Are You the Main Character?

Visibility Labor and Attributional Practices on TikTok

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ABSTRACT

This paper revisits hypertext theory from the 1990s (George Landow, Jay David Bolter, etc.) and database theory from the 2000s (Lev Manovich, Victoria Vesna, etc.) with attention to explaining new authoring practices on the video-sharing platform TikTok. Because hyperlinking is automated on the platform whenever composers select audio clips, effects, hashtags, and author references to other videos for "dueting" and "stitching" to remix from pre-existing databases of material, TikTok is characterized by rich attributional practices of citation. At the same time, the site's users are keenly aware that search and recommendation algorithms may obfuscate their published materials and that additional labor may be required for their contributions to be visible in the larger hyperlinked matrix of database participation. At the same time, users may also choose to de-link their content or the content of others. Case studies are drawn from variations of the "main character" meme and recent moral panics about supposedly dangerous TikTok "trends."

CCS CONCEPTS

• Intellectual property rights • Hypertext Architectures • Privacy

KEYWORDS

Digital literacy, hyperlinking, database aesthetics, algorithmic profiling, content moderation

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1 Introduction

This paper uses three different explanatory frameworks - hypertext theory, database cinema, and visibility labor – to analyze content-creation practices on the video-sharing platform TikTok. In the mobile application's interface design, videos can be automatically connected by multiple hyperlinks that indicate shared hashtags, sounds, effects, places, or references to the usernames of other content creators. The category of "products" was added more recently as a way to hyperlink videos promoting the same consumer goods. Additional citational practices of stitching and dueting reinforce accepted norms around attribution. [1]

1.1 Hyperlinking Affordances and User-Generated Content

As a platform, TikTok is characterized by design affordances that encourage hypertextual authoring and publishing. In the case of the "main character" trend originating in 2020, TikTok creators could use related hashtags (such as #maincharacter, #maincharactersyndrome, or #maincharacterenergy), audio clips (such as a "main character" rap by @lexaprolesbian or "main character" affirmation by @ashlaward), or a "main character filter" (such as the more recent Cartoonify or Comic Me effects) to add useful metadata that provides a hyperlinked label connecting the original content to all of its subsequent derivative works in a reference database that plays snippets of individual clips as the user scrolls through the gridded corpus of videos.

However, despite the hypertextual presentation of TikTok videos on the platform, the way that another content creator is cited in individual videos does not always function with the obvious indexicality of a consistent metadata scheme nor explicitly point to specific publication information like a footnote. For example, one of the originating "main character" videos created in 2020 by Ashley Ward, which was viewed over three million times, shows Ward reclining on a beach from the perspective of drone-style footage. A scratchily recorded voice-over commands the viewer to take action. "You have to start romanticizing your life. You have to start thinking of yourself as the main character because if you don't — life will continue to pass you by. And all the little things that make it so beautiful will continue to go unnoticed. So take a second, and look around and realize that it's a blessing for you to be here right now." For background music, she uses a rendition of the tune "A Moment Apart," which has been used in over thirty thousand other TikTok videos, and credits musician @hannah_harpist for providing the score.

Although Ward is widely recognized for starting the #YouHaveTo trend [2], it is not a hashtag that she herself uses in the video.

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Instead, this hashtag is used by imitators with videos adopting the same theme music that assert that "you have to" pursue other courses of action, such as "stop vaccinating your kids," "stop binge watching Korean dramas," "stop spending so much money on food delivery," "stop coloring your hair," or "start a local witch trial."

Instead of deploying #YouHaveTo, Ward's hyperlinked hashtags (#fyp, #foryou, #aesthetic, #lovelife, and #drone) connect to very different metadata touchstones that are designed to amplify her presence by linking her work to more generic descriptors to accelerate popular content to the default "for you" page. In drawing such a large audience, Ward obviously benefited from her expertise as a video production professional for the ESPN sports channel and amplification by celebrity Addison Rae. Her call for an egocentric narrative also coincided with the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, when in-person social ties were severed by lockdown orders [3].

The soundtrack for Ward's video – which consists of both Ward's words and her chosen harp music – is itself a hyperlinked object on the video that is labeled "A Moment Apart – ODESZA." Through this hyperlink the soundtrack of the original poster is joined to over sixty thousand remix videos depicting other activities, such as riding a luggage trolley, wearing blue face-paint and acting like a sci-fi villain, making candy in unnatural colors, transforming a tailored shirt into a frilly top, and racecar driving. In keeping with the mix of homage and parody that is common in TikTok response videos, many of these related sound-alike clips also feature moving images of animals defecating to illustrate the "romanticizing your life" audio satirically.

In later TikTok videos Ward attempted to use her internet fame to proselytize for evangelical Christianity. Although most of her more recent videos cited Bible verses, the TikTok platform lacked an obvious affordance for scriptural intertextuality other than through hashtags. Thus, a video by Ward that references Mark 16:15 or Philippians 4:19 doesn't connect to videos by others inspired by the same passages.

Rather than present herself hubristically as a "main character," Ward's audio in these later Christian videos is derived from clips with celebrity voices drawn from movies and interviews, including snippets of male dialogue from Kobe Bryant, Idris Elba, and Ke Huy Quan. This kind of cross-gender – and even cross-racial – hypertextual ventriloquism is also a common trope in TikTok discourse. Elsewhere, this technique is used for humorous effect, as in the case of comedian Sarah Cooper lip synching to the voice of Donald Trump as a Black woman channeling a powerful white man. However, Ward incorporates these disembodied voices from men of color reverently.

In addition to claiming a stand-alone "main character" persona, content-creators might also engage in collaborative worldbuilding activities through the platform's affordances to develop complex, ongoing, collective narratives with multiple characters, settings, plot lines, and cultural touchstones that are unified both by a sense of shared lore and a cluster of interconnected multimedia hypertexts. These videos can take the form of a synchronous chorus of activity or a montage of related actions. These hypermediated world-building activities have been explained in the context of other networked publics on social media as manifestations of "participatory culture" [4], "X-reality" [5], or "subcreation" [6].

As Alice Marwick has noted, however, the enthusiasm for world-building on TikTok can also promulgate conspiracy theories, which might be signaled by a hyperlink to shared spooky music or a creepy otherworldly backdrop [7]. Regardless of the scale and scope of these database narratives, TikTok's design features automate some elements of hypertextual organization with virtual push-button controls.

At the same time, there is copious metadiscourse about the hypertextual practices of content-creators, particularly around norms of citation and credit, because intellectual property is often recycled without indication of its provenance, as in the case of a recent song attributed to Drake that was actually composed by generative AI. Potentially objectionable TikTok behavior is policed through comments, reaction videos, tutorials, formal complaints to the service, and many other kinds of metadiscourse.

2 The Paradigm of Visibility Labor

In recent years, scholars of digital media – particularly those who have been influenced by Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial theory – have asserted the importance of labor as a framework for interpretation when approaching the artifacts of digital design. Hypertextual databases like TikTok and other social media platforms require labor to affix additional metadata [8], moderate content [9], and train or emulate machine learning algorithms [10].

Although the labor of most TikTok creators is ostensibly voluntary, many depend on TikTok for their livelihoods or consider TikTok to be a must-have repository for their intellectual property from which they derive essential social and cultural capital. Unlike an ideal republic of letters that always fairly compensates enterprising authorship, TikTok labor can be coerced, alienated, and even exploited [11].

Furthermore, many creators fear that their labor could be expended in vain if they are disconnected from the hypertextual matrix of TikTok's databases through delisting, delinking, downgrading, shadow banning, and suspension for violation of the site's terms of service.

As a consequence of this perceived antagonism with the mechanisms of algorithmic sorting and platform governance structures, many TikTok creators perceive visibility as a primary challenge that requires intensive labor investment [12].

2.1 The Origin Stories of Hypertext

When Ted Nelson defined hypertext in 1974 as "forms of writing which branch or perform *on request*" (italics mine) [13], he envisioned a a kind of interlinked discourse that presupposed voluntary rather than compulsory labor. Although it could be argued that Nelson's paradigm of computers as "dream machines" suggested that these networked devices were vehicles to output unconscious and involuntary expression, most of Nelson's original manifesto focused on voluntary input and tropes of liberation, freedom, and choice.

Obviously even relatively early examples of hypertextual composition entailed unequal investments of labor that presupposed asymmetrical power relationships. For example, it is likely that not all contributors to Robert Coover's Hypertext Hotel or authors publicized on the StorySpace platform were treated equally. Certainly, even more has been written about the hierarchies and gatekeeping of Wikipedia [14].

Nonetheless, by the 1990s George Landow was arguing that the rise of more decentered "read-write" hypertexts seemed to coincide with the poststructuralist criticism of Jacques Derrida and other attacks on logocentrism. Of course, Derrida also famously seemed to ignore theories of labor during the bulk of his career, although he also saw himself in dialogue with Karl Marx as early as 1993. For Landow, "linking is the most important fact about hypertext" [15]. To his credit, Landow anticipated the rise of other read-write interfaces and emphasized "the crucial distinction between electronic textuality and its display on changing technology [16]. He was also quick to incorporate theories of "interactive cinema" in his scholarship, as he revised his original book Hypertext to be Hypertext 2.0 and then Hypertext 3.0. Thus, Landow's work remains remarkably timely in the era of TikTok.

2.2 Evolving Database Infrastructures

The essential distinction between narrative, which was assumed to be linear in its organization, and database, which was assumed to be nonlinear, vexed critics eager to explain new genres of database cinema that were being created by recombining digital assets stored in shared databases, as online video-sharing sites like YouTube experienced exponential growth.

Lev Manovich suggested an expedient compromise to describe new forms of "nondestructive" timeline-based editing that linked to reference files from a database: "Given the dominance of database in computer software and the key role it plays in the computer-based design process, perhaps we can arrive at new kinds of narrative by focusing our attention on how narrative and database can work together. How can a narrative take into account the fact that its elements are organized in a database? How can our new abilities to store vast amounts of data, to automatically classify, index, link, search and instantly retrieve it lead to new kinds of narratives?" [17]

Manovich's team has focused on developing software for data visualizations in which complex moving images (such as those from cinema or videogames) in database narratives can be accurately represented as discrete media instantiations, so that information about source files in database cinema can be preserved for analytic purposes. In some ways the gridded source databases for each metadata category of TikTok links provides a similar vehicle for visualization that allows users to trace lineages of media practice incorporating the same sound, visual, user video, or hashtag.

In both "main character" and world-building TikTok stories, the site's hypertextual organization facilitates heightened user awareness of design affordances and user appreciation of what Victoria Vesna has called "database aesthetics." [18]

3 The Paradigm of Invisibility Labor

Vesna also has written about how artists have traditionally "responded to archives and databases" as active participants in "the global information infrastructure." [18] She also raises issues about the privacy of health information and other data associated with the sovereignty of the individual self in isolation from others.

To resist legibility in the matrix of database borrowing, many TikTok creators also seek to exclude their content from visibility and withdraw from participation, thus performing the work of obfuscation [19], which I characterize as a kind of "invisibility labor" that complements prior analyses of "visibility labor." Previous work on user apathy and the "privacy paradox" [20] and social privacy management techniques [21] also informs this approach.

On TikTok, this invisibility labor often entails the use of non-hyperlinked and even non-lexical word pictures – such as text images with deleted letters, negative phrasing, and incomplete acronyms. For example, creators fearful of takedown algorithms or scrutiny by content moderators use oblique codewords, such as "unalived" rather than "murdered" or "SAed" rather than "raped."

Nonetheless, the erasure of some TikTok material does not entirely undo the larger matrix of all of the dependent hyperlinked content that might spawn from one influential video.

For example, in 2020, @lexaprolesbian created a "main character" video that shows her prancing and strutting in front of neighbors that one might presume disapprove of her daily unconventional behavior. "This is the time that I walk through my neighborhood to remind everyone in my neighborhood that I am the main character in this neighborhood," she declares over a jazzy synthesizer score. She then instructs all of her presumed viewers

to give her their full attention as well. "Look. Look at my shoes. Look at my socks (boobs). Look at my hair, the way I walk."

By choosing a username that incorporates the brand name of a medication used to treat depression and anxiety and by referencing being deprived of attention in middle school in the video, she also shares sensitive information about seemingly private matters of illness and past trauma. Given the widespread existence of such content on social media platforms, Wendy Chun has asserted that defending the "right to be vulnerable in public and not be attacked" may be a more useful goal than a purported right to privacy [22].

At the present time, @lexaprolesbian appears to have removed all her public content, so that the original video is no longer available with its linked metadata. Yet her audio track remains accessible, as part of many derivative work videos that are still posted online. For example, @kawaiicripple uses this key component of the "main character" song as a background score for showing herself navigating public space in her wheelchair.

Links to content can also be obfuscated by TikTok users who wish to refuse providing direct portals elsewhere to their audiences, often in the interest of protecting their viewers from direct, unmediated contact with objectionable videos from other creators that are racist, sexist, patently false, or dangerous to consume. This allows commentary and criticism of potentially offensive material on TikTok without stitching, dueting, or linking to such content in the ways that are signaled by the design affordances of the site.

As a case in point, in 2023 there was a moral panic about a "challenge" on TikTok that supposedly dared people to jump off boats moving at high speed into the water. News stories reporting on this purportedly popular "trend" claimed that four people in Alabama had died as a result. Although the story was ultimately debunked as an internet legend [23], TikTok creators used scenes from the videos that were shown by journalists in the background of their own cautionary messages about avoidance but did not provide attribution or links. For example, Dr. Zain Hasan showed unidentifiable snippets of boat jumping in a video with the negative hashtags #trauma and #boatinjury.

Tagging other users or appending shared hashtags is a common way to create hyperlinked media content that is clustered around the central "challenge" descriptor. Rather than promote dangerous activities most TikTok challenges are associated with charity [24], collective learning [25], or other positive attributes, as in the case of common TikTok dance challenges.

4 Conclusion

Early digital media theory that evolved out of discussions at this conference – and other sites of knowledge exchange – conceptualized hyperlinking, hypermedia, and database aesthetics to imagine new kinds of hybridized computational media objects. These scholarly conversations continue to be relevant for describing many aspects of social media phenomena on TikTok, such as citing and remixing. However, by emphasizing features such as "flexibility" and "interactivity" as constitutive of the dynamics of collaborative, multivocal, and audience-oriented cultural production [26], key features of the algorithmic oppression and ghost work that undergirds today's platform politics were not anticipated. Attention to labor relations structured around managing public visibility, community kinship, and contemporary informational gatekeeping practices offers a way to build on these earlier theoretical conceptualizations with a more complex understanding of hyperlinking as a practice that expresses both existing and imagined power relationships. Perhaps the contorted topologies of hyperlinked and hypermediated reference material that is marked by both redundancy and erasure on TikTok offers more interesting terrain for future discussions.

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