

# THE BALL'S IN YOUR COURT: Algorithm Awareness and the Nonuse of TikTok



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## Introduction

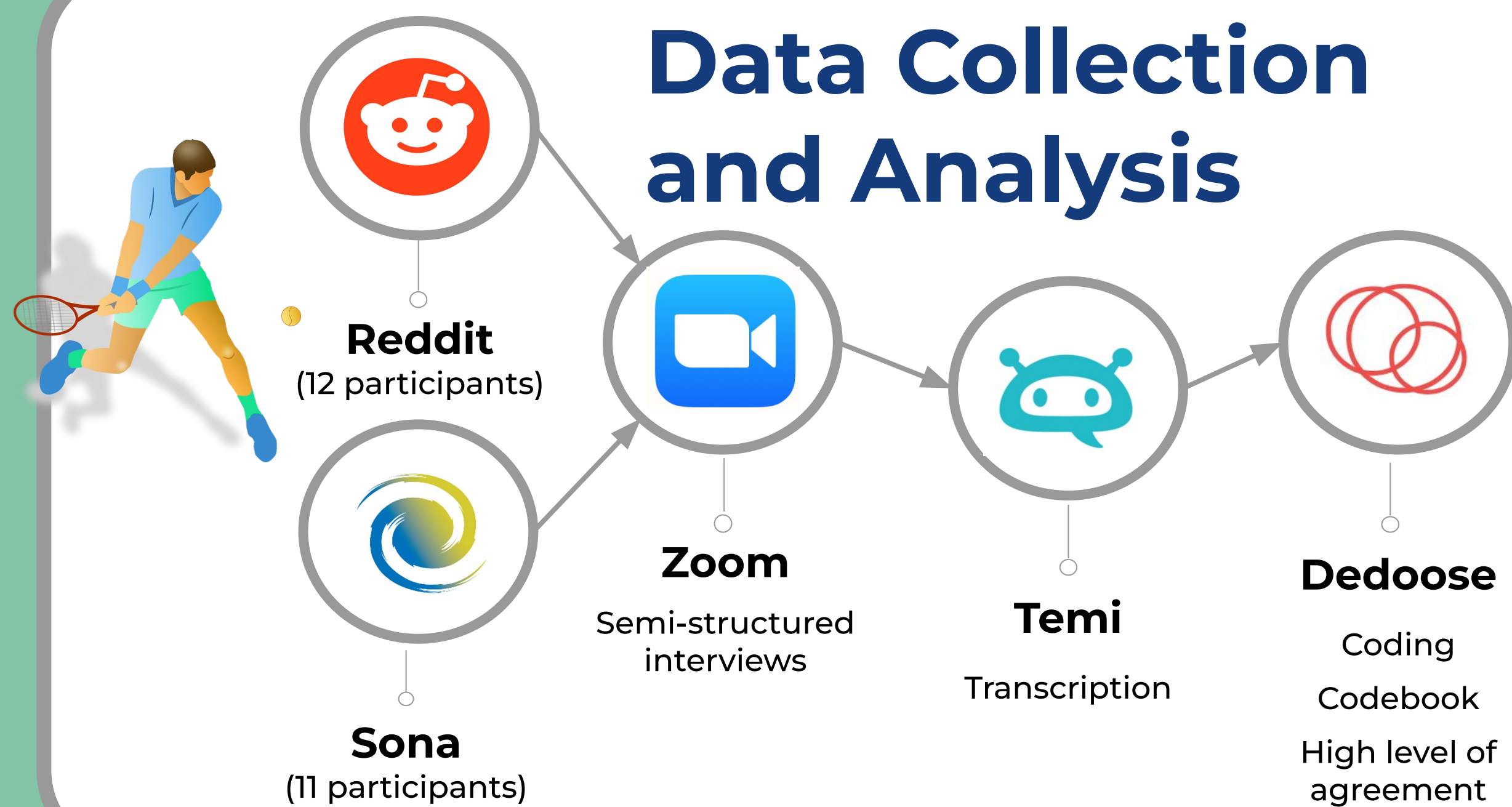
We conducted qualitative interviews with **23 TikTok nonusers** (individuals who have previously used TikTok but have stopped using the platform for a given period of time) to investigate how their **algorithm awareness** and **perception of TikTok as a platform** have informed their **choice of TikTok nonuse**. Our findings indicate that the perceived tradeoffs for nonuse can be explained by the conflict between a user's desired control and sense of agency over the TikTok app – a personalized experience mediated by the algorithm.

## Background

- **Nonuse:** 6 types of nonuse: lagging adoption, **active resistance**, **disenchantment**, disenfranchisement, **displacement**, and disinterest<sup>1</sup>
- **Algorithm awareness:** The perceived quality of user experience of recommendation algorithms influences users' use or nonuse of TikTok<sup>2</sup>
- **Sense of Agency:** An individual's perception that their actions are under their own control; conceptual lens for studying nonuse (awareness, intentionality, capacity)<sup>3</sup>



## Data Collection and Analysis



## Results & Interpretation

**RQ1: How does TikTok users' interaction and experience with the algorithm relate to temporary or complete nonuse of the app?**

### EXPERIENCE WITH TIKTOK

"Once in a while I could see the content I didn't really like the buttons, the not interested one(...) They were, not responsive since I could see the same video. Then I see, let me mark this as not interested, I don't like this. Then after a while, a similar type of video could pop up. So I was wondering if this is basing on my choices, why would it, uh, display the same kinda video again?" (P22)

Coded as: **Experiences lack of control with algorithm** (P09, P12, P15-17, P19, P20-P22)

"Sometimes after searching for some content, particularly, I wish not to see them anymore, but based on the fact that I've searched for it on TikTok once, I kept seeing them in different varieties at different forms." (P09)

"I felt like I need to suspend this for a while because I realized if it's something, someone is doing and does not really have discipline as regard to its usage, then there's a problem. So... I tried to see if I can reduce the time I spend or [if] it still isn't working (...) I think for the [first] couple of weeks it was still the same. Then I felt like, I think the first solution was for me to just stay off completely, but in the meantime, if I focus on other things that's gonna, you know, help my life move forward." (P04)

Coded as: **Attempts self-discipline with TikTok** (P02, P04, P06-08, P12, P16-18, P21, P23)

**RQ2: How does their perception of TikTok as a platform inform temporary or complete nonuse of the app?**

### PERCEPTION OF TIKTOK

"I wouldn't have a say on anyone's opinion on TikTok(...) It's depends if it's working for you(...) [if] it's not working for you then go ahead and quit. Just do what is good for you." (P10)

Coded as: **External sources don't influence nonuse** (P01, P03, P04, P05, P08, P11, P14, P18, P23)

"I would also try to, to investigate and see it for myself if I can find the content that they're talking about, if it's true or they're just trying to demean the app." (P18)

Coded as: **Decision to use TikTok depends on the person** (P02-04, P06, P08, P10, P11-13, P15-19, P21-23)

- Highly individualized experiences, dependent on own interaction with TikTok, other apps, + desired functionality
- External sources of information don't motivate nonuse → perception largely based on personal experience

"In some other cases, like messaging(...) chatting with friends, connecting with people, viewing profiles, learning about locations, joining groups, learning about other things. Then TikTok doesn't stand a chance with some of these platforms(...) TikTok is more of social fun and things like that." (P01)

Coded as: **Prefers other social media to TikTok** (P01, P05, P06, P08, P10, P12, P14-18, P21, P22)

### REASONS FOR NONUSE

"Evaluating at the end of the day, the value I got, I found that it really gained nothing. I spent most of the time just watching videos browsing aimlessly." (P22)

Coded as: **Stopped using due to lack of gratification** (P3, P8, P10, P11, P22, P23)

"Yeah. Like I was at my friend's house, I created a video, I was dancing, but um, and I posted it on TikTok. So the next day checking the comments, I just saw some of like many hate comments, too far to just leave this app. Like all sort of hate comments that make someone to be sad or depressed throughout the day." (P06)

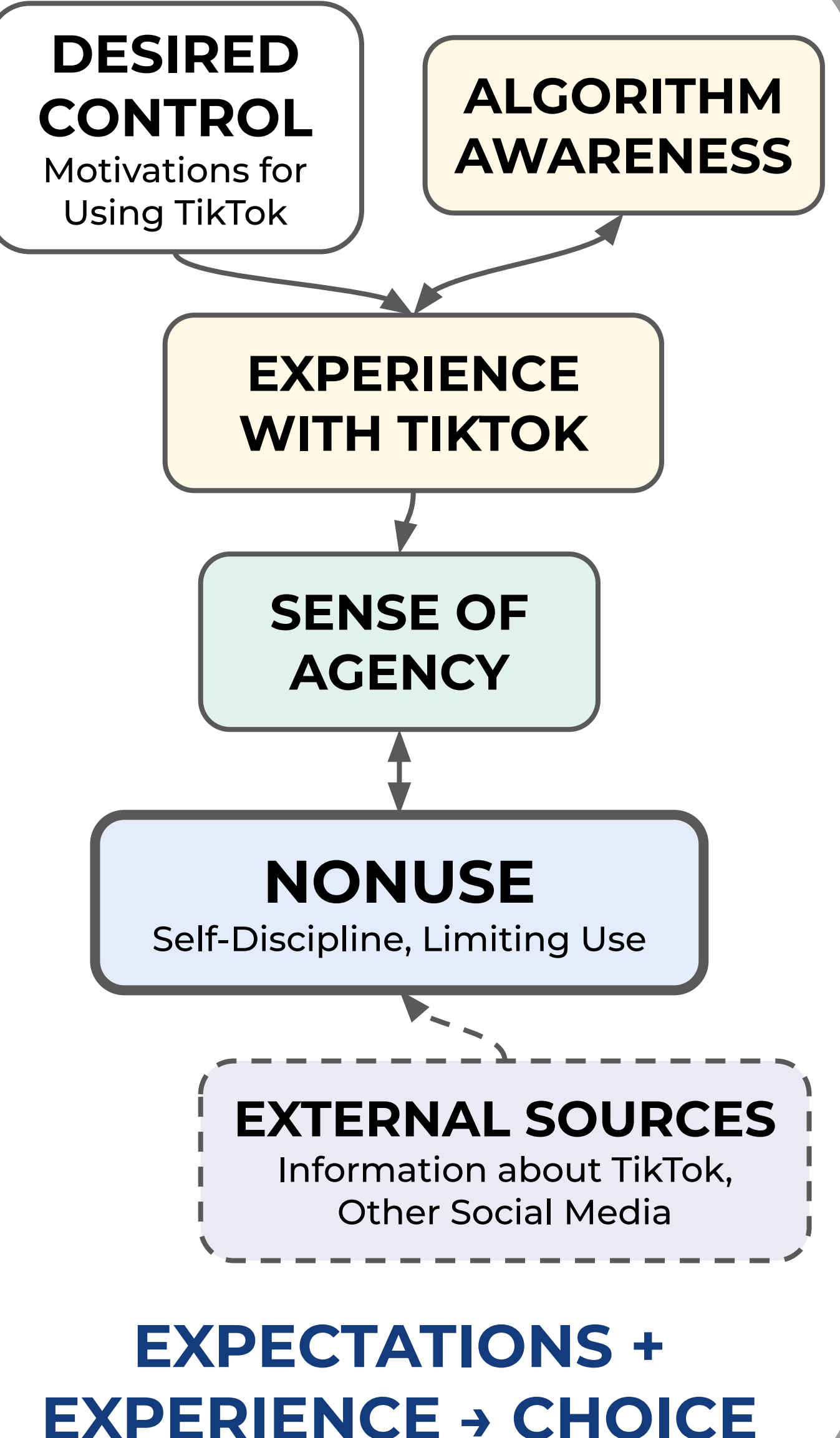
Coded as: **Stopped using due to toxic culture** (P2, P6, P8, P14, P17, P23)

"Any few spare time I have, I watch TikTok(...) Spending hours on TikTok became part of me. Without watching TikTok, I don't feel comfortable. I feel like a part of me is missing. So it felt very odd when I was using considerable amount of my time, which I was supposed to invest in something else (...) it's always terrible and I felt bad." (P12)

Coded as: **Stopped using due to wasted time** (P1, P5, P7, P9, P11, P12, P14, P16-18, P21)

"Majority of the people I know... they're not on TikTok, and that is why it's very essential to be on, on other apps." (P21)

Coded as: **Nonuse related to social connections** (P7, P8, P16, P19, P21)



- Various reasons for nonuse, stemming from a lack of control over TikTok's algorithm and/or perception of limited functionality → negative effect on life
- TikTok nonuse as a form of regaining of control via self-discipline



(1) Satchell, C., Dourish, P.: Beyond the user: use and non-use in HCI. In: Proceedings of the 21st Annual Conference of the Australian Computer-Human Interaction Special Interest Group: Design: Open 24/7, OZCHI 2009, pp. 9-16. ACM, New York (2009). <https://doi.org/10.1145/1738826.1738829>

(2) Lu, X., Lu, Z., Liu, C. (2020). Exploring TikTok Use and Non-use Practices and Experiences in China. In: Meiselwitz, G. (eds) Social Computing and Social Media. Participation, User Experience, Consumer Experience, and Applications of Social Computing. HCI 2020. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 12195. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49576-3\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49576-3_5)

(3) Eric P. S. Baumer, Rui Sun, and Peter Schaefer. 2018. Departing and Returning: Sense of Agency as an Organizing Concept for Understanding Social Media Non/use Transitions. Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact. 2, CSCW, Article 23 (November 2018), 19 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3274292>