

# **TikTok Affordances as Identity Infrastructure for Generation Z**

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## **Abstract**

TikTok has become a central arena in which Generation Z users construct and negotiate digital identity, yet research on how its affordances relate to this process remains fragmented across platform-feature, algorithmic, and self-presentation perspectives. This article presents a systematic literature review that examines how TikTok affordances have been conceptualized, how existing studies explain their role in Generation Z digital identity construction, and what theoretical, methodological, and empirical gaps remain. Following PRISMA 2020 guidance, 37 peer-reviewed studies published between 2021 and 2026 were retrieved from Scopus and a supplementary Google Scholar search, appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool, and analyzed through thematic synthesis, yielding five descriptive and three analytical themes. The review finds that algorithmic affordances (recommendation, personalization, and visibility) dominate the literature, while social affordances remain comparatively under-examined. It identifies three mechanisms linking affordances to identity: algorithmic

recognition, the negotiation of visibility and platform power, and community-based affirmation and cultural meaning-making. On this basis, the review reconceptualizes TikTok as an identity infrastructure rather than merely a platform for self-presentation. This reconceptualization is offered as a conceptual proposition rather than a demonstrated effect. Because 33 of the 37 studies rely primarily on qualitative and self-reported accounts of user experience, and relatively few directly examine recommendation systems or their effects over time, the evidence is better suited to explaining how users perceive and interpret algorithmic influence than how recommendation systems objectively shape identity. The literature is also concentrated on marginalized communities. Advancing the field, therefore, requires observational, computational, and longitudinal research extending beyond the populations studied to date.

**Keywords:** *Digital Identity; Generation Z; Platform Affordances; Systematic Literature Review; TikTok.*

## **1. Introduction**

In contemporary digital culture, TikTok has emerged as one of the most influential platforms among Generation Z users. As the platform's largest demographic group, Generation Z has played a central role in TikTok's rapid growth and cultural significance (Karataş & Karakoç, 2024). Unlike earlier social media platforms that rely primarily on pre-existing social networks, TikTok is driven by algorithmic recommendations and personalized content discovery (Lu & Lu, 2019; Zhao & Wagner, 2023). Through its creative tools and recommendation systems, the platform has become an important environment in which young people express, negotiate, and construct digital identities. This significance is not merely demographic. Having grown up within networked and digitally mediated environments, Generation Z is accustomed to recording, editing, and sharing representations of the self as part of everyday social communication (Boyd, 2014; Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Consequently, digital identity is continuously performed, adjusted, and negotiated through platform-based interactions, making self-construction an increasingly ordinary and taken-for-granted aspect of everyday life (Francis & Hoefel, 2018)

Despite growing scholarly interest in TikTok and digital identity, the literature remains conceptually fragmented. Existing studies tend to examine platform affordances, algorithmic identity formation, and self-presentation as separate phenomena, leaving unclear how these perspectives collectively explain Generation Z digital identity construction on TikTok (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Hollenbaugh, 2021; Zhao & Wagner, 2023). Consequently,

there remains no systematic synthesis that maps how TikTok affordances have been conceptualized across the literature or explains how different perspectives collectively account for Generation Z digital identity construction. Furthermore, existing studies rarely integrate affordance-based, self-presentation, and deep mediatization perspectives within a unified analytical framework.

Existing studies increasingly suggest that digital identity on TikTok is shaped not only by users' self-expression but also by the platform environment in which such expression occurs. Drawing on the concept of affordances, researchers argue that platform features enable and constrain communication, visibility, and interaction (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). On TikTok, recommendation systems, creative tools, and participatory features influence how users present themselves and engage with others. Consequently, identity construction is understood as a product of the interplay between user agency, audience dynamics, and platform infrastructures rather than as an entirely individual process (Hollenbaugh, 2021). This perspective is further reflected in the concept of the algorithmized self, which highlights how users' identities are increasingly shaped through ongoing interactions with algorithmic recommendation systems (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

To examine this relationship, this review draws on an integrated framework combining social media affordances (Treem & Leonardi, 2013), TikTok-specific affordances (Zhao & Wagner, 2023), imagined affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015), self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), and deep mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Because TikTok combines platform features, algorithmic recommendations, user interpretation, and identity performance, no single framework is sufficient to explain the relationship between affordances and digital identity construction. Taken together, these perspectives form a layered framework linking platform structure, user perception, identity practice, and everyday embedding, providing the conceptual basis for understanding Generation Z digital identity construction on TikTok.

A systematic literature review (SLR) was selected because the objective of this study is not merely to map the breadth of TikTok scholarship, but to synthesize how existing research conceptualizes the relationship between TikTok affordances and Generation Z digital identity construction. By systematically identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant studies, this review provides a structured account of how affordances have been theorized, how they relate to identity construction, and where important theoretical, methodological, and empirical gaps remain within the literature.

This paper aims to systematically review the literature on TikTok affordances and Generation Z digital identity construction. By synthesizing existing studies, it seeks to clarify how platform affordances have been conceptualized, how they relate to identity construction, and what gaps remain within the literature. To achieve this aim, the review is guided by three research questions: (1) How have TikTok affordances been conceptualized in previous studies? (2) How do existing studies explain the relationship between TikTok affordances and Generation Z digital identity construction? and (3) What theoretical, methodological, and empirical gaps can be identified in the existing literature?

## 2. Methods

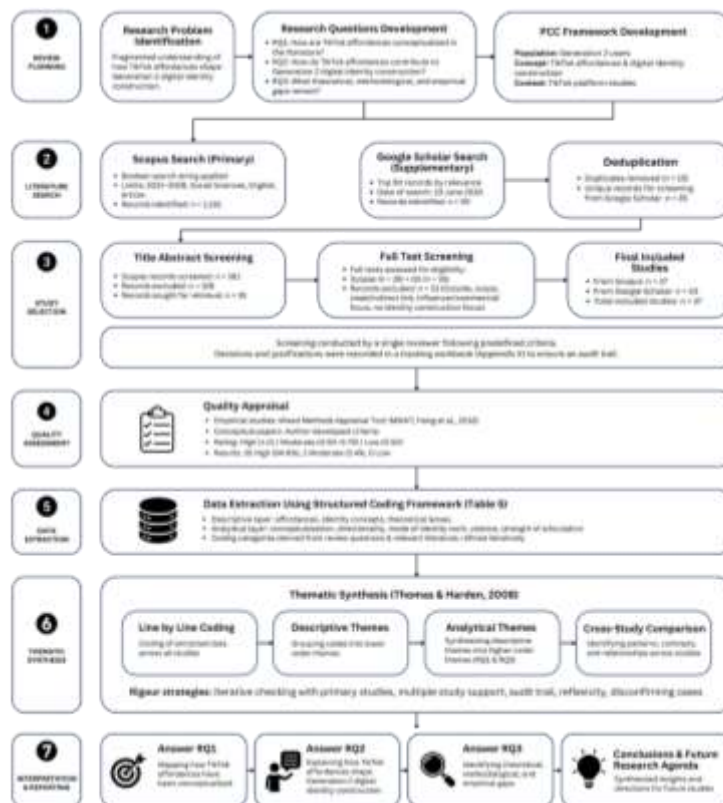


Figure 1. Methodological Framework

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to examine how previous research has conceptualized TikTok affordances and explained their relationship with Generation Z digital identity construction. As illustrated in Figure 1, the review followed a multi-stage process: review planning, literature searching, study selection, quality appraisal, data

extraction, thematic synthesis, and interpretation. It adopted the PRISMA 2020 framework to guide identification, screening, and reporting, while thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) generated higher-order interpretations across the included literature, providing a transparent and reproducible basis for understanding the affordance–identity relationship within TikTok's algorithmic environment.

To define the review's scope, the PCC framework (Population, Concept, Context) was applied, as the review maps and synthesizes a broad, conceptually driven body of literature rather than evaluating an intervention. Here, Population refers to Generation Z or young TikTok users; Concept to TikTok affordances and digital identity construction; and Context to TikTok as a short-form, algorithmic, platformized media environment. The PCC framework is summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1. PCC Framework**

<b>Component</b>	<b>Description</b>
Population (P)	Gen Z or young TikTok users as subjects of digital identity construction
Concept (C)	TikTok affordances and their relation to digital identity construction/self-presentation
Context (C)	TikTok is a short-form video, algorithmic, and platformized media environment

Scopus served as the primary database, given its broad, high-quality indexing across communication, media, and the social sciences. Because reliance on a single database may introduce coverage bias, Google Scholar was added as a supplementary source via the PRISMA 2020 “other methods” route, screening the first 50 results (by relevance, on 19 June 2026) to capture studies (including regional or open-access venues) not indexed in Scopus; the limited reproducibility of Google Scholar searches motivated this a priori cap. Results were limited to peer-reviewed journals and review articles published in English between 2021 and 2026, then combined and de-duplicated before screening.

Search terms operationalized the Concept and Context components of PCC, covering TikTok affordances, platform features, and algorithmic recommendations alongside digital identity, identity construction, and self-presentation. Affordance and identity terms were combined in one TikTok-anchored query rather than separate clusters, ensuring that studies bridging both concepts were captured. The Population component was applied at

screening rather than in the search string because TikTok is predominantly youth-oriented, and embedding “Generation Z” or “youth” would have reduced sensitivity. Full search strings appear in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Search Strings

Search Cluster	Boolean Components
Primary Source: Scopus	( TikTok ) AND ( affordance* OR "platform feature*" OR "algorithmic recommendation" OR "recommendation algorithm" OR "algorithmic curation" OR "algorithmic visibility" OR "For You Page" OR "For You feed" OR FYP OR "digital identit*" OR "online identit*" OR "identity construction" OR "identity formation" OR "identity performance" OR "identity negotiation" OR "self-presentation" OR "self presentation" OR "self-representation" OR "impression management" OR authenticity )
Supplementary Source: Google Scholar	TikTok ("affordance" OR "For You Page" OR "algorithmic recommendation") ("digital identity" OR "self-presentation" OR "identity construction" OR "identity performance" OR authenticity OR "impression management" OR "identity negotiation")

Study selection was guided by predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure alignment with the research questions and the PCC framework. The criteria were designed to identify studies examining TikTok as a platformized and algorithmically mediated environment, with particular attention to platform affordances, recommendation systems, digital identity construction, self-presentation, authenticity, and related identity processes among young users. Screening was conducted through title, abstract, and full-text assessment. The complete eligibility criteria are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Inclusion Criteria</b>	<b>Exclusion Criteria</b>
Population	Studies focusing on Gen Z, Generation Z, youth, adolescents, young adults, or young social media users	Studies focusing only on children, older adults, organizations, brands, or general users without relevance to youth identity practices
Platform & Context	Studies focusing on TikTok as an algorithmic, platformized, short-form video environment, including studies that provided TikTok as the central object of analysis	Studies focusing only on unrelated platforms without relevance to TikTok or short-form video affordances
Conceptual Focus	Studies addressing platform / social media affordances, algorithmic recommendation (e.g., For You Page), and/or digital identity, identity construction, identity formation, identity performance, identity negotiation, self-presentation, self-representation, impression management, online identity, or authenticity	Studies that do not substantively address platform affordances, identity, self-presentation, or user-platform interaction, or whose primary focus is marketing/commerce, engagement/flow, health info, linguistics, governance, cross-platform, influencer focus, or political communication without a clear link to identity practices
Study Type / Design	Empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method), systematic reviews, conceptual	Opinion pieces, editorials, news articles, blog posts, and other non-scholarly works



Methodological quality was appraised with the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018) for empirical studies, supplemented by author-developed criteria for conceptual papers assessing conceptual clarity, theoretical grounding, internal coherence, theoretical contribution, and transparency of scope and assumptions. Following MMAT, each study was screened on two questions (clarity of objectives; adequacy of data) and then scored against five design-specific criteria, with the mean classified as High ( $\geq 0.80$ ), Moderate (0.50–0.79), or Low ( $< 0.50$ ). Consistent with thematic synthesis, appraisal-informed interpretation rather than exclusion. Overall quality was high: of 37 studies, 35 (94.6%) were High and 2 (5.4%) Moderate, with none Low; the two Moderate studies lost points on reporting of data collection and analysis rather than design (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Summary of Quality Appraisal Results (n = 37)

Quality tier	Score range	Number of studies	Percentage
High	$\geq 0.80$	35	94.60%
Moderate	0.50–0.79	2	5.40%
Low	$< 0.50$	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	—	<b>37</b>	<b>100%</b>

Data were extracted using a structured coding framework (Table 5), capturing both the substantive focus of each study and the nature of the affordance–identity relationship. A descriptive layer recorded affordances, identity concepts, and theoretical lenses, while an analytical layer characterized the relationship by conceptualization, directionality, mode of identity work, valence, and strength of articulation. Categories were derived from the review questions and relevant literature and refined iteratively. This approach enabled the review to move beyond identifying the presence of an affordance–identity link and to examine how that relationship was conceptualized across studies. Extracted findings were analyzed through Thomas & Harden (2008) three-stage procedure: line-by-line coding, descriptive themes, and higher-order analytical themes, with cross-study comparison informing the identification of gaps. Themes were iteratively checked against primary studies, analytical themes were retained only when supported by multiple studies, and an audit trail linking initial codes, descriptive themes, and analytical themes was maintained throughout the process. Reflexive awareness was also maintained during coding and synthesis, recognizing that familiarity with TikTok and affordance scholarship could shape interpretation, while disconfirming cases were actively examined to strengthen analytical rigor.

**Table 5. Coding Framework**

Variable / dimension	Coding categories	Description
<b>Descriptive coding (what the study examines)</b>		
TikTok affordance	Social affordances: visibility, editability, persistence, association. Algorithmic affordances: recommendation, For-You-Page (FYP) / algorithmic visibility, datafication	Which platform affordances does the study examine
Digital identity	Self-presentation, identity performance, identity negotiation, authenticity, impression management, algorithmized self	Which identity-related concept does the study examine?
Theoretical lens	e.g., affordance theory, algorithmic imaginary, dramaturgy, performativity, communication theory of identity	The conceptual framework grounding the study
<b>Analytical coding (the affordance–identity relationship)</b>		
Conceptualization of affordance	Technical feature / Perceived (relational) affordance / Algorithmic imaginary	How the affordance itself is theorized
Directionality	Platform-shaping (affordance→identity) / User-appropriation (identity→affordance) / Co-constitutive	Which side drives the relationship
Mode of identity work	Enabling self-presentation / Algorithmic visibility & recognition / Negotiation of authenticity / Resistance & domestication	The process through which the affordance relates to identity
Valence	Enabling / Constraining / Ambivalent	Whether the affordance supports or hinders identity construction

Variable / dimension	Coding categories	Description
Strength of articulation	Central / Partial / Peripheral	How centrally the affordance–identity link is theorized

### 3. Result

#### 3.1 Characteristics of Included Studies

Thirty-seven studies met the inclusion criteria. Published between 2021 and 2026, they reflect the rapid growth of scholarly interest in TikTok as a site of digital identity construction among young users. The corpus spans a wide range of identity contexts, such as neurodivergent, LGBTQ+, transgender, ethnic and cultural, professional, educational, and gendered identities, providing a broad basis for examining how affordances shape identity work across different social positions.

While most studies directly examined the affordance–identity relationship, two were retained as peripheral, context-setting contributions: Maddox and Gill (2023) on platform vernaculars and community formation, and Schellewald (2021) on communicative and interactional forms. Both illuminate the broader communicative environment but do not foreground affordance–identity relationships, and so were not mapped onto the thematic structure.

**Table 6.** Characteristics of Included Studies (n = 37)

N	Author(s) & Year	Method	Q	Primary Affordance	Identity Concept	Conceptualisation	Dir	Mode of Identity Work	V	S
<b>Theme 1: Algorithmic Recognition and Self-Discovery</b>										
1	Cullen et al. (2025).	Qual	H	Algorithmic – recommendation	Identity development; self-concept	Perceived / Relational	CC	Algorithmic visibility & recognition	A	•
2	Bhandari & Bimo	Concept	H	Algorithmic – recommendation	Algorithmized self	Imagined / Interpretive	PS	Algorithmic visibility &	A	•

N o	Auth or(s) & Year	Me tho d	Q	Primary Afforda nce	Identit y Concep t	Concept ualisatio n	D ir	Mode of Identit y Work	V al	S t r
	(2022)							recogni tion		
3	Taylor & Chen (2024)	Quant	H	Algorithmic – recommendation	Social identity ; identity validation	Perceived / Relational	PS	Algorithmic visibility & recognition	A	●
4	Lagerkvist & Foka (2026)	Qual	H	Algorithmic – recommendation	Self-discovery; neurodivergent identity	Imagined / Interpretive	CC	Enabling self-presentation	A	●
5	Lee et al. (2022).	Qual	H	Algorithmic personalization	Self-concept	Algorithmic	PS	Self-reflecti on; self-understanding; identity alignment	E	●
6	Milton et al. (2023).	Qual	H	Algorithmic – recommendation	Self-concept	Algorithmic	PS	Self-discovery; identity recognition	A	●
<b>Theme 2: Negotiating and Domesticating Algorithmic Power</b>										
7	Entrena-Serrano	Concept	H	Algorithmic – recommendation	Algorithmized self	Perceived / Relational	PS	Algorithmic visibility &	C	●

N o	Auth or(s) & Year	Me tho d	Q	Primary Afforda nce	Identit y Concep t	Concept ualisatio n	D ir	Mode of Identit y Work	V al	S t r
8	(2025) Schell ewald (2022)	Qu al	H	Algorith mic – recomm endatio n	Algorit hmized self	Imagined / Interpreti ve	CC	recogni tion Negoti ation of authent icity Negoti ation of authent icity; Resista nce & domest ication	A	●
9	DeVit o (2022)	Qu al	H	Algorith mic – FYP/vis ibility	Gender identity negotia tion	Perceive d / Relationa l	CC		A	●
10	Steen , Yurec hko, & Klug (2023)	Qu al	H	Algorith mic moderat ion	Self- expressi on	Imagined / Interpreti ve	CC	Resista nce & adaptat ion	A	●
11	Obrej a (2024)	Qu al	H	Algorith mic – recomm endatio n	none	Algorith mic	UA	none	A	○
12	Kariz at et al. (2021).	Qu al	H	Algorith mic – recomm endatio n	Person identity & social identity	Algorith mic	PS	Identit y negotia tion; algorit hmic	A	●

N o	Auth or(s) & Year	Me tho d	Q	Primary Afforda nce	Identit y Concep t	Concept ualisatio n	D ir	Mode of Identit y Work	V al	S tr
13	Simpson et al. (2022).	Qual	H	Algorithmic personalization	Algorithmic identity	Algorithmic	PS	resistance Identity alignment; domestication	A	●
14	Issar (2023)	Qual	H	Algorithmic – recommendation	Algorithmic identity (indirect)	Algorithmic	CC	Algorithmic literacy	A	●
<b>Theme 3: Performing Authentic and Strategic Selves under Conditions of Visibility</b>										
15	Barta & Anda libi (2021)	Qual	H	Social – association	Authentic self-presentation	Sociotechnical	CC	Negotiation of authenticity	E	●
16	Hernández - Serra no et al. (2022)	Quant	H	Image-control affordance	Self-presentation	Technical / Functional	PS	Impression Management	A	●
17	Ditchfield & Vicari (2025)	Qual	H	Social – association; Social – Visibility	Identity performance	Sociotechnical	CC	Role performance	A	●

N o	Auth or(s) & Year	Me tho d	Q	Primary Afforda nce	Identit y Concep t	Concept ualisatio n	D ir	Mode of Identit y Work	V al	S tat r
18	Ulla et al. (2024).	Qual	H	Self-expressi on affordan ce	Teache r identity	Perceive d / Relationa l	CC	Profess ional identity constru ction	E	●
19	Sand all (2024)	Qual	M	Social – visibility	Identity perform ance	Perceive d / Relationa l	UA	Enabli ng self- present ation	A	●
20	Ntall a (2026)	Qual	H	Algorith mic – FYP/vis ibility	Entrepr eneuria l identity	Perceive d / Relationa l	CC	Strategi c self- present ation	A	●
21	Fehr, Rodri guez & Ringr ose (2026)	Qual	H	Algorith mic – recomm endatio n	Femini ne identity	Algorith mic	PS	Femini ne self- making	A	●
22	Schell ewald (2024)	Qual	H	Social – associati on	Self- identity in interper sonal relation ships	Sociotec hnical	CC	Relatio nal identity express ion	E	●
23	Putri et al. (2026)	Qual	H	Social – visibility	Acade mic identity	Technica l / Function al	PS	Self- present ation; impress ion manag ement	E	●

**Theme 4: Identity Affirmation through Community and Recognition**

N o	Auth or(s) & Year	Me tho d	Q	Primary Afforda nce	Identit y Concep t	Concept ualisatio n	D ir	Mode of Identit y Work	V al r	S t r
24	McMillan (2025)	Qual	H	Algorithmic – recommendation	Neurodivergent identity	Perceived / Relational	PS	Identity affirmation; community belonging	A	●
25	Steinke et al. (2024).	Qual	H	Algorithmic – FYP/visibility	STEM identity expression	Technical / Functional	PS	Enabling self-presentation	E	●
26	Leveille (2024)	Qual	H	Algorithmic – FYP/visibility	Neurodivergent identity performance	Perceived / Relational	CC	Algorithmic visibility & recognition Community validation & identity support	E	●
27	Paciente et al. (2026).	Qual	H	Algorithmic – recommendation	Trans identity affirmation	Perceived / Relational	PS	Identity affirmation; identity exploration; identity repair	E	●
28	Simpson & Seman (2021)	Qual	H	Algorithmic personalization (FYP)	LGBTQ identity	Algorithmic	PS	Identity affirmation; identity exploration; identity repair	A	●

**Theme 5: Resisting, Reclaiming, and Reconfiguring Cultural Identities**

N o	Auth or(s) & Year	Me tho d	Q	Primary Afforda nce	Identit y Concep t	Concept ualisatio n	D ir	Mode of Identit y Work	V al	S t r
29	El Sayed & Hotai t (2024)	Qu al	H	Algorith mic – recomm endatio n	Intersec tional identity negotia tion	Technica l/ Function al	CC	Negoti ation of authent icity	A	●
30	Lutz & Arag on (2024)	Qu al	H	Algorith mic – recomm endatio n	Identity negotia tion	Perceive d / Relationa l	CC	Negoti ation of authent icity	A	●
31	Brow n et al. (2025 ).	Qu al	H	Social – visibilit y	Ethnic identity expressi on	Perceive d / Relationa l	CC	Algorit hmic visibilit y & recogni tion	A	●
32	Ismai l (2025 )	Qu al	M	Algorith mic – FYP/vis ibility	Cultura l identity	Sociotec hnical	PS	Cultura l affirma tion	A	○
33	Frene tte, Millet & Desbi ens (2024 )	Qu al	H	Social – visibilit y	Cultura l identity	Sociotec hnical	PS	Cultura l self- present ation	E	●
34	Civila & Jara millo- Dent	Qu al	H	Discour se & perform ance	Hybrid cultural identity	Sociotec hnical	PS	Identit y negotia tion; self-	A	●

N o	Auth or(s) & Year	Me thod	Q	Primary Affordan ce	Identit y Concep t	Concept ualisatio n	Dir	Mode of Identit y Work	V al	S tr
	(2022 )			affordan ces				present ation; resistan ce Identit y		
3 5	Darvin -2022	Qual	H	Meme/s ound affordan ces	Hongk onger identity	Technica l/ Function al	PS	perform ance; identity resistan ce	A	●
<b>Peripheral / Context-Setting Studies (not mapped to an identity theme)</b>										
3 6	Maddox & Gill (2023)	Qual	H	Algorith mic – recomm endatio n	Comm unity identity	Sociotec hnical	CC	Comm unity formati on	A	●
3 7	Schellwald (2021)	Con p	H	Meme/r emix commu nicative forms	none	Sociotec hnical	PS	Not central	A	○

Source: Authors' coding results (2026)

Note—Method: Qual = qualitative; Quant = quantitative; Concep = conceptual. Q (Quality tier, MMAT): H = High; M = Moderate. Dir (Directionality): PS = platform-shaping (affordance→identity); CC = co-constitutive; UA = user-appropriation (identity→affordance). Val (Valence): E = enabling; C = constraining; A = ambivalent. Str (Strength of articulation): ● Central; ● Partial; ○ Peripheral.

As shown in Table 7, the corpus is strongly qualitative: 33 of 37 studies (89.2%) used qualitative designs, against two conceptual (5.4%) and two quantitative (5.4%) studies, with no mixed-methods or longitudinal designs. Quality was generally high (35 High, 94.6%; 2 Moderate). Algorithmic affordances were most frequently examined (25 studies, 67.6%), especially recommendation, the For You Page, personalization, and moderation, while social affordances (18.9%) and content-related affordances (13.5%) were less

common. Conceptually, affordances were most commonly framed as perceived or relational (32.4%), followed by algorithmic (21.6%) and sociotechnical (21.6%) perspectives.

**Table 7.** Aggregate Characteristics of the Corpus (n = 37)

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Methodological design</b>		
Qualitative	33	89.20%
Conceptual	2	5.40%
Quantitative	2	5.40%
Mixed-methods / longitudinal	0	0%
<b>Methodological quality (MMAT)</b>		
High ( $\geq 0.80$ )	35	94.60%
Moderate (0.50–0.79)	2	5.40%
Low ( $< 0.50$ )	0	0%
<b>Affordance type examined</b>		
<i>Algorithmic affordances (total)</i>	25	67.60%
– Recommendation	16	43.20%
– For You Page / algorithmic visibility	5	13.50%
– Personalization	3	8.10%
– Moderation	1	2.70%
Social affordances (visibility, association)	7	18.90%
Other / content affordances (image-control, self-expression, discourse, meme/sound)	5	13.50%
<b>Conceptualization of affordance</b>		
Perceived / relational	12	32.40%
Algorithmic	8	21.60%
Sociotechnical	8	21.60%
Technical/functional	5	13.50%
Imagined/interpretive	4	10.80%
<b>Directionality of the affordance–identity relationship</b>		
Platform-shaping (affordance → identity)	19	51.40%
Co-constitutive	16	43.20%
User-appropriation (identity → affordance)	2	5.40%
<b>Valence of the affordance for identity work</b>		
Ambivalent	27	73.00%
Enabling	9	24.30%
Constraining	1	2.70%

Characteristic	n	%
<b>Strength of affordance–identity articulation</b>		
Central	23	62.20%
Partial	11	29.70%
Peripheral	3	8.10%

Two analytical patterns stand out. First, most studies framed the relationship as platform-shaping (51.4%) or co-constitutive (43.2%), with user-appropriation rare (5.4%). Second, affordances were predominantly framed as ambivalent for identity work (73.0%) rather than purely enabling (24.3%) or constraining (2.7%). Together with the predominance of central articulations (62.2%), these patterns indicate that the literature increasingly treats identity construction on TikTok not as an individual communicative act but as an outcome of ongoing interaction between users and the platform's affordance architecture.

### 3.2 Thematic Synthesis

#### 3.2.1 Theme 1: Algorithmic Recognition and the Interpretive Self

TikTok's recommendation system was consistently described as a mechanism through which users encountered aspects of themselves in algorithmically curated content. Lee et al. (2022) found that participants read personalized recommendations as mirrors of their multifaceted self-concepts, and Bhandari and Bimo (2022) observed that users treated the For You Page (FYP) as central to self-making and identity recognition. Cullen et al. (2025) showed how users interpreted reflective content as evidence that the algorithm had captured elements of their identities, generating feelings of being “seen.” Similar dynamics appeared in studies of neurodivergent identity (Lagerkvist & Foka, 2026), mental-health engagement (Milton et al., 2023), and social connectedness (Taylor & Chen, 2024). The recommendation system thus functions less as content distribution than as an interpretive resource through which users make sense of who they are.

The strongest pattern concerns recognition as a route to self-discovery. Lee et al. (2022) reported that users perceived the FYP as reflecting latent interests and identities, while Cullen et al. (2025) found that reflective content prompted users to refine their self-concepts. This was especially visible for previously unrecognized identities: Lagerkvist and Foka (2026) documented ADHD “aha moments” in which exposure to neurodivergence-related content explained previously misunderstood experiences, and Milton et al. (2023) found that mental-health content helped users recognize themselves in others' narratives. Recognition operated less as information delivery than as an interpretive process linking curated content to personal narratives of identity.

The literature is far less unanimous about what is actually being recognized. While users described the algorithm as “knowing” them (Cullen et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2022), Bhandari & Bimo (2022) argued that TikTok merely encourages users to read algorithmic outputs as identity (the “algorithmized self”), and Lagerkvist and Foka (2026) emphasized uncertainty and “self-unknowing” alongside recognition. The corpus, therefore, offers stronger evidence for perceived recognition than for claims that algorithms reveal or determine the self. This matters because most studies here relied on qualitative, self-reported interpretation rather than direct observation of recommendation systems; the evidence explains how recognition is experienced, not how algorithms objectively classify or shape identity.

### ***3.2.2 Theme 2: Negotiating and Domesticating Algorithmic Power***

Users were portrayed not as passive recipients but as active interpreters who constructed explanations of how TikTok's algorithm operates. Schellewald (2022) showed how “stories about algorithms” circulated as collective sensemaking through which algorithmic imaginaries formed, Issar (2023) found users narrating their encounters with the recommendation system, and Obreja (2024) documented users legitimizing recommendations through narratives of profiling, moral guidance, and educational value. Algorithmic power is thus rarely experienced directly; it becomes meaningful through user interpretations that explain and contextualize algorithmic outcomes.

These folk theories are translated into action. Karizat et al. (2021) found users deliberately modifying engagement to influence how the algorithm categorized them, and Simpson et al. (2022) documented LGBTQ+ users attempting to “domesticate” the FYP while often unable to fully control outcomes. Resistance was clearest among marginalized users: DeVito (2022) showed transfeminine creators navigating an algorithmic “visibility trap,” balancing visibility against harassment and suppression, and Steen et al. (2023) found creators using Algospeak to evade moderation perceived as biased. Rather than simply accepting algorithmic governance, users negotiated and adapted to it through strategic self-presentation, linguistic innovation, and behavioral adjustment.

Yet a central tension concerns whether these practices challenge algorithmic power or accommodate it. Many studies read them as agency (DeVito, 2022; Karizat et al., 2021; Steen et al., 2023), while others suggest they reinforce platform governance: Entrena-Serrano (2025) argues TikTok's interface discourages meaningful control, and Simpson et al. (2022) found users who believed they were shaping the algorithm yet could not align its outputs with their values. Both readings remain plausible: users exercise

genuine agency, but within infrastructures whose rules stay invisible, proprietary, and beyond their control. The evidence, therefore, supports negotiation and domestication more than successful resistance, underscoring the asymmetry between platform governance and user agency.

### ***3.2.3 Theme 3: Performing Authentic and Strategic Selves under Conditions of Visibility***

Identity construction emerged as a balance of authenticity and strategic self-presentation rather than a choice between them. Barta & Andalibi (2021) found authenticity operating as a social norm, a “just be you” attitude that still requires alignment with audience and platform expectations, and Hernández-Serrano et al. (2022) treated authenticity, image control, and validation as interconnected dimensions of adolescent self-presentation. Digital identity is thus constructed not through unmediated disclosure but through selective performances perceived as authentic; authenticity is less the absence of curation than a culturally valued style adapted to platform conditions.

These performances are tied to role-taking in specific contexts. Ditchfield and Vicari (2025) show creators enacting recognizable roles such as mentors and defenders; Schellewald (2024) treats everyday sharing as identity work through which users negotiate belonging; and Ulla et al. (2024) find teachers constructing multifaceted professional selves. Ntalla (2026) describes single mothers framing themselves as “imperfect-resilient” entrepreneurial subjects, and Putri et al. (2026) show sociology students branding academic identities while balancing credibility and visibility. Identity here is an ongoing performance in which creators assemble roles, narratives, and symbolic resources to win recognition from specific audiences.

Tensions surround which identities become visible and rewarded. Sandall (2024) shows that hyper-feminine “BimboTok” identities both challenge and reproduce gender norms, and Fehr, Rodriguez, and Ringrose (2026) argue that TikTok's visibility economy privileges aestheticized, commodified feminine self-presentation, recasting collective feminist concerns as individual self-branding. Even authenticity-focused studies acknowledge that participation requires creators to remain legible and visible within algorithmic conditions. Performances are therefore never entirely self-determined: agency in crafting the self is continuously shaped by platform norms and visibility incentives; a paradox in which performances appear authentic precisely because they align personal expression with the conditions of visibility.

### ***3.2.4 Theme 4: Identity Affirmation through Community and Recognition***

TikTok functions not only as a site of self-presentation but as a space where identities are affirmed through community recognition, particularly for marginalized users. McMillan (2025) found neurodivergent users engaging with TikTok primarily for affirmation, community formation, and validation of experiences misunderstood offline, and Leveille (2024) argues that ADHD content operates as collective identity work in which humor and self-disclosure let users recognize themselves in others. TikTok thus facilitates affirmation through recognition, transforming private experiences into collectively meaningful identities.

Community visibility also sustains identity development. Paciente et al. (2026) found trans-related spaces functioning as environments of connection and support, and Simpson and Semaan (2021) show the FYP facilitating LGBTQ+ identity work by surfacing affirming communities and narratives. Similar patterns appear among women in STEM, where supportive communities contributed to affirmation and belonging. (Steinke et al., 2024). Through repeated encounters with shared experience, users explore and strengthen their sense of self, with TikTok serving as an infrastructure for community-based identity formation.

The literature cautions, however, against romanticizing affirmation. The same systems that enable recognition shape whose identities become visible or excluded: Simpson and Semaan (2021) Note algorithmic exclusion through moderation, misrepresentation, and the invisibility of certain intersections, and studies of neurodivergent and trans communities flag misinformation, harassment, and unequal visibility. Affirmation is thus a negotiated process embedded within algorithmic infrastructures that selectively amplify particular voices.

This body of work is also heavily concentrated on marginalized, minority, and underrepresented communities. While this reflects TikTok's importance for groups overlooked offline, it limits transferability: current evidence speaks more to community-based affirmation among marginalized users than to how these dynamics operate across the wider TikTok population.

### ***3.2.5 Theme 5: Resisting, Reclaiming, and Reconfiguring Cultural Identities***

TikTok emerges as a site where marginalized communities resist dominant cultural narratives and reclaim representational authority. Studies of Muslim women (El Sayed & Hotait, 2024) and Latinx users (Lutz & Aragon, 2024) show marginalized groups navigating affordances and algorithmic systems to negotiate intersectional identities across culture, religion, and ethnicity. Civila & Jaramillo-Dent (2022) describe performative hybridization, in which users negotiate culturally hybrid identities against the

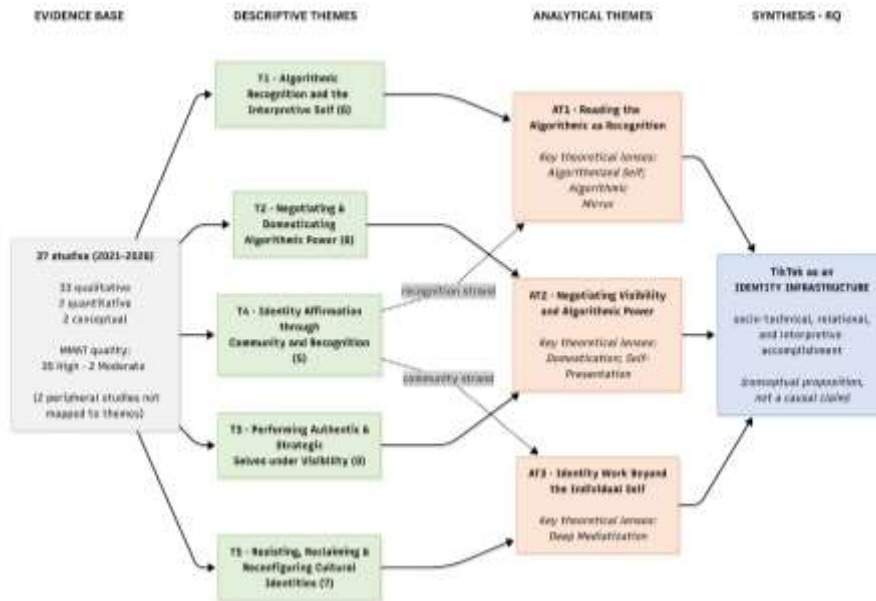
platform's tendency to amplify essentialist narratives. Identity practice here extends beyond self-presentation into cultural intervention by contesting externally imposed definitions and producing alternative narratives that expand possibilities for self-definition.

Resistance is enacted through reclaiming identities, histories, and aesthetics. Brown et al. (2025) show women of color repurposing the outfit-transition trend to celebrate heritage and resist Eurocentric beauty standards; Frenette et al. (2024) show Inuit creators challenging colonial representations and asserting contemporary Indigenous identities; and Ismail (2025) shows Eastern Indonesian musical expressions from Papua and Maluku circulating as cultural affirmation and symbolic resistance against center–periphery hierarchies. Across these contexts, users reclaim visibility not merely by being seen but by redefining the cultural meanings attached to their identities.

Tensions complicate celebratory readings. Lutz and Aragon (2024) Describe algorithmic identity compression, whereby complex cultural identities are flattened or stereotyped through recommendation; El Sayed and Hotait (2024) Note that despite TikTok's potential as a “third space,” Muslim women remain vulnerable to harassment and unequal visibility; and Darvin (2022) frames resistance as ongoing negotiation between platform design and user agency rather than unrestricted expression. Cultural resistance, therefore, does not signal that platform power has been overcome; it arises precisely because users operate within sociotechnical environments that privilege some representations while constraining others.

#### **4. Discussion**

Figure 3 presents the framework derived from the thematic synthesis. Five descriptive themes (T1–T5) were inductively generated and synthesized into three higher-order analytical themes (AT1–AT3), showing that TikTok affordances relate to identity through three interconnected processes: algorithmic recognition and the interpretive self (AT1), the negotiation of visibility and algorithmic power (AT2), and identity work beyond the individual self (AT3). Together, these support the proposition that TikTok functions as an identity infrastructure, where identity emerges through socio-technical, relational, and interpretive processes. The framework is a conceptual synthesis of the reviewed evidence, not a causal model.



**Figure 3.** Synthesized framework derived from the thematic synthesis.

#### 4.1 Reading the Algorithmic as Recognition

The first analytical theme synthesizes Theme 1 with the recognition-oriented findings of Theme 4 to argue that TikTok's recommendation system is theorized less as content delivery than as an interpretive layer through which users recognize, name, and refine who they are (Figure 3). This appears across the six Theme 1 studies (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Cullen et al., 2025; Lagerkvist & Foka, 2026; Lee et al., 2022; Milton et al., 2023; Taylor & Chen, 2024) and is reinforced by Theme 4, where algorithmically surfaced communities enabled neurodivergent and ADHD users to recognize themselves (Leveille, 2024; McMillan, 2025) What unites them is not that algorithms deliver identity, but that users read algorithmic outputs as meaningful signals about the self.

This extends rather than illustrates existing theory. It resonates with the algorithmic mirror, whereby recommender systems infer and reflect users' traits (French, as cited in Lee et al., 2022), and Bhandari and Bimo (2022) “algorithmized self” offers its strongest articulation, wherein TikTok encourages users to constitute the self through algorithmic feedback. The contribution of the synthesis is to show that this is not an isolated proposition but a recurring interpretive pattern across a heterogeneous body of studies.

Yet the evidence supports a cautious reading. A question remains unresolved: when users say the algorithm “knows” them, are they describing genuine recognition or attributing identity-relevant meaning to

personalization never designed to recognize identity? Lagerkvist and Foka (2026) document uncertainty and “self-unknowing” alongside recognition, and Bhandari and Bimo (2022) frame the algorithmized self as something users are encouraged to perceive rather than something demonstrably produced. The corpus thus evidences perceived recognition more than any claim that algorithms reveal or determine the self.

This bears on the paper's broader argument. If the algorithm is a “co-author” of the self, the evidence supports that only as an account of how users experience and narrate the platform's role, not as a demonstrated causal effect. The evidence base itself explains why: of 37 studies, 33 are qualitative and two each quantitative and conceptual, and none directly observe how recommendation systems classify users or trace effects over time. While self-report methods are well-suited to capturing how recognition is experienced and interpreted, they cannot establish what algorithms actually do. The pattern's consistency is better explained by two converging conditions: a platform architecture that continuously personalizes content and invites identity-based interpretations, and a human tendency to connect those recommendations to existing self-narratives. Algorithmic recognition functions as identity infrastructure not because the algorithm knows its users, but because users act as if it does.

#### **4.2 Negotiating Visibility and Algorithmic Power**

The second analytical theme joins Theme 2 and Theme 3 to examine how users exercise agency within, rather than over, TikTok's conditions (Figure 3). As the largest theme (17 of 37 studies, 46%), it marks visibility, agency, and algorithmic governance as the most examined area of the literature. Across these studies, users are active and inventive, yet act within an infrastructure whose rules they do not control.

The first strand concerns algorithmic power. Users interpret the algorithm through “folk theories” that render opaque systems meaningful: Schellewald (2022), Issar (2023), and Obreja (2024) trace such narratives, while Karizat et al. (2021), DeVito (2022), and Steen et al. (2023) show them translating into behavioral adjustment and “algospeak” to influence visibility and navigate moderation. These resemble what domestication scholars call efforts to render unfamiliar technologies manageable in everyday life (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1922), though here domestication targets an invisible algorithmic governor rather than the device.

The second strand concerns visibility. Several studies suggest that authenticity functions not as the opposite of performance but as a strategic and culturally valued style of self-presentation. Barta and Andalibi (2021) describe a “just be you” norm that still requires alignment with platform expectations, and Hernández-Serrano et al. (2022) treat authenticity, image

control, and validation as interlinked. Similar dynamics appear among teachers, mothers, students, and other creators enacting recognizable roles (Ditchfield & Vicari, 2025; Ntalla, 2026; Putri et al., 2026; Ulla et al., 2024). This remains broadly consistent with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy, yet raises an open question: because visibility is algorithmically mediated, the audience is partly constituted by the platform itself. Whether this extends dramaturgy or strains its assumptions is unresolved; the evidence shows visibility is algorithmically conditioned, but does not establish that Goffman's framework has been superseded.

The strands converge on a tension: do these practices challenge platform power or accommodate it? Some read them as agency (DeVito, 2022; Karizat et al., 2021; Steen et al., 2023); others as reinforcing the conditions they navigate (Entrena-Serrano, 2025; Simpson et al., 2022). One reason for the divergence is that studies examine different groups and contexts: research on marginalized creators foregrounds moderation and vulnerability, while everyday-performance studies emphasize strategic adaptation. The coded evidence underscores the asymmetry: even within this theme, only 2 of 17 studies position users as the primary driver, mirroring the corpus-wide pattern of just 2 user-appropriation cases across all 37. The most defensible interpretation is therefore not that users have mastered algorithmic visibility, nor that they are passively governed by it, but that agency and constraint remain inseparable.

#### **4.3 Identity Work Beyond the Individual Self**

Whereas the first two analytical themes focused on how identity is constructed through recognition and the negotiation of visibility, the third theme shifts attention from mechanism to scale by asking not how identity is constructed, but at what level. Synthesizing Theme 4's community findings with Theme 5's cultural and decolonial work, it argues that identity on TikTok is rarely theorized as an individual project but as a relational, collective process shaped through recognition, belonging, and the contestation of shared meanings. Marginalized users affirm identity by encountering others with similar experiences, such as neurodivergent and ADHD users, in collective narratives. (Leveille, 2024; McMillan, 2025), LGBTQ+ and trans users through surfaced communities (Paciente et al., 2026; Simpson & Semaan, 2021), while ethnic, religious, and Indigenous users contest representation itself (Brown et al., 2025; Civila & Jaramillo-Dent, 2022; Frenette et al., 2024; Ismail, 2025).

This connects to Couldry & Hepp's (2017) deep mediatization; the claim that social life is increasingly organized through, not merely communicated via, media infrastructures. TikTok functions not simply as a venue where collective identities are expressed, but as part of the socio-

technical infrastructure through which belonging, recognition, and cultural meaning are negotiated. The contribution lies in showing that affordance and deep-mediatization perspectives converge: identity construction arises through ongoing interaction among users, communities, and infrastructures, making it a socio-technical, relational, and interpretive accomplishment rather than an individual performance on a neutral platform.

This claim must be held cautiously, as it may partly reflect the evidence base. The contributing studies focus overwhelmingly on marginalized, minority, and identity-defined communities, for whom identity work is already tied to collective belonging and representation. The prominence of relational identity may therefore reflect not only TikTok's affordances but also which populations have been studied. Moreover, the same systems that enable collective affirmation also constrain it through exclusion and unequal visibility (El Sayed & Hotait, 2024; Lutz & Aragon, 2024; Simpson & Semaan, 2021). The evidence cannot determine whether identity work is inherently more collective on TikTok, or whether research has concentrated on contexts where collectivity is already salient.

#### **4.4 Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Across the three analytical themes, this review's central theoretical contribution is to reconceptualize TikTok as an identity infrastructure rather than a stage for self-presentation. Identity construction emerges not only from individual expression but also from processes of algorithmic recognition, negotiated visibility, and community-based affirmation and cultural meaning-making. At the same time, the findings resist deterministic readings: users perceive algorithms as identity-relevant actors, but the evidence supports how that influence is experienced and interpreted more than claims that algorithms directly produce identity outcomes.

Three practical implications follow directly from the synthesized evidence. First, the prevalence of folk theories and algospeak (Theme 2) points to a need for algorithmic transparency and digital-literacy efforts that explain how recommendations work, reducing reliance on inaccurate assumptions. Second, the affirmation findings (Theme 4) suggest that practitioners in education, mental health, and community development can treat platform-based communities as meaningful sources of support and belonging, particularly for neurodivergent, LGBTQ+, and trans users. Third, evidence of algorithmic exclusion, identity compression, and harassment (Themes 4–5) indicates a need for moderation and platform policies more responsive to marginalized users, so that visibility is distributed more equitably.

#### **4.5 Limitations**

Several limitations apply. First, despite supplementing Scopus with Google Scholar, the review depended on a limited set of databases and predefined search terms, which may have missed studies indexed elsewhere or using alternative terminology; screening and appraisal were also conducted by a single reviewer. Second, the 2021–2026 window, given TikTok's rapid evolution, means the findings reflect a particular developmental stage rather than stable dynamics. Third, the evidence base is dominated by qualitative, self-reported research (33 of 37 studies), with little quantitative, longitudinal, or computational work, so the review better explains how algorithmic influence is experienced than how recommendation systems objectively shape identity. Finally, the literature concentrates on marginalized and identity-defined communities, limiting transferability to broader user populations.

#### **4.6 Future Research Directions**

These gaps suggest concrete directions. First, given the dominance of self-report, future work should use computational, experimental, and digital-trace methods to examine how recommendation systems actually operate and shape identity-relevant exposure, closing the gap between perceived and observable algorithmic influence. Second, longitudinal designs are needed to trace how recognition, visibility management, and community participation shape identity over time, beyond the cross-sectional snapshots that dominate the corpus. Third, research should extend beyond marginalized communities to broader user groups whose practices may follow different motivations and contexts. Finally, future reviews could widen database coverage and search strategies to capture more disciplinary perspectives and emerging scholarship.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This review synthesized 37 studies (2021–2026) on how TikTok affordances shape digital identity construction among young users, and its three questions can now be answered. For RQ1, the literature is dominated by algorithmic affordances (recommendation, personalization, and visibility) appearing in roughly two-thirds of the corpus, while social affordances remain under-examined. For RQ2, affordances relate to identity through three mechanisms: algorithmic recognition, the negotiation of visibility and platform power, and community-based affirmation and cultural meaning-making. For RQ3, the evidence base is methodologically narrow, with 33 of 37 studies relying on qualitative, self-reported accounts and very little computational or longitudinal work.

Rather than restating these findings, the review distills them into three testable propositions:

(1) TikTok operates as an identity infrastructure, not merely a stage for self-presentation. Identity is shaped not only by what users post but by how recommendation systems organize visibility. This predicts that changes in algorithmic exposure should measurably alter identity-relevant content encounters, although current self-report evidence cannot yet confirm this claim.

(2) The algorithm's role in the self is, on present evidence, perceived rather than demonstrated. Users experience the algorithm as knowing or “co-authoring” them, but no study observes the recommendation system directly; co-authorship is therefore an account of user meaning-making, awaiting observational and computational work.

(3) Identity work on TikTok is relational and collective, but this may reflect who has been studied. Because the literature concentrates on communities for whom identity is already collective, this cannot yet be generalized to the wider user base.

The central contribution is the reconceptualization of TikTok as an identity infrastructure rather than a communication platform. The most consequential next step follows from the second proposition: the field's central claim about algorithmic influence currently rests on how users describe that influence, not on how recommendation systems behave. Closing that gap through observational, computational, and longitudinal designs (and extending inquiry beyond marginalized communities) is the priority for advancing this area beyond its present, largely interpretive, foundations.

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