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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE GIFTS ON TIKTOK

Cristina-Oana CRISTEA¹

Abstract

TikTok is a social platform that has become a significant social phenomenon characterized by its complexity. It is a multifaceted object of study, allowing research on various topics such as security and surveillance, algorithms and addiction, and communication and online interactions. However, the practice of giving on TikTok remains under-researched by social sciences. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to understand the practice of giving to discover how it structures the economy of attention. The data obtained were generated through digital ethnography, which involved several qualitative research methods and techniques: participatory and non-participatory observation and conducting semi-structured interviews. Data analysis revealed that virtual gifts must be understood in their dual manifestation: they are the means by which the virtual self is both subjectified and objectified by the platform. First, they contribute to the construction of the influencers' self because they reflect the appreciation and attention received from users, thus enhancing their social reputation. Secondly, the platform monitors and calculates the gifts obtained by influencers to remunerate them, acting like a real bureaucracy that classifies and ranks users according to their actions. The research results suggest that the virtual gifts should be understood as a manifestation of the economy of attention, through which the work of influencers is rewarded based on the attention and dedication they gain from others. The work of the influencer is based on the monetization of the self, and its transformation into an object of free consumption within an economic system centered on the attention of others, a perishable resource that must be constantly attracted.

Keywords: gift, microcelebrity, attention, self-exploitation, work.

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Introduction

TikTok is an application created by the Chinese company ByteDance. It was introduced to the local market in 2016 under the name Douyin and launched globally for iOS and Android systems in 2017, competing with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube (Green *et al.*, 2022). The app's popularity can be attributed to various factors, including specific marketing strategies, such as attracting celebrities who migrated to the app, significant marketing investments, and powerful artificial intelligence technology (Xu *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic played a crucial role in its surge in popularity (Feldkamp, 2021), resulting in 1.2 billion monthly active users by the fourth quarter of 2021 (Iqbal, 2021).

Ultimately, TikTok has emerged as a noteworthy social phenomenon, rekindling critical discussions surrounding applications and the digital landscape. These debates have permeated public discourse, garnered significant media attention, and become focal points of deliberation among political leaders and policymakers. These debates encompass issues such as addiction, inappropriate content, surveillance, algorithms, and the extraction of personal data. Furthermore, TikTok has also influenced geopolitical relations, leading to a form of techno-nationalism manifested through discursive tensions and prohibitive measures from countries like the United States and India, which have accused the app of being a tool for social surveillance due to its association with the Chinese state (Miao *et al.*, 2023).

However, this article aims to analyze the practice of gifting in the world of TikTok, where users can give and receive virtual gifts during live stream. This activity is shaped by the application's user interface, which conditions the participation of users-whether they are consumers or content creators-and defines the form of the gift by equating it with virtual currencies. Recently, social networks have increasingly promoted financial gifts as tokens of appreciation for content creators. These options are in addition to traditional methods such as paying for subscriptions, receiving remuneration from the platform based on audience engagement, or through collaborations to promote products and services. Thus, this research investigates how the TikTok application influences the monetization of the self in the online environment, by examining the application's user interface and analyzing how the relationships between content creators and their followers are shaped by the receipt of gifts during live broadcasts.

The article is structured as follows: the first part reviews specialized literature on gifting and the monetization of the self, the second part details the methodology used, the third part presents and interprets the data, and the final part draws the research conclusions. The sections elaborate on the main finding that the virtual gift represents a playful manifestation of a socio-economic environment, where attention from others is a temporary resource that must be continually attracted. It serves both as symbolic capital, enhancing the status and reputation of influencers,

and as economic capital. The playful representation of gifts sustains the illusion of TikTok as a purely entertainment space, despite its role in creating a complex environment with multiple stakes and manifestations.

Virtual gifts thus act as an interface between the platform's bureaucratic infrastructure, which measures and classifies user activities, and its superstructure, which appears to offer a free space for user interactions. In reality, users navigate a volatile environment where trends change quickly and videos disappear from the "For You" page once consumed. This dynamic illustrates that the virtual gift is not merely a simple, disinterested act but a normative practice influenced by the cultural context in which it appears.

Literature review

Practices and Meanings of the Gift

The generality and diversity of the gift have made it a significant subject of anthropological and sociological research. It serves both as a descriptive and explanatory unit for ethnographic studies and as a comparative element across contemporary societies and different historical periods. Its theoretical relevance lies in the reflective and interrogative processes it generates concerning notions of exchange, value, and economy. The multifaceted nature of the gift challenges the rhetoric of classical economics and allows for a rethinking and reimagining of economic activities.

Marcel Mauss's seminal essay on the gift (1925/1997) is a cornerstone in this field of research, notable for the wealth of information it provides and the debates it has sparked. By comparing the societies of Polynesia, Melanesia, and the American Northwest, Mauss illustrates the obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate as a fundamental principle of relationships, especially between communities (Mauss, 1925/1997). Thus, exchanges form a complex network of total social facts, in contrast to simple, utilitarian individual acts (Mauss, 1925/1997).

Building on Mauss's essay, Marshall Sahlins (2013) offers a secularized interpretation of exchange, positing the gift within the framework of a social contract. For both Mauss and Hobbes, the base of society is conflict, and the gift, through its reciprocal nature, becomes an intermediate form of social contract that allows communities to maintain their competitive positions without using violence (Sahlins, 2013).

The gift is thus conceptualized as an exchange that transcends the materiality of objects, intertwining with their possessors and becoming a means of establishing and maintaining social relations. For example, Simmel views exchange as the perfect social form, with social relations multiplying from it, while value is a psychic process of representation and perception of the object by the subject (Simmel, 1900/2017). The axiological action orders existence, and exchange

structures society. Economically, Simmel presents exchange from a polarizing perspective: robbery and gift are primitive forms marked by subjectivity, while monetary exchange represents pure objectivity, equalizing values and ensuring individual freedom beyond the exchange episode (Simmel, 1900/2017).

For Bourdieu (1999), the existence of the gift is always conditioned by a social field that encourages and rewards it. Analyzing the Kabyle economy, he presents the gift as the paradigm of symbolic exchange, manifesting as a practical euphemism that denies the economic (Bourdieu, 1999). The economic aspect is obscured through the time lapse between gift exchanges and the taboo against uttering the price (Bourdieu, 1999).

These perspectives present the gift in opposition to the capitalist economy, depicted as a separate environment from society and a reality that transcends the subjects involved in exchanges. While commodity exchanges are defined as objective, measurable, and independent of their subjects, gifts reveal the myriad economic possibilities that classical economic theory cannot grasp, merging the subject with the object of exchange, extending the transaction temporally, and building interpersonal relationships.

Contrary to these traditional views, the TikTok economy surrounding gifts transcends these dichotomies, relying on the social environment in which this practice is embedded and translated. While relationships between content creators and donors are involved into a process of subjectification, the relationship between the platform and its users is defined by objectivity, as TikTok operates as a bureaucratic apparatus measuring user activities. This recalls David Graeber's observation that Mauss's approach highlights the coexistence of moral principles structuring society with the practice of gifting, showing that there is no singular notion of the gift opposed to the free market (Graeber, 2014).

On TikTok, gifts are primarily the result of the digital work done by content creators. These have both an economic significance, as they are the reward for their efforts to capture others' attention, and a symbolic one, as they represent the appreciation of others for the self-image they present. Therefore, it can be concluded that they engage in self-monetization, an economic practice carried out on social media platforms where content creators are financially rewarded based on the amount of attention they attract through the image they build of themselves.

Monetization of the Self

The content creator or influencer epitomizes the entrepreneurial vision in the virtual environment, particularly through social media platforms, which have enabled the rise of micro-celebrities in an attention economy (Frank, 2019) taking place in the society of the spectacle, where relationships between people are mediated by images (Debord, 2006).

Monetizing the self becomes a form of work denial, as found in the mythologizing of online careers through narratives of fun, authenticity, self-expression, and creative freedom (Duffy, & Wissinger, 2017). This occurs despite the fact that personal branding necessitates presenting oneself in an instrumentalized manner to be commercialized and economically competitive (Whitmer, 2019). Influencers thus become curators of the self, objectified by constructing an online profile to attract attention and gain digital reputation (Flisfeder, 2015), which can then be monetized (De Ridder, 2021).

However, users are not the sole curators of their online public profiles, as algorithms selectively present the content they create (Hogan, 2010). The agency of algorithms has been highlighted by authors such as Striphas (2015), who identified algorithmic recommendations as the pillar of algorithmic culture. TikTok's architecture is part of a broader technological process of datafication of human experiences that produces personalized recommendations and promotes influencers based on this output (Collie, & Wilson-Barnao, 2020). Consequently, it becomes a persuasive social network, assisting users in decision-making by influencing their behavior (Larbi *et al.*, 2023).

Despite their immateriality and opacity, algorithms are perceived and recognized by people, generating various meanings and interpretations. For instance, influencers often negatively assess the platform's redistribution of the economic value created, resorting to reciprocal algorithmic assistance. They collaborate with other influencers and users to draw attention to content that is not trending or aligned with TikTok's entertainment algorithms (Maris *et al.*, 2024).

This structural necessity for visibility among influencers and social media users is a consequence of the way algorithmic surveillance operates as a temporary mechanism, oscillating between visibility and invisibility. This dynamic arises from a de-territorialized and immaterial space that does not function based on fully known or pre-established rules comprehensible to users (Bucher, 2012). Social media platforms, therefore, shape sociability – understood as the relationship between the self and others – through their organization as assemblages composed of both human and non-human actors (Bucher, 2012).

This algorithmic interaction is perceived by social media users, who make sense of this relationship by legitimizing the content promoted through social institutions and framing algorithms as political, moral, and educational benchmarks (Obreja, 2024). Alternatively, users employ *folk theories*, which either personalize and humanize algorithms as benevolent overseers contributing to the identification of appropriate recommendations, or describe algorithms as part of a co-agential system that can be trained to generate improved recommendations (Siles *et al.*, 2020).

TikTok is a social platform that structures the positions and relationships of influencers through virtual gifts. For this reason, their roles and meanings represent the objectives of this research, as influencers use them to construct their virtual

selves, differentiate themselves from other influencers through popularity and appreciation, and directly influence their interactions and communication with their followers.

Methodology

This research represents a qualitative approach to the concept of gifting in the world of TikTok through a six-month-long digital ethnography conducted in 2023. The main research question that guided the investigation is: *How does TikTok's user interface shape virtual gifting practices, and what effects do these practices have on how content creators engage with their audience and conduct their work.* The research thus has the following objectives:

1. To analyze the characteristics of TikTok's user interface and how it influences gifting practices.
2. To explore how TikTok's user interface affects the work of content creators.
3. To identify the relationship between content creators and their followers.
4. To contextualize gifting practices on TikTok within the broader context of the digital economy.

In this paper, I followed Varis's (2015) view that digital ethnography is a research approach rather than a fixed set of techniques and methods. This perspective opposes generalizations and restrictive assumptions about the universality of human experiences (Varis, 2015). Consequently, digital experiences and practices must be understood within their specific cultural contexts (Miller, 2018).

For data collection, I employed participatory, non-participatory, and undercover observation during live sessions, alongside semi-structured interviews. I focused on live sessions as they represent a core feature of the app, where influencers must go live to receive gifts from viewers and are compensated by the platform based on the number of participants they attract. Over six months, I used the app for two hours daily, engaging at various times and following different influencers based on algorithmic recommendations, which rank live sessions by view count.

This approach enabled me to observe both popular broadcasts and those with fewer viewers. The results of the observations were categorized based on similarities and differences, revealing patterns of behavioral and communicational activities between influencers and their audiences. Thus, the primary objective of the observations was to describe TikTok's user interface and identify patterns concerning the relationship between influencers and their followers during live sessions. Both participatory and non-participatory observation methods were employed to familiarize and deepen the understanding of how the application functions: the acquisition of virtual gifts, the role of likes during live streams, and the identification of behavioral patterns among influencers and followers, particularly in relation to the direct impact of gift-giving - or the lack thereof - on structuring their relationships.

The research was further enriched by conducting semi-structured interviews with three TikTok influencers: a 31-year-old woman working as a courier, with a high school education, who has lived in Germany for three years, having left Romania 10 years ago and converted to Islam; a 25-year-old student who is employed within a corporation; and a 30-year-old man with a higher education who works in the real estate sector, offering short-term rentals. These three individuals were the only ones who agreed to participate in my interviews. Despite my attempts to apply the snowball sampling method, I encountered significant reluctance among people to engage in my research.

In my social network, there was no one who went live on TikTok, so I tried to expand my social relations through other social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook and Gmail. I began increasing my number of followers and followings. I also turned to other social networks since some people provide information such as email addresses, Instagram, or Facebook on their TikTok profiles. I sent over 150 messages asking people to participate in my research. These messages either went unread, were ignored, or were seen as an opportunity to make extra money. The challenge in interacting with people stemmed from the difficulty to delve into the community I was studying because I had remained an outsider, unfamiliar and detached, which hindered meaningful connections: while I interacted directly with the technology, I watched and listened to people without them being aware of my presence.

The three interviews lasted between one, and one and a half hours and were conducted online due to the geographical distance between the researcher and the respondents. While the two male participants were located in different cities in Romania, Irina lived in Germany. The purpose of the interviews was to collect personal data about the respondents, explore the trajectory of their influencer careers, examine their relationships with their followers, and analyze their perceptions regarding their interactions with the platform. Specifically, the interviews investigated how they organize their activities as influencers, their understanding of TikTok's algorithms, and their views on the platform's policies regarding commissions applied to the virtual gifts they receive.

Although I tried to maintain their anonymity by using pseudonyms and suppressing certain information, this was made more difficult by the fact that the app allows personal characteristics to form the core of one's virtual identity, distinguishing them from other content creators through unique traits. This blending of the self with one's activities also has methodological consequences. Nonetheless, the respondents assured me during the interviews that they were not concerned with revealing their identities. Therefore, since I recognized post-factum the challenge of maintaining total anonymity, I decided to include some details that helped outline their TikTok careers, based on their consent given during the interviews and reaffirmed later.

The research is thus shaped as a mosaic, resulting from the way the research subject - the practice of gifting - was framed and segmented: a dynamic, almost amorphous world that does not reveal itself in its entirety but is constructed through fragments shared by people via self-disclosure, verbal or written exchanges, and information found online regarding the app and its direct use. This situation is characteristic of digital spaces that are not dependent on physical locations, allowing for distant proximity and asynchronous communication (Cleland, & MacLeod, 2022).

Digital ethnography, conducted from a qualitative perspective, inherently involves this strategy - practicing continuous flexible thinking until the conclusion of the study - because data collection required the reconceptualization of perspectives, the identification of patterns, and the creation of innovative connections between concepts (Lofland *et al.*, 2006).

While observing live streams, I identified and categorized repetitive elements in interpersonal interactions, and through interviews, I uncovered individual stories, though these were not complemented by the perspectives of the donors who contribute to the existence of such interactions. The community and the research field were revealed as a mosaic, composed of elements from both the material and virtual worlds. This stems from the fact that the two realms are not numerically or spatially distinct but instead present themselves in a dynamic form, shaped by the app's design and the inherent relationships between what we refer to as the "real" and the "virtual." The community was defined as encompassing all individuals who go live on TikTok, while the research field was constructed through TikTok, other social media platforms, and direct interactions with the app's users.

Ethical concerns primarily emerged due to my unseen presence during live streams, but these were justified for methodological purposes, given my interest in identifying recurring elements and commonalities in the interactions between influencers and their followers. Additionally, I sought to minimize algorithmic biases affecting the visibility of certain influencers by accepting the flow of promoted live streams based on popularity and using TikTok at various times of the day.

Findings

The Democratization of Visibility

TikTok has successfully integrated elements from traditional mass media while offering users a new format, providing composite content accessible to anyone with a smartphone and internet access. From personal care tips to scientific information, recycled and repopularized past shows, entertainment, or conspiracy theories, TikTok offers a broad spectrum. The idealizing tendency of social networks is counterbalanced by the acceptance of everyday life and the demystification of

perfection: from critiques of product prices and confessions about jobs, family, or romantic relationships, to personal grievances and humorous posts. This specific TikTok trend is also reflected in the *de-influencing phenomenon*, where influencers critique and discourage the purchase of overly idealized products promoted by other influencers, thereby presenting a counter-narrative to the consumerist idealization generally propagated by influencers across all social media platforms (Ekvall, & Mellberg, 2023).

The same scenario is found in the live section: people go live anytime, anywhere - while eating, cooking, working, traveling, driving, singing, dancing, praying, sleeping, or simply staring at their screens, waiting for others to join. These phenomena reflect a historical trend defined by the *demotic turn* characterized by the massification of celebrity, where ordinary individuals attain fame through mediums such as reality television and the internet (Turner, 2006).

TikTok users who engage with live content are divided into two main categories: hosts and spectators. Hosts are the platform's micro-celebrities, representing the trend towards individualizing media consumption that fosters community-building or social bubbles. Spectators, on the other hand, can take on different roles – some become donors by sending gifts, while others become moderators, entrusted by the host to monitor the chat, prevent cyberbullying, and assist with communication through actions like conducting polls or pinning announcements.

The narratives surrounding celebrity status emphasize the serendipity associated with achieving virality online, which is subsequently followed by the sustained effort required to maintain such prominence. On TikTok, virality is quantitatively measured through metrics such as the number of likes, shares, followers, gifts received, and the duration of time others engage with a user's profile. This quantitative framework of fame is integral to the functioning of live streams. The higher the appreciation – reflected in these metrics – the greater the likelihood that the content will be recommended by the platform's algorithm. This, in turn, enhances the prospects for both social recognition and monetary rewards from viewers, the platform itself, and potential collaborators.

Measuring the Virtual Self

Hearn and Schoenhoff (2015) described influencers as products of technologies that measure their attention-capturing ability on social networks, where accumulating attention capital is crucial for monetizing the self (Franck, 2019). TikTok uses these metrics to establish, shape, and define users by tracking the activities of both hosts and spectators. Reaching the 1,000-follower threshold is the minimum requirement to become a nano-influencer and go live. During a live session, repeated taps on the screen (equivalent to likes) increase the stream's chances of appearing in the top of algorithmic recommendations. Though the

algorithms itself remain an impenetrable black box, users understand that higher engagement ensures more visibility on the platform.

The agency of algorithms is evident in influencers' calls to their viewers to donate gifts and like the stream. Gifts, likes, and time spent during a live broadcast contribute to rankings of both hosts and top viewers, generating symbolic, economic, and social capital that determines their positions in TikTok's hierarchy. These rankings function much like a bureaucracy, with user positions determined by the accumulation of various forms of capital.

TikTok's encouragement of openness and personal fulfillment is underpinned by a strongly organized system of mathematical rules that classify every social actor into distinct categories of influencers, based on their influence and the resources they acquire through online activities. Host rankings are refreshed weekly and consist of individuals with the highest number of gifts, while top viewer rankings are specific to each host and based on gifts, likes, and time spent with the host. However, viewers also enter a general ranking system, grouped by the gifts they send, which earn them badges next to their names and unlock more gift options.

As hosts consolidate their popularity, top viewers establish direct relationships with those they admire through conversations, promotions, mutual follows, and sometimes becoming moderators during live sessions. TikTok also provides influencers with tools to see who has donated and how much, allowing them to set goals for the types and numbers of gifts they need, further segmenting users based on their contributions.

Thus, the importance of community-building stands in contrast to the individualization of members based on the gifts they send. This is why, in the world of TikTok, interpersonal relationships are often fleeting, dependent on the ability of hosts and viewers to maintain a continuous virtual presence through the ongoing reproduction of the self in a social environment that does not allow for long-term memory. Relationships formed are both subjective and objective, as users' actions are first measurable, and only then transformed into personal connections. Without these actions, hosts and viewers fall into anonymity, are forgotten, and replaced.

Communication: Between Acceptance and Rejection

During both participatory and non-participatory observation of live stream transmissions, it was found that despite the content diversity of live streams, recurring patterns of communication were identified. Communication within these environments is structured around two opposing principles: direct engagement and deliberate disregard.

Direct communication encompasses both positive and negative interactions. Positive interactions include expressions of gratitude, compliments, donations,

responses to questions, and dialogues. Conversely, negative interactions involve conflicts, insults, reproaches, and criticisms. Ignoring, on the other hand, occurs when responses are absent, or when users are blocked or muted. While ignoring can escalate into a form of negative interaction, it may also result from neutrality or inactivity on the part of viewers.

Live streams are further characterized by overlapping conversations, with multiple participants creating scenarios where the host interacts directly with individual viewers, while viewers simultaneously communicate with one another in the chat. This dynamic becomes more complex when multiple hosts are involved, each managing their own chat and community. Participants are limited to viewing the conversations linked to a specific host, leading to fragmented and overlapping communication. This often results in instances of participants talking over one another, muting each other, abandoning conversations, and resuming discussions later. These interactions are frequently interrupted by hosts expressing gratitude to donors.

Expressing gratitude for gifts has emerged as an almost inviolable rule in live streaming etiquette. In nearly all observations, hosts acknowledged donors regardless of the context of the live session. In one particular instance, a host faced criticism from participants for offering a general acknowledgment of donors rather than individually thanking each one. This incident transformed into a lesson on managing a successful live stream, emphasizing that respect and attentiveness toward community members are essential. A host's consistent expression of gratitude significantly contributes to the cultivation of their virtual persona.

Although TikTok serves as a platform for social interaction and self-presentation, the extent of influencers' involvement in its competitive framework varies based on individual goals, follower count, and the potential for monetization: the closer a influencer aligns with the platform's rankings, the greater their anticipation of financial rewards, which subsequently shapes their behavior and expectations.

In smaller live streams, requests for gifts are relatively rare. However, as audience size increases, financial expectations often emerge. TikTok battles, in particular, exemplify competition, interpersonal relationships, and the central role of gifting. These battles, typically lasting five minutes, pit individuals or teams against one another to accumulate the most points through likes and gifts. The winners often impose penalties on their opponents, with the community frequently deciding the nature of these penalties. Some penalties challenge social norms, including public nudity or the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, such as the objectification of women through twerking or sexually suggestive behavior.

The emotional dimension of live streams is also significant, evident in hosts' appeals to viewers, supportive messages in the chat, and the dramatic tension created by phone vibrations during the final seconds of a battle. Not all battles result in financial gain because many users, particularly new ones, participate purely for entertainment or community-building purposes. Despite this, participants often

harbor expectations of receiving something in return – whether in the form of likes or gifts. However, not all achieve financial success, reflecting the competitive and uneven nature of the platform.

Commodification of gift

TikTok invites the users to cheer up the influencers during a live session and show their appreciation through gifts. This action, beyond the appreciative rhetoric, reveals a process that goes beyond the simple relationship between two people. The gifts are emoticons representing various elements: roses, caps, dogs, lions, scepters, and so on. They signify, on the one hand, support from a follower and, on the other hand, an economic value since they have a purchase price and, after being received, are converted back into monetary form. The images presented below show some of the gifts available:

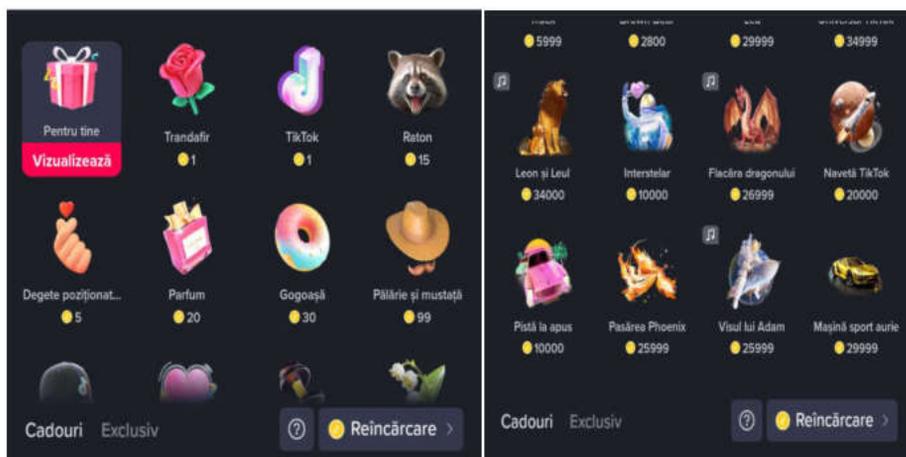


Figure 1. The gifts available for a user with a generosity level of 0. From the cheapest to the most expensive

The value of gifts is both objective and subjective, material and non-material, as a result of the way the platform structures exchanges between people: it encourages interactions and the creation of interpersonal relationships through economic exchanges. Random images of the gifts are ordered by their economic value: from a simple rose to a golden sports car, while the playful appearance maintains the ideal of socialization and personal relationships, hiding the economic nature of gifting.

Unlike Marcel Mauss's (1925/1997) observation that the equalization of values and the imperative to return the gift are defining characteristics of gift-giving, TikTok replaces these principles with the freedom of the consumer to decide whether to reciprocate. Consequently, reciprocity in both economic and non-economic exchanges does not manifest as a closed circuit, where both parties are

obligated to give and receive. Instead, TikTok presents an open-ended framework with multiple possibilities, characterized by the presence of either a loyal or contingent audience and the variability or consistency of virtual gifts.

The imperative of reciprocity is nullified by the individualization of participants, which leads to the instability and fragmentation of interpersonal relationships. The platform operates on the principle of forgetting and neutralizes the subjectivity of influencers when they fail to attract attention. This is a direct consequence of the weekly recalibration of rankings based on each user's activity—whether as a recipient or a donor of gifts. The absence of a reciprocal imperative is rooted in the way the influencer's self becomes commodified and transformed into an object of free consumption. Here, monetization is mediated by the act of attracting and maintaining an audience that consumes the performance without necessarily engaging in traditional economic transactions.

Gifts on TikTok acquire multiple identities, depending on the context of exchanges established between users. On one hand, they can serve as symbols of selfless appreciation. On the other, they function as instruments of calculated, transactional exchanges: in return for a gift, hosts may offer donors attention, promotion, increased followers, or personalized content. In some instances, gifts are provided solely to secure a victory in a TikTok match, only to be returned afterward. These diverse relationships between users generate the multiple meanings attached to gifts, while, within the broader economic circuit, gifts act as intermediaries in the profit-generation process for both influencers and the platform itself.

To better illustrate this dynamic, I propose a graphic representation of TikTok's monetary circuit, which would detail the flow of value from donors to influencers and, ultimately, to the platform.

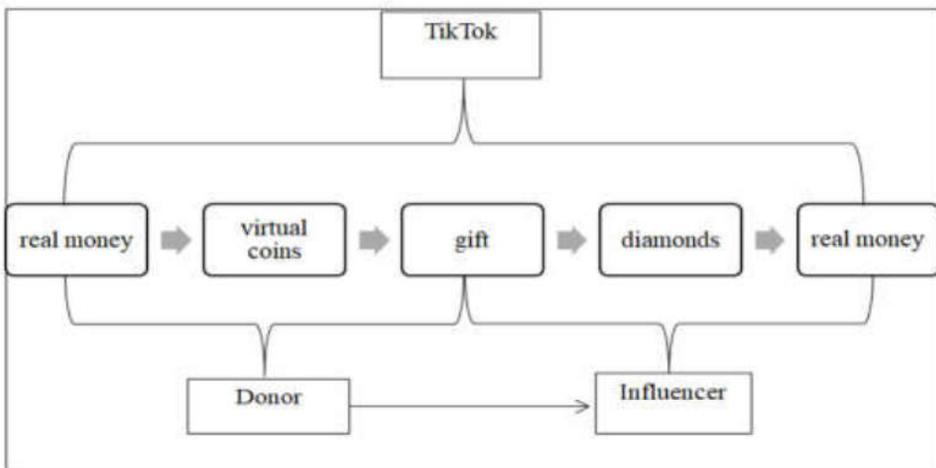


Figure 2. The gift circuit on TikTok

The gift is a transitory element that loses its form and transforms upon receipt into virtual diamonds and then into real money, being shared as a commission with the platform that centralizes and bureaucratizes the act of giving, establishes conversion rates, redistributes earnings, and determines the stages involved. Thus, the influencer generally receives 25% of the total earnings, while TikTok benefits from the remaining 75%. These percentages circulate discursively as conventions, because explanations differ from influencer to influencer.

Both virtual coins and gifts, as presented by TikTok, are virtual items whose prices vary depending on the number and country where they are purchased. For donors and hosts, they have an emotional significance as signs of appreciation, but also an objective one through their monetization and ranking calculations. The opacity of the economic circuit contrasts with the public nature of the gifts, as everyone present during a live can see who gave or received what and how much, and because they are directly requested by the host. The host may express why or how much they need to defeat an opponent, reach their set goal, or negotiate various exchanges: once the gifts are received, the host is obliged to offer in return the highlighting, promotion, following of the donor, or the delivery of certain types of content to them.

Gifts differ visually and auditorily: expensive ones occupy a considerable part of the screen for a few seconds and are accompanied by specific sounds, unlike cheaper ones which are represented on a smaller scale. The frequency and quantity of gifts structure the relationships between people because, after the platform accounts for the gifts, the actions of the participants gain visibility through the established rankings.

Gifts are a constant and current practice that must be repeated to keep the virtual person alive; they are commodities and exchange elements that contribute to consolidating work where the self produces economic value. The concepts of gift and donation have multiplied their meanings within this application: from help and selfless appreciations to recognized and solicited gain objectives. Work and earnings on TikTok take place in a speculative environment due to rapidly changing trends and preferences, being combinations of chance and rational strategies. Classical bidirectional and structured economic exchanges are transformed into an open and changing circuit.

In this context, virtual gifts become both symbolic and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1999), contributing to consolidating an influencers' status and reputation, based on which they become economically competitive. They contribute to the classification and differentiation of influencers, the consolidation of the virtual profile, and the monetization of the self. Virtual gifts consolidate the personal brand more than social interactions, considering that most relationships are parasocial, as spectators have a limited relationship with the influencers, rarely extending beyond the virtual environment.

Thus, virtual gifts are both means for consolidating the virtual self, through the status and reputation assigned to the Tik-Toker, and goals because they are the economic gains obtained by the Tik-Toker and the platform. The monetization of the self is possible due to the internet allowing the content created by ordinary people to become viral and turning them into micro-celebrities.

The descriptions of TikTok's interface and mechanisms, based on observation, reveal an environment that facilitates the rise and the turning viral of ordinary people. These individuals are rewarded for the attention they garner through gifts and direct payments from TikTok, which are determined by the size of the audience they attract. In the next section, this information is supplemented by the experiences of three influencers, illustrating how the platform compensates digital labor, fosters social relationships between users, and the material and financial implications involved.

Careers of influencers

Participatory and non-participatory observation, conducted through active use of the application, was complemented by interviews with three influencers, who have between 4,700 and 351,000 followers. These interviews focused on the history of their careers as influencers and their perspectives regarding their online activities: live streaming, relationships with followers and other influencers, and the work involved in attracting attention.

Although these are distinct stories, they share the following common elements: the beginnings were unplanned and driven by curiosity, followed by the formalization of their work as influencers, and a desire to differentiate themselves from others by creating content perceived as unique or special.

Irina has lived abroad for nearly 16 years; she is a courier, a mother, and a convert to Islam. She describes her content as revolving around her life: cooking, living abroad, and combating stereotypes related to her culture and religion. Encouraged by her husband and sister to start posting, she was initially skeptical, associating the platform with dancing, "drama," or vulgar language, but discovered its positive side: the opportunity to interact with people, the chance to speak Romanian after many years, and overcoming the introversion and isolation caused by the pandemic. She quickly gained her first 1,000 followers, with around 700 of them coming through TikTok's follow-for-follow mechanism. The remaining 300 followed after she posted a video explaining why she wears a hijab.

Seeing positive reactions from others, she decided to go live, despite her anxiety. The next day, she went live from her kitchen, as this allowed her to multitask and protect her children from prying eyes. She only streams live while cooking because, on one hand, she does not want to dedicate special time to the app, and on the other hand, she feels the need to remain active and dynamic during live sessions to engage her audience and avoid boring them.

Irina does not follow a fixed schedule: some days she goes live multiple times, while on others, only once, generally spending one or two hours with her viewers. Her activities and interactions are spontaneous: she answers questions and shares details about what and how she is cooking. When streaming live, she is careful about her attire, particularly to respect religious dress codes; however, she has faced criticism for having food or sweat stains on her clothing or for not wearing nail polish, even though she believes it's natural to encounter various mishaps while cooking that prevent maintaining a pristine appearance.

Her earnings fluctuate monthly, depending on her level of activity and collaborations to promote products or services. TikTok pays her for views, averaging about three euros per day. She managed to accumulate 1,200 euros in one month from gifts received during competitions, using the money to purchase a phone and furniture. Although the platform takes a portion of her earnings, Irina considers it reasonable since it provides her with the means for promotion.

Recently, she has been unable to go live as frequently, as she needs to care for her increasingly active daughter, who requires supervision. Consequently, she relies more on earnings from product promotions. Irina rarely participates in competitions, as audiences do not always donate when she streams live frequently, and she must be selective about the hosts she collaborates with in competitions due to associated penalties. Thus, she participates sparingly, only with women, avoiding dangerous or eccentric penalties, and accepts only those that are easy to perform and minimally degrading to her personal standards. For example, she agrees to have coffee or chocolate smeared on her face. She criticizes influencers who opt for penalties that violate social norms, mentioning an instance where someone agreed to receive a pizza delivery while naked. The need for differentiation from what is perceived negatively is also evident in the following statement: "If you want to do something beautiful, it is possible; you don't necessarily need to act like a monkey. It's one thing to gather 2,000 people at a circus, and another to gather 200 people at a theater".

Robert is 30 years old and works in music and real estate. He gained his first 1,000 followers within a week, largely benefiting from being recognized from a television show he appeared on as a teenager. Initially, he was reluctant to stream live because he associated it with humiliation and the image of a clown. However, a friend explained to him that he could create his own niche without compromising his dignity. Curiosity, the desire for an additional occupation, and a new means of promotion solidified his decision to use the app.

Robert tries to avoid being crass because he does not want to use offensive language, yell, or argue with people. He is careful about the language he uses and the topics he addresses. The following statement suggests that, although he tries to differentiate himself through calmness, he does not always succeed: "I want to believe that they follow me and appreciate me for being a person with common sense, I try to teach people, I try not to behave like a hooligan, but I

do have moments when I snap and swear. I don't know, maybe I'm different to some extent."

For this reason, he has established criteria for interacting with others: he avoids people who give him negative feelings or who are not dynamic and interesting. He is also selective about the penalties he accepts in competitions, as he refuses those that involve extreme danger or humiliation. His first penalty had unexpected negative consequences: during his first match, he asked spectators for suggestions, and a boy proposed that his opponent hold a tight grip on a cube of ice and salt for one minute, which caused burns.

For Robert, a successful live session is one that fosters engaging discussions and entertains the audience. According to him, "You must, first of all, pay attention to how you look, have good vibes, erase any trace of hate, and stay indifferent". He responds to negative comments with indifference or humor. Only once did he block someone - a person who repeatedly asked inappropriate questions about his intimate relationships. This decision, however, violated an unwritten rule of the platform: blocking users makes the algorithm less likely to recommend your content.

Robert also perceives TikTok as addictive, especially in terms of gift-giving. He recalls a match where he spent all his money to support someone, only realizing afterward what he had done: "The adrenaline got to me - I think this is how gambling addicts feel".

His earnings fluctuate from month to month, but he managed to earn 600 euros in two weeks of consistent activity. However, he criticizes the platform's commissions because TikTok retains 75% of total earnings and adds additional fees for each transfer. Robert considers TikTok a "thief," arguing that it could retain 50% instead, as it provides excellent tools for promotion. He believes that even if TikTok were to disappear or be shut down, a better and more economically advantageous platform would eventually emerge.

Matei is 25 years old, a student, and an employee at a multinational corporation. He began using TikTok after helping a friend who was already active on the app. Curiosity and the desire to earn money - since he was already searching for a second job - convinced him to go live. Today, he views TikTok as a second job that often takes up more time than his main one, as he constantly needs to think about marketing strategies and what to post. Matei sees the app as a diverse source of content for users, offering suggestions across various fields and easily satisfying the appetite for entertainment or knowledge.

Matei became popular during the peak of the "Chernobyl" series' popularity, when he posted a video shot in an abandoned park that resembled scenes from the series. The clip garnered 80,000 likes and over one million views. To date, he has not specialized in a particular niche, and his audience spans all age groups: children, teenagers, and adults. He is considering creating multiple accounts tailored to each target audience.

Matei believes his audience follows him because he has a presentable, attractive image, knows how to joke, socialize, and respond to malicious comments with humor. He takes care of how he presents himself to others and maintains a positive mood. He also considers the energy of other hosts he collaborates with during live streams, avoiding those who might insult his community. Despite his efforts, due to time constraints, he struggles to communicate with his audience outside of live sessions.

Matei aspires for TikTok to become his main job. He believes the platform should adopt a progressive taxation policy for influencers: newcomers and those with lower earnings should be taxed less compared to top earners. His earnings can reach 1,000 euros per month when he is consistent, but they decline during periods when he is busy with other commitments. He is working on creating and maintaining a steady schedule.

The work of all three influencers - Irina, Robert, and Matei - is characterized by flexibility and the blending of professional and private life. Fixed working hours, clearly defined spaces, and consistent salaries are replaced by fluctuating incomes and the constant reshaping of their online activities and projects. This new type of work highlights both the potential and challenges of modern digital platforms. Presenting oneself in front of viewers becomes a mechanism for differentiation and capturing attention, transforming it into various types of capital: social, economic, and symbolic. The need to be different originates from the platform's operational mechanism, which rewards individuals with high scores in an economy of attention where others' gaze is temporary and difficult to maintain for extended periods.

Conclusions

The purpose of my research was to discover virtual gifts in the TikTok economy. Over time, I observed that there are multiple practices and meanings of gifts on TikTok determined by the fact that they have both subjective and objective components. The initial parts of the research aimed to describe the TikTok world composed of two categories of actors: hosts and spectators. Behaviors, communication, interpersonal relationships, and expectations are determined by their position shaped by the accumulation of economic, social, and symbolic capital. The final part detailed the stories and perceptions of three influencers for whom the platform has become a second job.

Earnings from creative and emotional work are taxed by the application, which functions as a bureaucratic entity that generates calculations, measurements, and steps people must go through, while allowing them the freedom to create their virtual characters. However, this freedom operates more as an idealized rhetoric of the internet associated with the imaginary of free will. In reality, influencers become dependent on the elements of the virtual assemblage: spectators, algorithms, trends, multiple norms, and values that coexist. For this reason, the theme of authenticity

must be rethought in terms of the alteration and creation of the virtual self, alongside other human and non-human actors.

The platform capitalizes on a type of work based on the monetization of the self, where subjectivity and objectivity intertwine in a permanently changing and hierarchical space. The work is fortuitous because it oscillates between chance and rational strategies, without long-term prospects. The economic circuit established between the influencers and their audience, through gifts, is open because the imperative of reciprocity does not exist, making their position fragile and unequal: they offer content but are unsure of what they will receive, as audience members donate gifts based on their subjectivity.

Virtual gifts are essential components of the fetishization of work by the application. Influencers invest time and resources in creating content. Time spent analyzing the virtual environment, filming, preparing personal images, and building advantageous social relationships are examples of time-consuming activities that are rarely discussed and create economic value in the TikTok economic circuit.

Micro-celebrities become dependent on material resources, such as access to the internet and the necessary technologies for using TikTok, the interface of the application that intervenes in content formatting and mediates economic exchange, political power, other users for popularity, and material gains, thus becoming engaged in constant work to maintain their audience and established image.

At the same time, TikTok is characterized by the coexistence of multiple economic principles based on which exchanges between people are established through gifts: disinterest and signs of appreciation for someone, means of exchange for obtaining promotions or created content, and indicators of the positions occupied by donors and hosts on the platform.

The subjectification of the Tik-Toker is achieved through the measurement and bureaucratization of the self by the platform, which maintains their presence relevant or cancels it in the flow of recommendations offered by the algorithm. In this sense, TikTok presents a particular situation where constant work and unpredictability are the main pillars of the attention economy. This is the reason for the multidimensionality of the gift, which can simultaneously take the form of appreciation and economic value, as the TikTok environment translates the act of giving through mechanisms of capitalization.

The results of this research cannot be generalized because it included a limited number of influencers who, although they can be categorized based on the number of followers, are not representative of the entire TikTok community. Additionally, even in the case of the three respondents, their stories are partial because they lack the perspectives and meanings of the donors, who consolidate their virtual existence. Why do people donate gifts on TikTok? How do they interpret the connections between themselves and their hosts? These are questions that can complete the understanding of this subject.

Research Limitations

This paper presents the results of qualitative research, which are impossible to generalize. The main purpose of the paper was to understand the gift economy on TikTok, providing a model of theorization through the concepts of symbolic and economic capital and inserting them into the logic of the attention economy. Other theoretical approaches can contribute to revealing characteristics omitted in the research due to the researcher's focus predominantly on the economic circuit of this application.

Virtual gifts were thus understood through their role as intermediaries in the various exchanges that take place between influencers, followers, and the platform. The motives and meanings contributing to the decision of those who give virtual gifts remain unknown and require distinct sociological investigations. Furthermore, the experiences of influencers cannot be generalized, given the limited number of interviews and social and geographical context. Therefore, the paper contributes to providing information about a subject very little investigated and theorized by social sciences.

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