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Abstract

This essay will discuss TikTok as a medium of communication, providing a brief description of TikTok. A relevant paper on the analysis of TikTok will be discussed, followed by examining the impacts of the app's properties in regards to language, society, and communication. Lastly, the properties of TikTok would be analysed and compared to that of speech and text according to the seven features by David Crystal.

Introduction

Amid a social media revolution, it is apparent that social media are used largely for communication, social interaction as a superset beyond social communication (Baruah, 2012). Among the many forms of social media, short videos have become one of the more popular means of the social networking world (Clarine, 2016). One popular application is TikTok. Launched in 2017, TikTok is a video sharing social networking service owned by Beijing-based company Bytedance (Leskin, 2020). Previously, the company had launched Douyin (抖音), for the China market in 2016. The app took China by storm then and eventually gained international attention. Both TikTok and Douyin are similar to each other, differing only in their operating servers due to Chinese censorship restrictions (O'Flaherty, 2019). It allows users to create short videos up to 60 seconds. Users have the freedom to make their content, from dances, challenges, lip-syncing, singing to comedy skits.
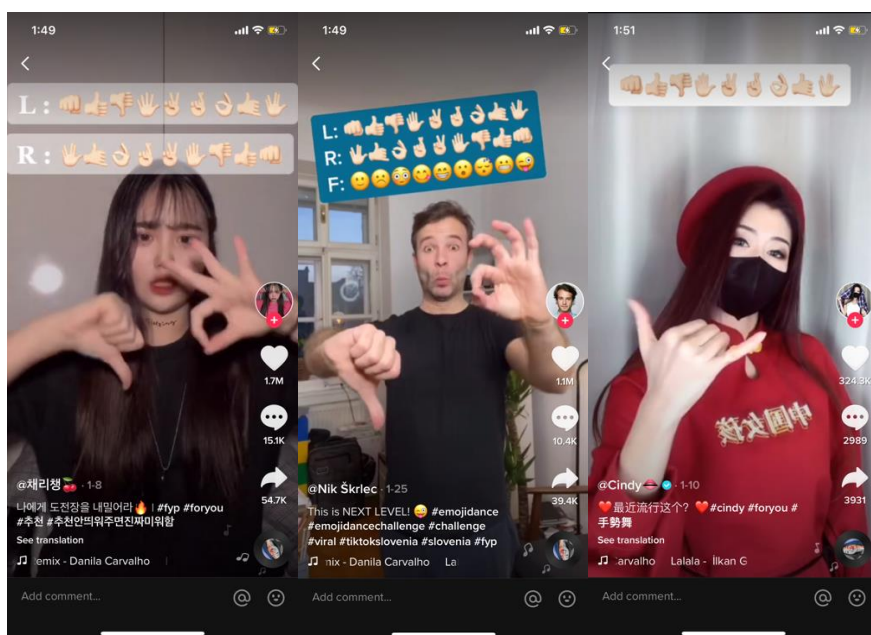

Figure 1: Examples of TikTok users doing the emoji hand challenge

In recent years, the popularity of TikTok has sky-rocketed. It is one of the fastest-growing social media platforms in the world, with 800 million active users worldwide (Kemp, 2020). Available over 150 markets, TikTok is also available in 39 languages ("Support Center | TikTok", n.d.). According to analytics from Sensor Tower, the app reached more than 738 million downloads in 2019 (Williams, 2020). TikTok is rather a new social networking application that gained popularity among youngsters, with 41% of TikTok users aged between 16 and 24 (Beer, 2019). The app skew towards the younger demographics and these statistics have indicated how TikTok is gaining popularity and changing the social media world game.

Summary of relevant literature

In this day and age where short videos play a significant role in social media usage, this recent paper analysed the reasons and development of short video application, using TikTok as an example. TikTok is one of the most favoured apps by young people due to the unique communication strategies and clear audience positioning (Yang, Zhao & Ma, 2019). Some of the reasons why TikTok grew popular is because the application uses the function of pushing content based on user's preferences and needs. The paper also discusses the simplified short video features that allow users to fully make use of their creativity to produce rich and engaging videos. Moreover, TikTok encouraged user-generated content (Herrman, 2019), the content creators come from every background, either celebrities or commoners like anyone. With relatability in mind, short videos that are popular with the recipients from the perspective of the audience are capable to achieve good communication results. (Yang, Zhao & Ma, 2019). TikTok hence became a platform where users bond and grow together as a community.

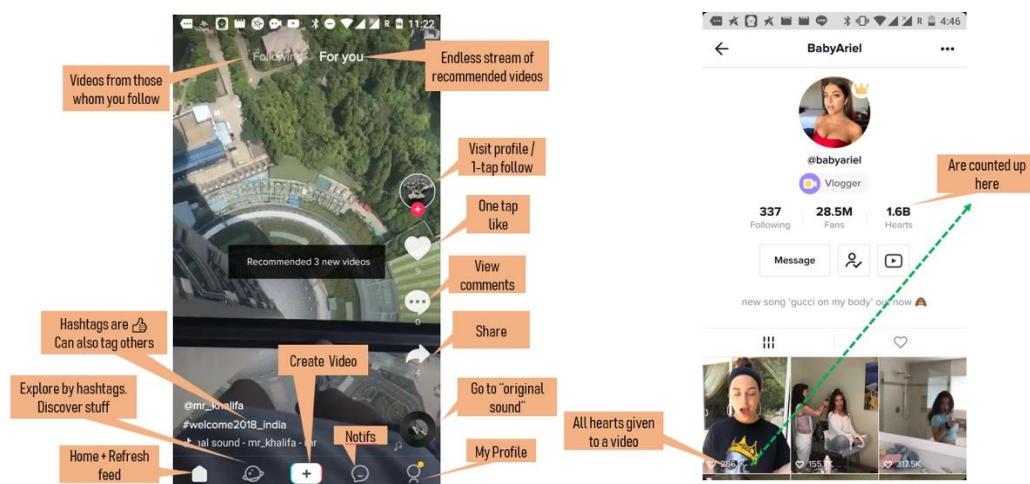Properties of TikTok and its effects on communication

Figure 2: User interface and features of TikTok

TikTok has anonymity, an account is not necessary to watch the videos. However, in an instance where a person wants to follow comment or send a message to the creator, they do need an account. Users are required to create an account if they want to upload their videos.

Similar to the concept of social media like Instagram where they can like the content, comment. They can also follow creators that they are interested in. Users can create their content based on the TikTok editing tools which include many filters, a range of sounds to score their videos. Users are also encouraged to interact and engage with other users through "response" videos, also known as "duets" (Herrman, 2019).

Figure 3: Examples of TikTok Duets

The ease of these features in TikTok gave a form of collaborative, communicative platform to the users, unleashing their creativity to engage with one another. TikTok provides an algorithm feed based on videos the user interacted with or watched frequently (Herrman, 2019). On top of that, the app encouraged users to jump from trend to trend and from audience to audience, creating a small group that gets together to form connections and give feedback(Herrman, 2019). It aims to expand the connections and network of the users using TikTok. Users can insert hashtags #fyp #foryou on their caption, to increase their content exposure.

TikTok general effects on language and society

The language used in TikTok is generally informal, with users expressing themselves through the content they produce. There were also cases in which organisation capitalise on the benefit that social media offers. The Chinese Provincial Health Committees made use of the micro-video sharing platform, TikTok to convey messages on health-related information to the local residents (Zhu, Xu, Zhang, Chen & Evans, 2019). These show how TikTok has influenced the facets of one's personal and professional lives.

Despite TikTok being a potential platform to bring about good intentions, negative effects may arise as the exposure increases. The videos are mainly built around music, so language tends not to pose a significant barrier (Tolentino, 2019). However, the huge collection of music present is likely to consist of different kinds of music with abusive and swear words that can affect the language use and mannerism of a kid when they chanced upon it (Hassan, 2019). Therefore, posing a possibility of bad influence.

Nonetheless, TikTok still does have its benefits. It is a source of income for many. People may come together to create content and share it with the public. On top of that, TikTok connects people from all around the world together. Whether the user is from Thailand, Singapore, Japan or the United States of America, users can still interact with one another despite the language barrier. Translation options are also provided for language that's not the user's preferred or selected language options.

Moreover, TikTok trends in different countries also reflect different cultures. In the case of Singapore, firms work closely with the local content creators to produce videos of various genre catering to society (Seow, 2019). The different market staffs also make use of the global aspect of TikTok to exchange potential viral content and promote it to viewers from other countries. With this, the content of various cultures can be spread and viewed by people all over the market, especially when users can share the videos with their friends, family through other social media platforms as well. Ioana Literat, a communications professor from Columbia University, believed that TikTok is capable to become a place where youth can have powerful self-expression and social connection (O'Carroll, 2020).

TikTok provides a platform for people to express themselves, be it their thoughts and opinions about themselves or the world, these factors play a part in fostering a digital society where people are connected virtually.

Seven features introduced by Crystal (Crystal, 2006)

The linguistic properties of TikTok will be examined using Crystal's framework to compare the linguistic differences between speech and writing.

SPEECH-LIKE	TEXT-LIKE
Time-bound*	Space-bound*
Spontaneous*	Contrived*
Face-to-face*	Visually decontextualized
Loosely structured*	Elaborately structured
Socially interactive*	Factually communicative
Immediately revisable*	Repeatedly revisable*
Prosodically rich*	Graphically rich*

*Table 1: David Crystal's Seven Features table. Marked * denotes the features of TikTok communication*

Firstly, comparing features of TikTok as a communication medium to speech-like and text-like characteristics, TikTok can be argued to have both properties of speech and texts. The unique selling point of TikTok is the vast amount of short videos that greets the user when they first open the app (Herrman, 2019). It is time-bound because of the content duration limit imposed on the content creator. They have the flexibility to work with whatever they want but the

content must be kept within 3 to 60 seconds. The video also loops over and over unless skipped. Users of the app can pause but not fast-forward or rewind the video. Therefore it forces the user to re-watch the content if they were to miss out on anything.

Apart from the speech-like feature like time-bound, TikTok is also space-bound, with the character limit for the caption being 150 characters. However, this does not affect communication that much as the users can comment or reply to the video, continuing the conversation.

Interestingly, TikTok is both contrived and spontaneous. While most of the time, it is contrived as users can prepare for the content and retake as many times as they want before uploading the video and can prepare the content according to who they want to appeal to their followers. There are instances where TikTok may also be spontaneous as content shared could be based on the spontaneity of the uploader to show what was happening then. Some moments may be captured unintentionally unexpectedly, giving a refreshing twist to the content. Comments given to the creators might be spontaneous as well. Most of the time, content on TikTok is loosely structured despite being contrived as it due to the social media nature. Users from the app mostly use short, attention-grabbing words, slangs, abbreviation, on their video or caption to attract attention.

Generally, TikTok contents are considered face-to-face, with the audience receiving mostly verbal content cues of the creator. However, between TikTok and a face-to-face conversation, there is no immediate feedback given on regular TikTok videos, making it an asynchronous communication (Salihefendic, n.d.). One exception of the feature of TikTok is the live-streaming features, specifically available for users with more than 1000 followers. Live streaming enables viewers to interact with each other in real-time (Zhou & Wang, 2017). The hybrid of the features is what makes TikTok versatile as a communication medium.

Another function of TikTok is that messaging is allowed. One can message other users even if they do not know them personally, but it does not guarantee a reply from them. Unlike the speech-like feature in TikTok live streams, TikTok is mostly not communicated in real-time.

Other than that, TikTok videos are graphically rich, with the potential to be rich in prosody as well. Some messages are also inserted in the video. The video can be further enhanced with the sticker text, used to direct the users' attention to the content of the video.

Figure 4: Example of TikTok user plastering their video content with stickers/text

TikTok is socially interactive because the interaction between the creator and the user is possible, even between strangers, by following the accounts, tagging, liking and commenting. Additionally, contents on TikTok are immediately and repeatedly reversible, users have the freedom to modify the content before uploading and can delete it anytime they want. Similarly to commenting, comments can be easily removed and deleted by the user.

Conclusion

Overall, TikTok as a medium of communication is a video sharing social networking site that is popular among millennials. People from all walks of life can use this app to express their feelings or share their knowledge through the short video function. Research has shown the popularity of the application over recent years. Comparing TikTok to the speech-like and text-like characteristic, it generally consists of more speech-like features than the text-like feature.

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