

Transcript

The Social and the Self: TikTok

SS: I'm sure a lot of you are familiar with some of these sounds. Whether you've danced to them, forwarded them to friends, or just wasted a ridiculous amount of time scrolling through them and procrastinating work. For those of you who haven't been renegeading those sounds were audio tracks from Tik Tok, a newly popular social media app

SU: Many of us joke about being addicted to Tik Tok and losing hours of potential productivity to it, but have you ever thought about how Tik Tok might be a medium for self help?

SS: I'm Scout Stohrer

SU: And I'm Samantha Su, and we're your hosts for another episode of The Social and The Self, a podcast series in which we explore how social media impacts the individual. Today we'll be talking about Tik Tok content and its relation to self help

SS: Initially talking about this we thought of specific categories or trends which might belong to the category of self help as we talked about it more we identified seven categories of tik to videos that we wanted to focus on

SU: Obviously we know there's a lot of content on the app, and while some of it isn't connected to self help, there's likely a number of videos that are and that are outside of the videos we are addressing. But with trends on the app constantly changing and for you pages being personalized for the individual user, our conversation is somewhat contained, so if there's some side of Tik Tok that you want to hear more about in relation to self help in our bonus extended convo next week, email us at thesocialandtheself@gmail.com

SS: With that being said the seven categories we've identified for this conversation are mental health and positive thinking, tutorials and skill building, health and medicine, aesthetics and ASMR, relatable humor, life advice, and finally, lifestyle. We know some of these overlap so these categories aren't hard and fast but really just a way to make our discussion more organized and easier to follow. In talking about these categories, we're gonna provide some examples of videos that belong in these categories, for some we're gonna cite them in our show notes, for others we're gonna play the audio for you here. Just a heads up though, we have been using the word Tik Tok a lot and while that is kind of the main focus, some of these videos have been discovered through, there's a

new feature on Instagram called Instagram reels. Most of these are just recycled Tik Toks. They all have like the Tik Tok badge on them. Some are made through the Instagram app, but it's very similar content—these short videos that just play on loop, and you just scroll through endlessly.

SU: Okay so our first category that we are going to talk about is mental health/positive thinking, and we're gonna play some audio really quickly

AUDIO

A friendly reminder that you
 Have only ever seen yourself through photographs
 And the mirror
 You've never seen the way your smile beams from it's edges
 Everytime you talk about something you love
 Or the way that your eyes light up at the sight of sunrises or coffee or puppies
 So next time someone tells you how beautiful you are
 Don't question it
 Cause although you have never seen it, your beauty, I mean,
 It's all that they know
 And they've been amazed by it every single day

SU: That was an example of a Tik Tok video that we've labelled under the positive thinking/mental health category

SS: I think for some people these types of videos these affirmations are probably helpful and considered a form of self help, but I think a counterpoint is just that, I think there's actually a few, on the one hand for some people depending how the video is presented it could be triggering. It could contain triggering content. Given that many of them address different mental health issues or experiences with mental health issues. And also, there is such a thing as toxic positivity and some of these affirmations might kind of play into that.

SU: So for our next little category we're going to go over health and medicine. A lot of these focus on health advice and you know, medical advice which, again can be good and bad. On one hand you have kind of this like accessibility to healthcare in a way that you might not always see. I think people find it a little easier to be less intimidated by their doctors if they're seeing them dancing on Tik Tok to songs by Doja Cat. But at the same time I know this one Tik Tok that we have linked in our show notes shows a doctor, and she is dancing as she has captions above that have signs that you're

depressed which was a very jarring comparison of having someone very gleefully dancing while at the same time it's talking about very serious topics.

SS: That kind of presentation or strategy for talking about health issues might be preferable to some but also kind of weird and bizarre for others.

SS: The other point we were kind of talking about is just how if users are getting this immediate access to quick little bits of advice from medical professionals, does that deter—

SU: Yeah I get what you mean, yeah, cause it's like, if you're some thirteen year old kid, are you really going to want to go set up all this stuff - a doctor appointment? I mean I know personally I just hate even talking on the phone with a doctor and setting up appointments, so it takes a lot of the anxiety out of, you know, dealing with your health and having to worry about things. At the same time it's nice cause you have kids who normally wouldn't be able to probably ask these questions, they're getting their information from WebMD. But at the same time, you might have the kid who's like okay well now i'm cured or im fixed I don't need to, I can just focus on all this Tik Tok content, and I don't really need to go to the doctor ever again.

SS: Another point about this category, this might be too tangential but I'm just thinking about so, you know all this stuff is coming out about the Johnson and Johnson vaccine right now, and I actually got that vaccine, and so my mom forwards me this article to like symptoms you should watch for if you're a woman who got that vaccine, and they're not super specific things like shortness of breath, abdominal pain, headaches, and these are things that you know you have headaches somewhat regularly, and then you get all stressed out like—oh my god now I am at risk for these side effects from the Johnson and Johnson vaccine, and so I think where i'm going with this is that sometimes when you're being presented with symptoms or signs of something it can be kind of anxiety provoking for certain people, because you're suddenly convinced that you're diagnosable for whatever.

SU: It brings out the inner hypochondriac of everyone.

SS: Next category is tutorials and skill building, so kind of an overview of generally what this category looks like—there's a lot of Tik Tok videos about, you know, how to make this baked feta pasta dish, like food recipes, and there's also how to draw a cat or just different little quick tutorials on basic things.

And here's the audio for an example for one of these. It's a woman giving a tutorial on how to make a recipe.

AUDIO

Let's make creamy no dairy cauliflower pasta

Start by boiling a pot of salted water and chopping up your head of cauliflower

Once water is boiling, add the cauliflower pieces to the water, and let it boil for about five minutes. Once tender, add pieces to your blender or food processor along with your non-dairy milk, garlic, tomato, basil, nutritional yeast, salt, and pepper. Blend it until it's creamy, and add it to your favorite pasta. I top mine with crushed red pepper. I hope you love it!

SU: Yeah I personally I really love this side of Tik Tok. I know there's a lot that are, so i'm someone who's interested in learning more ASL and learning about deaf culture, and there's a lot on there that show in you just like a ten second video of some signs that you can use like if you're in customer service - those are just really amazing. I mean, personally I don't know if there is even, just self-help-wise kind of we've been talking about the good and the bad, and I don't know if there are any.

SS: Yeah I honestly can't think of a counterpoint for this one because I also am a huge fan of this side of Tik Tok. I am a huge consumer of these like little recipe tutorials. I'm someone who doesn't really cook a lot. I kind of am a little bit daunted by it, and these videos make it seem way more approachable. I mean this one that we've shown isn't necessarily the best example because she does reference a lot of ingredients that probably aren't in every household because it's a vegan recipe. But for the most part they make these recipes seem super easy, and like minimal ingredients and minimal time, and they do it in a way that's super cute and aesthetically pleasing, so I really like them.

SU: So our next category we have aesthetics/ASMR, and this, again, is kind of very popular on my For You page. In this category of aesthetics and ASMR, you kind of have painting and really satisfying sounds and some of these, as we've linked in our show notes, there's a video of someone cutting soap, and this is also the same user who kind of creates like she'll paint over little clay or sand balls and then crack them or mash them and that's also really satisfying, so and I think these are just, again, they're just so calming cause they give you kind of like a little break, so yeah again I don't know if these if this has any downside to it.

SU: Alright so our next category we have relatable humor, and we also have a clip of an audio from a relatable humor Tik Tok, and so we'll play that now.

AUDIO

All of my teachers start their emails like, “students I know these are troubling times but” Bro, you are the troubling in my times. It is you, you are the troubling in my times.

SU: I just thought that was really funny, and I think sometimes they even help me feel like oh hey i'm not the only one who feels this way or who's going through the same thing in regards to online school or dealing with professors.

SS: Yeah I mean I generally like these types of videos. They're probably the ones I forward to friends the most often, and I often catch myself laughing out loud at them. One potential downside to this category, though is that a lot of these videos involve relatable humor about perhaps guilty or unhealthy behaviors. Those terms might be dramatic, but what I mean is they might be joking about procrastinating your homework like how relatable is that, and I think that in the moment, when you're watching it you're like that's exactly what i'm doing right now i'm laying in bed scrolling on Tik Tok not doing my homework, and you feel better about it because you're like clearly somebody else is too cause this video has over a hundred thousand likes so a hundred thousand people can relate to procrastinating homework, and i'm not the only one. However, it also means that because I feel better about it and less guilty about it does that ultimately result in me feeling generally more inclined to procrastinate homework? Will it ultimately result in a long term habit?

SS: So the next category we wanted to dive into was life advice. These can be anything from career advice videos to, you know, how to approach job interviews, what not to write in your cover letter, what to write, resume tips. So here's a quick audio clip of one example from this category.

AUDIO

If you're a college student who likes studying in coffee shops, you need to see this I Miss My cafe allows you to adjust a variety of cafe sounds to recreate the ambience of your favorite coffee shop. You can also link your spotify for a 10/10 productive and cozy study session.

ST: As you can see, it's pretty cute. What she's talking about is not something I knew about, and who knows maybe i would go use that. It's helpful. A lot of these provide good resources and ideas. I actually haven't used any of the resources it's pointed me to, but im sure some people do and find it really useful.

SU: There's one I remember watching about like the question you should always ask to your interviewer when you're interviewing for a job, stuff like that is really helpful

especially for people who might not have that support in their life ,you know, not everyone kind of has that access to like career help, but at the same time I think it's interesting to think about like how sometimes it's almost like with the life advice especially with studying, i'll see a lot that push products, and they'll be like oh to study effectively you have to use this one type of highlighter or this one type of notebook that costs like 40 dollars.

SS: Yeah I think those are all really interesting points. I think another counterpoint that just occurred to me is sometimes i'll just have woken up in the morning i'll be doing my daily routine of scrolling through Tik Tok just trying to wake up the brain a little bit, stimulate myself, and then I encounter some Tik Tok video about how to prep for a job interview, and i'm like Tik Tok! This is not what I was planning on doing today, but thank you for reminding me that I don't have a career lined up post college!

SU: Yeah that's true, and like some people and I know i'm one of those people, like sometimes you just want that escapism from Tik Tok so you're like no, I don't want to be reminded of the real world right now.

SS: So that brings us to our final category which is the lifestyle category. So an overview of this one— this one's pretty broad. We've got a lot of like fitness videos, then there's a lot of people portraying their lifestyle like a day in the life or what I eat in a day in New York City. So being that it's broad, it's kind of hard to pin it down as entirely positive or entirely negative. We've linked some examples of these kinds of videos in the show notes, but i'm tempted to say that I think this is one of the more harmful sides of Tik Tok. Sometimes it's not really helpful to see what somebody else eats in a day, like that seems like weird knowledge to have. I mean, I just finished my slice of pizza. I don't really want to know that you had vegan yogurt for lunch.

And also some of like the fitness ones in here you know those might also qualify as tutorial type videos, so in some ways i'm sure they're helpful for people to see a specific workout routine, but I think generally it's just another kind of like the, how we were saying the career advice videos, just a reminder like im just waking up, I don't really need to feel this pressure to go work out right now.

SU: I mean I think this is like with a lot of videos on Tik Tok. It's like it can be a motivator or it can be something that just makes you feel bad about yourself like. I think they can be helpful, but they can also be just so harmful cause they're just romanticising a certain lifestyle.

SS: Yeah I think this one kind of taps into the conversation we've always been having about social media, even before Tik Tok, about like you know Instagram isn't real life, it just shows what people want you to think about their real life.

SU: Now that we've given a brief overview of all the categories and kind of started this conversation of how they relate to self help, we want to bring in some more theoretical and critical texts of self help.

One podcast that Scout and I have actually been listening to at the start of the fall semester has been self help narratives. It's a podcast by English professor Dr. Kathy Psomiades, so yeah a lot of the texts that we reference are from that podcast, so definitely check it out if that's something that you're interested in.

SS: So one writer that Dr. Kathy Psomiades brings up in her podcast is Sam Binkley. He's a professor of sociology, and his research looks at the social production of subjectivity through texts like self help texts in his paper "Happiness, Positive Psychology and the Program of Neoliberal Governmentality." Binkley defines governmentality as a confluence between microtechnologies by which individuals govern themselves and macrotechnologies by which social authorities and states control populations. He also kind of expands on how self help practices can function to make entrepreneurial subjects out of us, and so this was really interesting, and we thought he was a really interesting thinker to draw in in our conversation about Tik Tok as self help because as we've already kind of brought up many of these videos are arguably contributing to kind of creating or building this model subject.

SU: I thought the Binkley article was really interesting to think about in connection to Tik Tok, just because his whole thing is about kind of this capitalistic society in which everything that we're doing is to produce something, and it's focusing on like productivity and how like as a citizen you're trying in this capitalistic society, you're trying to be like the ultimate person of productivity, and I think Binkley would actually see Tik Tok as a bad thing in this way, and that it's making you— especially the life advice ones— or the tutorial/skill building, you always have to be learning something new in order to then produce something or like kind of always improving on yourself so that you can be a better person of productivity, a better worker.

So we've been talking a little bit about Binkley—Sam Binkley— and I think another really cool text that we were looking at is from this German american philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse, and he's very well known for his discourse on communism and industrialism, and he has a paper called "The Affirmative Character of Culture," and it was published in 1937, and this also brings up some really interesting points.

Affirmative culture is kind of this idea that you're you have this culture of like art and beauty that affirm your happiness, your positivity in life, and then almost I guess kind of affirming your kind of will to live, away from this whole capitalistic society of like toil and trouble and constantly being kind of ground down by your work. And so the affirmative culture is his idea that there's this other kind of form of escapism found in beauty in art. I think this is something that definitely relates to Tik Tok, especially in we talked about kind of the category of like romanticizing your life in the lifestyle/life advice category and even the aesthetics category especially when we talk about kind of this appreciation for art and this appreciation for things that are just exist just to be enjoyed cause they're beautiful.

SS: Yeah and even like, I mean this might be a little too specific, but even the availability for users, or content creators, rather, on Tik Tok to apply filters to their videos just because people are able to make something as simple as their morning cup of coffee just look so glamorous and like the best thing and a reason that we should be celebrating life. I think that Tik Tok really functions to kind of glamorize and romanticize just basic life.

And Marcuse really brings up kind of this distinction between the necessary and luxury and how some people can afford to enjoy certain things whereas others are just looking to fulfill basic needs, and so I think that that is somewhat related to this conversation about Tik Tok because one of the, arguably joys or benefits, of Tik Tok is how accessible it is for both users and content creators in a number of ways, and you know we kind of brought this up in our brief discussions of each of the categories, but you've got health advice at the swipe of a finger, even if it's just bite sized. I think Tik Tok delivers a lot of relevant content to people. I also think that the discussion of accessibility is also important when talking about the content creators themselves because a number of people have made a career for themselves through this app or have expanded recognition of their business by promoting it through the app.

SU: The next text that we want to bring up is from the Canadian author Sheila Heti, and she wrote this book called "How Should a Person Be?" It's written in 2010. It talks a lot about her personal experience with figuring out who she wants to be and how she figures out this question of how should a person be. I think one way that this definitely relates to Tik Tok is the fact that you have a lot of people, and this goes along with our conversation about celebrity, and that you kind of make a brand of yourself especially as a content creator, you know some people fill a certain niche like if you're an ASMR artist that's your thing or if you're a part of dance Tik Tok. It's interesting to think about how people create caricatures of themselves and that's what they then have to put out to the world kind of consistently.

SS: And also it's interesting because you said especially for the content creators, but it's also almost true for users too because since there's a For You page, Tik Tok is recognizing you as a brand, because they are seeing what you consume and that you are almost a character that subscribes to certain things.

SU: I think Heti would hate that! Because she really, in her book, is just talking about kind of not worrying so much like that's kind of the conclusion she comes to is like I shouldn't be forcing myself to always constantly be like who am I? who am I? and so I think her then seeing how people have to very carefully put together this idea of who they are so that they can then show it to the world and not only show it to the world but market it to the world

SS: Another big theme in her book, she's a writer and her best friend is an artist, so there's a lot of discussion about creating art and work, looking at Tik Tok I think she would be somewhat critical of it because her artistic process is just so separate from what I would assume content creators on Tik Tok are following, and I actually saw this— it was a twitter post I think— it was talking about how Tik Tok is really frustrating for some artists because for many people, really good art work takes a lot of time, but the algorithm favors, you know, individuals who post more frequently, and so there's this pressure to keep creating and creating and putting stuff out kind of like what we brought up when we were talking about Binkley. It's not natural for a lot of artists, and it's kind of unfair that if they don't follow that then they're going to be bumped down on where they appear on people's For You pages.

SS: Now that we have officially reviewed the different categories as well as the theoretical texts that we thought we could connect them to, we are going to wrap up kind of talking about well our experience with Tik Tok and given this conversation what our kind of final review is of whether Tik Tok is actually a form of self help or is it harmful or you know, what are the takeaways...

SU: Personally I kind of came in as someone who, i'm just not someone who knows the trends that well or has ever really been addicted to it, but it's been interesting to see how there is so much content, and so much of it can be really good, and so I do think it fulfills a lot of the requirements of self help but at the same time it's kind of a double-edged sword, like there's definitely a darker side of Tik Tok.

SS: Okay, in terms of my thoughts on Tik Tok and self help, I definitely want to emphasize that I think the user's experience of Tik Tok and how it relates to self help is definitely dependent on the individual. I think that everyone experiences this app and

the videos it puts out differently. I think, in my personal experience, and how it affects me, I'd say I don't really find it that helpful. I think I waste a lot of time on it, and I think I see more videos that make me feel bad about myself than I do videos that make me feel motivated or good about myself.

SS: Thank you for tuning in to another episode! We hope you've learned some more about both the positives and negatives of Tik Tok content as we've broken down in these seven categories and whether it can be seen as self-help. I'm Scout Stohrer

SU: And I'm Samantha Su, and this has been The Social and The Self.