

# Young women are the face of TikTok

## A STUDY ON REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER ON TIKTOK

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**This study examines the social media app TikTok with regard to the gender representations of its users.**

Lip synching, fast cutting, colourful filters – these are the essence of TikTok, the app from Chinese provider ByteDance. In August 2018, an app previously known as Musical.ly was merged with the Chinese platform. As a result, the market leader in the Asian region is now successfully represented in the Western social media world – especially among younger users. In contrast to successful audiovisual social media services such as Instagram and YouTube, TikTok mainly attracts a very young audience. According to the German 2021 JIM study, the frequency of use increases the younger the person is. While 13% of 18- to 19-year-olds in Germany use this app regularly, the figure is 24% for 14- to 15-year-olds, and rises to 35% for 12- to 13-year-olds (mpfs, 2021). The TikTok community and the content produced and viewed therefore offer the young adolescent target group many opportunities to develop identities through social media.

### IDENTITY, GENDER AND SOCIAL MEDIA

TikTok users operate in a nearly age-homogeneous space, which has many advantages. They can play around with creative elements of the app (e.g. editing and musical techniques) and thus acquire new skills. Thanks to the age-related seclusion of the community

and the ease of use of the app, TikTok can support developmental processes such as gains in autonomy. At the same time, the app provides a parent-free space, where there are no sanctions for interest-specific experimentation (Harring et al., 2010). This creates a kind of “identity market” (Vogelsang, 2014), where adolescents can try out and practise strategies of self-presentation. The young age of users and the tendency to experiment with identities in adolescence lead us to suppose that such a digitally created space on TikTok will allow diversity and variety in content, visibility and self-presentation. And yet studies on the practices of representation of German-speaking YouTubers (Prommer et al., 2019), or young girls on Instagram (Götz & Becker, 2019), have concluded that these are more likely to (re)produce a one-sided, stereotypical world with gender-determined roles and ideals of beauty. In other words, the forms of social media that are popular with adolescents tend to restrict spaces of experimentation rather than cultivating them, thus suppressing displays of diversity. It also seems that there are efforts within TikTok to inhibit diversity. In 2019 moderation guidelines were revealed which restrict the visibility of content from people with disabilities and from overweight or queer users (Reuter & Köver, 2019). In 2022, research by public broadcasting association ARD found out that in the German TikTok, terms are apparently censored and comments blocked which can be semantically assigned to political discussions or

social and freedom movements (e.g. words such as gay, homo, LGBTQ, National Socialism, Auschwitz and even the Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai) (Deutschlandfunk, 2022).

There are, however, barely empirical studies on the representation and self-presentation of German-speaking users and their content on TikTok. Only the JFF Institute for Media Education conducted a monitoring study with 12- to 14-year-olds. The focus was on receptive and productive use, their motives and self-presentation on TikTok as well as their perceived risks of the platform and their handling strategies in this context (Stecher et al., 2020).

### THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to examine the representation and self-presentation of TikTokers. Although TikTok is now used by many influencers as a supplementary platform to build up and consolidate their following (Eisenbrand, 2019), it requires a different approach. This is partly because of the very young target group and partly because of the specifications (e.g. videos can usually only be 60 seconds long). So the way the app works and its audience differ substantially from well-known content and advertising apps such as Instagram or YouTube. It is therefore interesting to investigate whether this time limitation can create differences in visibility and diversity in comparison to popular social media services, or whether users

## RESEARCH

reproduce the same tried and tested strategies for the representation of their own gender, in order to gain more followers and secure their place in the social media market.

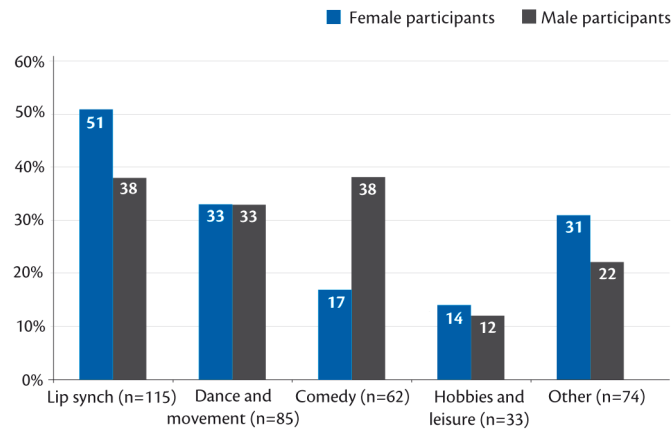
The focus is on the 50 most successful German TikTok accounts held by individuals (as of 3 February 2020).<sup>1</sup> Of these, 27 accounts are held by young women and 15 by young men. The other 8

accounts either belong to non-binary users (n=1) or teams (n=7). Further parameters, such as the total number of likes and comments, are provided by the monitoring platform pentos.co. As well as looking at the basic monitoring data, the study aims to analyse the strategies of self-presentation used by the main participants. 4 videos were selected from each account (if available): the one with the most likes, the most comments, and the most shares, as well as the most recent one. In total, the analysis included 198 videos. These were analysed using a standardized coding method and the Audiovisual Character Analysis (ACIS) system (Linke & Prommer, 2021; Prommer & Linke, 2019), with a focus on representations of gender. Of particular interest here are the account holders visible in the videos, and other people who appear and are named verbally or tagged. A total of 257 individuals were identified, of whom 64% (n=165) were female, 34% (n=88) male, and 2% (n=4) non-binary.<sup>2</sup>

## RESULTS

### Women toil, men triumph

The analysis of the monitoring data from the top 50 accounts shows that male account holders, with an average of 2.1 million subscribers, have more followers than female users, with an



Ill. 1: TikTok: genres by gender (n=369; multiple answers possible)

average of 1.9 million subscribers. In contrast, women engage in more networking than men, following more accounts (women follow 458 accounts on average, men 201). They also produce far more content, with an average of 1,234 videos as opposed to men with an average of 603 videos. However, users rate the content produced by male TikTokers more positively. Their average number of likes per video is 150,738, while the average for videos produced by women is 88,786. Male TikTokers also get more comments and shares: the average number of comments is 166,208 for men and 88,808 for women, and the average number of shares is 220,429 for men and 174,158 for women.

### Young bodies in motion

Like their audience, TikTok influencers are young. More than half (58%) of the individuals identified in the study are aged between 15 and 20. Up to the age of 24, there is no significant divergence between female and male influencers. From the age of 25, however, men appear more frequently than women (43% vs. 29%).

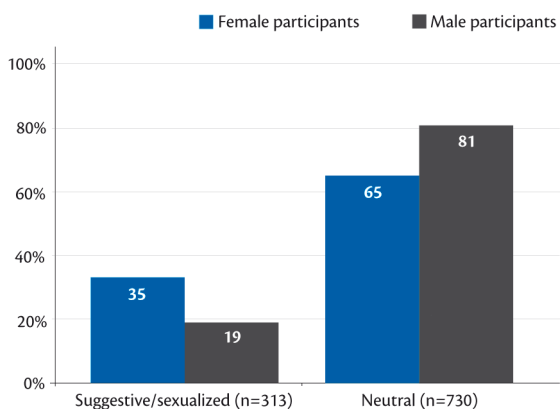
Further differences can be identified in the area of genre. While female TikTokers are significantly more likely to lip synch in front of the camera (51%), male TikTokers more often present themselves in comedy clips such as

pranks or imitations (38%) (Ill. 1). It can also be observed that female participants are more experimental in the production of content, appearing in a greater number and variety of genres. Male participants avoid certain genres such as beauty and fashion (4%), which are thus occupied solely by women.

TikTok is an app with a strong focus on bodies.

Both male and female

participants mainly show their upper body (female: 52%; male: 55%) or their whole body (female: 48%; male: 63%). Although young TikTokers of both sexes are mainly to be seen standing or performing simple movements, slight differences can be observed: women in the sample are more likely to show themselves dancing than men (28% vs. 15%). Facial expressions and gestures are also core components of these videos, especially those emphasizing the body. Here significant differences appear. It becomes apparent that women's videos are much more likely than men's to contain sexualized and suggestive gestures and facial movements, e.g. body in "S" shape (17%), hip movements (30%) or pouting lips (9%) (Ill. 2). The alluring presentation of bodies is also reflected in the use of make-up. 58% of all female participants have visible make-up on their faces, while another 14% have very obvious, overstated make-up. At the same time, female TikTokers much more frequently (20%) present themselves in skimpy clothing (e.g. with their stomach and legs exposed) than young men. Male participants, in contrast, mainly present themselves with neutral gestures and facial expressions. For example, they use simple poses filmed front-on (97%), side-on (40%) or from behind (18%), and most (97%) appear fully clothed or in normal clothing.



Ill. 2: TikTok: bodies, facial expressions and gestures by gender (n=1,043, multiple answers possible)

### White, slim, not particularly diverse

The participants are mostly *white* (86%). Although male TikTokers cover a slightly wider spectrum in terms of ethnic diversity (e.g. Middle Eastern or mixed), the differences between men (81% *white*) and women (89% *white*) are small. When it comes to body shape, the majority of the people shown (99%) fall into the thin or normal category. Apart from one individual case among the female participants, there are practically no larger bodies (1%).

### Sexuality is a hidden topic

Diverse sexualities are also virtually invisible. 95% of the videos themselves do not thematize sexuality. This topic is largely hidden, not just in the clips studied here but also in the accounts and the other videos on them (female TikTokers: 66%; male: 59%). If there are any references to the participants' sexuality on the accounts, then both females (33%) and males (35%) mainly present themselves as heterosexual. Homosexual individuals are marginal. Nonetheless, it may be noted that gay male participants appear slightly more often (6%) than lesbians (1%).

## CONCLUSION

TikTok is young; TikTok dances, sings, and shows its body. This is exactly what female participants do. So their self-presentation matches that of the platform, as it were, and these young women can be described as the face of TikTok. They make the familiar lip-synch videos, dance across

the screen in skimpy clothing and make suggestive movements. In short, successful female TikTokers – despite their comparatively young age – are already deploying familiar, traditional body techniques. Young men, in contrast, produce more neutral, comedy-oriented entertainment clips, which are rated more highly in the TikTok community. They receive significantly more positive feedback in the form of likes, comments and shares than the young female participants. At the same time, diversity in the form of gender, sexuality, ethnicity or body shape is barely present among the top 50 accounts and the people appearing in their videos. We can only speculate about how much this has to do with internal moderation guidelines, which artificially restrict the reach of certain users and thus prevent them from performing successfully on the platform. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Accounts held by football clubs (e.g. FC Bayern München) and accounts for pets were excluded.

<sup>2</sup> Non-binary users were excluded from further analysis due to their low numbers.

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