

Historical Analogies and Historical Consciousness: User-Generated History Lessons on TikTok



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Not a summer passes by or social media use by the younger generation creates a stir over issues related to historical memory. In August 2020, the video-sharing platform *TikTok* made international headlines for hosting a trend that saw users playacting Holocaust victims. In so-called point-of-view (POV) videos, TikTokers dressed up as Holocaust victims, replete with stage makeup that imitates burns or bruises, explained to viewers how they died in the Nazi death camps—often to Bruno Mars’s *Locked Out of Heaven* as background music. The videos had thousands of views, while some had more than a hundred thousand likes. In the (social) media outrage that unfolded critics were quick to denounce TikTokers for abusing the Holocaust’s shock value for quickly gaining likes and followers, and accused them of a lack of historical consciousness. In response to the coverage and criticism, most TikTokers removed their Holocaust POV videos, and some justified their actions by stressing their intention to educate and ‘spread awareness’ of the Holocaust (Froio, 2020). The Auschwitz Memorial Museum called the trend ‘hurtful & offensive’ and warned for the trivialization of history but recognized the genuine intentions of some creators who used the ‘symbolic language familiar to them’ to express memories (Auschwitz Memorial, 2020). The museum acknowledged the importance of personal stories to educate and commemorate but calls on to refrain from roleplaying, as it puts oneself in the victim’s position. Stressing that ‘not every social media activity can commemorate the Holocaust,’ the museum calls on educators to teach not only the facts right, but also to teach young people to commemorate in respectful ways.

The TikTok case is representative of contemporary educational challenges connected to young people’s social media use. At the same time, the moral discussion overshadows the study of how TikTok’s platform design allows for new, creative, forms of historical representation and even education. The popularity of history videos on the platform is not to be underestimated, nor is the creativity of its makers

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(Noor, 2019). This chapter will study how the platform's design and its utilization affect the ways TikTokers represent the past in user-generated history TikToks. Special attention will be paid to historical analogies, as history TikToks display significant use of analogical reasoning. First, I will provide a theoretical discussion of how historical analogies are conceptualized in historical theory and history education research; second, I will discuss the relationship between historical analogies and historical consciousness; third, I will analyze the use of historical analogies in relationship to TikTok's platform affordances. This research is based on a dataset of 5100 history TikToks, derived from the hashtags #historytiktok, #historylesson, and #historymeme, and uses a mixed-methods approach combining an explorative quantitative analysis with a qualitative content analysis.

Historical Analogies

In general terms, analogical reasoning transfers or maps information from a particular subject (called the base or source) to another (called the target). More specifically they are inferences that unlike deductive or inductive arguments do not include a general premise, but relate two particulars. Because of this, Fischer (1970) stresses in his classic *Historians' Fallacies* that analogies should not be understood as inferences that can provide explanations. Rather than explaining the causes, consequences, or development of historical occurrences, they help *discovering* possible explanations by highlighting similarities. A basic analogy, therefore, has the following logical form: 'A resembles B in respect to the possession of the property X. A also possesses the property Y. Therefore, it is inferred that B also possesses the property Y' (Fischer, 1970, p. 258). In short: $AX : BX :: AY : BY$, in which A is the base and B is the target, X is the known property or characteristic, and Y is the unknown property of B that is being established through analogical inference.

Fischer stresses that analogies are a central part of the historian's repertoire for two main reasons: firstly they stimulate creative thought and can be useful to heuristically identify patterns, developments, and situations, and, secondly, they are crucial for communicating and teaching history, as they can clarify historical situations and developments to otherwise uninformed audiences by highlighting similarities to situations they know. In both instances, historical analogies can become problematic when people are not aware of the analogy's limits. First, analogies assume the existence of dissimilarities, because similarities are only drawn between a limited number of variables. Assuming past and present developments to be fully identical would mean confusing the concept of analogy with that of identity. This implies that, when used as an argument, analogies require additional proof—either in the form of empirical evidence that the unknown property Y exists in both cases, or in the form of a deductive argument about the coexistence of X and Y. Second, arguments are used to support explanation, they may become problematic when they 'persuade without proof, [...] indoctrinate without understanding, or [...] settle an empirical question without empirical evidence' (Fischer, 1970, p. 259). In such cases, they achieve the

opposite of understanding by failing to take contextual differences between past and present into account.

It is important to emphasize that the formula $AX : BX :: AY : BY$ does not define whether A (the base) is a historical occurrence, and B (the target) refers to the present—or the other way around, or whether A and B are both historical references. Van Straaten et al. (2016) identify three possible types of historical analogy. First, the present experience can serve as a base and a historical phenomenon as a target, for example in comparing the Concordat between Mussolini and the Pope as a marriage of interests (Laffin & Wilson, 2005). Second, both source and target can be historical events: by drawing an analogy between two historical occurrences, the target can be understood in reference to the base. Third, a historical event can serve as the base and the present as a target. This type of analogy is oriented toward understanding the present through analogy with the past. This is a classical form of historical understanding but is less likely to be used in contemporary formal or informal history education contexts. This type of analogical reasoning is, however, common in contemporary political (Axelrod & Forster, 2017; Ghilani et al., 2017; Houghton, 1998; Neustadt & May, 1986) and military (Macdonald, 2000; Record, 2002) decision-making processes.

In one of the few studies focusing explicitly on historical analogies in history education, McCarthy Young and Leinhardt (1998) discuss only the first and second type. They distinguish between analogies that make direct historical comparisons and analogies that make contextual historical comparisons. Direct historical analogies compare historical events, structures or metasystems, even though one of these may be more recent. In this case, both X and Y are properties of the past. One could, for example, compare Hitler's failed invasion of Russia to Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia in 1812 (Holyoak & Thagard, 1995, p. 205). This may be illuminating, but not to students who do not possess contextual knowledge about the French invasion of Russia. In such instances, contextual historical analogies become useful in classroom contexts. Contrary to direct historical analogies, contextual historical analogies compare a historical event, structure, or metasystem with a familiar context drawn from personal or shared experience. In this case, the unknown property Y is historical, while the known property X is drawn from experience. In the context of history education, this means that teachers could leverage cross-domain analogies that do connect to the experience of students, for example by comparing—as Tolstoy did in his *War and Peace*—‘the marauding French army to a herd of cattle trampling underfoot the fodder that might have saved it from starvation’ (Holyoak & Thagard, 1995, p. 205). The difference between direct and contextual historical analogies is that ‘direct historical analogies tend to explain what something was, while contextual analogies tend to explain what something meant’ (McCarthy Young & Leinhardt, 1998, p. 171).

From the educational perspective, the logical approach put forward by Fischer (1970) does not always suffice to analyze the real-world use of analogies. McCarthy Young and Leinhardt (1998) found that most analogies they encountered in their study were ‘unmapped.’ With ‘mapping’ they refer to syncing properties (X, Y)

of a familiar concept, system or domain (the base, A) with an unfamiliar target domain (B). Unmapped analogies do not identify specific properties of base and target systems, but rather rely on general metaphors that stipulate general similarities. Unmapped analogies require additional analogical processing of base and target in which the student must identify relevant properties out of a variety of possible implied—but not explicitly stated—meanings. Most direct historical analogies McCarthy Young and Leinhardt (1998) found were mapped, while most contextual analogies were unmapped. They explain this in reference to the use of analogies in classroom settings, where direct analogies were most often phrased in the form of a question about the similarity of events, which resulted in answers and discussions in which elaborate mapping took place. Contextual analogies, on the contrary, were used to evoke the impact or context of historical events and remained unmapped as the speaker would assume the listener's familiarity with the base, even though that may not be the case. While Fischer (1970) noted the danger of this generalized way of using analogies, McCarthy Young and Leinhardt (1998) aimed at analyzing how historical analogies were used in classroom settings without preestablishing a normative understanding of 'good' versus 'bad' analogical reasoning. Yet, despite the broad use of historical analogies in education and public discourse, historians and history education scholars remain wary about them.

Historical Analogies and Historical Consciousness

One reason for this wariness is that historical analogies, by identifying similarities between past and present, appear to be in conflict with the general historicist assumption that the past is essentially different from the present, and that historical understanding involves grasping processes of change and continuity that explain how this difference has developed (Grever & Adriaansen, 2019). As modern historical consciousness increasingly saw the past as remote and past experience to be untranslatable to contemporary contexts, it became harder to draw historical analogies that assumed continuity (Thomas, 2001). Modern historical consciousness values causal explanation over analogical reasoning because that consolidates, rather than draws into question, the idea of the alterity of the past. This accounts for the reservations historians have about analogical reasoning.

A similar explanation can clarify reservations by history education scholars and history didacticians, even though they perceive historical consciousness not as a collective societal phenomenon, but on an individual level as a cognitive-epistemological category closely linked to historical thinking (Grever & Adriaansen, 2019). In a recent study, Jay and Reisman (2019, p. 99), argue that 'historical knowledge does not easily boil down to core theorems or conceptual truths that hold constant across time and place.' Because the historical discipline prescribes the 'importance of articulating disjunction and difference,' historical analogies can be valuable for opening up an understanding of historical continuity, but there is a danger in the potential suggestion of history relying on universal lawlike principles. Change, they

argue, requires a nuanced contextual understanding of the varying historical contexts in which human experience is embedded. The usefulness of historical analogies for history education, therefore, is mainly that they open up possibilities to critically discuss issues of change and continuity.

These reservations about historical analogy are quite common. Salevouris and Furay (2016, p. 7) disregard historical analogies altogether and emphasize that analogies assume a structural likeness in historical processes and result in “cherry-picking” historical episodes in order to bolster a predetermined conclusion.’ The problem is that such arguments misapprehend historical analogy. Salevouris and Furay (2016) confuse historical analogies with a specific, fallacious, use of analogy, by claiming that analogies assume a structural likeness. Fischer (1970, p. 247) calls this assumption a fallacy of perfect analogy—it fails to see that ‘analogy, by its very nature, is a similarity between two or more things which are in other respects unlike.’ As a consequence, it confuses analogy with identity.

Jay and Reisman’s (2019) position is more nuanced and they rightly state that historical analogies do not identify immutable laws, and make a similar point as Fischer when stating that assuming that similarities between specific properties of historical particulars stand for universal historical laws would not only be erroneous, but also dangerous. Yet, they do associate historical continuity with analogical similarity and conclude that analogies fail to account for change—hence they conclude that the educational value of historical analogies would be to use analogies merely as entry points into critically discussing continuity and change, also by assessing the validity of the accuracy of the analogy itself. However, analogies do reference entire processes of continuity and change, they stipulate similarities between two different phenomena on a limited number of properties. Relating analogies to processes of continuity and change can, however, be done in the type of ‘mapping’ exercises that McCarthy Young and Leinhardt (1998) discuss.

Generally, most scholars will agree with Fischer’s (1970, p. 259) conclusion that historical analogies can be fruitful when the past is used to illuminate the present, but that the reverse procedure is ‘dangerous to both logic and empiricism.’ History educators, of course, aim primarily for the reverse procedure and use analogies to help students understand the past. Even those who plead for a reappraisal of using historical analogies to better understand the present do so while warning for ‘bad history,’ overgeneralization, and for abusing analogies to affirm assumptions. Tosh (2019, p. 70), for example, argues for an engagement with historical analogy because ‘analogical thinking is too prevalent for historians to ignore, and too mixed in its outcomes for them to reject it out of hand.’

The purpose of this chapter is not to come to a conclusion about the values and pitfalls of historical analogies for historical understanding, but it aims to reinvigorate the debate by analyzing the prevalent use of historical analogies in contemporary digital culture, specifically on one of the most popular social media platforms of the moment: TikTok. Tosh is right that analogical thinking is too prevalent to ignore, and its contemporary prevalence is displayed online. But in order to understand how historical analogies are configured on social media we first have to establish an

understanding of how social media platforms facilitate the creation of (historical) representation through their technological affordances.

TikTok's Affordances and Historical Representation

Broadly defined, the concept 'affordances' refers to 'what material artifacts such as media technologies allow people to do' (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 3). Social media platforms leverage technologies that allow people to take certain actions, thus affordances refer to the potential actions that can be taken given the technology. Scholars agree that affordances are not simply provided by the platform's design, but that they emerge from the interplay between a technology's design and how users intend to use it (Evans et al., 2017). They integrate both the possible actions that platforms allow users to take, and how users perceive these possibilities (Majchrzak et al., 2013, p. 23). It has also been emphasized that while affordances open up representational possibilities, they also put up limits and constraints. Constraints should, however, not be seen as the negation of affordances, but as an intrinsic part of what constitutes the dynamics of what allows activities to take place (Cammaerts, 2015, p. 96).

This section relies on a dataset of history-related TikToks created by retrieving the most recently available public posts of three popular history-oriented hashtags: #historytiktok, #historymemes, #historylesson from TikTok's API as of February 5, 2021. These hashtags have been selected based on popularity, and whether they were used to tag posts that actually reflect on the past. Other popular hashtags such as #history or #historybuff proved to be too 'contaminated' with non-history related content to be useful for this analysis. This resulted in an initial sample of 5453 unique posts for the three hashtags combined. Subsequently, language detection was applied (Joulin, Grave, Bojanowski, Douze et al., 2016; Joulin, Grave, Bojanowski, & Mikolov, 2016), and only English-language videos were retained. This resulted in a dataset of 5100 TikToks created by 1330 individual TikTokers.

In their study on the relationship between TikTok's affordances and political communication on the platform, Guinaudeau et al. (2020) state that what makes TikTok unique among social media platforms is that it provides a synthesis of four main trends in social media. First, it has a feed that displays many distinct pieces of content per minute; second, it leverages both visual and verbal information which increases the information density and the capacity to communicate emotions; third, it has a very advanced algorithmic recommendation system; fourth, it has a mobile-only interface that is tailored to take advantage of a smartphone's user-facing camera. It is out of these technological affordances that Guinaudeau et al. (2020) explain TikTok's success: the centrality of the main feed, the 'For You Page,' makes follower count less important to reach an audience than in traditional social media, specifically YouTube, to which they compare their findings. This results in more variation in viewership and also makes more videos go viral faster. The shortness of videos makes that TikTok

videos generally get more views than videos on other platforms. Users who leave comments are also more likely to produce videos themselves compared to YouTube.

Another study on political communication on TikTok by Serrano et al. (2020) emphasize the performative character of the platform. TikTok's constraints make it inconvenient to share external information, like URLs or news articles. Instead, 'every TikTok user is a performer who externalizes personal political opinion via an audiovisual act, with political communication becoming a far more interactive experience than on YouTube or Instagram.' Furthermore, Serrano et al. also conclude that the design of the platform is geared toward producing viral videos, despite the fact that it is also possible to create private videos only visible to friends. This is confirmed by Bhandari and Bimo (2020), who state that contrary to traditional social networking platforms, where users manage their identity through engagement with networks of friends and followers, TikTok's design encourages interaction through either the algorithm, which could assist in creating virality by landing the video on users' For You Pages, or through their own content and self-presentation. The *New Yorker* journalist Jia Tolentino (2019) calls TikTok an 'enormous meme factory' for this reason: the social network isn't social because it builds on offline social networks, but because it is geared toward interaction by having users create content that is 'shared, replicated, and built upon.'

We have already seen in the introduction how the algorithm-orientedness and the desire to land on the For You Page affects TikTokers' actions, choice of topics, and use of hashtags. Although the inner workings of TikTok's algorithm are subject to speculation, suggestions to increase virality include using trending hashtags and sound bites, recording in high definition, having your post incite user engagement, and collaborating with other TikTokers (McGlew, 2020). It makes sense to hypothesize that TikTok's affordances and constraints affect historical representation as well, as both the technical and the perceived affordances of the platform, such as beliefs about how the algorithm works, directly affect user behavior and the content of their videos.

This is confirmed by looking at the use of hashtags in the dataset. Hashtags such as #fyp, #foryou, and #foryoupage feature in the top-10 most frequently used hashtags, featuring, respectively, 1974, 1397, and 845 times, confirming an algorithm-oriented use of hashtags. The use of #xyzbca (featured 168 times) also confirms this, as the hashtag #xyzbca, together with the variation #xyzcba, became popular because of rumors that it would somehow increase the chances to land on the For You Page (Sommer, 2020)—chances which could actually increase as more people use it, but this remains subject of speculation. In any case, this use of hashtags adds a dimension to the second function hashtags have on TikTok, namely as an index to the content—this use of hashtags is similar to other platforms such as Instagram (Adriaansen, 2020, 2021). The assumption that hashtags are used as an index underlies the choice to collect data focusing on the hashtags #historytiktok, #historymemes, and #historylesson, as hashtags provide a prime way of searching the platform for specific posts. The use of hashtags is also related to another affordance, namely 'challenges.' Challenges invite TikTokers to participate in creating viral content using similar

formats, challenging TikTokers to do or perform something, generally to the backdrop of the same sound fragment, and often with the use of overlay text. They rely on either a specific choreographic structure or on a specific daunting task that TikTokers replicate. Some history TikTokers in the dataset tap into—non-history related—viral challenges and connect them to their historical topics of interest. The ‘How I Walk Challenge,’ for example, features TikTokers performing different kinds of ‘walks’ displaying how they react to walking by different people or different places. The TikToks display a text similar to: ‘How I walk when _____,’ with the blanks filled in differently given the different situations. While TikTokers generally perform how they walk past friends, their crush, or their boss, @confusedprairiegirl (2019) uses the challenge to represent walking on the Oregon trail—starting optimistically; experiencing hunger; having to ‘kill and eat jebediah’; and succumbing to dysentery. The post manages to represent the hardships of life on the Oregon Trail, while at the same time providing a funny and mocking contrast with the overly stylized walks of other, non-history-oriented, contributions to the challenge.

Challenges generally rely on the reuse of the same sound bite, as do viral trends on TikTok in general. The pivotal role sounds play on TikTok needs to be understood from the fact that the platform was originally made for creating dance and lip-syncing videos. For this purpose, a sounds library was created as a core affordance, which allows users to use custom, user-added, or commercial audio clips as the soundtrack of their videos. The use of sounds also affects users’ choices and options in representing the past—partly because viral sounds encountered in other TikToks may inspire the creation of new content, but also because reusing popular sounds may positively affect being algorithmically boosted on the platform. Sounds that go viral offer templates for memes that history TikTokers subsequently apply to historical contexts.

When analyzing the use of sounds in history TikToks in the sample, it becomes clear that sounds are used in two ways. First, as background music to a video recording of a user recounting a historical narrative. For this purpose, light music fragments, including fragments from the Summer Presto from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*, Glenn Miller’s *Moonlight Serenade*, and Stephen Flaherty’s *Once Upon a December*, elicit a dreamy mood with a hint of times past. These sounds are not particularly related to the content of the representation and are background music to narratives about varying topics such as the history of cannibalism in Fiji (@megafrogirl, 2020), patriotism in Woodie Guthrie’s music (@honeynutt.cheerios, 2020), and the history of astrology (@cailleachsdaughter, 2021).

Second, sounds are used to structure a TikTok’s performance in a video. In these cases, the audio functions as either the backdrop to or narrative framework of a staged performance, with no new voice recording present. Here, sound is a core aspect of the representation, which would be meaningless without it. @nosebled (2020, February 11), for example, uses the audio of Blink 182’s song *First Date*, syncing the song’s chorus—‘Let’s go; Don’t wait; This night’s almost over; Honest; Let’s make; This night last forever; Forever and ever; Let’s make this last forever; Forever and ever; Let’s make this last forever’—with text that narrates the Bolshevik seizure of power over Russia, its apparent success of industrial growth, while struggling with

famine, the 1980s oil glut, and finally ending in the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Syncing the song’s chorus with the overlay text, combined with the content creator’s self-recorded video in which she displays initial hopeful, but increasingly desperate gestures, paints the picture of the Soviet Union as a project that was built on dreams, hopes, and illusions, and carried on until the very end with increasingly desperate attempts of self-reassurance. By doing so @nosebled basically draws a historical analogy between the contents of the song and Soviet Russia. We will dig deeper into this type of analogical reasoning below.

For now, it is important to also highlight the constraints concerning content creation on TikTok, as these allow also and disallow specific forms of historical representation—next to the affordances. The most important constraint of TikTok is the video segment limit. In January 2021, the initial limit was 15 seconds of recorded video, with the added ability to record or upload clips up to 60 seconds. The 15-seconds limit was the original limit for purposes of lip-syncing and dancing, while the 60-seconds limit was added in later updates and requires additional actions to realize. When looking at the frequency distribution of video lengths in Fig. 1, we can clearly see the split at 15 seconds. When recording longer videos, TikTokers generally use the maximum available time. The reasons why correlates with the distribution of user-recorded, original, audio versus non-original audio (reused sounds). Strikingly the vast majority of short videos up to 15 seconds reuse sounds from the sounds library, while longer videos use user-recorded or uploaded audio.

The video length restrictions make that history TikToks can be generally divided into two types. First, narrative-centered videos that use original, recorded audio, which are often longer than the 15-seconds segment limit and address the viewer as its audience. In this first category, the user who posted the video is presenting a narrative about certain aspects of the past. The second type of video does not

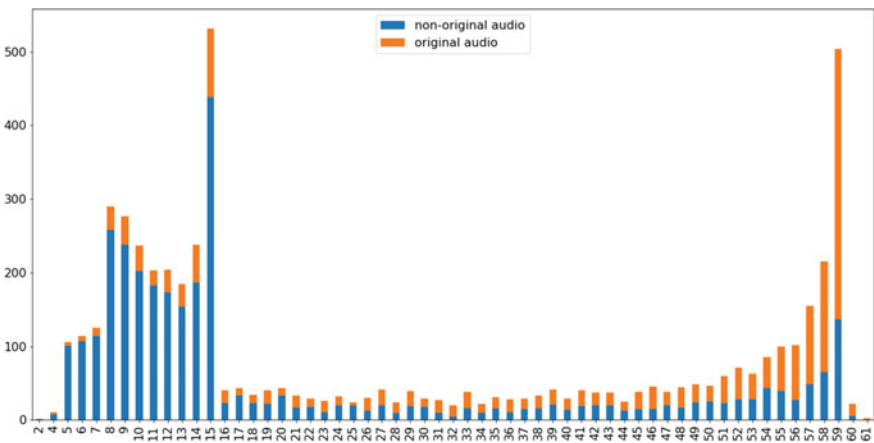


Fig. 1 Number of posts per second of video duration for a sample of 5100 TikTok videos with hashtag #historytiktok, #historymemes, and #historylesson. The colors represent the percentage of videos with original user-generated audio and non-original audio reused from other sources

exceed the 15-seconds limit and typically uses audio from the sounds library, and often invokes a POV-like style or choreographed performance in the video. It is in this second category where historical analogies are prominent. The reason why is straightforward: the audio clips from the sounds library are generally not historical, but contemporary audio fragments—such as fragments of record music or audio from movie scenes or viral videos. This makes history TikTokers to resort to text overlays or the recorded video to include explicit historical references. Because the audio is contemporary, the contrast between present and past that invites for historical analogical reasoning is given by default in these 15-seconds TikToks. By sequencing non-historical audio with enacted historical scenes or real historical footage, these TikToks try to explain history through analogy between the video and audio contents. For this reason, the second part of my analysis will zoom in on a subset of the sample, namely videos of 15 seconds or less with no self-recorded audio ($n = 2162$). By means of a qualitative analysis of several TikToks I will explain the effect of TikTok's platform affordances on analogical reasoning and historical representation.

Historical Analogy on TikTok

To explore the contents of these TikToks, topic modeling has been applied on the combined caption and 'sticker' text overlays of history TikToks with a maximum duration of 15 seconds, and a minimum total word count of 8 ($n = 1587$) to ensure semantic coherence in the combined texts. These texts have been preprocessed, removing hashtags to avoid the prevalence of the #historytiktok, #historymemes, and #historylesson hashtags affecting the topic model. Using the Python module BERTopic (Grootendorst, 2020), sentence embeddings were retrieved and subsequently clustered using the default settings. This resulted in the identification of 21 topics, with a minimum topic size of 10 TikToks. 696 TikToks (44%) have not been assigned to a topic, as their probability to belong to a cluster did not reach the threshold value.

Table 1 displays the identified topics, together with the four most important words in the topic, as well as a manually created topic description. It provides a good insight into the type of topics used in historical analogies on TikTok. Only three topics—2, 8, and 13—bear no reference to the historical subjects that are represented. Topic 2 is interesting because the posts on this topic have captions or sticker texts that reflect upon school history or learning from the past. The captions invite users to comment by asking what history lessons they remember most (@angelcorado2, 2019), give reasons for their interest in the represented topic (@nosebled 2020), or reflect upon the state of history education. At the same time, nine posts on this topic reflect on the historical consequences of Adolf Hitler's rejection from art school; the higher probability of belonging to this cluster can be explained through the fact that these posts generally do not mention Hitler by name. Subsequently, Topic 3 consists of metacommentary upon the video, for example, the caption 'This sound was too perfect not to make this 😊' accompanying a TikTok that combines a sound bite

from L'Trimm's 1998 song *Cars with the Boom* with references to the 1998 Real IRA's Omagh bombing (@bttec_noel_fielding, 2020). Topic 13 contains captions and sticker texts that reflect upon the feelings and emotions of the poster, for example, apologies for the quality of the TikTok because of laziness or being tired.

The other topics provide a clear indication of the main historical interests TikTokers leverage for short posts and analogies. The topics themselves display an Anglo-American historical orientation related to the fact that only English-language TikToks were processed. When creating historical analogies, TikTokers have to translate historical contexts to a situation with clearly identifiable agents. As the main concepts of the topics indicate, these agents are mostly natural persons or states. In the sample, these generally function as the target in historical analogies. Germany, Henry VIII, Stalin, Cleopatra, and the Ottoman Empire all feature as agents whose behavior or motivations related to a specific historical event are clarified in juxtaposition with an analogous sound fragment. Some topics, like topic 3, 10, 17, and 20 are explicitly related to the antics of historical individuals, which can relatively

Table 1 Results of topic modeling combined caption and sticker texts of short history TikToks ($n = 1587$, 696 posts have not been assigned to a topic)

Topic	Count	Most important words	Topic description
1	196	germany, german, war, soldiers	Second World War
2	96	history, school, my, art	Learning history, historical interests
3	73	anne, henry, viii, queen	Tudor History
4	67	stalin, russia, soviet, ussr	Soviet and Cold War history
5	56	japan, pearl, flag, japanese	Pacific War
6	52	british, britain, empire, kingdom	British imperialism
7	34	oregon, trail, donner, party	Settling and pioneering
8	33	videos, this, my, me	Metacomments on the video
9	29	kennedy, cia, jfk, oswald	Political assassinations, mainly JFK
10	28	roosevelt, president, nixon, taft	US Presidents
11	28	roman, empire, romans, rome	Roman history
12	28	french, france, revolution, louis	French Revolution
13	25	im, feel, trend, slowly	Feelings and intentions of the poster
14	25	jefferson, rights, constitution, states	US constitution and civil rights
15	22	ottoman, islamic, empire, balkan	Ottoman and Central Asian history
16	22	greek, socrates, trojans, zeus	Ancient Greece
17	14	rasputin, wine, jar, poisoned	Rasputin
18	13	labor, industrial, poor, wages	Industrialization
19	13	women, edith, goodnight, joan	Great women
20	13	caesar, julius, cleopatra, egypt	Julius Caesar
21	13	mexico, spain, chile, nicaragua	Latin American history
22	11	she, her, murders, brutal	Murder and genocide

easily be emplotted in videos that feature TikTokers representing these individuals while text stickers clarify which individuals they represent. Other topics, such as 1, 5, 6, 11, 15, and 21, use featured nation states and empires as actors, while in some topics even more abstract ‘actors’—such as ideologies—are displayed, as is the case with communism in topic 4. Narrative emplotment for these more abstract and multi-layered entities works similarly to representing natural persons, as they are emplotted as quasi-characters (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 181), also enacted by individual TikTokers in the videos, that act or think to the likelihood of individual persons. This reduction of complexity may appear problematic, but is also a necessity as an analogy by definition only applies to a limited number of characteristics.

The multimodal character of TikTok—the fact that it allows combining several semiotic modes such as video, text, and audio—also problematizes analogical reasoning in several respects. First, base and target are presented simultaneously in history TikToks. This means that a strict logical understanding of historical analogies on the platform could be helpful in an abstract sense, but cannot contribute to our understanding of how analogical *reasoning* works in these cases. When John Tosh (2019, p. 57) claims that ‘the whole point of an analogy is that it notes similarities in things which in other respects are unlike,’ because analogical reasoning ‘does not rest on a presumption of complete congruence or repetition,’ he not only rightly challenges problematic presumptions of scholars about historical analogies, but also identifies an aspect of analogical reasoning that history TikTokers leverage in order to maximize ‘memetic’ quality of their posts: the fact that the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated topics can be seriously funny, without being meaningless. A simultaneous juxtaposition of base and target in a history TikTok contributes to the joke because it allows bringing base and target together in a punchline, or because it facilitates a skit that highlights the differences between base and target for humorous purposes, with the analogy keeping the skit together.

To illustrate this, let us study a post captioned ‘There’s just rocks there guys’ by @sigmunclarg (2020), which represents the US space program’s desire to go to the moon as a meaningless effort to outpace Soviet Russia in the Space Race. @sigmunclarg is able to bring this message across by staging a mock interview between the world and JFK, with himself playing both roles in the video and with projected texts as the question–answer pairs. The meaning of the interview is established by the sound chosen for the video, which is a fragment from a viral video of a 2015 interview with a customer of the Supreme streetwear store, who queued for ten hours in order to be able to buy a ridiculously expensive branded crowbar (Bigiron, 2017). Supreme is known for its limited releases and special collections, and the video shows the customer commenting upon the fact that the brand is so powerful that it made him buy a crowbar. The audio used for the TikTok features the customer ridiculing his own meaningless purchase (see Table 2).

Here the Supreme store situation functions as the base and the US space program as a target. At first sight, it would be ridiculous to draw a serious comparison between these two subjects, which is also what makes the post funny. After all, the viewers often already know the sound from other, unrelated memes. But the analogy is

Table 2 @sigmunclarg’s ‘There’s just rocks there guys TikTok’

Seconds	Text	Video	Audio
0–2	‘The World: “Why does everyone want to go to the moon?”’	@sigmunclarg playing an interviewer, interviewing JFK	Interviewer: ‘Why does everyone want a crowbar?’
2–4	‘JFK: “Cuz it’s the f***ing moon, are you f***in’ serious?”’	@sigmunclarg answering as JFK	Interviewee: ‘Cuz it’s a fucking crowbar! Are you fucking serious?’
4–5	‘What are you gonna do there?’	@sigmunclarg as interviewer	Interviewer: ‘What are you going to do with it?’
5–10	‘F***in’ nothing, but we’re gonna beat the USSR’	@sigmunclarg as JFK	Interviewee: ‘Fucking nothing, but I’m gonna own a fucking crowbar now, so that’s the fucking shit!’
10–13	‘So you spent \$25B + to go to the moon?’	@sigmunclarg as interviewer	Interviewer: ‘So you’ve been waiting 10 hours for a crowbar that says Supreme’
13–15	‘Yeah. And?’	@sigmunclarg as JFK	Interviewee: ‘Ah I didn’t even know it said Supreme – I just want a fucking crowbar’

not meaningless. It pinpoints how great expenses are made for purposes that are practically futile, but driven by a blind desire for status.

Second, the utilization of three semiotic modes—sounds, text, and video—also allows for the configuration of what we could call ‘double’ analogies—analogs that compare three things and draw to analogies. Now, this is not a common procedure on TikTok, as generally, two modes complement each other, so that the distinction between one base and one target is upheld, but the utilization of three modes does allow for each mode to refer to a different subject. To illustrate this, we will look at a post by @airisusannn (2020) captioned ‘#greenscreen I KNOW I’M NOT THE ONLY ONE #fyp #onlineclass #meme #history #historymemes #historybuff #apworld.’ In the post, @airisusannn uses TikTok’s ‘greenscreen’ effect, which lets users replace the video background. In this case, she displays two historical cartoons often used in history classes about late nineteenth-century Western imperialism (see Table 3 and Images 1). The accompanying sound comes from a viral video in which English-speaking Pakistani children pledge loyalty to their nation during a school event in 2011 (Pakistani Kids Pledge Loyalty, 2020). It features the reaction of the school principal to a boy pledging to put an end to drone raids on Pakistan when he grows up (MEME LORD 007, 2020).

Images:

Table 3 Scenes of @airisusannn's '#greenscreen I KNOW I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE' TikTok

Seconds	Text	Video	Audio
0–4	'World history teachers when they see these cartoons':	Background: 1882 American cartoon 'The Devilfish in Egyptian Waters' depicts John Bull (England) as the octopus of imperialism grabbing land on every continent Foreground: TikToker lip-syncing the audio, pointing toward the cartoon	'Ooh, this is a strong message'
4–8	'World history teachers when they see these cartoons':	Background: 1898 French cartoon 'China - The Cake of Kings... And of Emperors,' depicting European monarchs slicing up China Foreground: TikToker lip-syncing the audio	'No one will have courage to undermine the sovereignty of our country'

1. Henri Meyer, 'En Chine - La gâteau des Rois et ... des Empereurs' (China - the cake of kings ... and emperors), *Le Petit Journal. Supplément Illustré* January 16, 1898.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

In the video, @airisusann is lip-syncing the principal with the cartoons in the background, but additionally, a text sticker is featured on top of the video stating: 'World history teachers when they see these cartoons.' This means that there are three topics referenced: (1) a claim on protecting the sovereignty of the nation, derived from a

present-day viral Pakistani audio fragment, featured in many memes; (2) the history of Western, particularly European, imperialism of the late nineteenth century, as represented by historical cartoons from that era; and (3) contemporary investment in historical cartoons as resources in history education, as represented in the projected text. Two analogies are drawn between these three topics. First, the principal's reaction of enthusiasm about a message is rendered analogous to history teachers' reactions to seeing these historical cartoons—something which is underlined by @airis-usannn lip-syncing the sound, while pointing toward the first cartoon at the moment we hear 'this is a strong message.' Second, an analogy is drawn between the contents of the sound and the contents of the cartoons, as through analogical reasoning the problems of Western imperialism addressed in the cartoon are rendered problems of national sovereignty. The pun is not lost on the 1.5 million people who viewed the video (of whom almost a third liked the video), who recount experiences of having to analyze the depicted cartoons in school in the comment section, and comment on the (over)investment of history teachers in cartoons in class.

The third and final implication of the use of three modes for historical analogies is that TikToks primarily use the first type of historical analogy Van Straaten et al. (2016) identify: analogies in which the present is the base and historical occurrences are the target. We have already discussed how this is related to the use and reuse of present-day viral sounds and memes. The second type of historical analogy, in which both source and target are historical, is virtually absent. The third type, in which the past is the base and the present is the target, does occur in several instances—mostly in cases where TikTokers are reflecting upon the understanding or teaching of history in the present (topic 2). @isbagent (2020), for example, posted a TikTok of himself pretending to sit in class, with the text overlay 'Teacher: get into groups, today we will be playing Risk.' The next scene titled 'Me and the Boys,' depicts historical videos of Patton, Rommel, Zhukov, and Montgomery holding speeches and explaining tactics. The analogy between strategic decision-making by WWII generals and playing Risk in class informs the viewer of the motivations of @isbagent and his peers, while it satirizes them at the same time as armchair generals.

Conclusion

Historical analogies form an important part of popular historical culture. Digital historical culture on social media platforms is no exception. In this chapter, I have shown how both the prominence of historical analogies, and the configuration of analogies are a result of the platform's affordances and constraints. Having originated as a dancing and lip-syncing app, TikTok heavily relies on reusable sounds as a basis for creating videos. The historical 15-seconds video duration limit is still very prominent in history TikToks, even though videos up to 60 seconds can be posted at the time of writing. While longer videos are mostly used to present extended narratives, and show TikTokers recounting these narratives, videos up to and including 15 seconds use the platform's affordances differently to represent the

past. They primarily rely on reused audio from TikTok's sounds library, combined with recorded video and text projected onto the video. Because the vast majority of popular sounds come from viral videos and memes, they bear reference to the present or contemporary contexts. Creating historical content using these audio clips necessarily draws TikTokers into the realm of historical analogy, as present-day audio is juxtaposed with either a video or text containing historical references, or both.

While this explains the prominence of historical analogies in history TikToks, the analogies in short history TikToks differ from traditionally narrated analogies in several respects, and can be characterized as 'condensed' historical analogies. First, the target and the base of the analogy are presented simultaneously. For example, when a contemporary pop song that serves as the base plays along with a video in which a TikToker enacts a historical situation as a target. The simultaneity in presenting target and base is an essential part of history TikToks, as it allows for the juxtaposition of differences between target and base in order to maximize the pun of the video, and to turn it into a viral meme. Second, the combined use of sounds, text, and video also allows drawing double analogies that compare between three elements rather than two. Finally, the present-centeredness of the audio as base makes that the vast majority of history TikToks have a present-oriented base and a past-oriented target, which allows to enhance an understanding of unfamiliar aspects of the past through analogy with familiar scenes drawn from contemporary popular and internet culture. Unlike comparative history education assignments, analogies in which both base and target are historical are virtually absent. Analogies in which the past is the base and the present is the target occur sparsely, contrary to the general political use of analogies. However, because history TikToks are also understood as memes by its audience, analogies of the latter type generally provide ironic commentary on the present rather than arguing for some kind of politically motivated historical continuity.

There is little danger in TikTokers or viewers assuming a full identity between present and past, as the sounds that generally function as the base represent specific, everyday situations rather than abstract ideas or complex histories. They are what McCarthy Young and Leinhardt (1998) called 'contextual' historical analogies that make sense because they allude to personal experience rather than to extensive historical knowledge. Even if sounds are drawn from movies, cartoons, or random viral videos that are not known by the video creator or the audience, they will be able to understand the analogy through association with the specific everyday context represented in the sound. And even if they know the source it is very unlikely that anyone will assume a structural similarity between, for example, a twenty-first-century meme and the Second World War.

Even though the motifs and intentions of TikTokers posting history videos are tainted by the zest for likes and hopes to land on the 'For You Page,' the posts gain a lot of traction that invokes additional mapping in the comment section. Similarly, the platform opens up possibilities for use in formal educational contexts where the capacity of students to reduce complex issues to straightforward analogies, combined with additional mapping exercises in classroom contexts can be leveraged to advance historical consciousness and historical understanding.

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