



Between Trend and Testimony: Methodological Challenges and Ethical Imperatives in TikTok Digital Ethnographic Research

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolving methodological and ethical challenges of conducting digital ethnography on TikTok, a platform where audiovisual intimacy and algorithmic amplification converge. While many TikTok trends emphasize performative spectacle, others—especially “story-time” videos—foreground deeply personal testimony, often staged in domestic settings and engaging viewers through direct address and voice. This hybrid space, where performance and confession coexist, requires researchers to renegotiate the boundaries of public and private, complicating consent, anonymization, and positionality. Arguing for a small-data, qualitative approach, the paper advocates for researcher-curated corpora, multimodal close reading, and attention to comment threads as dialogic extensions of video content.

It emphasizes hashtag taxonomy and manual retrieval strategies as emic classification tools that offer insight into user intentions and thematic continuity, while also critiquing the limitations of big-data approaches in capturing TikTok’s affective and folkloric nuances. Ethical frameworks are revised to accommodate the platform’s blurred visibility norms, proposing a minimal-reproduction principle and context-sensitive citation practices. Through methodological pluralism and careful ethical reasoning, this study outlines a flexible yet rigorous framework for studying ephemeral, belief-based, and culturally resonant content on TikTok, offering tools to better understand the platform’s role in shaping digital folklore and contemporary narration.

Keywords: TikTok, Digital Ethnography, Digital Folklore, Trends, Research Ethics, Platform Affordances, Methodological Challenges.

Introduction

Research is inherently an iterative endeavour, requiring the continual renegotiation of methodological approaches and ethical standards to address evolving contexts and technologies. In digital environments, this reflexivity becomes especially critical as platform designs and user practices rapidly transform the nature of fieldwork and participant engagement. TikTok epitomizes such challenges: its short-form videos, advanced editing features, and algorithmically driven trends constitute a research landscape distinct from other social media. The present line of inquiry has initially focused on how popular-culture genres are rearticulated within TikTok’s highly visual, trend-driven ecosystem.

Through analysis of videos that leverage platform affordances—such as AI-powered filters and sound-driven editing—to enact familiar narrative forms (as are contemporary legends and scary stories), viral trends have been framed as collective cultural artifacts in the public domain. Given that these trends typically emphasize technical spectacle rather than intimate self-disclosure,

their scholarly examination has conventionally been regarded as posing minimal ethical risk to the individuals who produce them.

That assumption however was overturned upon examination of TikTok’s intimate “story-time” videos—posts in which users reveal their personal spaces, voices, and identities while recounting deeply felt experiences. In this context, the boundary between public performance and private life dissolved: consent, privacy, and researcher positionality could no longer be treated as secondary concerns and instead necessitated a fundamental redefinition of the field’s boundaries. TikTok is a mobilefirst platform centred on shortform videos—typically 15 seconds to three minutes—staged in everyday environments such as bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, backyards, or on the street and framed vertically to highlight the creator’s face and immediate surroundings. Creators often position themselves against backdrops that blend the personal and the curated: unmade beds or bookshelves convey authenticity, while posters, plants, or carefully selected furnishings signal aesthetic preference.

Many use ring lights or natural window-light to enhance visibility yet retain glimpses of their private space—family photos, musical instruments, or even pet beds—that inadvertently anchor each performance in a real domestic context. Leveraging the app’s editing suite—including filters, effects, text overlays, emojis, stickers, and an extensive sound library—users produce a wide array of content, from dance routines, comedy sketches, and lipsyncs to participatory challenges and hashtag-driven trends, educational explainers, lifestyle vignettes, and “story-time” personal narratives. Quick cuts, voiceover narration, and background music guide pacing and mood, while features like duets and stitches enable direct interaction with others’ clips. The platform also hosts niche subcultures—book fandoms, hobbyist groups, identity-based communities—as well as aesthetic or ASMR videos that emphasize sensory appeal. Interaction is driven by the algorithmically curated “For You” feed, and comment sections function as collaborative spaces where viewers negotiate meaning and extend trends. By combining brevity, multimodal creativity, and participatory tools, TikTok fosters an intimate yet highly dynamic environment in which cultural expression, community formation, and user engagement intersect.

This paper therefore asks: How must digital-ethnographic methods adapt when TikTok’s affordances invite both mass visibility and profound intimacy? In what follows, the platform’s algorithmic and technical terrain will be mapped and ideas on why and how certain methods and procedures might be more effective in this field than others will be discussed. Eventually, this paper will attempt to propose an applied and practical framework—one that integrates user-co-designed consent protocols, algorithmic audits, and longitudinal multimodal analysis—to guide ethically responsible, rigorously reflexive fieldwork on TikTok. By confronting the platform’s dual imperatives of trend-driven spectacle and personal disclosure, this study aims to advance methodological best practices for researching one of today’s most dynamic social media environments.

Literature Review

Contemporary scholarship underscores the performative nature of digital folklore as it unfolds within algorithmically mediated social media platforms. Digital folklore encompasses the dynamic enactment of customs, traditions, and cultural forms within networked environments, where users continually externalize and reimagine their creativity through sharing, remixing, and re-performance across visual, textual, and auditory—that is multimedia—modes. It arises as popular and folk culture migrate online, shaped by communities that both preserve collective heritage and introduce individual innovation within the co-creative spaces of digital platforms [6-10]. The internet as a field for folkloric research does not present a major methodological challenge, as it does not require the creation of entirely new research tools but rather the adaptation of existing ones to its specific characteristics—because it deals with similar themes to those explored in folklore, ethnology, and anthropology in offline environments [11].

However, there is a clear difference between face-to-face research and digital research, particularly regarding their mate-

riality—the physical/digital dichotomy—which necessitates methodological adjustments; otherwise, such discussions would not be relevant. This does not imply the abandonment of ethnographic methods or fieldwork, but rather a critical revision of certain elements within them. From an ethical perspective, digital ethnographic research (“cyber ethnography” or ‘netnography’ which is the term that prevailed) adheres to the same four main principles as traditional ethnography: avoiding harm to research subjects; protecting anonymity where needed; ensuring confidential use of data; and requiring informed consent [12]. But on TikTok, things are slightly different. Accordingly, this paper aims to articulate and delineate the methodologies of digital ethnography and fieldwork adjusted to the features of this field.

Although existing scholarship has mapped critical terrain—algorithmic mediation multimodal ethnographic tactics privacy management and censorship experiences it remains largely descriptive. For algorithmic mediation, researchers have proposed maintaining “tactical logbooks” that systematically record recommendation stimuli (e.g., initial follows, likes, search terms) and conducting mini-experiments by toggling viewing histories to surface hidden curation logic [13-15]. In terms of multimodal ethnography, it has been suggested to use duets and stitches not only as data sources but as interactive probes within the community, and to adopt “public ethnographer” personas that actively elicit reflexive commentary from participants. Privacy management approaches include a tiered consent model where video captions provide clear notices of research intent, supplemented by direct messages to any users whose contributions will be quoted [16]. To address censorship, participatory audits have been recommended, inviting marginalized users to co-author transparency reports that document instances of shadow banning and content removal [17].

Building on these ideas, there is a pressing need for (a) standardized, TikTok-specific ethical protocols that address mass-audience consent and evolving privacy norms; (b) methodological toolkits for auditing and mitigating algorithmic bias; and (c) experimental designs that integrate computational methods (e.g., network analysis of duet chains, A/B testing of hashtag strategies) with deep qualitative inquiry. Therefore, this paper proposes a framework that prioritizes user co-designed consent processes, thereby advancing the discourse on ethically responsible and reflexive fieldwork and offering practical guidance for research on one of today’s most dynamic social media platforms.

TikTok as a Transcultural Agora: Imperatives for Methodological Pluralism

It is crucial at this point to highlight the fact that digital platforms such as TikTok function as transcultural agorae—spaces of global interaction where cultural narratives, aesthetics, and symbols circulate fluidly across geographic, linguistic, and social boundaries. As users from diverse cultural backgrounds engage with trends, audio tracks, and visual formats, content becomes hybridized, recontextualized, and re-emerges in new, often unexpected forms. This dynamic interplay not only reflects

processes of globalization but also exemplifies how digital environments mediate intercultural exchange. TikTok's algorithmic infrastructure accelerates these interactions, bringing together users from disparate locales into shared, if uneven, discursive spaces. Consequently, the platform demands an approach that is both globally attuned and sensitive to vernacular specificity. This underscores the value of methodological pluralism in digital ethnographic research: to adequately interpret the layered and sometimes contradictory flows of meaning within such a globally inflected public sphere, researchers must draw on tools from media studies, folklore, cultural anthropology, and discourse analysis alike.

On the TikTok “trend” concept

One of the most salient characteristics of content production on this platform mentioned several times before, is the emergence and propagation of “trends.” While not all content on TikTok is trend-driven, the vast majority is. It is therefore essential at this point to clarify the nature and function of trends on the platform. Providing a concise account of their role ensures that the specific affordances of the medium are properly contextualized, as trends significantly shape both user behaviour and the dynamics of content circulation—factors that will inform several aspects of the discussion that follows. These trends constitute collective repertoires of practice—often in the form of particular audio clips, catchphrases, or visual filters—that users iteratively appropriate and reinterpret within their own videos. Notably, the life cycle of a trend is typically brief: once widely adopted, a given sequence of performative gestures or sonic motifs is rapidly supplanted by new affordances or creative conventions.

An additional term, the term “viral”, is often treated as synonymous, yet it denotes a markedly distinct phenomenon; accordingly, it is instructive at this juncture to delineate the distinction between these two concepts. It seems thus important to distinguish “trend” from “viral” phenomena. The term “viral” denotes an almost instantaneous diffusion of content, whereby a post attains widespread visibility in a very short span—analogue to the epidemiological spread of a virus. Conversely, a “trend” describes a more gradual accrual of popularity, unfolding over days, weeks, or even months [18]. Although trends can culminate in viral episodes, they are not synonymous; rather, virality can be understood as one possible apex within the broader, temporally extended process of trending.

Crucially, neither aesthetic merit nor intrinsic informational value guarantees that content will trend or go viral. Instead, the driving factors are affective resonance and social dynamics. Users mobilize and repurpose existing digital artifacts as vehicles for self-expression or identity signalling, aligning their contributions with emergent cultural or discursive currents. As such, relevance to contemporaneous social or topical concerns is a primary determinant of whether content will garner sustained attention.

Finally, the structure of influence networks on the platform significantly shapes diffusion trajectories. When content is endorsed by high-reach accounts—commonly referred to as “influencers”—its visibility can be magnified exponentially. These

endorsements serve as catalytic events that propel trends beyond their organic growth patterns, underscoring the central role of networked hierarchies in mediating what content is perceived as noteworthy.

In short, central to TikTok's ecology is the creation and propagation of “trends”: users routinely replicate or adapt popular sounds, phrases, and filters introduced by others, integrating them into their own content. These trends—whether a specific audio clip, a distinctive effect, or an AI filter—often surge in popularity before quickly giving way to new ones. Their defining feature is responsiveness to users' evolving expressive needs: participants may adopt precedents (as in the case under study, where AI is harnessed to reframe urban legends) or repurpose existing content to convey personal perspectives or align with particular cultural stances. Audience relevance—namely, the extent to which content resonates with ongoing trends or addresses topics of current social concern—plays a pivotal role in trend adoption.

Trending phenomena on the platform encompass a wide array of content, irrespective of whether they ultimately achieve virality. However, TikTok's core logic is predicated on the casual disclosure of deeply personal facets of everyday life. Users routinely present their own faces, voice their opinions on diverse topics, share intimate experiences, and even film within private domestic spaces—often including family members or friends—sometimes in the context of ostensibly unrelated content. Such practices result in the exposure of far more personal information than is strictly intended. Consequently, TikTok operates as a paradoxical space: a highly public platform that thrives on the circulation of intimate, private content. This tension between visibility and vulnerability raises critical methodological questions that must be rigorously addressed.

Reviving Orality on TikTok: Unwriting the Internet through Secondary Orality trend

A notable corollary to these trend dynamics is TikTok's emergence as a site for renewed oral performance. Having outlined the mechanics and temporal logic of trending phenomena on TikTok, the subsequent analysis considers a related innovation: the platform's facilitation of a renewed orality—what Ong (1982) terms secondary orality—thereby effecting an “unwriting” of the internet that privileges embodied speech and gesture over static textuality. In some cases of this digital milieu, speech-acts once confined to face-to-face interaction are reborn online: users speak their own testimony, deliver first person narratives, and engage in real time vocal exchange via stitches and duets. This revival of orality effectively constitutes an “unwriting” of the internet—shifting authority from static text to embodied speech and gesture. These oral performances become sites of visible ethnography, where authenticity is signalled through tone, pace, and direct eye contact [19]. The format of directly addressing the camera is a core-aspect of the platform, this much that even if the narrator is a fictional character, they are still posted in front of the camera[]. Thus, a noteworthy innovation is the narrative shift from third-person to first-person narration. This shift is significant, because it transforms the narrative from an external report to a subjective articulation of it.

Moreover, digital-media research has shown that communities and networked actors play a decisive role in content diffusion: when prominent users or influencer networks promote a particular format, it can swiftly achieve visibility and widespread engagement [20-24]. The main issue remains how the material is collected and presented in academic use, thus, how research methodologies and ethics shape within this field.

Methodological Strategies for Researching Ephemeral Digital Trends

Such ephemerality -occurring by the trend-based content of the platform- is driven by the platform's dual imperatives: an algorithmic prioritization of recency and engagement, which renders even highly viewed content "old" within days and a social attention economy that continually demands novel stimuli. For scholars, these dynamics complicate any attempt at longitudinal analysis, since videos may be deleted, contextual commentaries erased, and emergent patterns obscured. As a result, rigorous digital-ethnographic inquiry necessitates proactive archiving practices—screen captures, detailed metadata logs, and precise timestamping—to preserve the fleeting "digital traces" of a trend before they vanish.

This intrinsic transience foregrounds two interrelated methodological imperatives. First, it underscores the necessity of devising robust strategies for the real-time identification and retrieval of relevant materials. This intrinsic transience foregrounds interrelated methodological imperatives for TikTok research. That is, it necessitates the development of rigorous, real-time strategies for identifying and retrieving pertinent content, with manual hashtag taxonomy emerging as a particularly effective approach. In fact, on TikTok and similar platforms, explicit tagging often offers the most reliable method for finding relevant content. In practice, a researcher who stumbles upon a useful video will note its hashtags and use them as search terms. These hashtags act as a folksonomy – user-generated labels that group content around themes.

Each tag reflects the creator's own framing (an emic categorization) of the material, which, however, can be utilized by a number of other users for a corresponding post they make themselves, thus creating categorizations of an emic nature, which researchers can also use in their research, by collecting all videos under that hashtag and then analysed them as a corpus. Thus, hashtags function as both search indices and emic classification devices, revealing how creators themselves frame and organize their material; by tracing these user generated labels, researchers gain access to dispersed yet thematically linked content that would otherwise remain obscured beneath algorithmic curation.

Still, the humanities scholar's direct engagement with this corpus demands hands on sorting and categorization, a process that enables critical oversight of observable attributes—visuals, audio cues, metadata—and, crucially, the intangible qualities of tone, mood, irony, or affective resonance. Unlike automated retrieval methods, which may amass large datasets at the cost of contextual sensitivity, manual curation ensures that both measurable patterns and the nuanced performative and emotional di-

mensions of video content are apprehended. In this way, manual strategies not only facilitate systematic data collection but also preserve the interpretive depth required for digital ethnography on TikTok.

In short, hashtag taxonomy proves invaluable in this regard: by examining user-generated tags researchers can ascertain the emic categories under which creators frame their own narratives, as well as locate dispersed content across the platform. These posts frequently adopt a confessional, emotive register, with hashtags functioning both as discursive signals of sincerity and as retrieval markers for subsequent analysis. In practice, robust TikTok research combines these strategies. The researcher leads the exploration: hashtags guide the way to material, but only the scholar's close reading – their immersion in the content as an observer-participant – uncovers the fuller, nuanced picture.

Second, the highly dynamic, multimodal, and algorithmically curated nature of TikTok poses unique methodological challenges that make qualitative small-data approaches not only suitable but necessary for in-depth scholarly analysis. Unlike platforms where content is relatively stable and searchable, TikTok's fleeting trends and opaque recommendation systems render exhaustive quantitative approaches problematic. While big-data methods offer breadth and statistical generalizability, they often fail to capture the cultural nuance, contextual specificity, and affective resonance embedded in TikTok's content and user interactions [1-3].

In contrast, small-data analysis emphasizes curated depth over scale, focusing on manageable corpora that allow for immersive engagement, reflexive interpretation, and ethical care. [6-8]. Through digital ethnography, close multimodal reading, and participant observation, scholars can trace the performative and, folkloric tensions within trends and their reinterpretation in comment threads. These qualitative methods foreground audience reception, identity construction, and emergent meaning-making practices that are often obscured in metadata-driven studies.

Moreover, the comment sections of TikTok serve as dialogic spaces where users negotiate, challenge, or reinforce the meanings of videos. This layer of interaction is central to understanding vernacular creativity, social norms, and collective belief systems in digital folklore. By incorporating comments into their analysis, researchers gain a vital interpretive lens that big-data methodologies typically ignore or flatten into numerical metrics.

Ultimately, the ephemerality, multimodality, and cultural texture of TikTok content necessitate a small-data, qualitative orientation. Such approaches not only offer methodological flexibility and analytic richness but also provide the context-sensitive insight essential for robust research in digital ethnology and folklore.

In the methodological approach proposed here privileges manual curation—systematic, hands-on engagement with the field—over reliance on opaque recommendation algorithms. Specifically, I conduct targeted hashtag searches to assemble a purposive

corpus, selectively saving pertinent videos to a private archive. Although I may intermittently “train” the algorithm by viewing theme-relevant content, I do not depend on its For You feed to surface key examples. This intentional, thematic sampling aligns with the imperatives of folkloristic inquiry: the objective is to construct a sufficiently robust dataset capable of sustaining valid interpretive arguments, rather than to catalogue every possible instance of the phenomenon.

Yet another critical concern pertains to the collection and preservation of research materials. TikTok’s content—and the trends it generates—are inherently ephemeral rather than timeless. Although scholars might study enduring forms of popular culture as they diffuse on this platform, it is arguably more valuable to analyse what is current at any given moment: which trends emerge, how they are performed, and what social functions they fulfil among various user communities. In this view, digital environments are best understood as dynamic, interactive fields in which users continuously produce and reconfigure popular culture, rather than as static archives preserving cultural artifacts. Traditional institutions—museums, libraries, and curated collections—remain more appropriate venues for long-term preservation of cultural materials, while the Internet’s creative potential lies in its capacity for innovation and rapid turnover.

Accordingly, my own research prioritizes the study of trends at the height of their visibility, emphasizing synchronic analysis over extensive archival efforts. Although I retain a selective sample of videos—downloading representative clips to local storage—this tactic cannot capture the full context of comment threads or the evolving metadata that underpin each trend. Instead, I maintain digital bookmarks or “likes” within the TikTok app itself, preserving material in its native environment. This dynamic approach retains access to user comments, related videos, and subsequent developments, while also respecting creators’ ongoing control over their own content. Although some data may be lost as trends fade, this methodology preserves the most salient dimensions—the content, context, and user interactions—and any gaps can themselves be documented as part of the research narrative, yielding further analytic insight.

Finally, the ethics of material preservation demand careful attention to participant rights and consent. The choice to “like,” or bookmark, content carries implications for creator control and privacy, and must be governed by transparent, humane research protocols. By situating preservation strategies within a broader framework of ethical responsibility, researchers can honour both the fluidity of TikTok as a cultural field and the dignity of the individuals whose performances constitute its ever-shifting landscape.

Still, while netnographic scholarship allows for both participatory and non-participatory modes of engagement, I consciously adopt a non-participatory or “lurking” stance. By observing without posting, reacting, or otherwise revealing my presence, I minimize researcher influence on community dynamics and ensure that the data remain naturally occurring. This emic practice of silent observation affords greater fidelity to authentic user

practices and narrative constructions, thereby strengthening the credibility and ethical integrity of the research.

Effectively integrating TikTok content into scholarly research requires treating each video as a dynamic, context-dependent performance rather than a fixed archive. Researchers ought to acknowledge the platform’s algorithmic intimacy—where recommendation systems elevate personal disclosures into shared public spectacles—by time-stamping recordings and logging metadata to preserve shifting contexts. Transparency about researcher positionality is essential: any account-based engagement should be openly declared, and protocols co-designed with participants to secure ongoing, informed consent and minimize inadvertent influence on user behaviour. The volatility of short-form videos and the opacity of TikTok’s algorithms demand robust archiving strategies and critical reflection on what constitutes “public” data, ensuring that analyses do not overstep the bounds of user expectations. Given the audiovisual identifiers inherent in TikTok posts—faces, voices, home environments—minimal-harm practices such as cropping images, anonymizing user handles, and limiting excerpts to the smallest necessary units of analysis help uphold privacy while still supporting rigorous critique. Grounding these practices in fair use and quotation exception principles allows researchers to balance intellectual inquiry with respect for creator agency and platform norms, thereby maintaining both methodological rigor and ethical responsibility.

Navigating Ethical Dilemmas in TikTok Research

As in traditional face-to-face research, the methodological and ethical principles guiding digital folklore inquiry remain fundamentally the same, only adapted to the specific affordances and challenges of TikTok’s environment. Research on digital platforms has long benefited from clear ethical demarcations: in the era of Facebook group studies, for example, publicly accessible posts could be republished with minimal risk, while content from private or closed communities was simply excluded [12]. Moreover, the predominantly textual nature of those posts made anonymization straightforward—names and identifiers could be redacted without compromising data integrity.

By contrast, TikTok foregrounds orality and embodied self-exposure, collapsing the public/private divide and complicating anonymization. Videos routinely capture faces, voices, gestures, and environmental context that resist decontextualized extraction; even blurred faces or omitted usernames may still allow for identification via distinctive vocal patterns, backgrounds, or other cues. Consequently, platform ethnographers must balance the platform’s permissive publicness against a researcher’s ongoing responsibility to protect individual privacy and agency [10-13].

In Habermasian terms, TikTok functions as a digital public sphere, with hashtags—such as #vampireencounter or #paranormaltok—serving as “topical rooms” that aggregate related posts into collective conversations. Yet this visibility does not extinguish creators’ exclusive rights under copyright law: despite public access, users retain control over the reproduction

and distribution of their audiovisual work outside the platform.

To address these overlapping ethical and legal concerns, it seems more appropriate for researchers to adopt a policy of minimal reproduction. Rather than downloading or embedding full videos—which risks decontextualizing and mishandling sensitive content—scholars might reproduce only a single, heavily anonymized screenshot. This image should be tightly cropped to the precise analytical focal point—for example, isolating the moment in a “vampire encounter” video when the creator’s hand recoils from an unseen presence—and used solely to illustrate a structural or thematic claim rather than as decorative flourish. Crucially, this screenshot must be captured in situ within TikTok’s native interface, preserving the original layout, on-screen text, and user interface elements that convey context. Finally, even when presenting this anonymized frame, researchers must provide clear citation details—creator handle (if public), date, and URL—so that audiences can still locate and engage with the source post. This approach upholds the creator’s visibility and autonomy, maintains the contextual integrity of the material, and aligns with legal frameworks of fair use and quotation across jurisdictions.

This approach aligns with prevailing copyright exceptions but requires jurisdictional nuance. In the United States, fair-use doctrine mandates that reproductions be demonstrably transformative, narrowly scoped, and non-substitutive of the source. In the European Union (including Greece), the “quotation” exception permits brief excerpts for criticism or teaching, provided the source is clearly cited, any modifications (e.g., blurring) are transparently indicated, and the excerpt remains strictly necessary for the analytical argument.

While obtaining direct permission from creators can resolve many ambiguities, the act of soliciting consent may disrupt the spontaneity of the digital field and introduce participatory biases that compromise data authenticity. Such interventions risk transforming naturally occurring posts into co-constructed artifacts, thereby affecting both creator behaviour and audience reception.

By adhering to these guidelines—minimal, context-preserving reproduction; jurisdictionally informed fair-use practices; and a cautious approach to consent—researchers can uphold both ethical respect for TikTok content creators and the methodological rigor essential to digital-ethnographic scholarship.

Between Performance and Confession: Methodological and Ethical Approaches to Intimate Self-Disclosure in TikTok Research

The dialectic of performance and confession lies at the heart of ethically responsible digital folklore research on TikTok. On one hand, users enact carefully staged presentations—framing themselves within curated backdrops, deploying filters, music, and narrative conventions borrowed from popular culture. These performative elements signal awareness of an audience and an intent to engage through recognizable tropes. On the other hand, the same videos often contain unguarded disclosures: fleeting glimpses of private spaces, raw emotional reactions, or details of lived experience that transcend mere entertainment. In this

dual register, each post functions as both testimony—a document of personal reality—and performance—a crafted spectacle designed to elicit attention and participation. Recognizing this interplay is essential, for it reshapes our understanding of what constitutes “data” on platforms premised on casual self-disclosure.

Although such content is technically public, creators typically share to connect with peers or process personal experiences, not to contribute to scholarly inquiry. As Carter (2005) cautions, public visibility provides no blanket waiver of ethical responsibility: visibility is not consent, and the audiences for which content is intended may be ill-matched to academic analysis. Accordingly, ethical netnography on TikTok must proceed with heightened sensitivity. Researchers should articulate their analytic aims transparently, employ rigorous anonymization to obscure identifying information, and cultivate reflexivity regarding how their theoretical frameworks and personal positionality influence interpretations. By maintaining vigilance at the threshold between confession and performance—acknowledging both the agency and vulnerability of content creators—scholars can preserve individual dignity while generating insights that honour the complex, hybrid nature of belief-based and deeply personal narratives in digital folklore.

Comment Sections as Sites of Vernacular Reception and Identification

Analysing TikTok’s comment sections yields indispensable insights into how content is received, interpreted, and repurposed within digital communities—far beyond what the video itself can convey. Comments frequently function as thematic continuations of the original post, with viewers sharing parallel experiences, offering emotional support, or elaborating on the creator’s narrative. Such user-generated testimonies not only validate the authenticity of personal disclosures but also map out the wider social resonance of belief-based or vulnerable content. Because TikTok’s algorithm privileges rapid scrolling through misaligned material, the decision to pause, view in full, and contribute a comment signals genuine engagement. As a result, the very act of commenting becomes an index of community identification: most responders self-select into a thread because they see their own experiences or values reflected in the video, rather than out of mere curiosity or antagonism.

Methodologically, comment analysis affords a dual advantage. First, it enriches qualitative interpretation by providing a corpus of peer-to-peer discourse, revealing nuances of humour, irony, solidarity, or dissent that might otherwise elude an isolated reading of visuals and audio. Second, from an ethical and practical standpoint, comment data are particularly tractable: as written text, comments can be fully anonymized by redacting usernames, profile images, or other identifiers without impairing interpretive richness. This contrasts sharply with audiovisual content, where faces or voices complicate anonymization and consent processes.

An additional dimension—content sharing—is conceptually appealing yet largely inaccessible to researchers. When users share

a video, often accompanied by their own remarks, they create a new layer of meaning and indicate the contexts in which the content continues to resonate. Unfortunately, most shares occur through TikTok's private direct-message feature, placing them beyond public observation and hence beyond scholarly reach. In transforming a public post into a private exchange, shares move important conversational threads into arenas where researchers cannot follow, underscoring a critical boundary in digital ethnography: the division between observable community discourse and private communication.

In sum, rigorous study of TikTok content requires close attention to comment threads as sites of collaborative meaning-making. By leveraging the ease of textual anonymization, scholars can ethically harvest and analyse these data to chart patterns of identification, belief affirmation, and discursive innovation. At the same time, awareness of the unobservability of private shares cautions researchers against overestimating the comprehensiveness of any public-only dataset, reminding us that a full account of digital folklore must acknowledge both visible and hidden modes of circulation.

Conclusions

TikTok's emphasis on concise, face-to-camera videos illustrates a broader shift in digital content toward orality: a process of "un-writing" folklore that privileges performed testimony over static text. Through the platform's audiovisual affordances—direct address, voice-over narration, and gesture—creators extend their spoken narratives across temporal and geographic boundaries, transforming private beliefs into public performances in pursuit of virality. Story-time videos, in particular, have crystallized into a novel form of digital storytelling that foregrounds intimate confession, demanding specialized methodological and ethical consideration.

This re-centering of orality raises two interrelated imperatives for digital ethnographers. First, researchers must critically attend to the intersection of user agency and performativity: although creators willingly disclose personal experiences, they rarely anticipate academic scrutiny. Lurking alone is insufficient; instead, scholars should employ transparent consent strategies, situate their own positionality, and engage in reflexive dialogue with participants about how their narratives are used and interpreted. Second, the ephemeral nature of TikTok content complicates traditional notions of data permanence. Selective in-platform bookmarking, combined with dynamic coding of comment threads and community interactions, offers a means of preserving context without resorting to static archives that strip away the lived temporality of trends [25].

Ethical netnography on TikTok must build upon foundational principles—respect for persons, beneficence, confidentiality, and reflexivity—while adapting to the platform's unique challenges. Methodological safeguards include anonymizing sensitive identifiers, obscuring or omitting particularly intimate disclosures, and ensuring that any public reporting honours the creator's dignity. The real-life vampire encounter trend exemplifies the necessity of these measures: when narratives blend folk-

lore, personal testimony, and performative spectacle, researchers must navigate consent, privacy, and community impact with heightened care.

As digital methods continue to evolve, ethical frameworks should remain flexible, integrating emerging best practices from media studies, internet research ethics, and digital folklore. By combining rigorous qualitative immersion—attending to multimodal performance, comment-section dialogues, and the affective resonances of orality—with dynamic, emically informed retrieval strategies, scholars can produce analyses that are both methodologically robust and deeply respectful of the individuals whose voices animate TikTok's ever-shifting cultural field.

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