focus on TikTok users' experiences and perceptions, a research scale incorporating multiple coding was constructed. The development of this scale was shaped by shared themes and categories observed in the content monitored during the author's long-term passive participant observation process. Through a multi-coding approach, the study seeks to explore the technological, social, and emotional dimensions of culture as a complex phenomenon. Users' modes of staging themselves, linguistic preferences, uses of the body, and everyday life narratives are treated as indicators that render visible their positioning vis-à-vis high culture. These forms of cultural production—classified here as banal—are analyzed as representational strategies that invert cultural hierarchies.

The coding categories used in the analysis were developed inductively through repeated observations conducted during the netnographic fieldwork. During this process, recurring patterns within the videos were identified and grouped into broader thematic categories. These categories were then organized into analytical dimensions such as aesthetic form, linguistic performance, bodily performance, self-narrative, humor types, class representation, and identity typology. This inductive coding approach allowed the researcher to interpret the symbolic structures embedded in user-generated content and to reveal how digital cultural expressions are constructed and circulated on the TikTok platform. Throughout the analytical process, the coding scheme was repeatedly reviewed and refined through iterative comparison of the video data. This process enabled the researcher to increase the

internal consistency of the categories and to ensure that recurring cultural patterns were accurately captured.

The videos included in the research consist of creators' most popular and most viewed content. In this regard, it is observed that many TikTokers "pin" the posts receiving the highest engagement to the top of their profile pages, thereby already presenting visitors with information about their popularity and self-presentation. The videos examined were first evaluated at the formal level. Under the theme of aesthetic form, the formats—produced consciously or unconsciously—were identified through code variables using multiple coding, and subsequently examined through frequency analysis. The frequency tables presented in this section were generated through a systematic coding process based on the analytical categories developed during the netnographic observation phase. These tables therefore provide a quantitative overview of recurring cultural patterns observed within the qualitative dataset.

Table 1: Frequency Analysis of Aesthetic Form

| Aesthetic Form | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--|------------------|-----------------------|
| Filter Use / Low-Quality Video | 111 | 27.27 |
| Visual Chaos / Background Clutter | 97 | 23.83 |
| Random Clothing | 92 | 22.60 |
| Poor Editing / Cropping Errors / Shooting Errors | 107 | 26.29 |
| Total | 407 | 100 |

Under this theme, the formal shortcomings frequently encountered in TikTokers' videos indicate that the speed of content circulation and production practices are prioritized over digital aesthetics. The category with the highest frequency, "Filter Use / Low-Quality Video," is noteworthy in this regard. This finding suggests that content creators, even on a platform known for high visual standards such as TikTok, often push technical quality into the background. This mode of production—where narrative or performance is prioritized over aesthetics—implies that users' participation in the platform tends to be not professional but rather everyday and spontaneous. The second most frequent category, "Poor Editing / Cropping Errors / Shooting Errors," likewise indicates that much of the content is produced in an amateur manner, often without technical knowledge or equipment. While these mistakes underline the improvised character of digital content production, they also suggest that TikTokers' practices are shaped not only by aesthetics but also by accessibility and intimacy. The "imperfect" visual relationship established with audiences may, at times, function as a form of resistance to—or an alternative aesthetic against—high-production content.

Similarly, "Visual Chaos / Background Clutter" points to spontaneous filming embedded in everyday life rather than controlled stage design. This indicates that influencers move away from traditional media codes such as staging and *mise-en-scène*, acting instead in alignment with the raw, real-time nature of social media. The category "Random Clothing" further reveals that creators often develop no deliberate costuming strategy in front of the camera, suggesting that the boundary between stage and everyday life becomes blurred. Overall, TikTok influencers appear to orient themselves toward rapid, everyday, and improvisational production practices rather than toward formal aesthetic design. These findings suggest that in digital culture, an "aesthetics of participation" becomes more salient than an ideal of "high aesthetics." The aesthetics of participation may be conceptualized as an aesthetic regime in which non-professional production techniques are legitimized, and error or low quality becomes a means of building a connection with audiences. In this way, social media platforms function not only as stages for content but also as cultural spaces in which aesthetic norms are continuously renegotiated.

Table 2: Frequency Analysis of Linguistic Performance

| Linguistic Performance | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Slang / Swearing | 9 | 14.52 |
| Local Dialect / Accent | 14 | 22.58 |
| Spelling / Orthographic Errors | 32 | 51.61 |
| Humor-Oriented Language Shifts | 7 | 11.29 |
| Total | 62 | 100 |

Creators’ linguistic performances, much like their formal aesthetics, reveal a pronounced tendency toward everyday, spontaneous, and often non-standard language use. The most striking finding here is the absence of any written narration (either in the video description or on-screen text) in the majority of the videos. The complete exclusion of textuality in 83 videos indicates that content creators construct meaning primarily through visual and auditory montage. This suggests that text is positioned not as a primary, but as a secondary—or even unnecessary—tool within the video. The dominance of visual and auditory material points to the prevalence of a post-textual narrative form in digital culture.

Among videos that did include text, the category with the highest frequency was identified as “Spelling and Punctuation Errors.” This level of error offers insight not only into the spontaneity of content production, but also into users’ linguistic competencies in digital environments—or the extent to which they prioritize such competencies. Violations of spelling conventions may function as indicators of “lack of knowledge” for some creators; for others, they may be strategically employed as part of appearing “cool” or “authentic.” The notable share of “Local Dialect and Accent” (22.58%) indicates that TikTokers frequently mobilize markers of belonging and identity within their linguistic performances. Local language here becomes a means of representing not the center but the periphery—embodying rural life, lower-class positioning, or everyday reality. The category “Slang or Swearing” (14.52%) provides a significant indicator of how digital performances are constructed through boundary transgressions. In digital environments, a desire for uncensored expression or proximity to everyday life may legitimize the preference for such vocabularies. Finally, “Humor-Oriented Language Shifts” (11.29%), though more limited, demonstrates creators’ efforts to engage audiences through linguistic play, indicating that humor is a key expressive mode in digital settings and that language functions as a creative tool in this context.

Table 3: Frequency Analysis of the Use of the Body

| Use of the Body | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Exaggerated Dance / Gestures | 35 | 16.83 |
| Grotesque Movements | 88 | 42.31 |
| Erotic References | 27 | 12.98 |
| Self-Ridicule / Bodily Mockery | 58 | 27.88 |
| Total | 208 | 100 |

On digital platforms, physical performance functions not only as a visual element but also as a domain of cultural discourse. In particular, absurd choreographies, exaggerated facial expressions, and unsettling bodily imagery—classified here as “grotesque movements”—emerge as the most dominant mode of bodily use, with a rate of 42.31%. Such bodily expressions are often deployed for humor, irony, or attention. The prevalence of the

grotesque body suggests that classic representations grounded in beauty or the “proper” body have been displaced by shocking and non-normative performances. The second most common strategy, “self-ridicule and bodily mockery,” indicates that the body is used through deliberate comicization and self-directed humor. This strategy implies that creators build intimacy with audiences through self-deprecation, while also establishing an ironic distance from idealized body representations typical of traditional media. This dynamic signals how platforms such as TikTok can become spaces of self-expression particularly for users not positioned at the cultural or class center.

The use of “exaggerated dances and gestures” (16.83%) further points to the presence of a theatrical and excessive bodily narrative in digital performances—one that aestheticizes immoderation and enables ordinary movements to be brought onto the stage. Unlike classical dance or performance norms, these gestures are typically produced spontaneously and amateurishly, far from professionalism. Yet precisely in this form, they establish effective audience relations and facilitate the viral circulation of content. By contrast, the “exposure” of the body or its presentation through erotic references appears at a lower rate (12.98%). This suggests that the body is sometimes positioned as an object of desire and that eroticism can function strategically within attention-seeking practices.

Table 4: Frequency Analysis of Self-Narrative

| Self-Narrative | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--|-----------|----------------|
| Emotional Confession | 5 | 1.57 |
| Representation of Poverty and Everyday Life | 104 | 32.60 |
| Family, Neighborhood, and Community Narratives | 95 | 29.78 |
| “This Is Who I Am” Discourse | 115 | 36.05 |
| Total | 319 | 100 |

Among TikTok users producing content, one of the most salient discursive forms is crystallized in the expression “This is who I am.” This discourse is not merely a mode of expression; it is one of the foundational strategies through which individuals construct their digital existence. Through this discourse, the user transforms the “self” from ordinariness into a kind of digital persona, shaping it in line with how they wish to be seen. It also demonstrates that in the digital era, identity becomes increasingly fluid, stageable, and strategic. The second prominent theme, “Representations of Poverty and Everyday Life,” offers a notable counter-representational form when compared with platforms such as Instagram, which are often associated with images of “ideal life” and “luxury consumption.” These contents make users’ socio-economic realities visible and at times even aestheticize them. Here, poverty operates not merely as background, but is often re-signified through narratives woven with humor, irony, or pride. Users’ decisions to place their living spaces, material constraints, or everyday hardships at the center of their content should be read as part of both a struggle for digital visibility and a claim of cultural belonging. This provides a significant opening for understanding the representation of the lower class on digital platforms and may be interpreted as one pathway through which social exclusions become visible within the digital public sphere.

The strong presence of “Family, Neighborhood, and Community Narratives” (29.78%) suggests that digital identity performances are shaped not solely through individualism but through collective belongings. These narratives show how the individual constructs their story together with the community and renders their performance meaningful within networks of relations. By contrast, the theme of “Emotional Confession” appears at a very limited rate (1.57%). This low frequency suggests that emotional intimacy on TikTok is often suppressed or expressed indirectly through other modes—such as humor, irony, or editing.

Table 5: Frequency Analysis of Humor Types

| Type of Humor | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Vulgar / Lower-Class Humor | 71 | 52.59 |
| Absurd Humor | 49 | 36.30 |
| Physical Prank | 14 | 10.37 |
| Crude Parody | 1 | 0.74 |
| Total | 135 | 100 |

On TikTok, subcultural humor practices are dominant. The most frequent category, “Vulgar/Lower-Class Humor,” indicates that creators’ comedic sensibilities often draw away from high culture codes and toward styles closer to everyday life, frequently associated with lower class positions. This humor is typically linked to coarse language, ordinary life practices, sexuality, physical appearance, or non-normative behaviors. Vulgar humor, especially on platforms such as TikTok, enhances accessibility and allows users to position themselves through an image of being “one of the people.” “Absurd Humor” reflects narrative forms aligned with the logic of digital platforms—built upon irrational, surprising, and unexpected elements. With its structure that disrupts or deliberately destabilizes meaning-making, absurd humor constructs an alternative to traditional narrative orders. It may sometimes become an ironic and creative way for users to disclose marginalization or non-normative identities. Through such humor, creators embrace the digital logic that “anything can happen,” producing effects through surprise, disruption, and displacement.

“Physical Pranks” correspond to classic comedy forms in which the body becomes an object of humor—featuring elements such as falling, collisions, excessive gestures, or grotesque movements. The least frequently observed humor type, “Crude Parody,” appears at only 0.74%. This low rate suggests that TikTok creators tend to prefer showcasing their own performances or producing spontaneous comedy derived from everyday life. Since parody involves deliberate imitation and critique of a particular cultural object or persona, it requires a certain level of cultural literacy and a shared referential system. In this respect, the limited presence of crude parody indicates a broader tendency to orient toward humor forms that are immediate, rapidly consumable, and less dependent on contextual knowledge.

Table 6: Frequency Analysis of Class Representation

| Class Representation / Social Position | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|-----------|----------------|
| Indicators of Poverty (Space, Language, Clothing) | 90 | 46.88 |
| Working-Class Representation | 17 | 8.85 |
| Rural Codes / Migrant Identity | 85 | 44.27 |
| Total | 192 | 100 |

The class affiliations of TikTok users are staged and presented not only through explicit statements but also implicitly through indicators such as the body, space, language, and clothing. In the videos analyzed, the most dominant representational form is constructed through “Indicators of Poverty.” The physical environments users inhabit (squatter housing, modest home interiors, streets), their clothing (unbranded, everyday, often work- or home-wear), and the language they use (local dialect, slang, low levels of formality) collectively position them within a particular social class—most often the lower class. This can be read through Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital: indicators of poverty on the digital stage function not only as class markers but also as a politics of visibility. The second prominent variable, “Rural Codes and Migrantness,” reveals how class representations intertwine with spatial and cultural peripheries. Clothing, speech patterns, background aesthetics, and everyday routines associated with the rural become central to the content. Here, the rural

is represented not merely as geography but as a cultural position and an aesthetic stance, transferring the center–periphery distinction into the digital plane.

The category “Working-Class Representation,” which appears more limitedly, suggests that occupational identities are not emphasized directly but constructed through indirect narratives. Even when worker identity is not explicitly articulated, it is visualized through the use of the body (physical fatigue, work clothing, narratives grounded in muscular labor), representations of workspaces, or workplace imagery—thus entering the digital narrative. This indicates that the working class operates not so much as an explicit object of representation in digital media, but as a latent cultural reference. Overall, TikTok content tends to construct class representations indirectly through various cultural codes rather than declaring them overtly.

Table 7: Frequency Analysis of Identity Typology

| Identity Typology | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| “Natural / Sincere” Type | 105 | 50.48 |
| “Stiff / Artificial” Parody | 15 | 7.21 |
| “Wild / Excessively Confident” Figure | 86 | 41.35 |
| “Victim” Narrator | 2 | 0.96 |
| Total | 208 | 100 |

How TikTok users represent themselves on the digital stage becomes intelligible not only through visual or verbal data but also through the construction of performative personas. In the analyzed videos, the most dominant persona type, the “Natural/Authentic Type,” suggests that creators seek an appearance of authenticity in digital environments. This authenticity and naturalness function not merely as communicative strategies but also as primary means of establishing credibility and intimacy online. Users address the camera directly, shoot in domestic settings, appear with minimal makeup or simple clothing, and thus display a stance that seems distant from artificiality. Yet the “authenticity” in such content can itself be understood as a planned and conscious performance. In digital environments, being “sincere” has almost become a new norm; the ability to “act as if one is not acting” has emerged as a form of digital capital.

In contrast, the persona of the “Wild/Excessively Confident Figure” appears as a strong secondary type. This figure is constructed through exaggerated bodily movements, bold statements, a language of challenge, or striking mise-en-scènes. This persona does not merely aim to exist on the digital stage but to occupy its center—to be noticed, talked about, and circulated. Confidence here functions less as an individual trait and more as a form of social performance. The “Stiff/Artificial Parody” emerges through the parodic imitation of a socially perceived type—someone seen as “overly serious,” “pretentious,” or “excessively self-admiring.” Users deliberately mimic, exaggerate, and ridicule this figure. This can be interpreted as a practice of critique or ironic distancing from high culture representations or status symbols within the digital sphere. Thus, this persona operates not only as humor but also as a mode of class- and culture-based critique.

Meanwhile, the “Victimhood Narrative” occupies a very limited space in the analyzed videos. This low frequency indicates that TikTok creators tend to position themselves as strong, humorous, extroverted, and in-control figures, while narratives of vulnerability, victimhood, or helplessness become marginalized within this aesthetic. In the economy of digital visibility, producing a “strong persona” often functions as a strategic choice for gaining followers, becoming viral, or receiving support.

5. Conclusion

Culture has long existed as a phenomenon transmitted across generations through

accumulated experiences, visual–auditory–written communications, bodily interactions, and locality. However, like many phenomena transformed by digitalization, the concept of culture has undergone a radical transformation in terms of both production and consumption. Cultural values have assumed a structure that rearticulates and reconstitutes itself within digital environments. Today, digital culture is not merely a continuation of the traditional; nor is it simply a digital copy of it. Rather, digital culture refers to the process through which cultural meaning is newly produced and constructed within a distinct medium. From this perspective, culture in its digital form simultaneously maintains continuity with the past while also carrying elements of rupture. Continuity refers to the persistence of traditional elements—namely the preservation and circulation of cultural content within cyberspace—whereas rupture relates to the emergence of a distinct digital domain and the development of new cultural forms unique to it. In digital environments, we increasingly witness the erosion of the contextual depth associated with traditional culture, as cultural signs are often transformed into a more superficial spectacle.

Within this analytical framework, TikTok content can be interpreted not merely as isolated forms of entertainment but as cultural artifacts reflecting broader transformations in digital culture. The practices observed on the platform—ranging from aesthetic preferences and linguistic performances to bodily expressions and humor types—provide valuable insight into how cultural hierarchies, social identities, and symbolic meanings are negotiated within digital environments. Thus, the analysis presented in this section seeks to interpret TikTok content not only at the descriptive level but also as indicators of deeper cultural dynamics shaped by the logic of the digital attention economy.

In response to the research question “Does digital culture create opportunities for the formation and representation of subcultural structures?”, the answer can be considered affirmative. Today, users are able to transcend geographical and physical boundaries and connect with communities that share similar interests, thereby creating a fertile ground for the emergence of subcultures. The ability of individuals to represent themselves, interact with traditional media, and even create their own media channels opens up opportunities for the representation of subcultural identities.

Regarding the question “How does the TikTok platform provide representational space for different cultures? Does the platform democratize cultural production?”, it is evident that TikTok offers relatively low entry barriers for participation. Users are able to produce and distribute content independently of the gatekeeping mechanisms that traditionally structured media production. In this sense, cultural production appears democratized within the platform. Nevertheless, TikTok’s algorithmic biases, its trend-driven content ranking system, and the pressures of commercialization may simultaneously overshadow certain forms of cultural expression.

In response to “How does TikTok make different social groups visible while banalizing the unusual?”, the platform’s visually oriented structure and identity performances allow narratives that rarely find representation in traditional media to circulate widely. At the same time, content that appears unconventional, deviant, or non-normative often becomes transformed into trends and repackaged into a marketable cultural form. Through this process, such elements are effectively domesticated by the system and rendered banal. Furthermore, TikTok’s interaction-oriented structure produces a form of algorithmic normativity, guiding what types of content gain visibility and circulation.

The question “Does TikTok facilitate cultural homogenization in a global context?” can be answered by considering the emergence of a shared communicative language across global users. Indeed, global codes circulate widely on TikTok—for example through common dance styles, visual formats, and memetic content. With regard to the question “Does TikTok enable the construction of temporary cultural formations, and does this generate an accelerated

pace of cultural change?”, the most evident answer lies in the platform’s trend-oriented content cycles and the tendency of users to adapt quickly to these trends. TikTok thus establishes a regime that reshapes both the structure and the mode of cultural production. Temporality is no longer only related to the lifespan of individual pieces of content but also to the way cultural values themselves are constructed. Traditional cultural forms were often grounded in long-term memory, ritual practices, and intergenerational transmission. In contrast, TikTok increasingly transforms culture into something less remembered and more displayed.

The research question “Does TikTok produce hybrid cultural forms through the interactions it enables?” can be addressed by observing how traditional elements are adapted into digital formats and transformed into new cultural expressions. Although TikTok is a platform of Chinese origin, it has created a global cultural interaction space through memetic production while simultaneously accommodating local cultural codes. This dynamic continually generates new forms of cultural hybridity.

In summary, TikTok has provided users not only with opportunities for cultural representation but also with a space of symbolic resistance. Undoubtedly, many aspects of TikTok make it a controversial platform compared with other social media environments. For a long time, the internet tended to showcase content that was elitized or aesthetically refined, presenting idealized and polished representations that often invited admiration. TikTok, however, introduces a rupture within this narrative structure by enabling the visibility of everyday lives that traditional media previously displayed mainly through formats such as reality shows. Consequently, TikTok content and its creators are frequently labeled as “cringe” (embarrassing or uncomfortable) by other social media communities. Although in recent years TikTok has expanded its user diversity due to advertising revenues—and in the Turkish context it is no longer perceived solely as a marginal or “ghettoized” application as it was during its early years—the nature of its content remains socially debatable. From this perspective, TikTok content seems to pass through a kind of societal filter of taste. The self-expression practices of individuals belonging to lower socio-economic groups often contain spectacular elements: striking visual effects, exaggerated behaviors, and performative staging all support this dynamic.

In relation to the research question “Does TikTok contribute to the superficialization of digital culture, and how does the platform create a culture of banality within the framework of the attention economy?”, the answer involves a multilayered structure. On TikTok, individuals must attract attention, surprise audiences, and sometimes display unusual or bizarre behaviors. However, these actions should not necessarily be interpreted as signs of deficiency; rather, they can be understood as strategic practices within the logic of the attention economy. The platform itself is built upon such algorithmic dynamics. Content creators frequently produce absurd, curiosity-inducing, or even disturbing content in order to capture the attention of viewers. These actions—designed to increase comments, shares, gifts, and other forms of engagement—function as strategic responses to the platform’s architecture.

Content that leaves viewers wondering “What exactly is happening here?” often generates the very sense of strangeness that drives virality. Even content lacking sophisticated humor can spread rapidly like a viral contagion. The unusual and the absurd are often rewarded within this ecosystem. In this sense, TikTok may function as a form of social springboard for individuals who possess subcultural capital. Elements that traditional media once framed as undesirable or sensational spectacles are now rewarded with visibility and digital incentives.

The perceived moral erosion associated with the behaviors individuals display in pursuit of fame and financial gain on TikTok is frequently attributed directly to the platform itself, leading some governments to frame TikTok as the primary culprit. Restrictive approaches,

including bans or limitations, attempt to address the issue by suppressing the platform rather than confronting the underlying dynamics. Yet TikTok should not be blamed simply because it renders visible aspects of social reality that have always existed. While the platform's algorithms and reward systems may indeed encourage such performances, similar spectacles have long been present within traditional media—either exhibited sensationally or suppressed through censorship. It is therefore crucial to recognize TikTok as a representational arena for real social strata.

To understand the dynamics of TikTok content more fully, it is important to examine both the supply and demand sides of these cultural productions. The analysis conducted in this study suggests that demand often shapes supply: through digital networks, individuals seek and consume the forms of culture they desire—whether considered high or low. Social media platforms, acting as cultural providers, facilitate this process by connecting cultural demand with the supply of content. When sufficient numbers of users share similar preferences, these platforms simultaneously generate profit and create the perception that they are responding to public demand.

Finally, TikTok as a cultural provider can be understood as simultaneously questioning and reproducing the traditional hierarchical distinction between high culture and banality. While the platform foregrounds banal culture and supports its mass circulation, it also transforms the concept of high culture by adapting it into popular formats. In this sense, both banality and high culture become accessible on TikTok. Culture itself increasingly functions as a form of capital within the dynamics of commercialization. Classical music or literary narratives may indeed find space on TikTok; however, their widespread circulation often depends on their adaptation into entertaining and easily consumable formats. This transformation carries the risk of flattening the depth traditionally associated with high culture—for instance, when a Shakespearean narrative is converted into a comedic sketch. While the platform's cultural democratization opens new spaces for participation, it may also contribute to a decline in the perceived quality and depth of cultural content.

Therefore, understanding the trajectory of culture within digital environments cannot be reduced to a mere process of technological adaptation. Rather, it represents a profound paradigm shift that reshapes individual identities, social interactions, collective memory, everyday practices, and ultimately the frameworks through which meaning itself is constructed. In this sense, TikTok should be understood not merely as a social media application but as a cultural laboratory in which the boundaries between high culture and banality, authenticity and performance, and center and periphery are continuously renegotiated within the dynamics of digital culture.

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