Negotiating morality and ethics: the social media user's perspective on TikTok

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Abstract
This study focuses on the contradiction between the alleged inclusivity and diversity that TikTok promotes and its apparent indifference for ethical standards. Specifically, the goal is to explore how social media users think in individualistic, moral and ethical terms about their online participation when they talk about TikTok. Relatively little research has focused on moral and ethical reasoning in the use of social media and no study to date has provided the opportunity to voice a user's own experience with moral issues as they perceive them through their use of TikTok. A thematic analysis of 47 in-depth interviews is applied to identify three dimensions of moral reasoning. First, interviewees talk about themselves as being an individual worthy of receiving moral esteem and stress the fact that they have the correct moral motivations. Second, interviewees locate the focus of morality in their own actions, whereas they justify their ethical decision by expressing themselves as a holder of moral virtues. Third, interviewees are aware of the ethical problems that have been discussed in the news, but they do not abandon their moral principles while participating on the platform. In order to reconciliate the conflict, they provide moral rationalizations which highlight TikTok's positive, inclusive functions for the individual or society. This aspect is confirmed by how they link authenticity to the concepts of inclusivity and diversity.

TikTok users are more tolerant and more accepting towards weird videos and also that's what makes TikTok so entertaining and so popular. So, I think that to some extent, on TikTok, people have more freedom to show all their flaws without being judged. It is a nice thing. (Nick, age 20).

So, I won't say people don't try to still look attractive and good, but I guess there is less pressure to appear perfect on Tiktok (Shaun, age 22).

I mostly saw alternative people in the videos; people that are not the white, straight, beautiful, perfect people that you tend to see on Instagram (Carolien, age 19).

TikTok makes headlines — and most of the time for less than desirable reasons. On August 6th, 2020, President Trump signed an unprecedented executive order aimed at banning TikTok in the US. According to the White House, the action was taken "to address the threat posed by one mobile application in particular, TikTok" (2020). Yet this was not the first move made on TikTok, who was fined $5.7 million by the U.S. government in 2019 to settle violations for illegally collecting names, email addresses, pictures and locations of children under the age of 13 (Washington Post, 2019). This settlement marked a record-high penalty for violating the nation's child privacy law.

Looking even further back in to the company's history, some policies at TikTok that were officially aimed at preventing bullying raised controversy for hiding videos by lesbian and gay users or people with disabilities. A leaked memo once revealed that TikTok managers asked their employees to remove videos from the feed that showed users who were 'poor' or 'ugly' as determined by the platform's 'standards' (The Guardian, 2020). The rationale offered in the memos followed the logic that the platform should promote a sense of aspiration through its content, ultimately aimed at attracting new users and retaining its existing ones.

Despite these legal violations and negative press coverage, TikTok has become the most downloaded app in 2020 (Financial Times, 2020). During the lockdown, TikTok has unquestionably grown to become a popular platform, particularly among younger users. Both in Europe and North America, TikTok users have shown more attention towards inclusivity: several of the most popular hashtags on TikTok, such as #allthedifference, are aimed at celebrating diversity. Furthermore, TikTok has become the leading digital platform to document anti-racist demonstrations, and to express solidarity with Black Lives Matter. TikTok's popularity continued to increase alongside the protest against violence and systemic racism towards black people following the death of George Floyd. The hashtag #blacklivesmatter reached 20 billion views on TikTok as of August 10th (TikTok, 2020).

As a scholar interested in media ethics, this paper focuses on the contradiction between the perceived inclusivity and diversity that TikTok's users promote and the alleged disregard of the social media platform for ethical standards. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to qualitatively investigate the way TikTok's users understand the platform's ethical responsibility and the underlying moral reasoning they employ while engaging with the social platform. The following question leads to this study: When social media users talk about TikTok, how do they think in individualistic, moral and ethical terms about their online participation?

Previous studies have stressed the need to further examine the views of users in regard to online choices (Livingstone 2008, 2014) and situations that involve the presence or absence of ethical and moral reasoning (James et al, 2009). Present research focuses on approaches to online self-expression, cheating, video games, piracy, cyber-bulling, and privacy with the intention of understanding the ethical and moral disposition of users (Kneer & Ward,2020; Gabriels et al, 2014; Veiga Simão, 2018; Piittinen, 2018). Very little research has focused on people's moral reasoning in social media (Flores & Carrie, 2012) and no study to date has provided the opportunity to voice a user's own experience with moral issues as they perceive them through their use of TikTok.

Utilizing the data collected from 47 in-depth interviews in Spring 2020, the study investigates the moral reasoning employed by users to justify their use of TikTok. Specifically, the main achievement of the study is to understand how moral and ethical reasoning are experienced and recognized by users of TikTok. Interviews were conducted with international students, between 18 and 24 years old, who had been residing and studying in the Netherlands. A thematic analysis is applied to explore how users provide moral rationalizations which highlight TikTok's positive, inclusive functions for the individual or society.

This article is organized into four sections. First, the article gives a definition of individualistic, moralistic, and ethical reasoning. Second, the research design is illustrated by focusing on the analytic approach and procedure used to explore the experience and recognition of moral reasoning by TikTok users. Third, the article explores how users understand moral reasoning and what significance they attribute to moral principles, while analyzing external moral commitments and motivations within 'ethical responsibility.' Fourth, the article reflects on the dialogical relationship between internalized moralities and the moral discourse used to justify TikTok as beneficial to the society or individuals.

Evoking moral reflection

The interconnected and exhibitionistic nature of TikTok fosters a more abstract way of considering the impact of one's own actions toward their community and unknown others. In contrast to other social media platforms where community is primarily comprised of people you know in real life, TikTok's algorithm provides for constant exposure to distant others. Therefore, community is created on an internet-wide scale between users who are not necessarily accountable to one another.

Scholars like Chouliaraki (2013), Silverstone (2007) and Boltanski (1999) explored the political aspects of morality and how the media affect the moral stance on 'the other'. However, the concept of 'media witnessing' emphasizes the primacy of texts, while the fundamental connection between mediation and public action remains under-theorized. Specifically, the role of social media in cultivating moral judgement among users inexorably increases questions about the context of mediation. Therefore, an analysis of how users reflect on moral reasoning would improve and shape our understanding of the conditions of ethical judgment that are mediated via social media.

Morality is central to any conception of what kind of person we can or should be, to what groups we can or do belong, or to whom we owe duty and responsibility. Boltanski and Thévenot (1999) reflect on how moral reasoning is mediated through cultural repertoires, and that people use repertoires to establish moral boundaries to separate themselves from other groups (Lamont 1992), Therefore, people acquire dispositions that partly depend on the morals they develop in their experience (Krijnen & Verboord, 2016). For example, moral agents internalize ideas through socialization after assessing them as 'good' and 'right.' Specifically, drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus (1984), morality can be described as a set of learned dispositions that give rise to moral judgments, emotions, and specific ways of reacting in morally relevant situations (Ignatow, 2009).

In advancing this idea, social media can be seen as an ontological space that allows viewers to put their moral skills into practice. This space also serves as a suitable place to try out moral decisions but without the regular consequences that come with such in normal life. This ontological space can be defined as a moral laboratory (Krijnen & Tan, 2009), where the media drives viewers into a state of moral reflection, which in turn optimizes their ability for moral discussions and expands their moral imaginations. Through these insights we get to understand our feelings and those of others, as well as motivations and desires perceived to be very important to moral decision making. This, in turn, evokes fresh insights about how the social media can evoke moral reflection on ourselves as well as others.

Accordingly, the next section provides a conceptual framework for analyzing moral reflection in the data collected.

A conceptual framework

The case of TikTok provides an excellent opportunity to study the ethical and moral judgments of a sample of TikTok's user community and what they consider right or wrong. The theoretical framework adopted in this study is built around a neo-Kholbergian approach to morality research (Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 2000). Therefore, this theoretical framework considers that moral responsibility is inductivistic, community-orientated, and assumes that abstract principles do not provide sufficient guidance for making specific moral and ethical decisions (Rest et al, 2000: 384). Consequently, the morality of a community is gradually built up from the members' experience in dealing with specific cases or problems. In this regard, studying the moral and ethical reasoning of TikTok's users allows us to define TikTok as a community that shares common and specific problems.

Moral reasoning regards morality as an inner reality, while ethical reasoning considers morality as an external phenomenon. Both levels of analysis explain morality as a "construction of meaning" used for differentiating between agents that deserve contempt or esteem and between 'good' or 'bad' behavior (Grauel, 2014: 4). Compared to moral reasoning that revolves around internal dispositions, ethical reasoning is centered on mediation. Thus, ethical reasoning can be seen as a communicated performance that allows a speaker to convey ethical judgments by expressing themselves as a holder of moral virtues. Moral reflection and mediation are thus linked to Habermas' three processes of social reproduction (2015). These processes include social integration involving the shaping and strengthening of obligations, rules and norms; cultural integration involving the elaboration and reinforcement of views; and lastly, socialization involving the adaptation of self-expression and social identities.

In this way, the distinction between ethical and moral reasoning is generally based on the division between "macro-morality," which refers to interactions with non-acquaintances, in societal institutions and or in broader communities, and "micro-morality," which involves close and direct interactions (Rest et al., 2000: 386). In other words, moral reasoning deals with acquired (moral) motivations that lie deep with an individual. Ethical reasoning is in turn concerned with ways in which inner morality is communicated and negotiated with others (Flores and & James, 2012). Although these two approaches are usually perceived to be in contradiction (Grauel, 2014), Flores and James (2012) observe that these different perspectives are practically embedded and reflected in the tensions experienced by social media users.

Moral and ethical reasoning can be defined as an individual rationalization in terms of dialogue, or as a negotiation between agents in a moral conflict. Therefore, contradictions and tensions pertaining to users of TikTok can be analyzed as rationalizations that allow individuals to reconcile differences between moral and ethical conflicts. Through rationalization, individuals tend to manage conflicts to make it personally acceptable and appropriate (Haidt, 2001; Ditto et al., 2009).

In this way TikTok users adopt an individual response to make sense of and to explain their ethical reasoning by using morally acceptable motivations (Mills, 1940) as a way to talk about their actions while highlighting the morality of their reasoning. Therefore, rationalizations might not reveal reasons behind actions; instead, rationalizations are a cultural convention used by moral agents to persuade others that a decision is morally appropriate and necessary (Snydey 2007: 322). As a consequence, the following conceptual framework differentiates between individualistic, moral, and ethical responses to identify the type of reasoning adopted by TikTok users.

Individualistic Response

Individualistic response can be described as the process through which persons negotiate the difference between what is wrong or right from a self-centered perspective. The individualistic response correlates to an internal orientation and is based on basic distinctions between what is wright and wrong. In other

words TikTok's users primarily structure their experience towards the self as opposed to moral obligations to known others and the awareness of ethical principles. It is assumed that the interconnectedness and public nature of the internet promote the tendency to think more abstractly about the impacts of one's actions on unknown others and at the community level (Krebs et al 1997:137-138). Therefore, it is defined individualistic response these forms of reasoning directly related to the interviewee's self-awareness of their own moral behavior.

Moral Response

Whereas individual response is concerned with the self, the moral response defines to what extent moral reasoning deals with how one's actions may affect others, thus: (1) observing moral principles such as respects of diversity, justice, and equality in relation to known others; (2) having a capacity for empathy for the close community (known other); and (3) moral responsibility, namely being aware of the consequence on known others included in the definition of moral principles. These elements are also captured in the model proposed by Flores and James (2012: 838). As such, moral response correlates to an internal orientation, where interviewees understand their experience on TikTok in relation to the morality of close community including themselves and known others.

Ethical Response

Ethical reasoning is similar to 'systems thinking' in Flores' and James's framework (2012: 838), which comprises: (1) interaction with unknown other, namely complex perspective-taking, or recognizing numerous stakeholders involved in online actions; (2) community thinking, namely reflecting on one's responsibilities and roles in online and offline communities; and (3) ethical responsibility, or being sensitive to the possible impacts of online actions for larger entities. Therefore, the ethical response correlates to an external focus, where interviewees consider a more abstract notion of society and a broader community of unknown others.

Research Design

The key achievement of the study is its exploration of how moral and ethical reasoning are experienced and recognized by users of TikTok. The methodology draws on in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. Interviews were conducted in Spring 2020 with 47 young international adults who had been residing and studying in Netherlands/Rotterdam for 2-3 years. Based on their friendship networks, the interviewees (n=47) were recruited through a snowball sampling strategy. Interviewees in this study ranged in age from 18 to 24 (mean = 22.66). The interviewees were predominantly European (n=30, 65%) and North American (n=7, 15%). Significantly more interviewees were female, reflecting campus demographics (women = 29, 65%; men = 16, 35%). Student participants were mainly in their second year (77.8 percent). The sample also reflects the largest demographic of users on TikTok in Europe and North America (Bloomberg 2020; Statista 2000).

In general, the interviews lasted for 45-60 minutes and were semi-structured with open-ended questions. Before the interviews were conducted, the questions were first tested on five respondents to check their validity, and a few adjustments were made where necessary. Participants received a general introduction about the study goals as well as the relevance and purpose of the interview. Before starting the interview, the interviewee was informed that they had no obligation to answer the questions. Permission was also requested for the interview to be recorded. To this end, all the interviewees granted the researcher permission and the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for further elaboration. The researcher explained to the interviewees how the study would process their responses. They were also assured that their responses would be used exclusively for research purposes, and all information would be handled with confidentiality.

An interview guide with a list of discussion points was written beforehand. In a bid to obtain various experiences and perceptions, the interviewee's competences and the theoretical framework were considered in formulating the open questions. New insights were discovered through the open questions, as the interviewees were encouraged to express themselves and include additional

information freely. Though interviewees come from different backgrounds, social classes and countries and thus were socialized differently, it was assumed that they would apply similar forms of moral reasoning to the specific case of TikTok.

Analytic Approach & Procedure

At the beginning of the interviews, the participants were asked basic questions regarding their social media habits. Afterward, the researchers sought information on TikTok, how such a platform is used, and the reasons for liking or disliking it. The interviewees were asked about their general perceptions of the trending videos in spring 2020. This discussion led to the main findings of this research enabling the researchers to evaluate the moral responses to traditional social media platforms and TikTok. To a large extent, the discussion also covered topics, such as the interviewee's reservations toward the use of specific platforms, cultural criticisms of social media, or commentary on the morality of certain aspects of the social media industry were also covered in the interviews (Appendix 1).

Thematic analysis was used in analyzing the interview data to report, analyze, and identify themes within the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79-80). In numerous empirical contexts, the experiences of social media have been studied using thematic analysis (e.g., Fereday and Muir Cochrane 2016). As outlined by Berg (2004), the thematic analysis was executed in three stages. First, a deductive content analysis approach was adopted in this study (García, López & Zerva 2009). This approach requires researchers to begin with a phenomenon that seeks an answer to a question or some form of explanation (Berg, 2004).

The second step is for researchers to identify categories relevant to the interviewees by carefully focusing on the research question. Specifically, three themes were identified in relation to individualistic, ethical or moral reasoning. In this way, two researchers organized the transcripts with three categories, using direct excerpts from the transcripts to identify motives articulated by interviewees, while paying attention to the reasons that specific motives were verbalized rather than others. Second, quotes were grouped together to form the basis for classifying sub-categories. Lastly, six sub-categories reflecting the analysis were created and organized into an articulate narrative structure. This approach is adopted to assure the credibility of interpretation and ensure that the data is grounded in the subjective meaning of the interviewees' words.

The two researchers are familiar with communication ethics and qualitative methods and have adequate personal experience to counter concerns of single-researcher bias. Saturation was operationalized in order to be consistent with the research question, the analytic framework adopted (Saunder 2018:1983). Pseudonyms were used to replace the names of the interviewees. In order to achieve reliability, the researchers compared and contrasted any discrepancies within and across interviews and resolved them by discussing and refining code definitions.

Results

It is important to note that all interviewees exhibited some form of individualistic response, moral response and ethical response when talking about their experience of TikTok, albeit to varying degrees. The interviewees exhibited the ability to employ these three responses to navigate fundamental contradictions and concerns in their experience of the platform. In some cases, the aspects addressed through the interviewees' experience of TikTok elicited answers that can be classified under these three forms of response, indicating a complex moral and ethical relationship to the platform. This section organizes the findings according to the three levels of response – individualistic, moral, or ethical – while addressing the aspects of TikTok discussed in the interviews accordingly (Table 1).

Table 1 – Categories applied to individualistic, moral, ethical responses

Response	Operational Definition	Categories	Excerpt
Individualistic	reasoning directly related to the interviewee's self-awareness of their own moral behavior	• Self-centered reasoning • Basic distinction between right or wrong	• "I feel less alone." • "I think it's nice to see women that aren't what your typical image of beauty would be, but they are still enjoying their lives." • "Your body can be different than people say it has to be."
Moral	an internal orientation, in relation to the morality of close community including themselves and known others	• Moral principles • Moral community (known others) • Moral responsibility	• "…these kinds of videos can help them feel more accepted" • "the assurance that they are not alone on some particular level" • "society is about accepting different types of people, and they should be welcome, not distanced from"
Ethical	external focus, where interviewees consider a more abstract notion of society and a broader community of unknown others	• Interaction with unknown other • Community thinking • Ethical Responsibility	• "… explicit videos and are not tailored for kids" • TikTok's algorithm should prevent egotistical behaviors, eg toxic masculinity • It is unethical to exploit body positivity, gender fluidity, or mental health for generating traffic.

Individualistic Response

The analysis of the transcripts reveals an acknowledgement of an individualistic notion of being morally responsible, focusing on the self. For instance, interviewees feel comfortable on the platform as they can openly express themselves and embrace their differences. Remarkably, some interviewees argue they feel less alone on TikTok, while on other social media platforms, everyone feels the need to be perceived as 'perfect' (Nina, 22). Overall, the interviewees positively value content that promotes their inclusion in a community of people from a wide range of age, origin, skin color, body type, gender identity, and sexuality. Julia agrees, stating further that "you have people from all sorts of backgrounds, people from all sorts of body sizes, genders […] without receiving backlash, as is common on other social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter" (Julia, 21). Specifically, TikTok offers them the opportunity to browse content from everyone around the world; you "do not just see the same ten people in your hometown" (Lihn, 20). Omar has a similar opinion: "you see and discover people from all backgrounds and races" (Omar, 20). Moreover, according to Laura, everyone can go viral regardless of where they come from and what they look like (Laura, 21). Overall, users agree that TikTok is a more comfortable platform for themselves.

According to interviewees, empowering diversity is another motive that plays a vital role in evaluating TikTok as morally 'good.' According to Christina (20): "TikTok is a platform that enables everyone and anyone to kind of just be themselves." She, therefore, considers TikTok a safer space in which body positivity, mental health, and gender fluidity are discussed in a positive light: "I felt like there were a lot of alternative people or people who are different from the beauty standards in the Netherlands…" Martha (19) has a similar opinion: "I think it's nice to see women that aren't what your typical image of beauty would be, but they are still enjoying their lives." One interviewee pointed towards the success of videos featuring people with disabilities on the platform (Nik, 23). He further noted: "[…] this might be to show the world that not everything has to be perfect, or your body can be different than people say it has to be." interviewees appreciate TikTok because it features content that is more aligned to their principles of acceptance. At the same time, they are very critical of traditional social media, specifically of Instagram and Facebook, because these platforms encourage content producers to create a conventional image of the self.

TikTok is described as a safe space where interviewees can be themselves and feel included in a community of people who are not seeking to promote any products, only to post content in order to

connect and engage meaningfully beyond difference. Natalie (20) thinks TikTok offers an accurate representation of society due to the diversity of messages. Because TikTok "is used by real-life people, and not models, not actors," Its acceptance is also something that stands out among TikTok's social media siblings, an aspect that makes interviewees identify more with this type of content and therefore feel invited to use the platform. According to Julia (22), "in a world where social media only shows the good things in our lives, the content creators within TikTok show themselves more naturally compared to other social media, where you are looking to entertain yourself and others, rather than wanting to show the best things that happen to you." Overall, interviewees agree that TikTok privileges a different type of content creator. But, the most successful videos are those in which moral and ethical reasoning does not come into conflict.

In summary, individual responses include the process through which users negotiate the difference between what is wrong or right. The individual response defines to what extent TikTok's users primarily understand their experience through the self. The users acknowledge a certain level of obligation to known others and the complexity of inclusivity and diversity. However, the users define their social experience from a self-centric perspective, as indicated by the use of the first person in these accounts. Furthermore, the comfort expressed in TikTok as a safe space demonstrates the centrality of the self in any reference toward the community.

Moral Response

A recurring example of what is considered a moral response is observing principles like equality, respect and acceptance of difference toward known others in a close community. For instance, users experience empathy toward content that highlights sexual orientation. Interviewees noticed that teenagers use the platform as an opportunity to come out, or "to even just support a cause or even just put it out there that you know they are acknowledging their orientations or just their personality" (Christina, 21). One participant (Natalie, 20) commented: "[…] if people are kind of struggling with their gender […] these kinds of videos can help them feel more accepted [...]" Elena sees an opportunity in TikTok posts to raise public awareness for the acceptance of sexual orientation. However, she thinks that heterosexual people have generally made most videos linked to the hashtag #catchingfeelings. So, "it isn't a portrayal of the acceptance of gender fluidity but cultural appropriation" (Elena, 22). Besides being an extension of what the society already looks like nowadays, Rachel sees the platform as an epitome of what the society should look like: "society is about accepting different types of people, and they should be welcome, not distanced from" (Rachel, 22). Overall, interviewees agree that TikTok videos encourage the expression of users' sexual orientation and might help lessen alienation against people within the LGBTQA+ community.

In the interviews, the definition of authenticity becomes a point of contention at the level of moral reasoning. Authenticity is cited as a recurring motive for using TikTok, but it is also the most polarizing. For instance, interviewees agree on the fact that on TikTok, they can show themselves more naturally compared to other social media outlets. They also feel it easier to identify themselves with this type of content because it is closer to how they lead their daily lives. Not one of them claims to desire the extravagant lifestyle of an influencer, and thus they admire the simplicity of the lives they see on TikTok. According to Lina (age 22) "on other social media, you're hiding your flaws, on TikTok, you're showing them off." However, few interviewees believe that those "flaws" are authentic.

> No, on TikTok, they are also making your flaws better than they are, I think. (Annemijn, 20)
> There is much content out there on TikTok that is completely flawless despite it being about showing your flaws. If you're making a video, you're not going to show the video that failed. You're going to retake and retake this video a million times. You're going to show the perfect video. (Renata, 23)
>
> Much content on TikTok is about showing off your flaws because it's entertaining, and it makes it fun for others to see you fail at something, for example. It's showing the perfect version of your flaws. (Leila, 22)

Authenticity is described as something believable that a user feels connected to in some way. An interviewee claims that pressing like on videos featuring personal flaws might correspond to a "search for some kind of self-assurance, including the assurance that they are not alone on some particular level" (Jay, 23). Therefore, authenticity can be translated as a form of self-acceptance. Interestingly, interviewees find it morally acceptable to perform authenticity on TikTok as a bid to build relationships with their audiences. However, the same interviewees consider the authenticity of influencers on traditional social media less plausible.

Interviewees do not necessarily attribute the inclusivity promoted on TikTok to the authenticity of the content. Instead, what makes the platform authentic is the dynamics of it. People remix, duet, and share content, giving an innovative spin to all the content on the platform. How the algorithm works motivates the users to come up with a new look for an old idea. Such an approach can give users the freedom to create any type of trivial content without being judged. Therefore, TikTok gives the impression of an inclusive space, rather than an exclusive community. This aspect can make some users feel that the content is repetitive, but at the same time keep them engaged with the app itself. Looking at the majority of the interviews, interviewees agree that the content is not there to be authentic, but rather to keep the users interested. Therefore, TikTok videos appear authentic but are not authentic in the real sense of the word; instead, they are simply a conscious attempt to look more authentic (Duffy & Kang 2019). This aspect can be designated as "performing-not-performing" (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014: 396) or appearing not to behave in a performative manner and, at the same time, seeming to always be one's true self, irrespective of who is watching.

In summary, interviewees were able to reflect a moral articulation of the known other. For instance, interviewees were able to articulate moral reasoning in their experience of TikTok. This aspect is confirmed by how they link authenticity to the concepts of inclusivity and diversity and the value they place on these concepts not only while online, but also in the offline society they envisage. However, the identification and articulation of these moral aspects show a lack of consideration for what could not be moral. In addition, their rationalizations consistently reflect their belief that they maintain a correct set of moral values without taking into consideration the potential for other moral perspectives. The interviewees' support of TikTok appears to be grounded in the idea of similarities rather than difference.

Ethical Response

When reviewing the transcripts through the category of ethical response, it became clear that interviewees were aware of the ethical problems that have been discussed in the news, such as the security and privacy of minors. In the interviews, ethical concerns arise when the type of content is under discussion, specifically in relation to unknown others. TikTok allows users to come across all types of people, and it does not matter the age, gender, and sexuality of users or how they look. This aspect can be considered positive, but at the same time, interviewees express concern in alignment with the negative press coverage on TikTok. Sara (18) read in the news that "there are also pedophiles on TikTok who can look at small children's videos, which makes the platform a dangerous place for a big part of its users." Furthermore, oversexualized content and possibly dangerous challenges are highlighted as problematic for underage users:

> There has been a bit of bad press about TikTok; there was a television show that said that pedophiles or people with less good intentions are also able to go on TikTok and they are commenting on younger kids their TikToks, so what do you think for example is essential when a younger child or a GenZer is going on TikTok (Lisa 23).

One interviewee mentioned that she worries about the kind of content her young cousin is consuming on TikTok. For instance, she stated that some songs often found on the app have "explicit videos and are not tailored for kids" (Maria, 23), classifying this as a "drawback" from all the positive features present on the app. For this reason, interviewees think that TikTok should take responsibility for improving the platform to eliminate safety issues for minors.

A recurring form of ethical reasoning in order to justify the use of TikTok revolves around the platform's algorithm. Specifically, interviewees express concern regarding the tension between how the platform's algorithm feeds users target videos that are highly appreciated and, inversely, how this computational profiling denies the principle of autonomy of the user. Interviewees claim not to follow any specific content creator and rely heavily on what the algorithm shows them. By continually showing users precisely the content, they want to see, it is tough for users to close the application or to be aware of the time they are investing in this application. This binge-consumption, as is pointed out by one of the interviewees, can result in a feeling of guilt because of the "wasted time" spent on the application that could have been used for something "productive" (Lena, age 22). Interviewees believe that the most critical issue to be addressed is the role of the algorithm in proposing content.

Specifically, they mention that, even though they enjoy watching challenges, videos can become repetitive when the algorithm pushes for similar content repeatedly. A theme that was mentioned continuously and discussed was compulsivity. All interviewees agreed that TikTok's features, such as the length of the videos, the scrolling feature, the music, and the matching algorithm make the need to use the application compulsive. Regarding the algorithm, one interviewee mentioned that "the endless content [is] the most addictive part" of the application (Julia, 23). Other interviewees touched upon the same idea, mentioning as well that the variety and amount of content were so immense that "getting bored was impossible" (Lina, 22).

The scrolling feature was also cited as the cause for compulsive behavior while interacting with the application, one interviewee having said that "you can scroll and scroll and there is no end to it" (Christina, 23). Unlike Facebook and Instagram, content on TikTok is never-ending since the algorithm is always going to forward new content to its users, and by having such a simplistic way of working (scrolling), people lose track of time. One interviewee described this as "not having to move a finger (except for scrolling) in order to consume content." The length of TikTok's video content was also discussed. Interviewees agreed that having access to so much content in such a small amount of time, watching videos and getting hooked is very easy. One interviewee explained the addictiveness deriving from a typical TikTok video's length: "videos in 15 to 60 seconds all have an introduction, a middle and a conclusion, allowing you to watch it and go to the next and the next and the next…" (Joao, 22) since videos have everything needed in order to be catchy in such a small amount of time, the user is not aware of the amount of added time that can pass while watching a hundred TikTok videos. The brevity of the videos makes it very hard for the user to lose concentration.

The algorithm is perceived as very useful in targeting specific videos and raises concerns on to what extent the autonomy of the user and their private preferences are respected. For instance, Jay (23) claims that the ForYou page keeps proposing hypersexualized videos of 'progressive' shirtless, muscular males fighting homophobia or racism. For this reason, some interviewees consider it unethical to exploit body positivity, gender fluidity, or mental health for generating traffic. Most interviewees are also concerned that some content producers might exploit social issues in order to go viral. Some interviewees wonder if TikTok will be normalized and become like Facebook and Instagram. It was mentioned that already different hashtags, such as #shirtlessguy, #whyIshouldbefamous, #Iusedtobesobeautiful encourage narcissism. Interviewees accept that the need for admiration is part of the social media game: "people can share the best versions of themselves, edit photos and put on filters, get attention and nice comments back, that way satisfying the need for admiration" (Julia, age 20). Moreover, "you need to have some extent of narcissism to be able to film yourself and post videos of yourself doing something on a platform like that" (Lina, 22). However, undoubtedly, they agree that "toxic narcissism" (Jay, 23) is neither a positive nor a valuable trait, and TikTok's algorithm should prevent egotistical behaviors.

In summary, interviewees are aware of the ethical problems that have been discussed in the news. Major aspects that arose in considering TikTok through an ethical lens include: the corporation's public media presence and its positioning on larger societal concerns; the details of the application's technical organization or algorithmic approach in relation to the user's experience of consuming

content; and the kind of content that TikTok users produce in relation to their own sociopolitical positioning and to other social media platforms. However, the interviewees demonstrate that they do not abandon their moral principles while participating on the platform. In order to reconciliate the conflict, they provide moral rationalizations which highlight TikTok's positive and inclusive functions for the individual or society.

Discussion

In answer to the research question, the findings highlighted three different approaches to how interviewees describe their use of the platform in individualistic, moral, and ethical terms. Initially, participation in TikTok is presented as consonant to users' ideas of inclusivity and authenticity. This fact emphasizes the possibility that personal moral motivations can be a factor for their increased use of TikTok. Though, the responses adopted by interviewees might lack any formal ethical principle, this motivation is utilized as a reference point when arriving at a moral judgment. Furthermore, ethical responsibility is expressed through different reasoning, but autonomy might be considered as the common denominator of how to resolve public concern around TikTok. Therefore, interviewees locate the focus of morality in their own actions, whereas they justify their ethical decision looking at the press coverage around the platform. The possible mechanism and explanations of these findings can be illustrated in three points.

First, interviewees present themselves as being individuals worthy of receiving moral esteem and stress the fact that they have the correct moral motivations. This point is highlighted by the way in which they refer to authenticity through the use of concepts of inclusivity and diversity. However, interviewees acknowledge the notion of 'being morally responsible' in an abstract and individualistic manner. For instance, a recurrent motive among interviewees is that content on TikTok is more "inclusive" or "diverse," compared to other platforms. Most interviewees view content on Instagram or Facebook as too "professional" or "commercial," that they become "fake" or "annoying," leading to a decrease in their interest. Conversely, TikTok is thought to be based on self-expression and authenticity. This reasoning reflects how interviewees try to negotiate the ethical condemnation of TikTok and personal moral rationalizations in order to justify their participation on the platform. In this scenario, there is a struggle between remaining real and responsible at the same time, whereas in the latter, the tensions are erased by addressing external factors.

As a result, interviewees think of how best they can present themselves as individuals deserving moral esteem, as well as how to express their behavior as morally acceptable via socially established vocabularies. Interestingly, this form of rationalization is associated with the typical judgment of individualistic persons. The inconsistency between moral and ethical reasoning suggests that TikTok may generates 'moral awareness' but it might also coincide with an individualistic perspective (Flores and Jones, 2012: 846).

Second, interviewees locate the focus of morality in their own actions, whereas they justify their ethical decision by expressing themselves as a holder of moral virtues. Thus, the attempt to rationalize their use of the platform can be seen as a mediated performance that allows interviewees to convey moral judgments. By nature of the way the platform functions, with its high number of unknown others, interviewees are prone to consider moral concerns such as the idea of an idealistic society marked by acceptance and diversity when talking of their experience of TikTok. The individualistic drive of the interviewees can be exhibited through their desire for comfort, for example when they describe that they do not need to adhere to predetermined images, e.g., body type, sexual orientation, in comparison to other platforms (Facebook, Instagram). It is for this personal feeling of comfort that they rationalize their use of the platform.

Consequentially, interviewees are likely to adopt a macro-moral orientation (Rest et al, 2000: 386), focusing on the unethical practices of TikTok while maintaining their moral autonomy. Therefore, the outwardness of their ethical orientation is based on the fact that they concentrate on moral actions

outside the self. Instead of reasoning in terms of 'right' or 'wrong,' interviewees make ethical judgments in the form of "this will be good for me" or "this will be bad for me."

Third, interviewees are aware of the ethical problems that have been discussed in the news, but they do not abandon their moral principles while participating on the platform. In order to reconcile the conflict, they provide moral rationalizations which highlight TikTok's positive, inclusive functions for the individual or society. This aspect is confirmed by how they link authenticity to the concepts of inclusivity and diversity.

This result may partly be explained by the fact that interviewees report their rationalizations in a performative manner in order to avoid feelings of dissonance while attempting to relate to their own self-identity (Berzonsky, 2011: 59). Precisely, the concept of "mediated authenticity" (Enli 2015) can explain this tension between the expectation of spontaneity and performativity present in mediated spaces. Therefore, two critical dimensions of moral reasoning can be identified: one that should lead to a more group-oriented mindset, whereas the other dimension focuses on moral orientation from an individualistic perspective. However, from a moral perspective, adequately addressing authenticity in everyday life would involve satisfying the desires of the inner self while managing the complexities of daily living.

The combination of these three findings provides support for the conceptual premise that, if moral reasoning revolves around internal dispositions, ethical reasoning is instead centered on mediation. While interviewees have to present their moral reasoning as consistent, they also communicate their ethical reasoning as morally valid according to the public debate surrounding the platform. This point confirms the theoretical premise that interviewee's take an inductive approach in which abstract principles do not provide sufficient guidance for making specific moral and ethical decisions (Rest et al, 2000: 384).

Conclusion

This study focuses on the contradiction between the inclusivity and diversity that TikTok's users desire and its alleged indifference for ethical standards. Specifically, the goal was to explore how social media users understand TikTok and adopt moral rationalizations to reconcile ethical and moral conflicts. The following question led to this study: When social media users talk about TikTok, how do they think in individualistic, moral and ethical terms about their online participation?

Three significant answers were obtained from the study. Firstly, interviewees talk about themselves as being an individual worthy of receiving moral esteem and stress the fact that they have the correct moral motivations. However, interviewees acknowledge the notion of 'being morally responsible' in an abstract and individualistic manner. Secondly, interviewees locate the focus of morality in their own actions, whereas they justify their ethical decision by expressing themselves as a holder of moral virtues. Thus, the attempt to rationalize their use of the platform can be seen as a mediated performance that allows interviewees to convey moral judgments. Thirdly, interviewees are aware of the ethical problems that have been discussed in the news, but they do not abandon their moral principles while participating on the platform. In order to reconciliate the conflict, they provide moral rationalizations which highlight TikTok's positive, inclusive functions for the individual or society. This aspect is confirmed by how they link authenticity to the concepts of inclusivity and diversity.

Finally, future research should incorporate individual differences, such as age, gender, class, and geographical differences in the analysis to improve applicability and the generalizability of these findings. Although the interviewees were international students from different continents, they apparently shared a cosmopolitan mindset that might have influenced ethical evaluations and moral rationalization. Moral reasoning varies according to values and norms shaped by the cultural and social context. Future research could also focus on intersectionality to understand to what extent individual differences in moral standards influence the ways they evaluate a violation of ethical standards.

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Appendix 1

Selected Interview questions

Part 1: Introduction

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
- Can you describe your current behavior concerning social media consumption?
- On what media platforms do you spend most of your time?
- Can you describe the media consumption behavior of your generation?
- Would you consider yourself a typical member of your generation when it comes to media consumption?
- Do you perceive a difference in media consumption between your generation and others?

Part 2: Interaction with TikTok

- What first comes to mind when you hear the name TikTok?
- Overall, how much do you like TikTok?
- Why do you think TikTok is very popular among young people?
- What are your favorite features on TikTok?
- How would you describe the videos on TikTok?

Part 3: Perception of TikTok

- How do you explain the popularity of TikTok in the media/press?
- How often do see ads for the TikTok app on TV or on the Internet?
- How often do see TikTok videos on other platforms?
- How do you explain this "spillover effect"?

Part 4: Open Questions on

- Gender Fluidity
- Creativity
- Heteronormativity
- Narcissism
- Body Positivity
- Acceptance of Differences
- Inclusivity
- Age Gap