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Design, resistance and the performance of identity on TikTok

Ron Darvin

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 3/F Fung King Hey Building, Shatin, NT, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region



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ABSTRACT

One of the most downloaded apps in the world, TikTok is known widely for its act-out memes and lip-sync videos, where music and sound clips are remixed among users. While most social media platforms serve as sites of self-presentation and identity management, embedded in TikTok's design is a memetic logic that encourages imitation and replication and downplays individual identities and social connections. By conducting a multimodal discourse analysis of videos produced by popular Hong Kong-based TikTokers, this paper demonstrates how these content creators were able to resist this memetic logic by finding ways to assert their Hongkonger identities and to forge a sense of community among fellow Hongkongers. Through the production of *sound memes* that use sound as an anchoring mode for producing derivative videos, these TikTokers foregrounded not only their embodied selves but also local spaces and languages. By formulating and promoting context-bound tracks that connected local users, they evoked a sense of pride and affinity among Hongkongers. As content creators produce videos on TikTok, the interplay of platform affordances and constraints can be understood as a negotiation of designs: the *platform design* which indexes the sociotechnical purposes of app developers and software engineers and the *user design* which involves the assembly of semiotic resources that enable users to achieve their own intentions. Recognizing the capacity of social media platforms to program sociality, this paper asserts the need for research methods that examine the tension between the structuring power of these platforms and the agentic participation of users.

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1. Introduction

Launched globally in 2017 by Chinese company ByteDance after merging with lip syncing app Musical.ly, TikTok, known as Douyin in Mainland China, is a video-sharing social networking service known for its act-out memes and lip-synch videos. Through accessible video creation tools offered by the app, users are able to remix trending music and sound clips and do dance challenges in 15–60-s videos. Downloaded more than 2.6 billion times, TikTok has become one of the world's most popular apps owned by a Chinese company that is not one of the country's three tech giants: Alibaba, Baidu and Tencent, and the phenomenal success of TikTok and Douyin as parallel platforms operating within different markets has heralded a paradigm shift in global platform expansion (Kaye et al., 2021). While the two apps are essentially the same platform with identical graphical user interfaces, Douyin can only be accessed in the Mainland and has some functions that are not available in TikTok: *yuyinzhibo* for personal broadcasting, *lianxian* for video calls, *zhifu*, for electronic payments. Douyin has no web browser support like TikTok, but its "Discover" interface has a trending tab called *zheng nengliang* (positive energy) that recom-

mends videos demonstrating "playful patriotism" (Chen et al., 2021).

In Hong Kong where there are 5.8 million social media users, the TikTok penetration rate in 2019 was at 13% and steadily rising (We Are Social, 2020), until ByteDance made the decision to halt its operation in the city after the establishment of the National Security Law in June 2020 to avoid potential conflicts with data and privacy policies. Because of this withdrawal, TikTok can no longer be accessed in Hong Kong unless with a VPN, leaving many residents of Asia's world city no longer able to participate in the global TikTok community. While this access was short-lived, that it was TikTok that was downloadable in Hong Kong and not Douyin indexes the relatively autonomous status of the city as a special administrative region (SAR) of China, under the doctrine of "One Country, Two Systems". Interestingly, the rise in TikTok's popularity in Hong Kong in 2019 coincided with great political unrest and shifting identifications within the city. Throughout the year, mass protests were held to oppose a controversial extradition bill that would have made it possible to extradite Hong Kong residents to mainland China. Concomitant with this resistance was a rise in the number of people in the city who identified as "Hongkonger" i.e. a resident of Hong Kong. In a survey conducted by The University of Hong Kong that year, the number of people who adopted this

local Hongkonger identity rose to 76%, the highest since the hand-over of the city to China in 1997. At the same time, those who identified as “Chinese”, which signified a national identity, was at a record low of 23% (HKUPOP, 2019). In earlier surveys, these contrasting identifications have been linked to categories of social class, educational attainment and age (Steinhardt et al., 2018) as younger members of the population, those with greater material security and higher education were more likely to adopt a Hongkonger identity.

Recognizing how social media platforms have become sites of self-presentation and identity management (Bolander, 2017; Darvin, 2021; Dovchin, 2019), how TikTok users in Hong Kong used this global platform to negotiate their Hongkonger identity during a time of pronounced political volatility is particularly interesting, not only because it is owned by a Chinese company, but also because its design appears to encourage mimicry and virality rather than the presentation of a unique self from a specific context. On Facebook, the city where one currently lives and one's hometown are highlighted in the user profile, and by arranging the posts of a user into a “Timeline”, the platform helps construct a narrative of oneself. On Instagram, users curate their identities by posting pictures that maintain a specific aesthetic and that often position them as foodies, world travelers, or fashionistas, and by indicating where the pictures were taken as well. Studies of TikTok (Zulli and Zulli, 2020; Bhandari and Bimo, 2020) on the other hand have demonstrated how the design of the platform downplays individual identities and contexts and instead, primarily encourages content creation based on imitation: the production of derivative videos that imitate others' dance moves or gestures and that promote participation in an algorithmic trend. For Shifman (2013), these memes are “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience” (p. 367). By grouping semiotic texts that share common content, form and stance, memes construct a network of users who are “culturally, socially, and politically *in the know*” (Zulli and Zulli, 2020), but whose identities are not necessarily foregrounded. Focused on imitation and replication, TikTok does not prioritize social media practices like commenting, following or messaging that enable personal connections among its users. Instead it extends the concept of the meme to an entire platform and makes imitation the underlying logic that governs user behaviour (Zulli and Zulli, 2020).

This memetic logic is supported not only by the design of TikTok but also its algorithmic processes. The platform integrates machine learning algorithms into its infrastructure, revolutionizing content curation on social media and enabling unprecedented patterns of consumption and virality. Rather than a news feed featuring content from one's network, the landing place when users open TikTok is the ‘For You’ page populated by a recommendation engine and showcasing videos not necessarily created by those that one follows. Through powerful artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, TikTok instead feeds videos to the user based on real-time viewing. As one scrolls down the ‘For You’ page watching videos in an infinite loop, the algorithm continues to read implicit or explicit signals about how the user engages with specific content, including retention rates i.e. the number of seconds that the user views a specific video, sharing it or following the creator who uploaded it. A user can also tap “Not Interested” or choose to hide content from a particular creator or featuring a certain sound. The platform uses natural language processing and computer vision technology to generate transcripts of the audio and to identify the objects and participants in the videos. By analyzing this content and the metadata (video name, description and hashtags), the algorithm then makes specific recommendations that match user preferences (Byford, 2018)

and this AI-powered filtering process is what enables the viral circulation of memes.

Recognizing the memetic logic embedded in the design of TikTok, this paper poses the following questions: In what way does the design of TikTok provide affordances and constraints of self-presentation and to what extent do the users in this study conform to or resist the logic of this design in order to perform a Hongkonger identity? This paper argues that while the design of TikTok encourages imitation, discourages interpersonal connections and downplays the presentation of a unique self, the TikTok users in the study, through their own design, resisted being just “meme machines” (Blackmore, 1999) or vectors of cultural transmission (Conte, 2001). As a platform that encourages the production of what I call “sound memes”, TikTok provides affordances for resemiotization where both body and space are inscribed in derivative videos, enabling identity work and agentive participation. Users were able to appropriate memes and design their profiles to serve their own communicative intentions. Through the creative assembly of their linguistic and semiotic resources, the users in the study who claimed Hong Kong as home were able to resist the platform's memetic logic by asserting their Hongkonger identity and collectively imagining Hong Kong.

2. TikTok, programmability and identity

Still in its early stages, scholarship on TikTok (Collie and Wilson-Barnao, 2020; Kaye et al., 2021; Zulli and Zulli, 2020; Bhandari and Bimo, 2020) has largely focused on issues of platformization (De Kloet et al., 2019; Van Dijck and Poell, 2013; Van Dijck et al., 2018) that highlights how social media platforms, their design, mechanisms and underlying logics shape social interaction and cultural production. By drawing attention to platform design, these studies demonstrate the affordances that enable engagement within the app and the tensions associated with its being supported by different governance mechanisms. These studies of TikTok often draw on data collected from a walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) that examines the app's technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references. By comparing TikTok and Douyin through a platformization lens for instance, Kaye and others (2021) demonstrate what has enabled these twin apps to exist in two different platform ecosystems: Mainland China and the rest of the world. Through a walkthrough of TikTok from registration to exit, Collie and Wilson-Barnao (2020) posit that the design of the platform promotes an “algorithmic culture” where what matters “is not the specific content or its meaning... but rather its capacity to incite interest, be shared, and go viral” (p. 173). This insight is similarly shared by Zulli and Zulli, (2020) who argue that TikTok “extends the Internet meme to the level of platform infrastructure” (p. 2) and constructs “imitation publics” where replication becomes the basis of sociality. Rather than encouraging users to connect with others or share lived experiences, TikTok prioritizes the consumption of content that is conducive for imitation and links replication to user profitability, made possible through the acquisition of followers and video likes. Recognizing this new model of interaction, Bhandari and Bimo (2020) talk about the “algorithmized self” that arises from user engagement with TikTok. Because of this memetic impetus, they assert that TikTok is a site where users interact mostly with the algorithm and their own content and self-representations. The videos are seen as public performances that are built upon intrapersonal rather than interpersonal engagement, and where such self-presentation is directed towards the individual instead of an audience.

When users engage in different apps like TikTok, it is important to note that these social media platforms do not just mediate inter-

action, they constitute it (Gillespie, 2018). Van Dijck and Poell (2013) contend that a platform operates with a specific logic, the set of principles that guide how information is processed and social traffic is channeled. This *programmability* enables platforms to “trigger and steer users’ creative or communicative contributions” (p. 5). As users perform identities online, the design and infrastructure of online spaces have the power to construct conditions of possibility for sociality in these spaces (Bucher, 2018), that is, as *programmed sociality*. Sociality in this regard is not just about the interaction between human users, rather it implies the ways in which human and nonhuman entities are associated with each other to enable interaction (Latour, 2005). In this case, sociality is “programmed” not in a technologically determined sense, but the notion signals instead how the architecture and material substrate of a medium can assemble and organize information in dynamic ways. When users participate in a platform like TikTok, they assemble what linguistic and semiotic resources they have at their disposal, and the architecture of the platform also defines the parameters of what they are able to deploy. As users negotiate their own intentions with the affordances and constraints of a platform and the contextual aspects of different communicative events, certain patterns or practices surrounding platform use emerge. These *cultures-of-use* (Thorne, 2016) are “historically sedimented associations, purposes, and values” (p.185) that accrue to a platform and that generate expectations of genre-specific activity. Such interactional and relational associations together with expectations of genre-specific activity are learned through processes of platform socialization.

As users of a platform negotiate cultures-of-use and designs that program interactions in certain ways, they can be steered towards certain behaviours that may afford or constrain possibilities for identity work. Blommaert (2005) defines *identity* as “particular forms of semiotic potential, organised in a repertoire” (p. 207). Rather than being a property or stable category of individuals, it is constructed by configuring semiotic resources through practices or socially conditioned semiotic work; hence, identity is always performed or enacted, and it also has to be recognized by others, by members of a community that one aligns with. As sites of self-presentation and identity negotiation, social media platforms reorganize private and public boundaries in ways that may result in “the loss of a sense of place” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 308). As networked and remixed sociabilities emerge and contexts collapse, “a sense of place is formed in response to the particular sense of self, or in response to the identity performance constructed upon that place” (p. 317). It is by adeptly navigating the social and material landscapes of these platforms that users are able to find opportunities for expression and connection that assert their own identities and membership in specific communities. As users move across different domains, they position themselves in different ways and adopt shifting stylistic, epistemic and affective stances, drawing on their semiotic repertoires to recontextualize meanings. To capture this reality, Iedema (2003) theorized *resemiotization* as a process of “how meaning making shifts from context to context, from practice to practice, or from one stage of a practice to the next” (p. 41). As meanings travel across online spaces, they can be interpreted in different ways through artifacts that “embody social relations in materials more durable than those of face-to-face interaction” (Law and Mol, 1995, p. 281). By following a *resemiotizing* logic, people assemble semiotic modes to recontextualize meanings in ways that index their own identities and communities. In this sense, *resemiotization* takes into account how “the community transposes and reifies its knowledges, techniques and technologies as well as its interpersonal, social and cultural practices and positionings” (Iedema, 2001, p. 36).

3. Methods and data collection

3.1. Multimodal discourse analysis

To examine the interplay of platform design and a user’s semiotic repertoire, this study draws on multimodal discourse analysis, an approach to discourse that focuses on how multiple modes of communication construct meaning. Mode refers to a “semiotic system with an internal grammaticality, such as speech, color, taste, or the design of images” (Levine and Scollon, 2004, p. 2). Media such as paper, digital devices and platforms are the material carriers of modes, which Norris (2004) argues are not bounded units but fluid groupings of signs whose meanings are historically constructed. Similarly, for Kress (2010), the function and significance of a mode shifts with technologies and conventions of use and that design enables “an individual’s realization of their interest in their world” (p.6). In multimodal discourse analysis (Jewitt, 2017), the mediated action is the unit of analysis. Actions can be further classified into higher-level action (e.g. a meeting among friends) that is comprised of multiple chains of lower-level actions (e.g. postural shifts, gaze shifts, etc.). The modes of spoken language, images, proxemics, posture, gesture, gaze, music, layout carry interactional meaning and possess different materiality, whether audible or visible, fleeting or enduring, embodied or disembodied (Norris, 2004). During a communicative event, interactants pay attention to these different modes in varying degrees, and Norris (2004; 2013) conceptualized the notion of modal density to highlight how the intensity or weight that a mode carries in a communicative event (where a higher-level action is enacted) can vary.

More recently, multimodal discourse analysis has been conducted to examine the affordances and interpersonal meanings represented on social media. In a study of Instagram, Zappavigna (2016) investigates the multimodal choices of users in representations of motherhood, and the way subjectivity is signaled in images using the hashtag #motherhood. Through a multimodal approach set within a social semiotic framework, Bezemer and Kress (2017) discuss how a young boy uses the resources available to him in order to construct a multimodal text and address an audience. Gürsimsek (2016) also uses a similar approach to examine how the animated GIF (graphics interchange format) enables participatory conversations between online television audiences. Through a multimodal analysis of design, she pays attention to the relationship between foregrounded figures and background elements, the layering of images, color and transparency, framing, and the depiction of temporal and spatial changes.

This examination of how modes are layered and foregrounded, the extent to which a mode is intricately intertwined with other modes, its complexity, also contributes to modal density that Jewitt (2017) extends to the analysis of digital texts, particularly food blogs. Through a systematic description of modes and the organizing principles of a platform, she creates an inventory of the meaning potentials within technology use represented by hyperlinks, the layering of images, and the moment-by-moment construction of multimodal ensembles. By exploring the design decisions made by bloggers, Jewitt draws attention to how certain modes are privileged not just in terms of frequency of use but the functions they serve. The modal densities within the blog signalled by the amount of space a mode occupies on the screen or the way modal elements are ordered in the layout indexes what discourses are hidden and what are made more visible. In this study, modal density is used to examine which modes or semiotic resources a user foregrounds or pays most attention to in order to enact specific actions i.e. performing a dance on a 15-s TikTok video. A mode would have high modal intensity if its discontinuation or absence would change the higher-level action and its corresponding mean-

ings. Modal density is also extended to the analysis of static pages like a profile page to examine what modes are given more weight because of the design or layout of this page.

3.2. Data collection and analysis


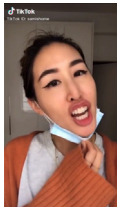

Data for this study was collected by downloading a total of twenty 15-s TikTok videos by verified users who are residents of Hong Kong and by taking screenshots of these videos and their corresponding creator profiles. This data collection was conducted after TikTok halted its operations in Hong Kong in July 2020 and thus, accessing TikTok required the use of a non-local SIM card for the mobile app and a virtual private network (VPN) for browser viewing.

Verified users are those that have been selected by TikTok for having met certain criteria: consistent daily follower growth, increasing watch time, media coverage, consistently viral content, and account verification on other social media platforms. Verified users have been chosen for this study not because of their popularity, but because the process of verification indexes what the platform values in terms of participation and considers symbolic capital. It also signals how the user creates content with greater intentionality, that is, to position one's self as a specific kind of user or a specific identity. To identify these verified users, the term "Hong Kong" was inputted in the search field of the platform's Discover page, generating a list of different videos that has Hong Kong in the title or hashtag. From this list, five verified users from Hong Kong were chosen. Four videos from each user that foregrounded Hong Kong in terms of location, content, and language use were chosen for study. For example, Victor Cheng's "Daily life in Hong Kong", "Hong Kong Rush Hour" and "Sounds of Hong Kong in 15s", J Lou's videos that include her speaking in Cantonese or talking about

Cantonese, or Samantha Wong's videos that feature different scenes from Hong Kong or uses the track "Hong Kong Check".

Because some videos were memes, original videos (e.g. the original "I will find the hood" video by Charli D'Amelio that J Lou makes a version of) and derivative videos (e.g. videos created by other users based on Samantha Wong's original "Hong Kong Check" video) were also examined. To conduct a multimodal transcription of the downloaded videos, a screenshot was taken for every change in lower-level action or shift in composition. When videos are downloaded, captions, buttons, and other static meta-data disappear, and only the TikTok logo and username are retained. To capture the disappearing data, I also took screenshots of the beginning of these videos while they were playing on the platform. In the transcription, I listed the information that appears throughout the video: caption, hashtags, and sound used. The next column identified the modes and semiotic resources in each screenshot and mapped out the chain of gestures, gazes, utterances, and other visual effects across different frames, including my interpretation of the intensity or weight of specific modes. Utterances, captions and hashtags in vernacular Cantonese were transcribed into Jyutping, a romanisation system for Cantonese that includes numerical tonal marks and translated into English by a native Cantonese speaker. A separate column was dedicated to notes and my thematic coding. While a creator on TikTok is also a user who interacts with other users, I use the terms "creator" and "user" in my notes to distinguish the individual whose profile or videos are being examined (creator) as opposed to the individual who interacts with this content (user.) I make the same distinctions in reporting the findings here. A sample of the multimodal transcription appears below:

Samantha Wong's "Hong Kong Check" 2020-2-14

| Time Stamp | Caption / Hashtags / Sound | Modes and semiotic resources | Notes |
|---|---|---|--|
|  | Life currently If you know you know #tiktokhkmo #coronavirus #xyzbca #tiktokhongkong Learn the facts about COVID-19 Hong Kong Check (Contains music from: ROXANNE (REMIX) – Arizona Zervas and Swae Lee | | Caption uses the flag icon to signify Hong Kong. Hashtag #tiktokhkmo links Hong Kong (hk) and Macau (mo). Hashtag #xyzbca is used to optimize video visibility. Hashtag #coronavirus activates the link "Learn the facts about COVID-19" that leads to a page providing local and global news about the pandemic |
| Samantha Wong's "Hong Kong Check" 2020-2-14 | | | |
|  | | Wong is foregrounded from head to chest as she takes off a mask. Wong lip syncs "Hong Kong Check" | Because the track begins with the utterance "Hong Kong Check" that is lipsynced, most videos of this meme show the creator at the beginning |
| 0:00 – 0:01 | | | |
|  | | Elevator buttons are foregrounded (G, 1, 2, 3, 4) Orange sleeve (what Wong is wearing from earlier frame) is extended to cover her finger as she presses G. | The action signifies a precautionary measure during the pandemic. |
| 0:02 | | | |

4. Findings

Findings in this study reveal that aligned with the memetic logic embedded in its design, TikTok provides limited affordances for creators to present a highly contextualized self and to engage meaningfully with others. The creator profile page does not provide rich opportunities to highlight aspects of one's identity, and instead foregrounds quantified descriptors that position users as productive content creators with varying potential for virality. The design of the newsfeed uses various semiotic cues to direct attention to the tools for meme production rather than those for social connections. While this platform design does encourage imitation and replication in ways that downplay individual identities, the creators in the study demonstrated agency by resisting this logic and circumnavigating the constraints of this design. By curating their profiles and resemiotizing memes in ways that their identities, contexts and relationships become central to the meaning of the derivative videos, these creators negotiate ways of asserting their Hongkonger identity, foregrounding the Hong Kong context while constructing a community of creators who collectively imagine Hong Kong.

4.1. Negotiating a Hongkonger identity through profile curation

4.1.1. Programming identity through the design of a profile page

The fields available in the design of the profile page (Fig. 1) index TikTok's notion of what should constitute a user's identity. By defining these parameters, the platform promotes a kind of self that serves specific sociotechnical purposes. Clicking on the profile of a creator, the page that appears can be divided into two parts: the top half that provides information about the creator and that remains mostly static and the bottom half that is designed as a grid of moving GIF thumbnails or "covers" of the six latest videos uploaded by the creator and is more dynamic. Given the distribution of images on this page, including the profile pic which occupies a prominent space in the top half, it is immediately distinguishable that the image is ascribed higher modal intensity. Although there is a large "Message" button that appears on the profile page, a user can send only a direct message to the creator if the creator also follows the user. This condition of reciprocity draws attention to how messaging is not a form of interaction or sociality that is encouraged in this platform. Words that populate the bio field are in a distinguishably smaller font compared to the numbers of "Following", "Followers" and "Likes" that are written in bold and appear immediately after the creator's username. Superimposed on each cover is the number of times a video has been viewed, continually updated by the app's algorithm. That these images and numbers are foregrounded in a profile page indexes what TikTok values and expects from a "verified user" or "good creator": the continuous production of quality videos that become viral and that can be converted into more sellable data.

On Instagram, when a user clicks on a creator's post (or scrolls down a feed), the location in which the picture or video was taken is positioned right under the creator's handle, foregrounding the context of the post, whereas TikTok posts have no specific field allotted for location. While Instagram profiles have a "Tagged" tab featuring posts by other users who have tagged the creator, signifying shared contexts and relationships with other users, the TikTok profile only has a "Liked" tab featuring videos by other users the creator has liked. In this case, liked videos serve more as a means to allocate value by identifying what is "likable", focusing on the objects of production rather than relations with other users.

While the creator has the agency to choose the words and emojis for his or her "Bio" and create the videos whose thumbnails will populate this profile, the fields and their arrangement are given,

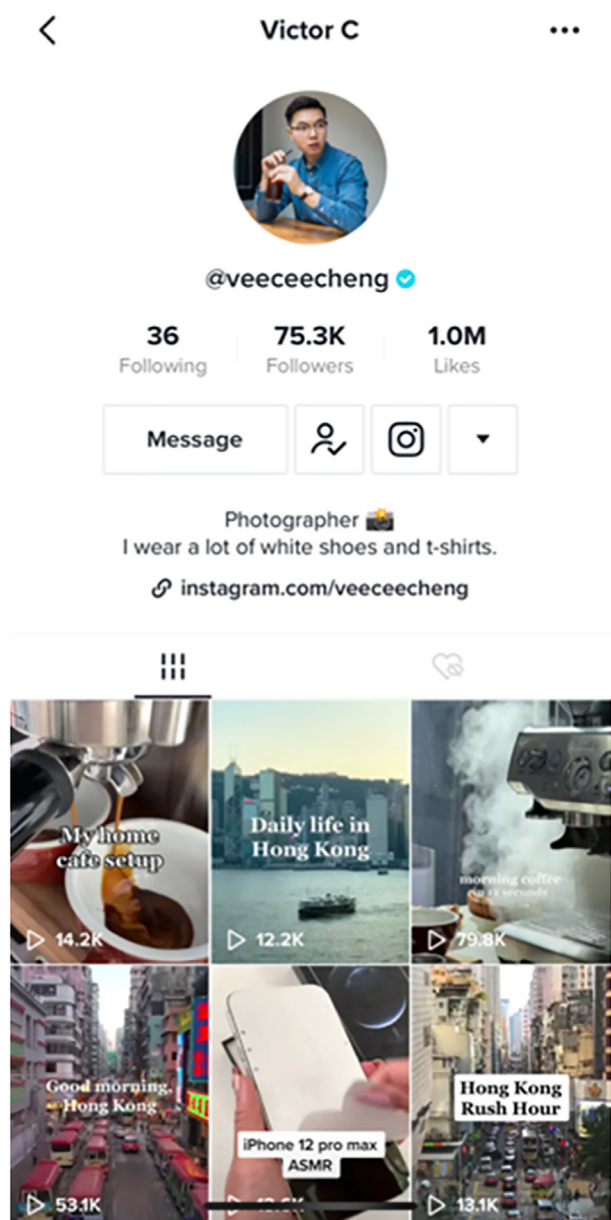


Fig. 1. Tiktok profile of @veecee Cheng.

and other foregrounded information such as the numbers of followers and likes are algorithmically produced. The Bio field allows only a maximum of 80 characters (between Instagram's 60- and Facebook's 101-character limit) and does not allow hyperlinks. In contrast to a Facebook profile that highlights other personal details like location, work or education, there are no fields in the TikTok profile that reveals one's location and in contrast to an Instagram profile that allows a creator to include a link to a website of his or her choice, the only links that a creator on TikTok could include are those of their Instagram and YouTube accounts, which are similarly focused on producing images and videos. Like TikTok, these two social media platforms contribute to an influencer economy where users can follow but not necessarily be followed back, and popular content creators achieve influencer status. Establishing connections across these platforms enables the circulation of not only these TikTok videos but also a creator's symbolic capital, and thus creates more opportunities for virality.

4.1.2. Resisting the decontextualizing logic of design

In the profile of @veecee Cheng (Fig. 1), the creator demonstrates an awareness of the multimodal ensemble that can position him as an influencer. Victor Cheng is a Hong Kong based photographer who has been listed by a local advertising agency as one of the city's key opinion leaders (KOLs) in social media. Popular lifestyle magazine *Hong Kong Tatler* also identified him as one of the top TikTokers to follow (Sobti, 2021). While “influencers” typically have a large follower size and a highly curated aesthetics to promote a specific lifestyle, KOLs are usually dedicated to a particular area of expertise, and in the case of Cheng, this expertise is photography. He identifies himself as “Victor C” withholding his surname, which is instead embedded in his username (@veecee Cheng). The blue check mark that appears beside this username is the “Verified” icon, also used in Instagram and Twitter and a marker of prestige or symbolic value. His videos include a range of photography tips, city views, and home activities that include preparing beverages and organizing his closet, all of which index an upper-class lifestyle. In the first line of his “Bio”, Cheng has typed the solitary word “Photographer” followed by a camera emoji. The second line downplays the official tone of the first by adding the more whimsical “I wear a lot of white shoes and t-shirts.” His profile pic is an image of him in a blue shirt against a white wall looking away from the camera, the “elsewhere gaze” that has become a convention in Instagram and what some have labeled as a “blogger pose” (Pham, 2013).

In his profile, Cheng does not post specific information about his being a Hongkonger in his profile. What he has done however is curate the covers that appear below his bio to represent Hong Kong more prominently. As a photographer, Cheng has produced a number of videos that highlight local spaces and domestic routines, and in one video where he showcases different scenic spots in Hong Kong, he adds the caption, “Being a tourist in *my own city today*” (italics mine), and the first-person pronoun becomes a marker of his Hongkonger identity. Unlike YouTube where thumbnails on the source channel are accompanied by linguistic forms such as the title and the creator's name, TikTok only displays the number of views on each thumbnail. What Cheng has done to foreground how the videos are about Hong Kong is create titles in English such as “Daily life in Hong Kong”, “Good morning, Hong Kong”, “Hong Kong Rush Hour” that are layered on images of public spaces that are distinctly Hong Kong. Before uploading a video, he selects the frame that includes the title to be his cover, and in doing so, his profile page is able to foreground Hong Kong through linguistic and semiotic forms. Through this intentional curation of the static Bio and the dynamic set of covers, the creator is able to foreground context. By identifying himself only as a photographer in the Bio while promoting his Hongkonger identity through the covers, Cheng is able to position himself as a global citizen and TikTok influencer whose location is not necessarily fixed, but who can also claim a local Hongkonger identity when he chooses to do so.

4.2. Inscribing a Hongkonger identity in a derivative video

4.2.1. Programming imitation and the production of memes

As a platform that encourages the reproduction of memes, TikTok reinforces this logic in multiple ways. Not only does the For You landing page showcase trending videos that can achieve meme status, but each video highlights the track that has been used and that serves as the basis of a meme. When a video achieves meme status and its derivatives gain a high number of likes, a red “Use sound” button (see Fig. 2) appears prominently below the video alongside the title of the track. Not only does it signal to the user the virality of this meme, but also the viral status of this particular video. When a derivative video has not achieved this status and does not have the “Use sound” button, the spinning sound icon

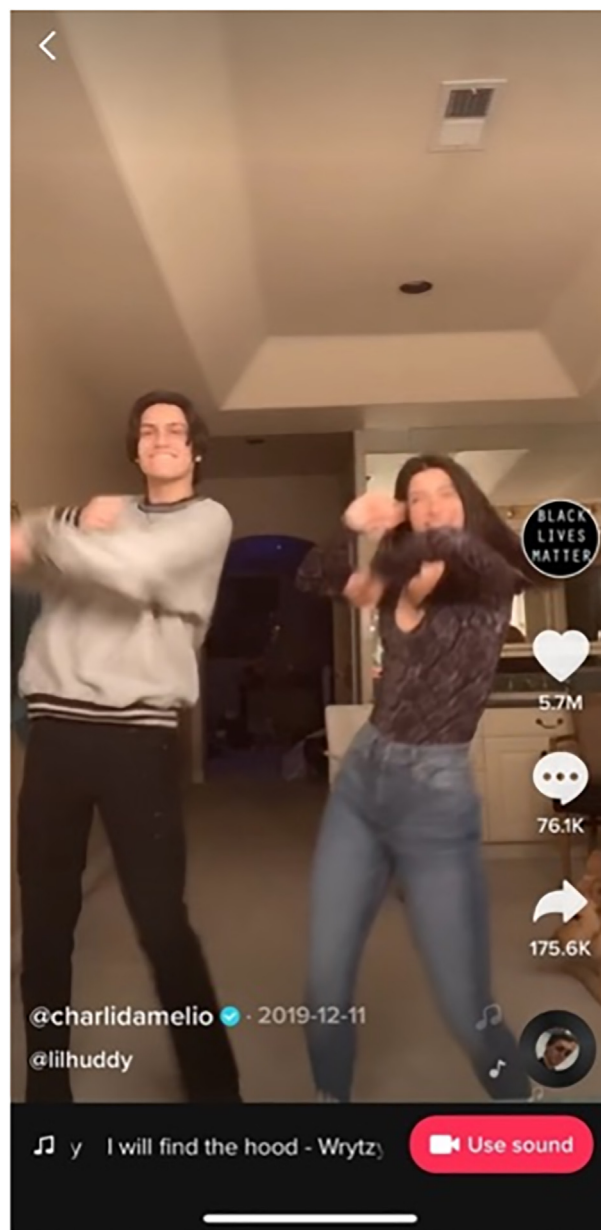


Fig. 2. *I will find the hood* video of @charlidamelio.

at the bottom right of the video leads users to a page where the title and creator of the track is followed by the total number of derivative videos. The covers of these videos are then arranged from most viewed to least viewed. In this case, the virality of the meme itself and its derivative videos are foregrounded. Such a design not only encourages users to create their own videos but also enables them to watch the most popular derivatives and to identify the semiotic patterns (i.e. the gestures or movements) that constitute this meme and that serve as the basis of imitation.

On TikTok, the most-followed and second-highest earning creator is Charli D' Amelio, with more than 100 M followers and nine billion likes. One of D' Amelio's most viewed videos is one where she dances to a mashup entitled “I will find the hood” (Fig. 2) with another popular TikToker @lilhuddy. Viewed 44 M times, this video does not have any caption but tags @lilhuddy and shows them in an indoor living space, full body, as they perform a choreographed dance. As the original meme video, it has instantiated more than 392 K derivatives, one of which is by Hongkonger J Lou (@jlou).



Fig. 3. *I will find the hood* video of @jlouofficial.

Born and raised in Hong Kong to a local Chinese mother and French father, Lou is a TikToker whose videos often features humorous interactions with her mother and her boyfriend and commentaries on Cantonese as a language. The derivative of D'Amelio's "I will find the hood" was Lou's first TikTok video (see Fig. 3), and in this version the Hongkonger situates herself in a similar indoor living space, full body shot, while imitating D'Amelio's dance moves. In this case, the music has high modal intensity because it is the mode that associates Lou's video with a trending meme, and the recreation of this meme is the higher-level action of this video. The dance moves also have high modal density because they are intertwined with the mode of music and also have high intensity because they link Lou's video to that of a viral TikToker. In the caption, Lou appends the hashtags #foryou, #foryoupage or #fyp because users believe these tags serve the algorithm and enable them to appear in the ForYou landing page. In this case, the linguistic mode of the hashtag recedes into low modal intensity because it

does not shape the meanings in the video itself and is only used as a strategy to optimize the video's visibility.

By examining the content, form and stance of an original video, Lou is able to participate in processes of imitation and replication. Through this resemiotization, she positions herself as someone "in the know" and gains symbolic capital by associating herself with a viral TikToker.

4.2.2. Resisting imitation

While Lou demonstrates an awareness of the conventions and strategies that constitute TikTok's memetic logic, she also resists complete imitation by inserting dissimilar semiotic elements in the video. Instead of dancing with a male partner, Lou instead includes her mother sweeping the floor in the background while inching her way towards the dancing daughter, seemingly oblivious to the fact that a video is being recorded. The mother moves from background to foreground, from being a silent figure to a speaking interactant who interrupts Lou's dance. The mother begins by uttering "哎咁" (aai1 jaa1), a Cantonese expression that can signify a range of emotions, depending on inflection and context. In this case, the mother expresses annoyance, and the utterance is accompanied by a text overlay ("Aiya...") on the top, and is followed by another utterance, this time in English, "Can you move?!" also with a text overlay. The modal intensity of the mother shifts to a higher state when she exclaims, "阻住晒" (zo2 zyu6 saai3) and this utterance is given both audible and visible materiality through the text overlay, "YOU'RE IN THE WAY!! / 阻住晒!!". By breaking the memetic link to D'Amelio's original video, the mother's actions and utterances lend humour to the video, which is heightened by the irony expressed in the first part of the caption, "My mom is so excited for my first TikTok video...", which is then followed by "媽媽鬻了" (maa1 maa1 nau1 liu5) (mama is angry)".

Through these semiotic affordances, Lou is able to assert her Hongkonger identity by providing Cantonese both audible and visible materiality, while at the same time maintaining a wider global audience by providing English translations. By code-switching in the caption and offering no translation for "媽媽鬻了", she is also able to negotiate context collapse and communicate exclusively to people who understand written vernacular Cantonese and establishes ties with fellow Cantonese speakers. Through language, she inscribes context into a derivative video, and her design choices highlights how the process of resemiotizing a meme is not necessarily one of mere replication but a negotiation of similarity and difference: the derivative should be similar enough to the original so that it could be recognized as a meme, but it can also be differentiated enough for it to be one's own. In this case, Lou establishes the video as a meme by imitating the sound and movement from the original but disrupts this memetic logic by inserting her own linguistic resources. Through this intentional design, the creator is able to move across global and local scales, addressing different audiences while inscribing her Hongkonger identity into a meme.

4.3. Collectively imagining Hong Kong through sound memes

Apart from negotiating the constraints of a TikTok profile and resisting the memetic conventions of a derivative video, the Hongkong-based TikTokers in this study have also been able to assert their identities by producing videos that showcase Hong Kong, some of which become, in varying degrees, memes themselves. Cheng's "Sounds of Hong Kong in 15 s" and Wong's "Hong Kong Check" are examples of these Hong Kong memes. By participating in the (re)production of a Hong Kong meme that uses one track or sound, derivative creators are able to insert their own local

images and embodied performances, inscribing their own identities into these videos, while collectively imagining Hong Kong and making visible an imagined online community of Hongkongers.

4.3.1. Designing a context-bound track

In a video entitled, “Sounds of Hong Kong in 15 seconds” (Fig. 4), Cheng matches moving images with sounds that he considers unique to Hong Kong: the beep that accompanies tapping one’s MTR card at the turnstile, the PA system announcing “Please mind the gap”, the sound that accompanies the Walk signal for pedestrians to cross the street. He adds the hashtag #ASMR, short for autonomous sensory meridian response, a term used to refer to the stimulating or relaxing sensation people get when hearing specific sounds. The linguistic forms (the title and the hashtag) directs the audience’s attention to sound, and in this case, it is the sounds that acquire greater intensity over the images. By

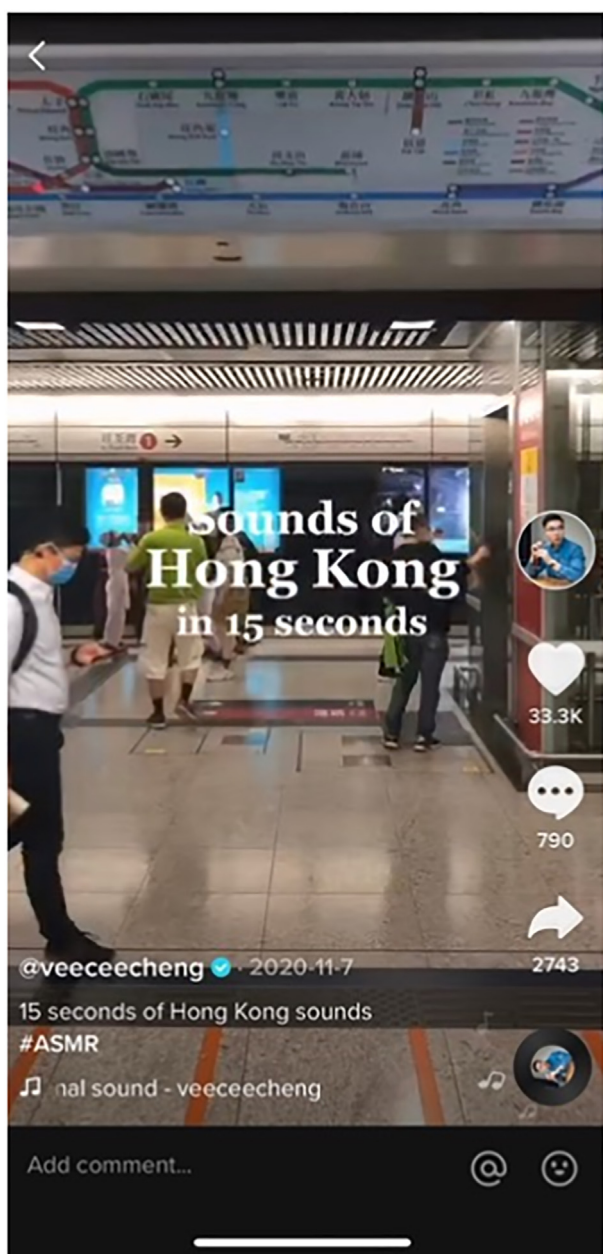


Fig. 4. The opening shot of Cheng’s video, “Sounds of Hong Kong in 15 s”

assembling these sounds in a video, Cheng thus creates a track that is context-bound, a “Hong Kong track” that can serve as the basis of a meme. Because of the evocative quality of the sounds in this Hong Kong track, another user, Niki Proshin (@nikiproshin) creates a “Duet”, a specific functionality of TikTok that enables Proshin to create a split screen where a user can see both Cheng’s video and Proshin’s reaction, which he begins with a text overlay that says “I miss Hong Kong so badly”. In this case, the way Cheng assembles the different modes in his video, highlighting some over the others, stimulates specific responses and facilitates interaction between creator and user.

By creating a context-bound track, Cheng resists the convention of using music that can be used for the production of derivative videos in different contexts. The video constructs the identity of Cheng as Hongkonger and visualizes a specific imagination of Hong Kong. The images and sounds in turn elicit an emotional response from either fellow Hongkongers or other users who have ties with the city. While the original track from this video did not become a popular meme and was used only in three other videos, it reiterates the significant role of sound in TikTok to evoke an affective response among users. This video elicited almost more than 700 comments where users mostly expressed how they missed Hong Kong and how “this brought back so many fond memories” (a comment by a user). As a collection of distinct Hong Kong sounds, the video takes the mode that occupies a privileged position in the platform’s memetic logic and uses it to construct context.

4.3.2. Constructing a community of Hongkongers

While the design of TikTok downplays interpersonal relations and contexts in the production of memes, some Hongkong users have produced videos that not only draw attention to place but also build a sense of community among Hongkongers. One such meme that became viral on TikTok was Hong Kong Check (Fig. 5) credited to creator @mavischanx and which begins with a woman’s voice saying “Hong Kong check” followed by a remix of the song, “Roxanne”. The track was used in the production of 11.2 K videos, and the most popular video with 1.5 M views and 114 K likes is by Samantha Wong (@samishome) (Fig. 6). While the track had already started its meme trajectory before Wong’s video, her status as an influencer and her depiction of how COVID-19 was reshaping everyday life in Hong Kong helped the video achieve viral status. The video begins with her pulling down her mask while lip syncing “Hong Kong Check”, followed by clips of her using her sweater sleeve to press elevator buttons, pouring alcohol on her palm, and buying bleach. The caption for the video is “Life currently [Hong Kong flag emoji] If you know you know” followed by the hashtags #tiktokhkmo #coronavirus #xyzbca #tiktokhongkong. While the hashtag #xyzbca just like #foryou or #fyp is an attempt to optimize the video’s visibility, the other hashtags serve as a way to contextualize the video and establish that it is about what life in Hong Kong is like during a pandemic. The flag emoji is a visual mode that stands out in the middle of the white text.

Other top ranking Hong Kong Check videos mostly include local scenes and artifacts: @marinasyoung demonstrates what her home quarantine situation was like; @rudeboyrazz shares views of mountain tops, high-rise buildings, and a juice box of a popular local drink, VLT, with the caption reading “no place like home [smiling face with hearts emoji] LIKE IF YOU’RE FROM HONG KONG”; @jmeannn showcases a local fish farm and uses the hashtags #hongkong #hk and #hongkongcheck; @derplinna shows the Dragon’s Back trail while the video of @loganclw includes Sharp Peak and High West. In this case, the Hong Kong Check track becomes a vehicle through which users create videos that showcase what they find remarkable about the city. By lip syncing the utterance at the start, usually through a selfie, the creators establish how they are in Hong Kong and then follow this up with

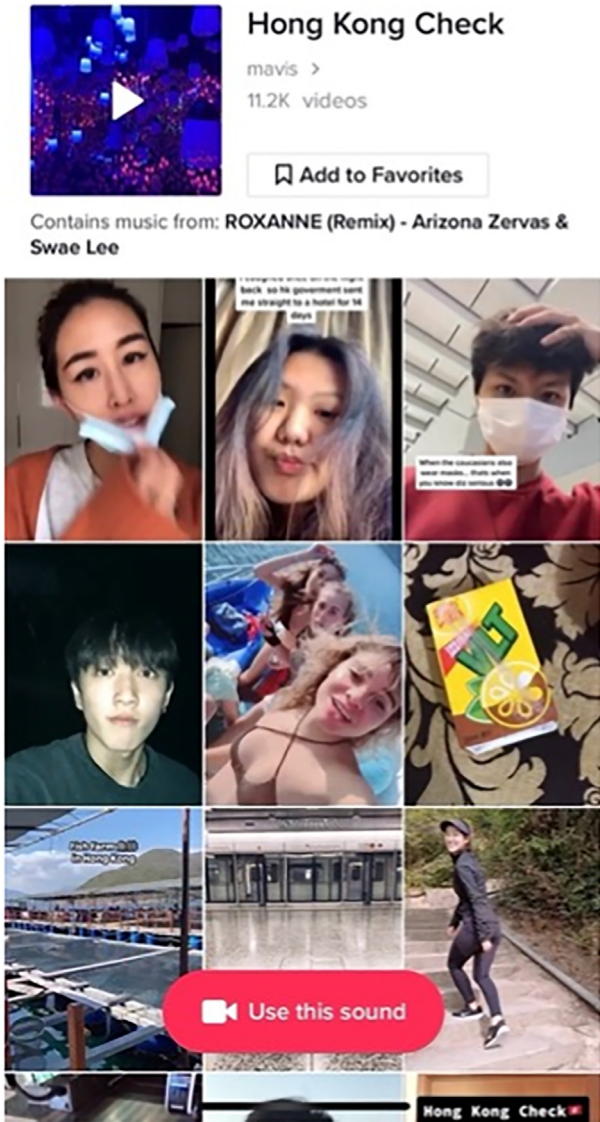


Fig. 5. Archive page of “Hong Kong Check”

images of local spaces. Through the Hong Kong Check track archive and the hashtags, these videos are arranged side by side with one another, and together, they construct a collective imagination of Hong Kong, comprised by the performances of different Hongkonger identities.

What the Hong Kong Check meme demonstrates is that while the design of TikTok encourages imitation at a global scale through the production of memes using the anchoring mode of a music track, creators can resist this logic by using a context-bound track that in turn, produces context-bound memes. Hongkonger users are thus able to inscribe their own local identities in the derivatives, and the track provides the cadence and the tone in which the local Hongkong images are presented, stimulating an affective response from its audience. This affective response in turn stimulates opportunities for interpersonal connections and shared imaginations among fellow Hongkongers.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The objective of this paper has been twofold: 1) to understand how the design of TikTok indexes a specific logic that can shape modes of production and cultures-of-use, and 2) to examine to



Fig. 6. Hong Kong Check video of @samishome.

what extent a specific group of users conforms to or resists this logic by making their own user design choices. What this paper has demonstrated is that while the memetic logic embedded in TikTok’s design encourages processes of imitation and replication and downplays individual identities and social connections, the Hong Kong TikTokers in the study were able to resist this logic by finding ways to assert their Hongkonger identities and to forge a sense of community among fellow Hongkongers. Focusing on this group of users is particularly salient as it draws attention to how those from a relatively autonomous special administrative region of China use a Chinese-owned app to negotiate their Hongkonger identity at a time when such an identification signals specific political convictions and solidarities. How this identity is shared with the wider TikTok community contributes to a global awareness of the Hong Kong context.

Embedded in the design of TikTok is a memetic logic that encourages imitation and replication through the production of memes. Circumscribed by ideologies of quantification and proce-

duralization, this logic works with algorithmic processes to achieve a virality that serves the purposes of a technology company to collect and sell user data. By promoting participation in an imitation public that foregrounds similarities in gestures and movement and downplays individual and contextual differences, the design of TikTok profiles or feeds provides limited affordances for presenting unique selves and maintaining personal connections. Instead, it repeatedly directs users' attention to the tools for creating, viewing, liking and commenting, that exist not to facilitate interpersonal connections but to provide metadata that can be aggregated to catalogue the growth and circulation of memes worth imitating. In this sense, users are encouraged to interact with a type of content rather than with the creators themselves.

Compared to other video sharing platforms, TikTok stands out by promoting the creation of what could be called *sound memes*, memes that use sound as an anchoring mode for producing derivative videos. In contrast to visual memes where one picture is reproduced with different written captions, the track in TikTok serves as the basis of replication where users perform similar gestures and movements that accompany a music track. Hence, while the visual meme attributes high modal intensity to language in order to establish variation, the sound meme relies on the modes of physical environment, gestures and facial expression to recontextualize and resemiotize an original video. This mode of semiotic production, I would argue, is what enables the memes to reach a wider global audience and achieve virality. By foregrounding gestures and movement, sound memes downplay linguistic modes and thus, language differences among users do not become a barrier in communicating meaning, and the videos can be appreciated by a wider set of users.

At the same time, one can argue that it is because of the same conventions of sound memes that creators are able to resist the decontextualizing and anonymizing tendencies of imitation. Because the sound meme requires the performance of bodily movements and gestures, the process of resemiotization involves creators inserting their embodied selves in local spaces. In the study, the Hong Kong users used language in creative ways to highlight context and identity. By providing a text overlay on the covers of his videos, Cheng uses linguistic forms to showcase the Hong Kong context of his videos. By speaking Cantonese and incorporating traditional Chinese text, Lou is able to communicate to both global and local Hong Kong audiences and assert her identity as Hongkonger. By formulating and promoting Hong Kong context-bound tracks, Cheng and Wong evoke a sense of pride and affinity among Hongkongers and inspire the production of derivative videos that foreground place rather than bodily movement. The page showcasing the derivatives of the "Hong Kong Check" meme becomes a collection of imaginations of Hong Kong that collectively construct a sense of community among Hong Kong users.

While the design of TikTok does have the power to program sociality in specific ways, the findings from this study provide a counterpoint to the notion of an algorithmized self in TikTok. By curating their profiles and producing videos that promote context and interpersonal connections, the Hong Kong creators in this study resist the platform's memetic logic and use its tools to subvert the conventions of a sound meme. Through multimodal discourse analysis, this study demonstrates how the act of choosing and assembling semiotic resources to perform identities online is always negotiated with the platform's architecture. On the one hand, the sociotechnical structures and algorithms that constitute a platform have the power to encourage specific modes of production, and on the other hand, users have the power to resist such programming and assert themselves not as vectors of cultural transmission, but as creative agents. As users create diverse semiotic texts, the interplay of platform affordances and constraints can be understood as a negotiation of designs: the *platform design*

which indexes the sociotechnical purposes of app developers and software engineers and the *user design* which involves users assembling their semiotic resources to achieve their own intentions. Given how these designs actively shape online interactions, this paper calls for research methods that examine more closely the interplay of platform architecture and creative production. By integrating insights from this bifocal lens, social media research can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how human and nonhuman interactants shape the way meanings are produced and distributed in online spaces.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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