

# The fascination of TikTok

## WHAT PRETEENS AND ADOLESCENTS LOVE ABOUT THE APP

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**This article summarizes the results of a series of studies by IZI, which used a representative survey, media analyses and individual case studies to examine the “fascination of TikTok” for young users.**

Within the industry, TikTok has been hailed as “the app of the hour” (igo, 2020). The network has its origins in the Chinese service Musical.ly, and has been operated by the Chinese tech firm ByteDance since summer 2018. In 2020, TikTok was one of the apps that saw the biggest growth in terms of the time that children and adolescents spent using it. In the US, usage time for 4- to 15-year-olds more than doubled in comparison to 2019 (from 38 to 82 minutes per day), and at the peak of lockdown it even tripled. This was also the case in Spain (Qustodio, 2020). This IZI study explores the “fascination of TikTok” with a representative survey, media analyses and individual case studies from a media education perspective.

### WHAT TIKTOK OFFERS

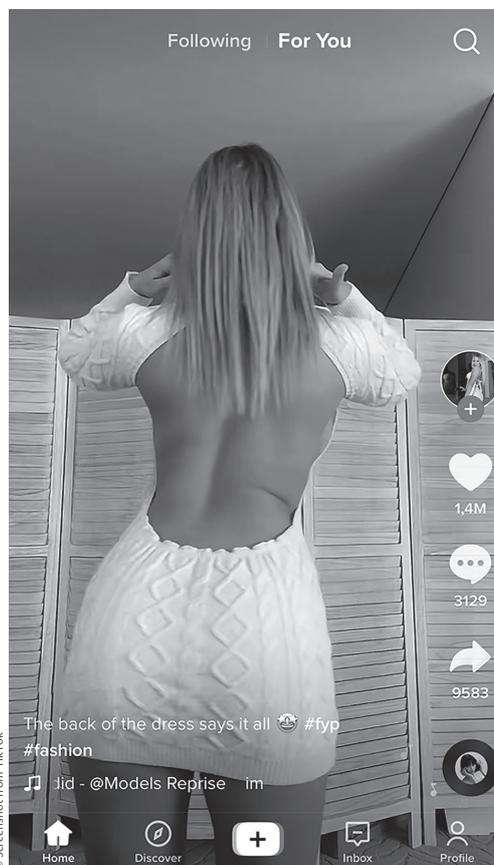
TikTok offers an endless number of short video clips, from 15 seconds to 5 minutes in length, (mostly) showing user-generated content. The algorithm-based “for you” feed plays an endless loop of short videos, which can be rated, commented on and shared (Ill. 1). Users move on to the next video by swiping. The content mainly consists of dancing and lip synch-

ing to pop songs, but also animal videos, stunts or movement arts moves, DIY instructions, professional travel videos, advertising and much more. Many of the videos in the “for you” feed contain material produced by international users. There are clips by influencers, who earn their living by posting videos, and content from businesses, institutions, and occasionally broadcasting corporations, as well as advertising.

The media analysis of the 50 most successful German TikTok accounts (as of 3 February 2020) shows that

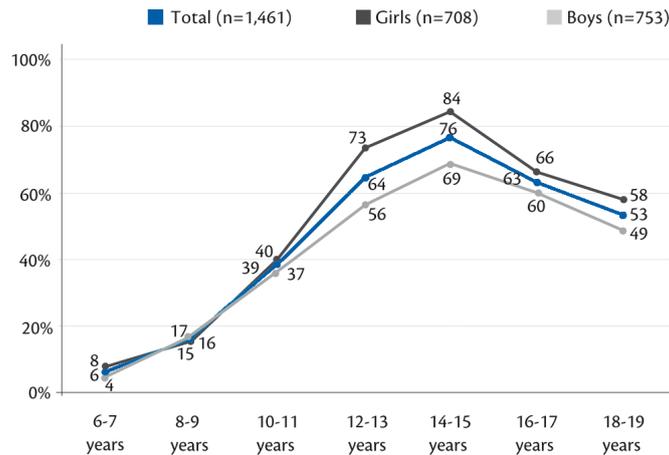
there are more women than men presenting themselves on TikTok, in contrast to YouTube. The protagonists are generally between 15 and 20 years old. Female TikTokers are significantly more likely to show themselves in lip synch videos, while male TikTokers more often present themselves with comedy clips, e.g. pranks or impressions. Their self-presentation shows clear gender stereotypes: girls and women present sexualized and suggestive poses and facial movements (e.g. body in an “S” shape, hip movements or pouting lips), and are usually in skimpy clothing (e.g. with stomach and legs exposed), while boys and men display simple poses and neutral gestures and facial expressions, and wear clothes covering their whole body (see also Stüwe et al. in this issue). In the qualitative analysis of aesthetic patterns and potential positioning in relation to the viewer, recurring types appear:

- In **dance videos with a single person**, the (female) protagonist often stands close to the camera and dances in an erotic, suggestive way for the viewer, as if there were an intimate erotic relationship between them.
- If **several people are dancing**, the angle is wider and the focus is on the synchronization of the dancers’ moves and the use of the space. Viewers are invited to watch and admire the choreography and the dancers’ performance.



Ill. 1: The algorithm-based “for you” feed offers TikTok users an endless loop of short videos

- If TikTokers are **talking** about something or telling humorous stories, the phone camera usually shows the head and upper body. The relationship between speaker and viewers is characterized not by erotic intimacy, but by close communication. Girls and young women are less likely to make statements about particular subjects, but there is a form of self-presentation in which they stand



Ill. 2: Use of TikTok at least once a month (n=1,461 children and adolescents aged 6 to 19, representative sample)

- very close to the camera, making small gestures and maintaining eye contact.
- In **action videos**, the camera accompanies the protagonist, thus inviting the viewer to join him or her on a fast-paced trip.
- In **do-it-yourself videos** and **visual tricks or stunts**, the action is central and the field size is based on whatever the video aims to present. Surprising twists and aesthetic spectacles are part of the dramatic structure.
- In **comedy** and **animal videos**, the camera centres on the action; depending on the quality there may be a dramatic structure with a surprising twist, or the recording may simply end abruptly.

The overall picture that emerges is an entertaining kaleidoscope of short videos addressing users in very different ways, offering them surprising, spectacular, exciting and often intimate content. The aesthetic of user-generated content gives the impression that these are “completely normal” adolescents or young adults, creating a sense of proximity and encouraging imitation. In actual fact many are professionals, who use their high numbers of followers and various forms of advertising to earn their living as influencers.

### DO CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS USE TIKTOK?

In 2021, IZI surveyed a representative sample of n=1,461 children and adolescents aged 6 to 19.<sup>1</sup> In face-to-face interviews, they were asked whether they knew TikTok, whether they used it, and if so, how often. The results show that 9 out of 10 adolescents, and roughly three quarters of the 10- to 12-year-olds, know TikTok. Only a small proportion of the 8- to 9-year-olds use this social network (16%); the highest level of use is found among the 14- to 15-year-olds, with three quarters of all adolescents in this group using it at least once a month. The figure is higher for girls (84%) than for boys (69%) (Ill. 2).

Officially the use of TikTok is permitted with parental consent from the age of 13, otherwise from 18. This means that many preteens and some children are not actually allowed to use the app or post videos themselves – yet they do so nonetheless.

### WHAT IS APPEALING ABOUT TIKTOK?

In the 2020 study, the children and adolescents (n=206) talked about what apps they used at least several times

a week, and what they liked about TikTok. The most common response was that “the videos are amusing” or “it’s funny”. Other frequently stated reasons are the brevity of the videos, the wide range of subjects, the dance videos, and the fact that TikTok is easy to use and helps prevent boredom. Respondents also appreciate the opportunity to post and share things themselves. Another reason

for using the platform is that many of their classmates and friends also use this social network (Ill. 3).

### WHAT DO REGULAR USERS PARTICULARLY LIKE WATCHING?

When it comes to preferred content, there are clear gender differences. Girls like watching videos with dancing and lip synching, and comedy and fashion; boys more often prefer clips relating to comedy and sport, but also dancing and lip synching, and games and cars (Ill. 4). So it is mainly the girls who like watching the intimate forms of staging (solo dances and lip synch).

One third of the 12- to 13-year-olds and nearly half of the 14- to 15-year olds would also watch news on TikTok, if there were news services available that were appealing for adolescents.

In addition to the quantitative survey, 6 case studies were conducted with girls (aged 12 to 14) who post regularly on TikTok, to investigate their enthusiasm for the app in detail. Here it became clear that these girls enjoy watching a wide range of genres, from cool dances to tutorials and images of beautiful places. They usually stick to the “for you” feed, and like the sense of not knowing what will come next. They use TikTok

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as a window to the world, a source of information about trends, a place where they can discover new things, and above all be entertained and have fun. They can appreciate the skill on display, for example in difficult dances; they enjoy the sense of being involved in the action from the start, thanks to the performer's gestures and personal forms of address; and they like to be surprised by an unexpected or amusing ending.

If something is contrary to their values, some of them report it immediately. For example, Makeda<sup>2</sup> (13) reports it "if I see one of those animal TikToks (...), where I know that they're not being well treated". As an example, she mentions pictures of horses in puissance jumping or recordings of orcas in marine parks. She can describe in detail how to report videos, but does not know whether this leads to the videos being blocked. So in this respect the TikTok users questioned here prove to be media-literate and critical.

### DO THEY "JUST" WATCH OR ALSO POST THINGS THEMSELVES?

The representative study clearly shows that most children and adolescents (69.4%) "just" look at things on TikTok, without uploading anything themselves. If they produce videos themselves,

girls almost always make dance and lip-synch videos. These are also the top areas for boys, along with comedy, and followed by sport.

The results of the representative study are confirmed by the case studies, which follow the 6 girls through various activities including producing a video. The girls make dance and lip-synch videos, or sometimes just recordings of themselves with no particular theme. When filming, some of the girls show considerable competence in dealing with the technical details of the media: for example, they are experienced in choosing the right light for their performance. Some use filters. They mostly get their ideas from the "for you" page; they discern trends or see "a cool beat" on a friend's page and then "you reproduce it" (Nina, 12).

They often spend a long time practising the dances beforehand, and the filming of a 20-second video sometimes lasts for up to 2 hours, until they are happy with the way it looks. At other times they film spontaneously and upload the videos straight away. If the girls feel they cannot dance well enough, they present themselves in lip-synch videos or just film themselves facing the camera.

The film locations are often the girls' bedrooms or the school toilets. One of the respondents says there was trouble

at her school when the head teacher realized they were uploading dances from the school building.

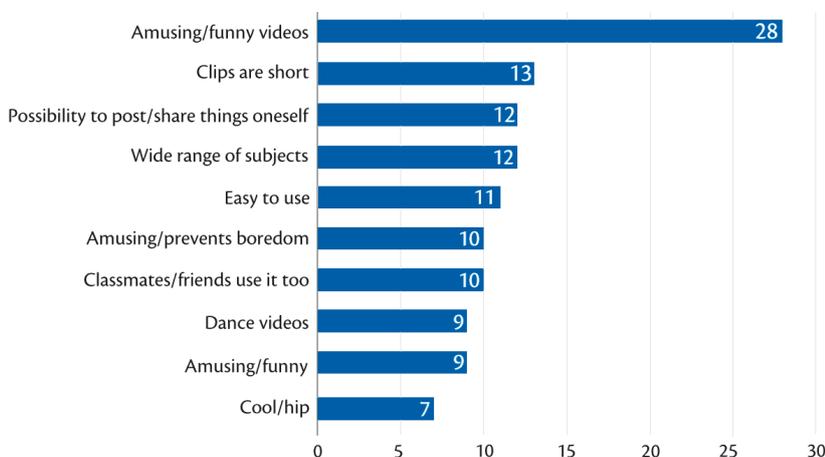
The reasons why they invest so much time in watching and producing videos vary from case to case. From a subjective perspective, a video "just comes about because I'm bored or because I see some videos on other platforms, and then I want to do them too" (Alshlyn, 12).

For some respondents, the desire for self-expression is central: they want to show themselves and gain recognition for this. For others, it is a way to creatively develop friendships. One girl initially posts videos on a channel that is only accessible to friends, until the clip has enough likes to show it publicly. This allows them to demonstrate their expertise. The goal of most of the girls is to get as many likes and (positive) comments as possible. For Nina (12), her great goal is to achieve "three K", i.e. "three thousand followers", and to be "really good" at video design so she can make the videos look the way she wants them.

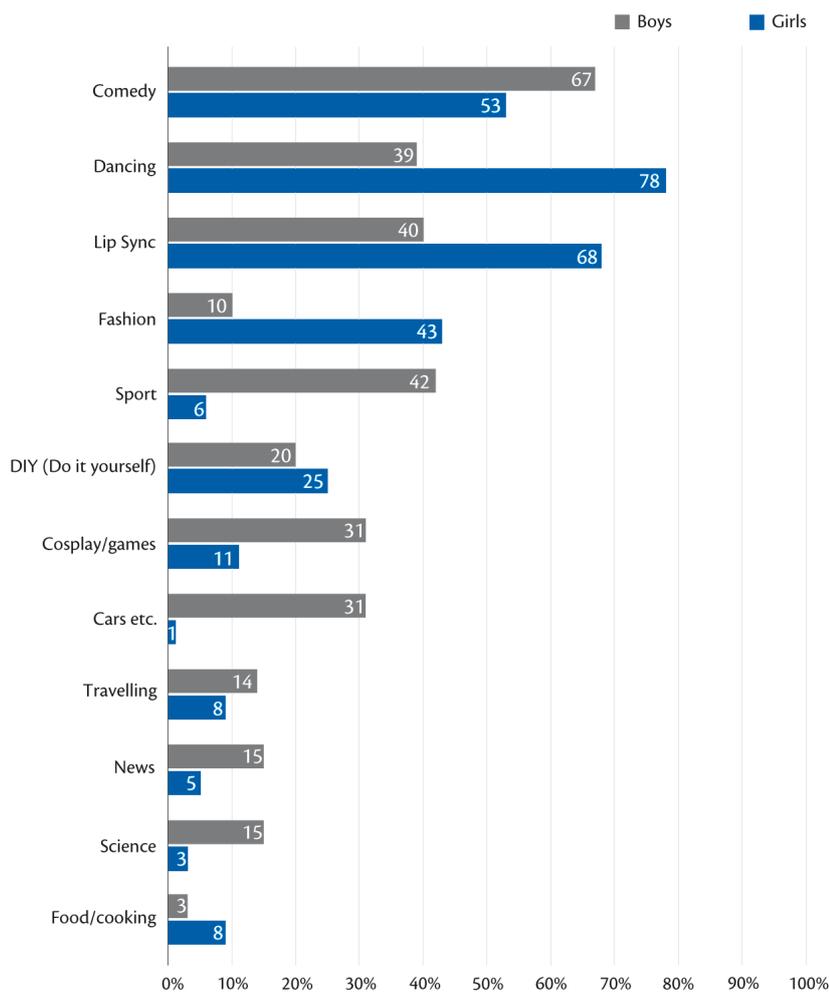
### Advertising purposes behind posts and challenges

### DO USERS TAKE PART IN CHALLENGES REGULARLY?

A typical phenomenon on TikTok is the challenges: a task is set and TikTok users film themselves trying to complete it, e.g. by doing as many push-ups as possible (#Pushupchallenge), performing particular dances (e.g. the Whopper dance), or dancing to frighten animals (#KulikitakaChallenge). From a commercial perspective, challenges are hailed as "the biggest trends on TikTok" and an ideal tool for marketing to specific target groups (Docherty, 2020). The representative study shows, however, that only a very small proportion of



Ill. 3: What regular TikTok users (aged 8 to 19) particularly like about the app (n=206, multiple answers possible)



Ill. 4: What regular TikTok users (aged 8 to 19) like watching (n=206, multiple answers possible)

the regular users – 15% of the boys and 4.7% of the girls – take part in such challenges.

In the case studies, Nina (12) says that on the previous day she made a video in response to the “ten finger” challenge. Here questions are asked and the TikToker (first holding up all 10 fingers) puts one finger down for every positive response. “For example there was [the question]: ‘Have you ever been drunk? And have you ever been hit?’” Nina does not ask any critical questions about whether this involves worldwide disclosure of something that should actually be private. From a media education perspective, this is not the only critical area.

### WHAT DO TIKTOK USERS KNOW ABOUT TIKTOK?

Only one fifth of the 12- to 13-year-olds and a quarter of the 14- to 19-year-olds know that TikTok is owned by a Chinese company. Some assume that TikTok belongs to Facebook or Instagram or Huawei, or that it comes from India. In the case studies, none of the girls have any background knowledge about TikTok or any idea what actually happens to the data disclosed on the app. They are completely unaware of the process that happens before a video is uploaded by TikTok: the fact that each video is briefly reviewed and ranked, a practice that has earned the

Chinese parent company accusations of censorship.

### Do users change their security settings?

The majority of the girls aged 12 and over who use TikTok regularly have their own account. This is only the case for about half of the boys. Nearly 9 in 10 children and adolescents (87.1%) retain the default security settings on their account, meaning that there is no limit on the number of people who can watch the videos they upload. Only a smaller proportion take care to choose the private setting, restricting access for strangers – or only giving access to followers that they know personally.

### Are there things they would prefer not to have seen?

For 7% of German children, negative experiences of and contact with age-inappropriate content are an everyday part of life online (mpfs, 2019, pp. 60 ff.). This also applies to regular TikTok users. One in 10 respondents (9.7%) had seen something they would rather not have seen, the girls (14.3%) more often than the boys (5%). “Cruelty to animals”, “sexism”, “ugly people”, “violence/fighting” and “disgusting videos” were all mentioned more than once. Individual respondents also mentioned “sad videos about people who have died, especially children”, “child pornography”, “a guy was dancing with a snake”, “shaving off eyebrows” and “my mother”.

In the case studies, Alshlyn (12) says that she once saw a video where “someone killed themselves, and that just wasn’t something you should see. I only saw it by chance, lots of people have reported it already”. When she tried to watch it again “it was probably deleted and the comment was deleted too”.

*Hate speech is accepted as a potential danger when using TikTok*

**Do the young users receive messages from strangers?**

Most of the regular users make their account visible for everyone. One of the dangers this brings is that of unwanted contact, and just over a quarter (25.7%) of the preteens and adolescents have received messages from strangers, the girls (29.5%) slightly more often than the boys (21.8%). While this still tends to be the exception at primary school and in the first 2 years of secondary school, it applies to every second female respondent in the 18 to 19 age group. In most cases (75.5%) this was seen as pleasing, since these were mostly remarks about how well they were dancing or lip synching. A quarter of the respondents found this an unpleasant experience. The case studies reveal deeper dimensions. In some cases, the girls assume that TikTok has mechanisms to temporarily exclude people who “hate” too much, and that such people “are shut out of TikTok for a week or so”. In the case studies, 1 of the 6 girls reports having had comments that were “not so positive”. When questioned more closely, she says that the comments alluded to her “skin, because it doesn’t look the same as other people’s, (...) or (...) my hair or my body shape”. Alshlyn (12) has slight acne, is a dark-skinned German, and has received racist comments. She accepts such comments with deliberate composure: if they appear, she changes her account settings for a while, “so that only friends could see [my posts] or just to private”, or she deletes the videos in question. She deals with negative comments as follows: “So either I take [it] out or I delete the comment, but if the person doesn’t stop, then I report them, because it’s just not OK.” With astonishing composure, the 12-year-old secondary school student recounts that her account was hacked, that racist and homophobic comments were made, and videos and comments by other people were posted in her name.

In response, she deleted her account, reported what had happened, and set up a new account. She does not see this as a reason to leave TikTok, “because I’ve kind of got into the habit of using it, I’d say”. But she hopes that this kind of thing will not happen again. It seems that the girls are aware of hacking and hate speech as negative experiences, but accept this as a potential danger and hope that it will not happen to them more than once.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Although the app TikTok can officially only be used from the age of 13, 1 in 3 children aged 10 to 11 are already using it. TikTok offers light entertainment and community with friends, and it inspires young people to be creative themselves. The children and adolescents have knowledge in many areas, such as the use of the app for filming, editing and cutting, and many probably also know how to report posts that they see as inappropriate. There are pedagogical opportunities here: to take the interests of preteens and adolescents as a starting point and work with them to gather more practical experience in aesthetic design and film dramaturgy. As well as opportunities, the new trend also presents pedagogical problems. Young people need to be more aware of security settings, and of the relationship between publicly and privately posted personal statements; they need to know more about the background of TikTok; and they need skills in identifying advertising purposes behind posts and challenges. There also needs to be a constructive discourse with regard to self-sexualization, contact from strangers, and how to deal with hate speech, cyber grooming and account hacking. Despite all the skills that children and adolescents intuitively acquire with new networks such as TikTok, they need pedagogical support to deal with potential stumbling blocks. ■

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Conducted by iconKids & youth as part of the omnibus survey iconYOUTH Bus (in home, CAPI), by 729 specially trained young interviewers. The field period for the 2020 study was 28 February to 9 April 2020, for the 2021 study it was 9 March to 14 April 2021. The sample is representative of the population of 6- or 8- to 19-year-olds living in private households in Germany. Quotas were applied based on the age, sex and migration background of the respondents, the school they attended and the school-leaving qualification they were working towards, distribution by federal states and community size classes (selection per 150 BIK sample points), and mother’s marital status.

<sup>2</sup> The names of the children and adolescents have been changed.

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