The Influence of Brands and Platform Mechanics on Creator' Content Sovereignty on TikTok

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Abstract. TikTok, the fastest growing app of 2020, has received much attention for its growth, creativity and marketing opportunities. Much accelerated through COVID19, TikTok has grown to over 800 million monthly active users and has catapulted itself in frontline media. However, the app has also shown to tightly control its infrastructure through its algorithm centric built, its approach to content censorship and active brand management. With that, TikTok has gone different routes than many predating platforms. Through TikTok's creator marketplace and indirectly monetizing content creators through its creator fund, TikTok has also shown to hold a tight grip on content creator. For this reason, this study examines the impact of TikTok and brands on content creator' content sovereignty. Through structured interviews, this study found evidence to suggest that TikTok's influence on the content behavior of its creator exceeds that of brands. It continues to propose a conceptual model to validate the findings through an empirical research track.

Keywords: TikTok · Content sovereignty · Influencer · Content creator

1 Introduction

TikTok has become the most talked about social media platform since its meteoritic rise during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Weimann and Masri 2020; Bhandari and Bimo 2020. Throughout 2020, TikTok has much capitalised upon users prolonged mobile online activity and thus grew its user base to over 800 million active users, coming from over 2 billion app downloads (Su et al. 2020). TikTok is frequently reported to be the most downloaded app in almost every app-store and achieved high media coverage (Su et al. 2002; Medina Serrano et al. 2020), not only for its stunning growth numbers, but also the platform's ongoing struggle with content censorship allegations (Anderson 2020), user data protection and of course the impact of China's ongoing tradewar with the US and other political issues (Janusch and Lorberg 2020). Academic interest in the platform has also started to increase with research focusing foremost on advertising and branding effects, the increasing usage of the app and potential political interferences through TikTok. However, very little research has yet focused on the platform's impact on content creator (Rach 2020). TikTok does not generate own content but acts as a matchmaking

platform, connecting users with user generated content (UCG) in order to monetize user engagement through advertising (Zeng et al. 2020). This reliance upon UCG is one of the few traits TikTok shares with competitors like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter (Taprial and Kanwar 2012; Susarla et al. 2012). In contrast to other platforms, TikTok ignores users' peer network, but focuses solely on users' platform behaviour for its algorithmic driven content curation. For this reason, the importance of the content creator is elevated as a vital element to increase user engagement and render the platform interesting to brand sponsorships. Through various mechanics, such as the Community Guidelines, the algorithm and the Creator Fund, TikTok moderates and impacts content and user interaction to a greater extent than other platforms (Lin 2020). At the same time, brands excerpt their influence on content creator through sponsored engagements. This paper therefore seeks to tighten the current research gap with regards to platform and brand impacts on content creator on TikTok. It seeks to provide insights, if and to which extent the content sovereignty of TikTok content creator is impacted by either the platform or brands. Therefore, this paper focuses on economically driven content creator to compare the potential direct and indirect behavioural altercation effect on their content sovereignty. As such, this paper seeks to further stimulate discourse about creator' content sovereignty within the larger framework of matchmaking platforms and persuasive technology applications in social media.

2 Methodology

Based on the prior research conducted in this field, the following research question has been formed, which will be answered through a sequential research method, building upon qualitative interviews with TikTok content creator: to which extent, if at all, is the content sovereignty of TikTok creator impacted by either platform mechanics, or brand sponsorship demands? This research question has been materialised through an extensive literature review, followed by series of qualitative interviews with TikTok content creator. The work of (Thomas et al. 2019) has been used to construct supporting questionnaire items and scaling to measure the perceived level of influence and persuasion exerted on content creator.

3 Literature Review

Due to TikTok's young age within the social media landscape and thus the missing large scale research coverage, particularly in critical areas, a rigorous literature review has been conducted to account published academic works, but also practitioner reports. Table 1 provides an overview of applies search parameters. Each search was full-text, time-restricted from 2017 to 2020 and using the following keywords.

Google search results have been further restricted by including the "content creator" operand, resulting in 155 findings. The only research identified within the scope of this paper is a conference presentation (Rach 2020), which hypothesizes the impact of TikTok platform mechanics on economically driven content creator. All other streams of research focus primarily on influencer effects, marketing and branding, TikTok's growth, or privacy and censorship issues. Since these were irrelevant for this study, they

Table 1. Literature Review Search Criteria

Database	Search Criteria (2017–2020)		
	TikTok	TikTok + content	TikTok + creator
EBSCO Host	2'108	143	54
Google Scholar	7'430	5'040	1'170
ScienceDirect	116	84	16

are not further discussed. The paper of Rach (2020) provided first evidence of subtle behavior altercation impact through the platform's algorithm and abrupt behavior altercation impact through platform mechanics, such as the enforcement of TikTok's community guidelines (Bandy and Diakopoulos 2020). It assumed, that TikTok's monetization objectives determine the behavior altercation impact the platform exercises on its content creator. However, it ignored to weigh these impacts against the second potential altercation force, brand sponsorships. In summary, based on the conducted literature review, a research gap to understand the behavior and behavioral impacts on content creator has been confirmed.

4 Qualitative Interviews

To conduct qualitative interviews, content creators with active brand sponsorships were first recruited via a network sampling technique in dedicated creator groups on LinkedIn, Facebook and various online forums. Network sampling has been proven effective in studies relating to the recruitment of social media users (Heckathorn and Cameron 2017). To qualify for the study, at least 2 different brand sponsored posts had to be realised. Further, creator had to have at least 1 million followers on the platform. This number was set so to avoid opportunistic content creator and only focus on creator with a high level of platform involvement (Narassiguin and Sargent 2019). To restrict cultural influences, only content creator in Europe and North America were targeted. Since the above failed to provide the necessary sample based on the set filter criteria, a manual sampling was initiated. Content creator fitting the above criteria were identified using TikTok's Creator Marketplace feature and subsequently contacted via in-app messaging, E-Mail, or through their linked Instagram account. Through this, a total of 125 content creators were contacted. 36 agreed to participate in the study, a further 13 were eliminated through either self-selected no-show, or language barriers. All interviews were conducted via videoconferencing and kept at 20 min, following a pre-set interview structure. Table 2 provides an overview of interviewed content creator.

65% of interviewees were based in the US, 9% in Canada and the rest in Europe.

5 Results

Main results are summarized in Table 3. Based on the conducted interviews, 87% of content creator acknowledged to have been impacted by algorithmic changes, or other

Table 2. Interview list

#	Follower count in million	Gender	Age range	Content focus
1	8	F	15–19	Dance
2	5	F	20–29	Storytelling
3	4	F	15–19	Entertainment
4	4	F	15–19	Dance
5	4	M	30–39	Stories
6	4	F	15–19	Dance
7	3	F	15–19	Dance
8	3	F	20–29	Tutorials
9	3	F	20–29	Entertainment
10	2	M	20–29	Stories
11	2	M	30–39	Learning with TikTok
12	2	F	15–19	Dance
13	2	M	20–29	Dance
14	2	F	20–29	Entertainment
15	2	F	20–29	Singing
16	2	M	20–29	Car related
17	2	F	20–29	Entertainment
18	1	M	15–19	Storytelling
19	1	F	15–19	Dance
20	1	F	30–39	Cooking
21	1	F	15–29	Dancing
22	1	M	20–29	Car related
23	1	F	15–19	Dance

indirect platform impacts. About 22% reported to have been directly impacted by platform induced penalties due to community guideline violations. To contrast, the study of Rach (2020) found over 80% impacts by algorithmic changes and 40% impact by other platform mechanics. Thus, this study found a much higher creator focus on the algorithm, but lower dependency on other platform mechanics. Creator seemed aware of community guidelines and appeared very savvy in avoiding any potential violation or flagging of their content. With the increasing following of a creator, risk mitigation measures to avoid any platform interreference seemed to positively correlate. Thus, the larger the account's following and the higher the impact of the platform on the creator's income structure, the more sensitive and aware creator appeared of the potential harm a guideline

violation could have on their account's monetization potential. All interviewed content creator provided hints of adjusting their personal platform behaviour to maximize user views and engagement. This finding extends the previous study of Rach (2020), which demonstrated a behavioural algorithm driven impact on posting frequencies.

Table 3. Results summary

Impact dimension	TikTok	Brands
Perceived direct impact	22%	NA
Perceived indirect impact	87%	30%
Monetization impact (direct)	43%	73%
Monetization impact (indirect)	100%	40%
Reason to content adjust	100%	22%

To contrast, the impact of brands on creator' content sovereignty proved less significant. Over 60% of content creator did not adjust their content style or creative to the demands of brands. The rational voiced was that overall account reach and relevancy was more valuable for further monetization opportunities than singular sponsored posts. Furthermore, creator stated to know the platform and their audiences' taste better than sponsoring brands. As such brands often rely upon creator's advice and content suggestion for their sponsored engagements. However, almost 22% admitted having adjusted to the liking of sponsored brands. Particularly smaller accounts seemed more prone to any form of influence, both platform and brand related.

Further noteworthy is the perceived monetization impact of the platform and that of brands. Since TikTok creator can receive three streams of monetization, direct brand monetization, TikTok creator fund monetization and marketplace influencer deals, the indirect monetization impact of TikTok was rated much higher and much more influential by content creators. This included any adverse algorithmic effect on an account's reach. To contrast, the direct monetization impact of brands was rated higher to the current sponsorship potential, but much lower in overall impact on a creator's content sovereignty.

6   Discussion of Findings

Whilst this study provided some interesting findings, any further discussion has to be both contextualized and demand empirical verification. First, the direct monetization through brand sponsorships has a lesser effect on creators' content sovereignty than the platform itself. Considering that TikTok operates its own creators' marketplace (Collie and Wilson-Barnao 2020) and stricter content moderation, its influence is perceived higher than that of any brand relationships. A lose interpretation of findings might suggest a platform dependency by creator, but a sponsorship interdependency. Thus, the skewedness of perceived dependency leans towards TikTok.

Contrasting influencer behavior on other platforms, some similarities can be noted, particularly by studies done on influencers on Instagram and their exhibited behavior towards brands. Account reach is understood as a long-term value, which generally supersedes short-term monetization opportunities. This correlates also with increase of account size as measured by the number of followers. Creator seem to act more tactical with an increase in account followership. However, with an increasing dependency on brand deals as a source of personal income, this content sovereignty protecting behavior seemed to take a turn. Unfortunately, the sample of income dependent accounts was too small to contrast these findings to existing Instagram studies in order to understand if account growth stimulates a tipping point in content behavior (Breves et al. 2019; Lou and Yuan 2019). Personal observations of the top 50 creator accounts by followers seemed to provide confirming evidence, with sponsored posts appearing scripted and not blending into the overall content structure of observed accounts.

To stimulate further research and to summarize the findings of this qualitative study on the content sovereignty of TikTok creator, the following conceptual model, as seen in Fig. 1, has been proposed as a result of this study's findings.
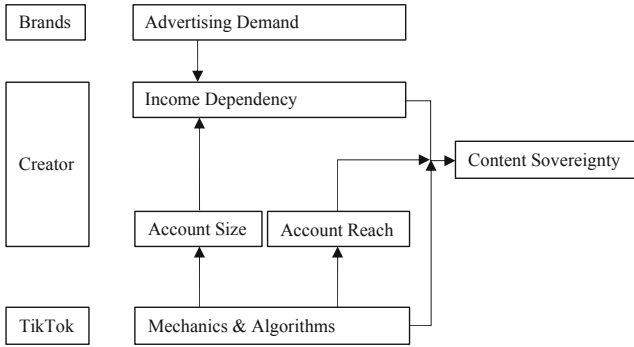

Fig. 1. Conceptual Model of Creator Content Sovereignty

7   Conclusion

This paper somewhat confirmed and validated the pre-dating study by Rach (2020) about the behavioral altercation impact of the TikTok platform on content creator. It further highlighted, that the influence of the TikTok platform on the content sovereignty of its content creator outweighs the impact monetization brand partners have. Whilst this might not seem harmful, it poses a tremendous change to the influencer-marketplace dynamic and highlights the potential level of behavioral impact of the TikTok platform. For brands seeking to invest in sponsored posts and for creator alike, it is vital to understand impacting forces on their relational construct and return expectations. It raises questions about the potential impact the platform could have creator brand posting vs. Platform native forms of advertising. Since a competitive platform already announced to guarantee views on its advertising products, the importance and relevance of creator to brands will be put to question.

8 Limitations and Further Research

Although all possible efforts have been undertaken to quality control the outcome of this study, some limitations have to be noted. First, this paper's research was built upon a qualitative research method to propose a conceptual model for further validation. Findings might thus not be representative and require substantial empirical validation. Further, the interview selection, although objectivized through selection criteria, did not follow a random selection method and thus holds the danger of a selection bias. At the time of research, no means was discovered to avoid a selection bias for the very specific scope of this paper. Lastly, since qualitative interviews were conducted, although following a preset structure, an operational interview bias cannot be excluded.

Nevertheless, the findings of this research are grounds for further quantitative research to validate the formed conceptual model empirically. Furthermore, the scope of this paper can be expanded to other social media platforms to understand the potential impact of platforms and brands on the behaviour and therefore content sovereignty of its creator. Particularly since younger generations strive to become content creator, it is vital to understand behavioural impacts to propose regulatory, educational, or platform monitoring processes, to neutralize behavioural altercation effects resulting from potentially manipulative influences. Finally, influencers are perceived as the current solution to the constant decrease of advertising effectiveness. Thus, if influencers adjust their content behaviour to the objective conformity of a platform and or the liking of brands, their level of influence might decrease due to the increasing advertising perception and gradual loss of authenticity. Measuring this effect could have a big impact on the marketing practitioners and their future budget planning towards native forms of advertising, the planning of organic platform interaction, or creator engagements.

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