

BRAND AUTHENTICITY ON TIKTOK

The impact of TikTok on perceived brand authenticity studied from the perspective of postmodern consumer culture.

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ABSTRACT

Being targeted with several marketing messages through the many social media channels in contemporary society, young postmodern consumers are increasingly looking for company interactions that feel real and authentic to them. As brands compete with each other for the consumers' attention, while consumers skip through advertised brand content, being perceived as authentic is an ever-increasing importance for brands. TikTok soared in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing consumers with entertaining and captivating short-format videos, and the user amount has continued to grow ever since, making TikTok the fastest-growing social media platform in history. Being a relatively new social media platform, research on brand authenticity on TikTok is lacking. Furthermore, academic research on the affordances of platforms linked to their authenticity is limited. Therefore, this research aims to answer the question: what does brand authenticity mean in the context of TikTok and how are the perceived affordances of TikTok supporting this authenticity? The research is conducted through an interpretive approach with a qualitative research design. Semi-structured in-depth interviews of consumers and brands are used as primary data, and the findings were supported by observations from the platform. The interview samples are composed of twelve (12) TikTok users between the ages of 20–25 years, and three (3) brands with a strong successful presence on TikTok. Our findings show that brand authenticity in the context of TikTok means to not only be true to oneself as a brand but also to the platform in relation to the platform's specific community culture and the values within. These values of TikTok are socially constructed and reflect the culture of TikTok users, most people belonging to Generation Z. The values include being transparent, true to oneself, not selling, being invested, caring, relatable and fun. These elements of perceived authenticity are afforded by cultural affordances reflecting identity, and social and affective affordances of the platform. The research contributes to the existing theoretical brand authenticity research and provides brand managers with relevant insight into consumer perceptions of brand authenticity on TikTok. Findings suggest that brands should act as equal to consumers through fun and relatable content in order to be perceived as authentic on TikTok.

Keywords: Brand Authenticity, TikTok, Social Media Platforms, Perceived Platform Authenticity, Social Media Branding

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1 INTRODUCTION

The search for authenticity is one of the “cornerstones of contemporary marketing” (Brown, Kozinets & Sherry, 2003, p. 22). Given the complex nature of brands in the hyperconnected world, the need for authenticity has also gotten an even stronger meaning (Fritz, Schoenmueller & Bruhn, 2017). In the 21st-century media landscape, where consumers are estimated to see on average 5,000 marketing messages a day (Simpson, 2017), consumers have begun to search for brands and communication with brands that feels relevant, genuine and authentic to them (Arnould & Price, 2000; Beverland, 2005; Brown, Kozinets & Sherry, 2003; Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin & Grohmann, 2015). To overcome the cultural meaninglessness concerned with postmodern consumer culture, consumers increasingly use brands as tools for self-expression, -enhancement and -verification (Aaker, 1999; Arnould & Price, 2000; Holt, 2002).

For brands, authenticity is a core component as it enables the formation of a unique brand identity (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993; Beverland, 2005). With a strong brand identity, brands can stay true to their values and themselves, which is a crucial component for brands in the postmodern hyperconnected world subject to marketing scepticism, uncertainty and constant change. Brand authenticity has also been shown to positively influence brand attitudes, and increased brand trust, value and loyalty, all of which are aspects that are becoming increasingly important in the highly competitive contemporary marketplace (Hasan, Qyauum & Zia, 2022; Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019).

When consumers' attention moved from traditional media to social media, these interactive digital platforms also became popular for marketers to use for co-creation of brand meaning and experiences, as these platforms afford consumers to have direct communication and dialogue with brands, which traditional offline media could not offer (Ramaswamy, 2020; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2022). The postmodern scepticism towards marketing communication has, however, not disappeared and new expectations for brands across industries to communicate and interact with consumers in new ways have occurred as brands were quick to realise that consumers did not want any advertising or consumerism on the platforms, since these are mainly meant for consumer-to-consumer interaction (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Fournier & Avery, 2011). This has further enhanced the importance of brand authenticity as an essential asset for brands (Campagna, Donthu & Yoo, 2022).

Competition between different social media platforms is high, as different platforms are competing to catch consumers' attention and keep them on the platform (Wallsten, 2020). TikTok, previously known as Musical.ly, introduced short-form video content in full-screen mobile format in 2016. The platform skyrocketed in popularity since the first lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. The content is typically between 15–30 seconds long and combines video with sound or music clips, which are then replicated by other users and referred to as trends. A study made by Nielsen (2021), commissioned by TikTok, found that the global consumer base of TikTok perceives the content to be “more authentic” and “more joyful” in comparison to other social media platforms. Furthermore, the users find it easier to express their true selves on the platform as well. However, the Nielsen (2021) study did not mention the platform’s properties that afford this perception of authenticity. Affordances of social media are properties of social media that enable specific actions for the actors in the environment (Ronzhyn, Cardenal and Batlle Rubio, 2022). Through observation, it is evident that TikTok, as a social media platform, stands out in the ways that brands are using it to either showcase their brand or communicate with potential customers and their consumers. However, many brands are unsure of how to be authentic on the platform to answer the consumers’ perceptions of authenticity there. It is crucial for brands to know how to act on social media, as poor attempts inconsistent with the platform’s culture can result in backfiring back to the brand (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

1.1 Research Gap and Aim

Following the introduction to the research, we summarise the research gap. It is well known that postmodern consumers search for authenticity in consumption. Hence authenticity is also essential for brands if they want to stay relevant for postmodern consumers. Authenticity has previously been studied in many contexts. However, authenticity literature within social media is insufficient. As the Nielsen (2021) study on TikTok discovered, for consumers, joy is authentic to, and brands are authentic on the platform. TikTok, however, does not align with the previously studied views of brand authenticity. This raises the question of whether there are more dimensions to brand authenticity on TikTok or whether brands can even be authentic on the platform. Furthermore, limited research on the affordances of platforms linked to their authenticity has been completed so far. To the authors’ best knowledge, brand authenticity has not been studied in the context of TikTok. With Generation Z becoming the largest generation globally (Meola, 2023), and the biggest

user group on TikTok, it is important to understand how this postmodern user group and brands perceive TikTok, what authenticity and brand authenticity mean for them in general and in the context of TikTok, as well as how the platform can afford this perception of authenticity. The aim of the research is, therefore, to:

- Understand why consumers and brands use TikTok (through the affordances of the platform)
- Identify what brand authenticity means in the context of TikTok and which affordances of the platform support this authenticity

With this aim, we develop theoretical and managerial implications based on an interrelation between the perceived brand authenticity on TikTok, the affordances of the platform, and postmodern consumer behaviour.

1.2 Research Question

From the presented research gap and aim, the following research question is proposed to achieve the aim of the research;

What does brand authenticity mean in the context of TikTok and how are the perceived affordances of TikTok supporting this authenticity?

To achieve the aim and answer the research question, both consumers and brands are interviewed, in regards to why they use TikTok, what they perceive as authentic, how consumers describe brand authenticity, and what consumers and brands perceive as authentic on TikTok. We start by studying the affordances of TikTok for consumers and brands and then studying how consumers and brands describe authenticity and authenticity on TikTok. The consumers were both asked how they perceive authenticity in general, in relation to brands, in relation to TikTok, and in relation to brands on TikTok, while the brands were asked about how they describe brand authenticity in general and in relation to TikTok. We then relate these perceptions of authenticity with each other to find a shared understanding of brand authenticity on TikTok. Lastly, we relate the affordances of TikTok (i.e. what the platform gives to the user), to the perceived authenticity to get a deeper understanding of the postmodern quest for authenticity and how brands can leverage on this through TikTok.

1.3 Delimitations

The research is focused on Generation Z, the largest user group on TikTok. However, only 18–25-year-olds are considered due to research ethics on under-18-year-olds. TikTok is the research focus due to the exciting and unique nature of the platform. The platform is still relatively new compared to other established social media platforms, and because of its exponential growth in the number of users globally and increased interest in the media. Aspects of brand authenticity are also relevant from the perspective of other social media platforms. However, the scope of the research covers only aspects considering TikTok. As the research is inductive, it does not follow a true grounded theory development, since background literature is used in the evolution of the research design.

1.4 Research outline

The outline of this paper is organised as follows;

- **Chapter 1 – Introduction:** Introducing the research topic, including the presentation of the research gap and aim, research question and delimitations.
- **Chapter 2 – Theoretical background:** Presenting the theoretical background including literature on postmodern society, networked individualism, branding in the postmodern hyperconnected world, affordances of social media platforms for consumers and brands, as well as describing TikTok. Finally, discussing the theory of brand authenticity and the contexts in which it has been studied.
- **Chapter 3 – Methodology:** Describing how the study was conducted, the philosophical underpinnings, the research strategy, data collection and data analysis process.
- **Chapter 4 – Findings:** Presenting all the findings from consumer and brand interviews. The findings are divided into four themes; perceptions of TikTok, Consumer affordances, Brand affordances, and findings on authenticity
- **Chapter 5 – Analysis:** Analysing the findings in relation to existing literature. New literature is also introduced to support the analysis.
- **Chapter 6 – Discussion:** Discuss the results of the research, limitations of the research, theoretical contributions, managerial implications and suggestions for future research.
- **Chapter 7 – Conclusion:** Presenting the final conclusions of the research.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this chapter, the theoretical backgrounds will be discussed to give the reader a better understanding of the research problem and gap. We start by discussing postmodernity, the networked society, and the quest for authenticity for postmodern consumers. After, the changes this has implied for brands, and how brand management has evolved together with these changes, are discussed. Then we describe social media platforms and TikTok more in-depth, and lastly, we discuss previous literature on brand authenticity, summarising the research gap and the importance of the research.

2.1 The Postmodern Society

Postmodernity generally referred to as the time from the 1960s and after, is in the contemporary Western culture distinguished by societies dominated by globalisation, deterritorialisation and hyperreality (Arnould & price, 2000), and an economy dominated by marketing, consumerism, and later on a hyper-connectedness through the technological advances of the internet and Web 2.0 (Kozinets, 2015). Consequently, postmodernity is also recognised as a time of personal meaninglessness, consumer scepticism and uncertainty, making consumers rethink the traditional values and societal norms of the previous modernist era (Arnould & Price, 2000; Holt, 2002). Rather than focusing on the tight bonds of communities, contemporary society is guided by networked individuals creating short-term relationships with each other, often specific to a time and place (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). These consocial relationships focus on information sharing rather than a fellowship or shared history, commonly related to communities, and are thus often friendly but not very strong (Wittel, 2001; Kozinets, 2015). The rules governing these social interactions are also institutional, meaning they are dictated by norms such as cultural practices, public opinions and legal systems (Perren & Kozinets, 2018).

A famous theorist and philosopher associated with postmodernity was Marshall McLuhan, who, already in the 1970s, predicted that the ‘cool, electric media’, which was participative and inclusive, would “retribalise” human society into a collectivist utopia. McLuhan saw that privacy, nationalism and individualism were adverse outcomes and things of the past and that isolated humans could now become parts of online collectives through electronic “retribalisation” (McLuhan 1970 in Kozinets 2015). However, the early internet environment was often perceived as cold, personal and unsociable due to the one-sided communication of Web 1.0 and early anonymity that consumers

had not experienced before (Kozinets, 2015). It was only with the development of Web 2.0 in the early 21st century that new interactive media platforms where consumers could create online social networks and exchange information with each other were born. This was due to the easier usability of Web 2.0 compared to prior Web 1.0.

The globalisation of the world has led traditional societies and communities based on cultural traditions to lose meaning as consumers can now identify with multiple identities and cultures (Arnould & Price 2000). In addition, consumers today see several marketing messages and content from other users of different media daily, creating hyperrealities leading to a blurred distinction between reality and fiction (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). These changes in the postmodern society have implied challenges for individuals in finding themselves and their collective identity, consequently leading to a feeling of meaninglessness and ‘feeling lost’ in themselves due to the multiple identities that they might have depending on the context. To overcome these feelings, consumers increasingly search for authentic experiences concerning themselves as part of self-authentication processes and the social units around them. Arnould & Price (2000) state that

“In the midst of multiple identities, and in the absence of the authority and continuity formerly provided by tradition, consumers actively foster a sense of continuity and integration [...] creative consumption can provide the foundation for individuals’ authentic selves and a connection to community.” (p. 145)

Creative consumption can happen both as authenticating acts and as authoritative performances, in which the consumer purposefully links the object to his/her self-identity and hence deems it authentic. An example of an authenticating act concerning consumption is that a consumer co-creates the product value as it relates to what the consumer deems necessary in their identity-building process (Arnould & Price, 2000). Hence, the consumer deems the product and its experience authentic (Napoli et al., 2014). An authoritative performance can, for example, be cultural displays such as festivals or rituals where significant life moments and values are shared and experienced together with the social unit or the ‘hyper-community’ around the event (Arnould & Price, 2000; Kozinets, 2002). A hyper-community is a “well-organised, short-lived but caring and sharing community whose explicit attraction to participants is its promise of an intense but temporary community experience” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 35).

2.1.1 Networked individualism

From the interest in the internet's impact on social networks, the term 'Networked individualism' was introduced. Networked individualism is characterised by people's social lives shifting away from closely-knit families and neighbourhoods toward more open and diverse personal networks (Wellman & Rainie, 2012). According to the authors, the change has evolved from three different "revolutions" in society; the social network revolution, the internet revolution and the mobile revolution. The social network revolution started in the 1960s with widespread connectivity through cars and aeroplanes, making long-distance trips more popular. The rapid growth of telecommunications in society was also a contributing factor to people being able to create and maintain social networks with others further away. The affordances of the internet (such as border bandwidth and connectivity) in the 1980s and 1990s accelerated the evolution towards networked individualism even more (Sun & Suthers, 2021). People did not have to travel long distances to interact anymore; a message could be sent and reach the other person immediately (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Networked individuals often think they are a part of groups. However, from the network perspective, they are just individuals being parts of different social networks around them, work, family and bowling friends, for example. Instead of relying on more intimate connections with a smaller group of people, networked individuals increasingly tap into these dispersed networks to meet their social, emotional, and economic needs. They move quickly between relationships and social settings to construct their identities depending on passions, lifestyles, and interests. Wellman & Rainie (2012) call networked individualism an "operating system" as it describes how people connect, communicate and exchange information. An example of networked individualism and a networked society is that members of a family act as members of multiple networks mediated by mobile phones, computers, and sets of contacts. The family 'home' becomes more of a base for the family members' networking instead of a place where the family gathers to pursue everyday family activities (ibid).

The mobile revolution in the early 2000s has enabled people to constantly connect to their networks as mobile phones have become more lightweight and cheaper than their earlier versions. This hyperconnectivity has led to an 'expectation' of others' constant availability. Social media platforms

also became increasingly popular during this time. Social media platforms further empower networked individuals to share their voices and vision with vast audiences (Kozinets, 2015). Social media can be described as

“a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61)

User Generated Content (UGC) is the general term describing the content users share on social media. Kaplan & Haenlein's (2010) definition relates to what the World Wide Web was initially created for, enabling user information exchange. Another definition for social media is

“forms of electronic communication that enable users to create and share information and ideas and other types of expression through virtual communities and networks” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

The increased use of these platforms has given rise to the term ‘FOMO’, which stands for ‘fear of missing out’, as the hyper-connectedness of contemporary society has led people to be able to, in almost real-time, see what their peers are up to via social media. This can quickly generate a feeling of missing out and people feeling more isolated (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Furthermore, the hyper-connectedness of society has led to an increased demand for privacy and transparency of people and businesses (ibid), more of which will be discussed in the following chapters.

2.1.2 Brands and postmodernity

To understand the societal changes related to postmodernity from a branding perspective, we discuss different branding paradigms identified by Merz, He & Vargo (2009). When the concept of a brand was first introduced in the early 1900s, brands were merely seen as a way for consumers to identify and recognise goods (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009). From this perspective, the individual physical product embedded with the brand value was therefore seen as the fundamental exchange unit. Merz, He & Vargo (2009) named this time until the 1930s the “Individual Goods-Focus Brand Era”. Around the 1930s until the 1990s, the importance of brand image, i.e. the perceptions that firms create in the minds of consumers, started to become increasingly important in the competitive

environment. With television becoming extremely popular in the 1950s, advertisers could now reach out with persuasive communication directly to consumers. This aggressive “cultural engineering” marketing tactic slowly led critics to notice what the companies were doing (Holt, 2002). An idea that these branding techniques were an attempt to get people to pursue material well-being through buying into excessive desires necessary for human happiness arose, leading consumers to question how corporations influence them (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 2002).

From the scepticism of postmodern consumers, marketers learned that consumers could not tolerate the idea that they would live according to a company-generated template and could not influence the consumers. Instead, it is the consumers who freely want to construct the ideas they want to express through their consumption of brands, and this consumption is a part of their personal development and self-creating process. (Holt, 2002). The postmodern branding paradigm posits that brands are more valuable if they offer cultural resources instead of cultural blueprints, as resources give consumers the assets to produce the self they choose. However, to work as such assets, the resources must be perceived as authentic, which has proved particularly challenging for marketers (Holt, 2002). As previously stated, “To be authentic, brands must be disinterested; they must be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value.” (Holt, 2002 p. 83). In other words, brands need to support customers in their symbolic needs in addition to the functional value of the product (Park et al., 1986). These years (around 1930-1990) can, within branding paradigms, be called the ‘Value-Focus Brand Era’ within branding paradigms. (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009).

2.1.2.1 From an inside-out to outside-in perspective

Until the 1990s, consumers were perceived as passive receivers (operand resources) of brand value), implying that the consumers had just accepted what the brands gave them. However, after the 1990s, the customers started to be considered significant actors in the brand value creation process (operant resources). A more interactive and relational co-creation process of value between the firm, its customers and the brand had started to take place (customer-firm, customer-brand, and firm-brand relationships), and the importance of internal and external stakeholders as brand value co-creators was also acknowledged. Merz, He & Vargo (2009) describes this as the ‘Relationship-Focus Brand Era’. From viewing internal and external customers as co-creators of brand value, it was soon discovered that the brand relationships were wider, including several

different societal stakeholders that co-create the brand value through collective and dynamic social processes both online and offline. Consequently, the brand began to be perceived as a continuous social process, which gave rise to the new ‘Stakeholder-Focused Brand Era’ where brand value was seen as co-created and dynamically constructed through social interactions online and offline in stakeholder network ecosystems between the brand and its stakeholders (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009).

2.1.2.2 Branding in a hyperconnected world

One challenge for brands in the current hyperconnected environment is that with the increased use of social media for brand communications, brand managers have started losing control over how their brands are interpreted, as the platforms enabled people to interpret brand meanings freely (Swaminathan et al., 2020). Consumers take the brand messages into their own hands and create parodies of them, consequently making brands struggle to leverage social media. In contrast, consumers have learned how to leverage brands instead (Fournier & Avery, 2011). As information is available more easily and much more quickly after the introduction of social media platforms in the beginning of the 21st century, consumers now have to put much less effort into learning about brands (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Information about brands also spreads quickly through the hyperconnected environments due to the information sharing on these platforms (see chapter 2.2.2). As a consequence of this, transparency in communication has grown to be extremely important for brands online, both to minimise the risk of misunderstanding information and being perceived as inauthentic (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2022), but also to increase brand trust (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu & Krush, 2016). As consumers in hyperconnected environments are bombarded with various marketing messages and brand stimuli, they start to look for the things they perceive to be trustworthy (ibid). However, to be transparent, brands must also assess the information-sharing risk. As mentioned, consumers might take the information into their own hands and create content deviating from the brand-generated identity and meaning (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Fournier & Avery, 2011).

The hyperconnected environment of social networks has led to changes and challenges in how brands interact with consumers and create value. From this loss of control of brands, a new European perspective on brand management was born (Wider, von Wallpach & Mühlbacher, 2018).

Brand managers are considered to be brand orchestrators, as they cannot manage the brand but only orchestrate the meanings (Wider et al., 2018; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2022). To fully understand this contemporary era, it is crucial to view brands as ‘assemblages’ in “ongoing and complex processes in constant flux” (Wider et al., 2018 p. 301). An assemblage can be described as a group of interrelated heterogeneous elements such as individuals, objects or concepts that exist in time and space (Lury, 2009; Wider et al., 2018). These elements are in constant change and evolve continuously. Hence assemblages are not the same from one day to another (Wider et al., 2018). The brand experiencers that create the brand value and experience through interactional flows of engagement in the ecosystems are called ‘interactive agencies’ (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2022). Thus, brands as assemblages in a digitalised world can be described as interactive system environments formed based on interactional flows with other agencial assemblages. This contemporary “Interactive Lived Experience” brand era (2010+) conceptualises brands as smart offerings that create and enable interactive lived experiences together with stakeholding individuals in the lived experience ecosystem (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2022).

2.2 Social Media Platforms

As with the interactive system environment perspective on brands, social media platforms can also be studied as such environments or ‘ecosystems’ (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2022). From the brand orchestrator’s objective standpoint, as an interactive system environment, the brand’s interactive structure is assembled of immaterial, informational and contextual information that is communicated in order to (re)produce a specific brand identity. As the interactive system environment is under constant change, the managerial function of branding becomes not only an activity of “what the brand is”, but also “what it can create” (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2022). For the interactive agencies or ‘the brand experiencers’ (i.e. consumers, communities, employees and other stakeholders etc.), the brand is subjective as the meaning is re-interpreted at every touchpoint with the brand (Iglesias, Ind & Alfaro, 2013). Brand experiences, i.e. the sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioural responses evoked by brand stimuli (Brakus et al., 2009), are also co-created as parts of collective social acts on platforms (Schembri, 2009). These are examples of some ageing engagements with the brand that create the “constant flux” through interactional flows, becoming parts of the interactive system environments that brands are.

For example, TikTok is both a brand seen from the traditional branding perspective, but the platform can also be seen as a lived brand experience ecosystem through the interactional and creational flows that it *affords*. James Gibson first introduced the concept of affordances in ecological psychology in 1977. Gibson (1977) describes affordances as the objective possibilities for action the environment elicits for the animal (Gibson, 1977). A decade later, Norman (1988) proposed that an affordance can also be determined by individuals' own subjective realities based on how they perceive the environment, i.e. a 'perceived affordance'. In other words, perceived affordances of an object are the subjective ways how users determine the opportunities this object offers to them. However, there is still no unified theory of affordances, as these have been studied in many different contexts (Ronzhyn, Cardenal & Batlle Rubio, 2022). Hence, the theory of affordances should be interpreted as a subjective theory depending on how the 'animal' (here: consumer, brand, stakeholder etc.) perceives and interprets the environment (here: social media platforms).

2.2.1 Consumer Affordances of Social Media Platforms

In recent years, the interest in studying social media platforms through the affordances that these offer has increased, leading to several perceptions of how social media can be explained through affordances depending on the context. Most common is to focus the research around the technological or functional affordances of social media, related to how the platforms' technology offers opportunities for several actions. Ronzhyn, Cardenal & Batlle Rubio (2022) define social media affordances as “the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms” (p. 14). However, other researchers have gained more interest in how technological affordances also affect social interaction, identity, and affective and cognitive aspects (Butcher & Helmond, 2017; Moreno & D'Angelo, 2019; Zhao, Liu, Tang & Zhu, 2013). To discuss the *affordances* of social media platforms and give an understanding of why people use social media we start by explaining the functional affordances of social media based on Kietzmann et al., (2011) functional building blocks of social media platforms. We then relate these to identity and social affordances of social media. Lastly, we discuss cognitive and affective affordances given by social media platforms from a consumer perspective (Zhao et al., 2013).

2.2.1.1 Functional affordances

The functional affordances of social media refer to the technological features that enable different functions on the platform, which users can then take action on and use. As social media is based on creating and sharing content with others, making the media 'social' rather than only one-sided, social media affordances have often been studied from the perspective of what the technological functions of it afford to the users. As social media was created to share information with other users, many social media platforms today also include the ability to facilitate conversations, exchange, share and receive content and information with each other as their main features (Kietzmann et al., 2011). The functional affordances of social media are hence often related to technological functions that afford conversations and sharing on the platform. The functional affordance of conversations refers to the extent to which social media platforms allow users to communicate with each other on social media. The functional affordance of sharing relates to the extent that sharing content with others is possible. Many social media users state that they enjoy sharing content such as pictures, videos or updates online. Information sharing was also found to be a reason for users to use social media (Whiting & Williams, 2013). This relates to the theory that networked individuals are, as mentioned, empowered by the internet to share their vision and voices with an extended audience, and invite this audience to become a part of their social world (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Kozinets, 2015).

The functional affordance of presence refers to what extent other users can see each others' availability or sharing of location. Whiting & Williams (2013) found that 'spying' on others or getting knowledge about what they are up to was one of the reasons people like to use or enjoy using social media. The functional affordance of presence hence affords the social affordance of getting information about other users' presence. Reputation affordance is usually referred to as how well users are able to see what other users think of a user, i.e. the user's reputation. This can be likes, shares or comments on a post, but also the number of followers or network size of the user. What Kietzmann et al. (2011) do not mention is the functional affordance of creation on the platform. Relating to Kaplan & Haenlein's (2010) definition of social media, "a group of Internet-based applications that [...] allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content." (pp. 61). A functional affordance of social media can also be defined as the technology that allows for creating content on the platform.

2.2.1.2 Identity affordances

The functional affordances of social media of identity refer to the extent that users can reveal their identities in social media platforms (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Moreno & D'Angelo, 2019). Revealing one's identity can refer to disclosing age, name, gender, location etc. Oftentimes this can happen consciously or unconsciously through 'self-disclosure', such as sharing thoughts and feelings, likes and dislikes on the platforms (Moreno & D'Angelo, 2019; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) divide social media into two different categories based on self-representation and self-disclosure. Examples of social media platforms with low self-disclosure include forums, content communities (e.g. YouTube), and virtual game worlds. Examples of social media platforms with high self-disclosure include blogs where users openly can share their thoughts and opinions with other users within the community, social networking sites (e.g Facebook, Instagram and TikTok), and virtual social worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

The identity affordance of revealing one's true self on the platforms might also serve the consumers as a self-authenticating act in response to the postmodern world (Arnould & Price, 2000), as an identity affordance of social media platforms relate to the opportunity for identity development and portrayal (Moreno & D'Angelo, 2019). An authenticating act is the expression of one's true self 'as it is', apart from any roles we play (Arnould & Price, 2000). According to Whiting & Williams (2013), who reviewed social media usage through the uses and gratifications it gives to the users, many social media users say they enjoy and like to make comments, or like others' pictures and videos. Some also mentioned they enjoy criticising others through the anonymity that some social media platforms enable (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

However, the sharing and revealing of identity online have also led to many privacy concerns for consumers concerned about where their data is stored (Kietzmann, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Within the European Union, the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) regarding the storage of personal data was implemented in 2016 to protect consumers' interests (Regulation 2016/679). However, similar regulations are not active in other parts of the world. As a reaction towards the security risks of a personal data breach, some users have developed different identity strategies for different social media platforms to 'protect' their identity (Kietzman et al., 2011). For example, one might use Facebook for connecting with friends and family and LinkedIn for self-branding and professional purposes (ibid) .

2.2.1.3 Social affordances

The functional affordances and identity affordances also enable social affordances, described as “the possibilities that technological changes afford for social relations and social structure” (Wellman, 2001, p.228). As mentioned earlier, the big change to Web 2.0 was the technological advances that made interaction between users possible. Alone, conversations and sharing are just a way of interacting with the platform. However, with the interactive nature of social media, this content sharing can afford users to connect with each other or even build relationships with each other online through the shared object, for example, a picture, video or text that is shared (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Wellman et al. (2003) also talks about social affordances of the internet generally on how it influences people's everyday lives. One social affordance of social media platforms is, therefore, the affordance of social interaction, which Whiting & Williams (2013) also found to be the most common reason for people to use social media. Some people even state that they have more contact with people over social media than in real life and that social media gives them a social life (ibid). Social media keeps them connected to their family and friends but also gives them an opportunity to interact with people they do not usually see or would have ever met in real life. (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Whiting & Williams, 2013)

From the cues obtained from the content that is being shared, conversations, and presence on the platforms, other users can more easily make a judgement of another user, and also identify if the user is similar to themselves or not, which are crucial for relationship or group building (Kietzmann et al., 2011). For relationships and groups to form, high self-disclosure is often needed for the partners to identify each other. Platforms that afford relationship-building and maintaining functions are, therefore often platforms where self-disclosure is also high (Kietzmann et al., 2011). These groups can be communities or subcommunities relating for example, to a shared interest, such as a brand for example (Kietzmann et al., 2012; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Communities afford a feeling of belonging to the members through the shared interests of the community members (ibid). Furthermore, many social media platforms are today driven by algorithms that choose the content that the user will see. These algorithms also pick up user interests and consequently show content relating to these interests to the consumers (Karizat, Delmonaco, Eslami, & Andalibi, 2021)

2.2.1.4 Affective & Cognitive affordances

Adding to the functional, identity and social affordances of social media, affective and cognitive affordances have also been identified within the context (Zhao et al., 2013). Perceived affective affordances refer to the extent that social media can trigger emotional reactions, these kinds of affordances have been shown to positively enhance user experience, satisfaction and continual usage of social media (ibid). Whiting and Williams (2013) also found that consumers who use social media for the affective affordances it offers, relaxation, fun and entertainment were mentioned as positive emotional gratifications of social media use. Furthermore, escapism has long been associated with mass media usage. Katz & Foulkes (1962) define escapism as the “tendency to seek relief from the routine and constraints of everyday life through involvement with media materials that offer us an opportunity to experience alternative realities” (p. 284). Escapism is argued to be a common motivation for why people consume mass media, as it denotes a fun and enjoyable experience with social media (Korgaonkar & Wolin, 1999). Within the context of social media it has been proven a contributing factor for social media usage (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

Whereas affective affordances relate to the possibility of social media to elicit emotional responses, cognitive affordances relate to how social media is perceived to support cognitive processes such as learning and problem-solving processes (Zhao et al., 2013). Examples of cognitive affordances of social media can for example be that it is perceived to provide information or inspire people in various ways (ibid). Whiting & Williams (2013) confirm that information-seeking is the second most popular reason for why consumers use social media. This information seeking refers to both information about brands, brand deals and sales or information about birthdays and events etc. The search functions of social media platforms easily afford to get information for consumers.

2.2.2 Brand Affordances of Social Media Platforms

When social media platforms became popular at the beginning of the 2000s, brands were quick to jump on the bandwagon. Today, it is generally expected of a brand to have an omni-social presence (i.e is active on many different social media platforms), as consumers’ decision-making processes largely depend on social media influence (Appel, Grewal, Hadi & Stephen, 2020). Social media, with its content-sharing features, also enables brands to showcase their desired brand identity and ‘who they are’ in a fun and interactive way. Compared to the increasing prices and difficulties with getting the right target customers’ attention through traditional media, social media was seen as an

easy and inexpensive choice for marketing products to bigger audiences simultaneously (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Therefore, social media platforms can be said to afford visibility and brand awareness for brands (Sedalo, Boateng & Kosiba, 2022).

Through later technological affordances of Web 2.0, in-depth information on consumer preferences and lifestyles could be collected, enabling micro-targeting and addressable, customised marketing. Users' actions on the platforms afford these with information about user preferences and interests through their actions on platforms. Algorithms pick this information up on the platforms, and the platforms then afford the brands the user information, which allows for targeted messages straight to the target audience. However, this is a purely "inside out" perspective where customers are seen as passive value receivers. Seen from the contemporary brand era of brands as co-creational interactive lived experience ecosystems, it is the interactional flows of engagement that the platforms afford that create value (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2022). The interactional flows of engagement are enabled by functional affordances of conversations and sharing (Cabiddu, De Carlo & Piccoli, 2014). This open, informational and transparent engagement offers an affordance of brand trust (Sedalo, Boateng & Kosiba, 2022), which is of crucial importance for brands in a postmodern hyperconnected world where consumers are sceptical of marketing communications as a result of the uncertainty of the world and the overflow of brand stimuli they are faced with on digital interactive platforms (Holt, 2002).

The functional affordances of conversations and sharing also enable relationship building. As stated in the previous chapter, social media platforms afford consumers to fulfil their needs of social interaction, the similar can also be applied to brands. Through relationship affordance, brands can build personal relationships with their consumers. Brands should recognise that the intimacy of the medium also influences relationships. Therefore a higher level of social presence on platforms is likely to make the interactions more influential (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Cooperative interactional relationships based on interactional flows of engagement are also likely to translate into loyal consumers who act as brand advocates of the brand (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2022). This is a win-win situation for the brand and other consumers, as consumers generally trust other consumers more than brands if they do not have a prior connection with the brand.

2.2.3 TikTok

In short, TikTok (tiktok.com) is a fun and fast-paced social media app or platform intended mainly for short-video content (Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021). TikTok was launched in 2016 by ByteDance, a Chinese-owned tech company, and has become the fastest-growing social media platform/app in the world, seeing exponential growth during the Covid-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020. Since then, the number of users on the platform has continued to grow, making it the third biggest social media platform in the world by 2023 with 1 billion monthly active users (MAUs) (Lua, 2022). For context, Facebook, launched in 2004, has 2.9 billion MAUs, YouTube, another video-sharing platform launched in 2005, has 2,2 billion MAUs, and Instagram, a picture (and later also video) sharing platform launched in 2010, has 2 billion MAUs (Lua, 2022). Table 1 below shows the differences between these platforms.

Platform	Launch	MAUs	Largest age group (of platforms users)	Main content
TikTok	2016	1 billion	*18–24 (39.91%) 13–17 (27.37%) 25–34 (25.11%)	Short videos
Instagram	2010	2 billion	**18–24 (30.8%) 25–34 (30.3%) 35–44 (15.7%)	Pictures, short videos
YouTube	2005	2.2 billion	***25–35 (20.7%) 35–44 (16.7%) 18–24 (15%)	Longer videos
Facebook	2004	2.9 billion	****25–34 (29.9%) 18–24 (21.5%) 35–44 (19.4%)	Text, pictures

Table 1. The usage of the popular social media platforms. Own creation. (*Khoros, 2022; **Statista, 2023a; ***Oberlo, n.d.; ****Statista, 2023b).

TikTok was made easy to use, and the built-in filters, text, sound and music effects on the platform afford fun content and creativity for its users. Furthermore, TikTok is described as fast-paced as each piece of content (videos) on the platform is generally under 1 minute long. This makes the platform attractive to people of Generation Z, born between 1996 and 2013 (Sparks Akers, 2022), who are also the most significant user group of TikTok. In a recent study conducted by OMD, Yahoo and Amplified Intelligence (2022), Generation Z had an 8 to 9-second passive attention span towards video format, which is significantly lower compared to the older generations. The attention

span lowers further when talking about active attention towards advertisements, ranging between 1.3 and 1.8 seconds (OMD et al., 2022; Sullivan, 2022)

Regarding the affordances of TikTok, the platform possesses the same functional affordances as of many other social media platforms. Users of TikTok can share content (sharing) and interact with other users through likes, comments or private messages (conversation) (Omar & Dequan, 2020).

A recent study made by Nielsen (2021), commissioned by TikTok, found out that 64% of users on TikTok say they can be their true selves on the platform and 53% also trust others to be their real selves on the app, making the platform to be perceived as more authentic than other social media platforms.

Furthermore, TikTok offers live streaming capabilities, affording users to interact with others in real-time (presence). The editing tools of TikTok are also perceived as user-friendly and therefore also afford content creation (Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021). Oftentimes, the videos on TikTok are based on ‘memes’, i.e. “a concept, belief, or practice conceived as a unit of cultural information that may be passed on from person to person, subject to influences in a way analogous to natural selection.” (Benveniste, 2022). Creating and sharing memes afford a community feeling online through humour and cues of relatability (ibid). Together, these functional attributes of the platform therefore also afford social affordances of relationship and community building and maintaining (Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021).

However, TikTok stands out from other platforms through the intelligent algorithm powered by artificial intelligence, a real-time recommendation system (Liu et al., 2022). Compared to other social media platforms such as Instagram or Facebook, where the default screen shows the content of people the user follows, the default screen on TikTok (called ‘For You’-page or ‘FYP’) shows an unlimited amount of videos even without following anyone on the platform (Arslan, 2022). This makes TikTok engaging from the beginning of the user experience. The more the user spends time on the platform, the algorithm learns what each individual user likes based on interactions, shares, searches and accounts followed (ibid). In practice, everything a user does on the platform is monitored and fed into the algorithm that together with artificial intelligence and machine learning pushes more similar content to the user, affording a more customised user experience than any other

social media platform has been able to create. This also means that one user's FYP can never be the exact same as someone else's.

With the help of the algorithm, several sub-communities or micro-communities have also emerged on the app. Built around different interests or subcultures, which emerge from interest related content which then are recommended by the algorithm to users interested in the topic (Mathieu-Phillips, 2022). An example of a sub-community is BookTok, which surrounds literature and books, and the impact of the community has even been said to have a revolutionising effect on the publishing industry (Armitstead, 2022). In addition to hobbies and interests, subcommunities are also created around specific aesthetic preferences, e.g., CottageCore (soft romantic style, romanticising quiet and calm country living), or identities, such as "LGBT Tok" (queer community-related content). TikTok itself describes these subcommunities as the "new demographics" for brands and marketers (TikTok for Business, 2023).

TikTok is also a trend-based platform where new trends (popular ways of doing videos together with sounds) arise weekly. Regardless of a user's personal algorithm, the trending videos reach all users in one form or another. TikTok uses the term trend to describe the "creative formats, ideas, and behaviours that get much attention on TikTok, and in turn, influence what people do on the platform" (TikTok, 2023a). A trend often starts from a single video that gets many interactions becoming a hit. Every video posted on TikTok will be seen by at least one person on the FYP, based on how many views a video accumulates, the video is shown further in the newer batches of people, and these rounds continue until saturation is reached. This phenomenon can be described as a video "going viral". Distinguishing between the concept of a viral video and a trend, we describe a viral video as a video that gets many views and interactions quickly. In contrast, a trend refers to how the video is made (i.e. usage of sounds or filters), and what is happening in the video. A video might start a trend by triggering others to recreate the video in their way using for example the same sound as in the 'original video'. TikTok categorises trends as moments, signals, and forces. The differences between the three categories are explained below in Table 2.

Trend categories on TikTok		
Moments	Signals	Forces
“Fleeting, high-participatory planned or unplanned prompts that take off and end quickly on TikTok after mass saturation.”	“Emerging user interests and expectations being expressed on our platform.”	“Enduring cultural transformations that reflect transformations in people’s values, interests and needs.”

Table 2. Trend categories on TikTok (TikTok, 2023a). Own creation.

Unique to TikTok, is that the platform affords everyone the possibility to create a viral video. In contrast to Facebook or Instagram, where the content was originally only shown to followers of the user, users’ amount of followers does not matter in the same sense when it comes to being able to create a viral video or not, every user on TikTok is afforded the chance of global fame for all its users (consumers and businesses). There is no ‘magic recipe’ to create a trend or viral video, as described in the process above, the viral videos are only dependent on other users’ impressions of the videos, and the algorithm interprets these as positive impressions, showing the video to more users (Hern, 2022). A fact is however that consumers react more strongly to something that elicit strong reactions, both positive and negative. Examples of content eliciting such strong reactions can be fun content that the consumer deems enjoyable to watch, and Omar & Dequan (2020) found the motivation for escapism to also be a contributing factor for TikTok use.

2.3 Brand Authenticity

Originating from Greek philosophy and the word *authentikos*, which refers to someone acting on their own authority (Spiggle et al., 2012), authenticity holds the meaning of something that is truthful, real and genuine (Beverland and Farrelly 2010). Within marketing and consumer research, the concept of authenticity has been studied for the past 25 years (Södergren, 2020). However, although having been studied for almost three decades, a generally accepted definition of authenticity within marketing and consumption is still lacking. A reason for this is partly because the concept of authenticity has often been studied within different contexts, some examples being tourist sites (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), luxury wines (Beverland, 2005), reality television (Rose & Wood 2005), objects (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), fast-moving consumer goods (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018), advertising (Stern 1994; Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008), brands (Holt, 2002; Morhart et al., 2015; Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2021), brand extensions (Spiggle, Nguyen & Caravella, 2012), and social media influencers (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard 2020).

Additionally, these marketing scholars who define authenticity have often ended up introducing subtypes of authenticity, such as iconic and indexical authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), self-referential hyper-authenticity (Rose & Wood 2005), and objective, constructed and existential authenticity (Leigh, Peters & Shelton, 2006). This has led to “a very insightful yet fragmented picture of what it means for consumption to be authentic” (Nunes, Ordanini & Giambastiani, 2021 pp. 2). As the progress in consumer behaviour research is highly dependent on standardised definitions, marketing scholars are battling for a standardised definition of brand authenticity as well. The conceptual ambiguity of authenticity challenges academics because without a shared meaning of the concept it is difficult to develop a coherent theory (Suddaby 2010). Some frequently cited definitions of brand authenticity and dimensions related to brand authenticity can be found in Table 3.

Authors (year)	Authenticity Definition	Dimensions
Campagna et al. (2022)	“a genuine brand with a unique style that cares about being open and honest with consumers and will survive times and trends”	3- Conscious, Longevity, Self-Empowerment
Nunes et al. (2021)	“a holistic consumer assessment determined by six component judgments (connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency)” (p. 2)	6- Accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency
Fritz et al., (2017)	“the perceived consistency of a brand’s behavior that reflects its core values and norms, according to which it is perceived as being true to itself, not undermining its brand essence or substantive nature, whereby the perceptual process involves two types of authenticity (i.e. indexical and iconic authenticity).” (p. 327)	4- Continuity, Originality, Reliability, Naturalness (Bruhn et al., 2012)
Morhart et al. (2015)	“the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful towards itself (continuity), true to its consumers (credibility), motivated by caring and responsibility (integrity) and able to support consumers in being true to themselves (symbolism)” (p. 203)	4- Continuity, Credibility Integrity, Symbolism
Napoli et al. (2014)	“a subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers.” (p.1091)	3- Quality commitment, Brand Heritage, Sincerity
Beverland & Farrelly. (2010)	Consumers have different goals (control, connection and virtue), and search for authenticity (something that is real, true and genuine) in different objects, brands and events to achieve these goals.	3- Real, genuine & true
Rose & Wood (2005)	Consumers negotiate authenticity based on existential cues. Authenticity is constructed by means of consumer (the viewer), which is only meaningful in cultural context.	1- Self-Referential
Grayson & Martinec (2004)	Iconic Authenticity-Authentic describes something whose physical manifestation resembles something that is indexically authentic. Indexical Authenticity-Authentic describes something that is thought not to be a copy or an imitation.	2- Genuineness, Truth
Arnould & Price (2000)	Authenticity can be attained by individual authenticating acts or a collective authoritative performance.	2- Self-authentication, Social Identity

Table 3. Brand authenticity definitions, dimensions and perspectives (Own creation).

2.3.1 Conceptualization of Brand Authenticity

Brand authenticity is often studied as a multidimensional construct reflecting subjective consumer perceptions of the brand. To support the understanding of the concept, Morhart et al. (2015) suggest the term to be conceptualised through three authenticity-related perspectives prevalent in previous literature; the objectivist perspective, the constructivist perspective, and the existentialist perspective.

2.3.1.1 The objectivist perspective

The objectivist perspective refers to objective facts about the item being perceived. Within objectivist philosophy, there is only one truth to an object (Rand, 1990). Hence, a brand can only be authentic or inauthentic when studying it from an objectivist stance. The objectivist perspective is Grayson & Martinec (2004) refer to this kind of authenticity as ‘indexical’, which “distinguishes ‘the real thing’ from its copies” (p. 298). In the branding context, this authenticity is often showcased through evidence and verifiable information about a brand, such as labels of the origin, age, ingredients or performance (Morhart et al., 2015). Indexical authenticity is also related to brand heritage, quality commitment, uniqueness and longevity. From the objectivist perspective, an authentic brand can therefore be conceptualised as an old brand with a long heritage with proven quality. Indexical cues that relate to the objectivist perspective on brand authenticity can be for example previous brand scandals or brand congruent employee behaviour, i.e. employees of the brand act according to the brand promises and values (Morhart et al., 2015).

2.3.1.2 The constructivist perspective

From the constructivist perspective, authenticity is a socially or personally constructed phenomenon, i.e. the result of “what the real world” looks like compared to one's expectations or beliefs (Morhart et al., 2015). Another term for this perspective on brand authenticity is iconic authenticity which can be described as when the physical manifestation resembles something indexically authentic (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Costa and Bamossy (1995) exemplify iconic authenticity with silver pieces in a museum gift shop that can be perceived as authentic if the viewer perceives them to look similar to coins made in the sixteenth-century Spanish colonies. In the branding context, this type of authenticity usually refers to consumers' expectations and perceptions of an authentic brand being in line with what the brand communicates and what the brand delivers

(Brown et al., 2003; Beverland et al., 2008; Morhart et al., 2015). In other words, being genuine or true to the brand (Campagna et al., 2022). Examples of iconic cues to authenticity include a communication style emphasising a brand's roots and virtue, i.e something perceived to be indexically authentic (Morhart et al., 2015). It is important to acknowledge that iconic and indexical authenticity are not exclusive of each other (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), for example, a brand might have a long history and heritage and proven quality over time (indexical authenticity), but might still be perceived as authentic if it has genuine and caring values and is perceived as to live up to their values (iconic authenticity).

2.3.1.3. The existentialist perspective

The third perspective, the existentialist, has its roots in existentialist philosophy and postmodernism and refers to how authenticity relates to one's identity (Morhart et al., 2015; Fouladi, Ekhlasi & Sakhdari, 2021). Although existentialist philosophy is similar to postmodernism, these are two separate theories. Whereas postmodernism is more concerned with society as a whole, existentialist philosophy is more concerned with the individual. Within existentialist philosophy, the individual is very self-conscious, and autonomous and seeks to achieve ultimate freedom; it is inauthentic to act upon external pressure as all actions should come from conscious intrinsic motivations towards living a free life (Herring, 2005). According to the existentialist perspective, an object or experience is therefore perceived as authentic when the consumption of it supports consumers in uncovering their true selves (Arnould and Price, 2000; Morhart et al., 2015).

Examples of existential authenticity can be extraordinary experiences such as river rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993), music festivals (Kozinets, 2002) or reality television programs when consumers are to discover their self-identities through programs that provide self-relevant information (Rose & Wood, 2005). The same goes for the branding context; a brand is seen as authentic when consumers feel that they support their self-identity and are true to themselves when consuming the brand. (Morhart et al., 2015). An existential cue to authenticity is brand anthropomorphism, i.e. ascribing human characteristics to non-human entities (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Morhart et al., 2015). When brands are anthropomorphised, consumers can more easily imagine the brand as a person (Aaker & Fournier, 1995; Fournier 1998). These cues can then provide self-referential cues that support the consumer's identity construction process. The higher degree of anthropomorphism, the easier it is for consumers to see the brand values, which consequently increases the brand's

symbolism and hence provides consumers' brand experiences with existential authenticity (Rose & Wood, 2005 in Morhart et al, 2015).

2.3.2 Brand Authenticity on Social Media

When it comes to brand authenticity on social media, research is still scarce. Previous studies have studied marketing communications' impact on perceived brand authenticity (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018), the perceived brand authenticity of startups in social media (Fouladi, Ekhlassi & Sakhdari, 2021), and social media marketing techniques and their impact on brand authenticity (Hasan, Qyauum & Zia, 2022), Dwivedi & McDonald (2018) found that, in the context of FMCG brands and marketing communications, a consumer's evaluations of the marketing communications have a direct effect on brand authenticity through the informational cues it provides. Furthermore, the cultural meaning (existential cue) of the brand is communicated to the consumer through marketing communication, enabling consumers to consume this symbolic and culturally constituted brand and then meaning through using the brand.

Hasan, Qyauum & Zia (2022) studied the impact of social media marketing techniques and brand authenticity, they found that influencer marketing and user-generated content had a positive impact on perceived brand authenticity, whereas traditional marketing techniques such as advertising impacted brand authenticity negatively. Furthermore, brand authenticity was also afforded by entertainment, customisation and trendiness of social media marketing techniques (ibid), however, they do not focus on understanding why these are important. In their study on perceived brand authenticity for startups in social media, Fouladi, Ekhlassi & Sakhdari (2021) found that the perceived brand authenticity is determined by a mix of indexical, iconic and existential cues, but due to the lack of indexical cues in startups, consumers tend to rely more on iconic cues and the corresponding existential feelings that these elicit. For example, the iconic cue of having commitment towards consumers can create existential feelings of perceived intimacy with the brand (ibid). These findings have implications relating to the existentialist perspective on brand authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015), as well as the postmodern marketing scepticism that consumers perceive items that they can relate to as more authentic than if a company directly tells them to buy something (Holt, 2002).

3 METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the methods used to study the phenomenon of inquiry are discussed. We first consider the philosophical underpinnings of the research, then move on to the research strategy, data collection and data analysis. Lastly, the quality of the research in terms of reliability and validity is considered.

3.1 Philosophy of science

Research philosophy refers to the underpinned beliefs and assumptions about knowledge development. Research philosophy is often divided into ontological assumptions (i.e the nature of reality), epistemological assumptions (what constitutes acceptable knowledge), and axiological assumptions (referring to how the researcher views the impact of his/hers own values and beliefs, and how to deal with these). These beliefs and assumptions are guiding the way that data will be collected, analysed and interpreted later on, and are therefore a key element of scientific research. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2021).

3.1.1 Ontology

The nature of reality can either be perceived as objective and external or as socially constructed (Collis & Hussey, 2014). As this study is concerned with finding out and understanding consumers' and brands' affordances of TikTok and what brand authenticity means for individuals on the platform, the ontological assumption departs from social constructivism. This ontological approach implies that reality is subjective and socially constructed in the mind of each individual (Collis & Hussey, 2014). It is essential to highlight the difference here between social *constructionism* and social *constructivism*, as social *constructionism* implies that reality is created from a shared collective meaning within a group or culture, whereas social *constructivism* implies that reality is individually created through the unique experience of an individual (Crotty 1998; Patton, 2015). According to social constructivist philosophy, the reality of an object depends on the individual's personal and subjective interpretations of the object in that specific context, therefore, multiple realities may exist interchangeably depending on the context (Patton, 2015). This implies that multiple realities can exist as mental constructions within the minds of humans, and these realities are subject to constant development and change (Saunders et al., 2021). The theory of affordances (Gibson, 1977) can be applied to understanding the individual's subjectively created realities of an object in terms of the possibilities of action that the individual perceives the object offers to them in

a specific context. In this thesis, we apply the theory of affordances to understand consumers' and brands' use of TikTok. Furthermore, as brand authenticity is a subjective concept created in the minds of individuals (see Morhart et al., 2015, Campagna et al., 2022, Nunes et al., 2021), a social constructivist ontology, rather than an objective, is highly applicable.

3.1.2 Epistemology

Epistemology, i.e. the 'theory of knowledge' follows logically from the ontological assumptions, as epistemology is concerned with how knowledge can be gained from that reality (Saunders et al., 2021). There are two main paradigms to scientific research; positivism and interpretivism. While positivists assume that the social world is singular and objective, interpretivism sees that social reality is within the minds of humans and is multiple and therefore subjective (Collis & Hussey, 2014). Rooted in social constructivist ontology, this research takes the epistemological position of interpretivism. According to interpretive epistemology, humans are seen as agents in constructing meanings, not as objects as in positivist research (Collis & Hussey, 2014). This epistemological approach fits with the research aim of understanding why consumers and brands use TikTok through the affordances of the platform and understanding what brand authenticity means in the context of TikTok, as the aim of interpretive research is to create rich new understandings of different phenomena based on individual and subjective stories, perceptions and interpretations of realities (Saunders et al., 2021). With individual subjective realities constituting knowledge, theories are seen as too simplistic for interpretive researchers (Saunders et al., 2021). Hence, interpretive research allows for more flexibility as surprising findings may appear (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). Additionally, an interpretive research approach is more personal than a positivist approach, as getting a deep understanding of a phenomenon would not be possible without interacting with the researched object when new surprising facts may arise (Collis & Hussey, 2014). When studying what brand authenticity means in the context of TikTok and what role the affordances of the platform have on perceived authenticity, flexibility and a personal research approach are crucial as there is no objective truth to the concept of brand authenticity or affordances of TikTok. The findings from interpretive research can therefore not be perceived as portraying the ultimate truth, but rather, in the context of this research, as portraying the different individual consumer and brand perceptions of the affordances of TikTok and what brand authenticity means in the context of TikTok.

3.1.3 Axiology

In addition to considering the ontological and epistemological assumptions, the researchers also have to consider their own roles in the research, this is what axiology considers. Following interpretive philosophy, it is important to note that the researchers are also part of what is researched and the researchers' own interpretations of the data also play an important role in the research process. Some even argue that empirical data within interpretive research is 'double-interpreted', the participants tell their subjective realities to the researcher, and the researcher then interprets and understands these stories in their own way based on their values and beliefs, therefore creating their own realities of the what the participants have told (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). The crucial part is therefore for an interpretive researcher to adopt a reflexive and empathetic stand to enable an open and deep understanding of the studied phenomenon. Furthermore, this enables the researchers to, in the most accurate way possible, interpret the social world of the participants and what has formed this view for them (Saunders et al., 2021).

3.2 Research Strategy

The research strategy relates to methods used to acquire data and answer the research question(s). First, the strategy for how theory is developed needs to be considered. There are three main approaches to theory development; deductive, inductive and abductive (Saunders et al, 2021). Typically, research with an interpretive research philosophy follows inductive reasoning, as the interpretive researcher aims to find and interpret socially constructed meanings of reality (ibid). However, a limitation and critique of the inductive approach are that it does not include any theoretical background, and no amount of empirical data might necessarily enable theory building (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). Therefore, many interpretive researchers have started taking on an abductive approach, building theory as reflexive narratives from a dialogical process between the empirical phenomenon and previous research within the field of study (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013). The abductive approach moves between induction and deduction, both applying data to theory and theory to data (Suddaby, 2006). A main benefit of the abductive approach is that it creates room for new insights and flexibility regarding theoretical development (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). Abductive theory development starts by observing a surprising fact that cannot be explained with existing theory, and by researching possible plausible theories to the phenomenon, the researcher might encounter more surprising facts that might enable new, unpredicted implications (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2022).

The surprising fact in this thesis came from the researchers' observations on TikTok and the fun, informational but addictive nature of the platform. What especially caught our interest was that brands also were a part of this. In contrast to many other social media platforms, for example, Facebook or Instagram, the most popular or 'viral' brand videos on TikTok were not videos where something was being sold, it was merely videos with brands jumping on trending sounds on the platform, and applying these to themselves. This phenomenon made us as researchers question the perceived authenticity of these brands. *How can a brand be perceived as authentic if it is just joking around on a platform? What about the differences in consumer perceptions about the brand on TikTok vs other platforms or reality? Is this the new way of branding for generation Z consumers?* were all some example questions and thoughts we had in our minds before researching the phenomenon further.

3.2.1 Exploratory aim: Qualitative research design

Second, the methodological choice of whether to use a quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods research design should be considered in relation to the purpose of the study. An exploratory study seeks new insights and understandings into a phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2021). Given that brand authenticity in relation to TikTok has not been researched before, and that research regarding brand authenticity on social media is scarce, this research follows an exploratory research design. As with the interpretive epistemology and abductive approach to theory development, exploratory researchers also have to be flexible for change in direction if data results or new insights indicate that.

Qualitative methods are often used when the research aims at understanding and interpreting participants' meanings and the relationships between them, as this research strategy is based on non-numerical data, such as words or visuals, that can capture a more profound richness than numerical data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Thus, following the exploratory nature of the research, and the ontological and epistemological assumptions of social constructivism and interpretivism, a qualitative research design should be applied (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022; Collis & Hussey, 2014). Furthermore, qualitative researchers do not seek to generalise a phenomenon across different social settings, they focus on understanding the phenomenon within one context (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). This is also in line with the aim of trying to understand the perceived brand

authenticity in the context of TikTok. Consequently, following the philosophical assumptions, abductive approach and exploratory nature of the research, this thesis adopts a qualitative research design with qualitative data from consumers and companies.

3.2.2 Pre-study and Literature review

Before data collection, literature from sociology, branding and social media platforms were studied and reviewed to get an insight into postmodern consumer behaviour and how social media has been implemented in society. Furthermore, literature on branding was researched to include the latest branding 'era' and the challenges for brands operating in a hyperconnected environment. Additionally, the theory about authenticity and brand authenticity was researched thoroughly through different perspectives and contexts to give an understanding of the topic, as well as to find out if there were any previous studies with TikTok and perceived brand authenticity. Google Scholar and CBS Library were mainly used for finding the previous research and literature on these topics. As TikTok is a relatively new platform, there have not been many studies on it yet. However, the Global Authenticity study conducted by Nielsen (2021) on the commission of TikTok was researched to understand perceived authenticity on the platform. Combining literature from these perspectives led to finding the research gap and the construction of the research question. Furthermore, it enables an abductive approach to the research as well as analysing data using the grounded theory method (chapter 3.4)

3.3 Data collection

The data collection for this thesis can be divided into three categories of primary data, interviews with consumers, and interviews with company representatives, and TikTok observations. For qualitative research, non-probability sampling is often used as the research aim is not to make big generalisations about a phenomenon but rather to understand the researched phenomenon. With non-probability sampling, the researcher gets more freedom in selecting samples and is therefore more likely to gain a deeper understanding and insights into the phenomenon. Non-probability sampling was used for both the companies and consumers, however, the types of non-probability sampling differ slightly between these two, self-selection sampling was applied in the consumer cases, whereas critical case sampling was applied for choosing the companies to interview.

The interviews were made in a semi-structured manner to make sure that the researcher has space to ask for clarification, as words may have multiple, and sometimes, unclear meanings. When collecting data qualitatively through interviews, showing empathy and sensitivity towards the ones who consent to take part in the data analysis is of crucial importance to gain cognitive access to data. Therefore, the partakers are not seen as respondents but as participants in the data collection process (Saunders et al., 2021). All the interviews were conducted between 23rd November 2022 and 17th December 2022, and the observations occurred between October 2022 and March 2023.

3.3.1 TikTok observations

The observations consist of qualitative observations on TikTok including videos, comments, and user profiles. These observations were collected in the time period between October 2022 and March 2023. Observations were chosen as supporting primary data collection methods to complement the findings and the analysis, as well as enabling to choice of suitable brands for the interview and exploring possible themes and topics for both consumer and brand interviews. The observations were done by following the platform regularly, as participant observations as becoming a part of the *studied culture*, and making notes of the observed material: through content, comments and user profiles (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). These we recorded through notes, screen captures and saved videos.

Content

Observations of the content on TikTok enabled an understanding of the style of content on TikTok and what is seen from a platform user's perspective. Since TikTok is a video-based platform, the content observations enabled the researchers to further understand the context of the platform and what is native content on the platform. A few examples of TikTok videos are presented as screen captures in the findings, and two more are in Appendix 3.

Comments

TikTok comments were observed for indications and implications for a specific language, tone of voice and culture. Comments enabled us to further understand the nature of interactions with brands on the linguistic context of the platform, along with public interaction between individual platform users, and individuals and brands. Examples of comments on individual-brand interactions are presented as screen captures in Appendix 2.

User profiles

User profiles were observed especially for different brand accounts with different success levels, in order to understand what is expected from a brand on TikTok. The brand profile observations enabled finding great brand examples, some of which were chosen as interview subjects for data collection. The observations also identified that the number of followers is not a key indicator of a successful brand on TikTok. Rather, the number of likes and interactions on the brand content was a far better indicator.

3.3.2 Interviews with Consumers

The primary data with consumers consists of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with TikTok users between the ages of 20–25. Semi-structured in-depth interview structure was chosen to allow thoughts and ideas to come up freely among the selected sample while ensuring all the relevant themes are discussed (Saunders et al, 2016). The structure of a semi-structured interview allows for additional questions to be asked when these arise, making the interview process more flowing and enabling deep insights into the area studied (ibid). 1-on-1 interviews were chosen over group interviews since the topic was more private and personal than anticipated, and personal contact was crucial to establish (Saunders et al, 2016). Personal interviews, however, allowed the individual to open up about their thoughts, opinions and experiences through open-ended questions without being influenced or interrupted by other participants (ibid).

3.3.2.1 Sampling

To recruit the sample, purposive self-selection sampling was applied to ensure that the sample would have enough knowledge of the topic being studied. Self-selection sampling is a part of volunteer sampling, which implies that the participants freely inform their interest in participating to the researcher (Saunders et al., 2021). Usually, volunteer sampling is non-purposive, however, due to the criteria of the participants stated below, the sampling process is defined as purposive. Purposive sampling enables the researcher to purposely choose information-rich cases to match the research objectives (Patton, 2002). Purposive self-selection sampling, therefore, enables the researchers to recruit people who have informed their interest in participating and fit the criteria.

The participants were recruited through the researchers' social media networks on Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn. TikTok was not used as a platform to recruit participants as neither of the researchers has a wide network. The requirements of the consumers were that they have to be between 18 and 25 years old, i.e. be part of Generation Z and the largest user group on TikTok. For ethical reasons, the participants had to be over 18 years of age. Furthermore, a criterion for the participants was that they had to be users of TikTok and be familiar with the social media platform. Posting content on TikTok was not a requirement but was seen as a benefit. To ensure that the participants would not feel uncomfortable opening up to the researchers, participants with close ties to the researchers were not selected.

The sample size depends on the research questions and objectives of the research (Patton 2015). For this study, the sample collection process ended up with 12 interviews. Although the sample might seem small, sample sizes in qualitative interpretive research are often small, as the focus is not on making generalisations about a population but rather getting knowledgeable insights into the phenomenon being studied (Saunders et al., 2021). The saturation method was used to determine the final sample size. All interviews were transcribed and initially coded after the interview, which enabled the researchers to determine when no new themes were identified anymore. The researchers' own memos also helped in ensuring saturation. A table of the consumer participants is presented in *Table 4*.

The median age for the interview participant was 23 and the average age was 22,9 years. A rough average of hours spent on TikTok on a daily basis is about 2,13h, however, some participants were not able to estimate their daily TikTok use and estimated their daily hours spent on social media platforms in general. Furthermore, five (5) of the interviewees were Finnish by nationality, two (2) Danish, two (2) Norwegian, two (2) Dutch and one (1) French. Thus, all the participants were (Northern) European. A commonality for all the participants was being currently participating in higher education (university) in Copenhagen or Helsinki, or having recently graduated.

Interview participants - Consumers								
Nr.	Interviewer	Interview date	Age	Gender	Nationality	Occupation	TikTok h/day	Interview language
1	LT	23/11/2022	23	F	Dutch	Employed	N/A	English
2	SÅ	23/11/2022	23	M	Danish	Student	0.5-1h	English
3	LT	24/11/2022	23	F	Dutch	Student	0.5h+	English
4	SÅ	24/11/2022	23	F	Danish	Student	5-10h	English
5	SÅ	25/11/2022	25	F	Norwegian	Student	~1h	English
6	LT	9/12/2022	22	F	French	Student	3-4h (SoMe)	English
7	SÅ	10/12/2022	20	F	Finnish	Student	1h	Swedish
8	LT	10/12/2022	20	F	Finnish	Student	N/A	Finnish
9	SÅ	11/12/2022	23	F	Finnish	Student	~0.5-1h	Swedish
10	SÅ	13/12/2022	24	F	Finnish	Student	~2h (SoMe)	Swedish
11	LT	15/12/2022	25	F	Norwegian	Employed	~1-3h	English
12	LT	17/12/2022	24	F	Finnish	Student	~1-3h	Finnish

Table 4. Consumer participants.

3.3.2.2 Interview process

When conducting the interviews, the locations were chosen based on what the participant preferred and what was possible to do. King and Horrocks's (2010) criteria of comfort, quietness and privacy were taken into consideration when choosing a location. For the participants living in Copenhagen, the interviews were conducted physically in their homes, as this is where the participant can feel most relaxed and comfortable. As some participants did not live in Copenhagen, these interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, with the participant at their home and the researcher at theirs. To get the most out of the interviews, the interviews were held in the participant's first language whenever possible, as participants can express themselves the best in their language (Bryman, 2012). This ended up with seven (7) interviews being done in English, three (3) in Swedish, and two (2) in Finnish.

As being semi-structured, the interviews consisted of open-ended questions, which were divided into two main themes: TikTok and authenticity. The interviews started with a discussion on the interviewees' social media habits, continuing to the topic of TikTok. The conversation on social media use was used as a discussion opener, intended to prepare the interviewee for the topic, as a "warm-up". The open-ended questions about TikTok discussed the participants' ways of using the app, the type of content consumed and accounts followed, and the user's general likes and dislike about TikTok. Furthermore, each participant was asked in advance to think of an example of a brand or company they had seen on TikTok, which had made an impression on them, in good or bad. The reason for giving the interviewees time to prepare for this in advance was to give them enough time to reflect on their experiences beforehand, so long breaks during the interview and leading questions could be avoided. The participant was able to freely express on their experience, and reflect on it through reflective, guiding questions on perspectives on brand authenticity.

Second part of the interviews centred around the theme of authenticity. As an introduction to the topic, the participant was asked about what *authenticity* or *being authentic* mean for them. This continued with a conversation about authenticity and how they experience it in regards to brands, and furthermore how they experience authenticity on social media, and on TikTok both in relation to brands and not. The interview guide, including the themes, sub-themes and guiding, open-ended questions are presented in Appendix 1.

3.3.3 Interviews with Brands

In order to understand the brands' perspective to brand authenticity, and understanding their experiences on the platform, brand interviews were necessary. Through observations on the platform, three (3) brands active on TikTok were chosen as cases. First, the reasoning for the sampling method is presented and brands in the sample are introduced. Furthermore, the brand interview process is explained. It should be noted that the brands were not used as case brands for the consumers, and therefore there is no information on whether these are perceived as authentic or not. The reason for this was that, due to time constraints, the interviews with consumers and brands happened simultaneously, hence some of the consumer interviews had already been conducted before having ensured all of the brand interviews. These brands are however very successful on TikTok and their experiences from the platform are highly insightful and relevant for understanding what implications a successful TikTok presence has enabled for them both externally in terms of

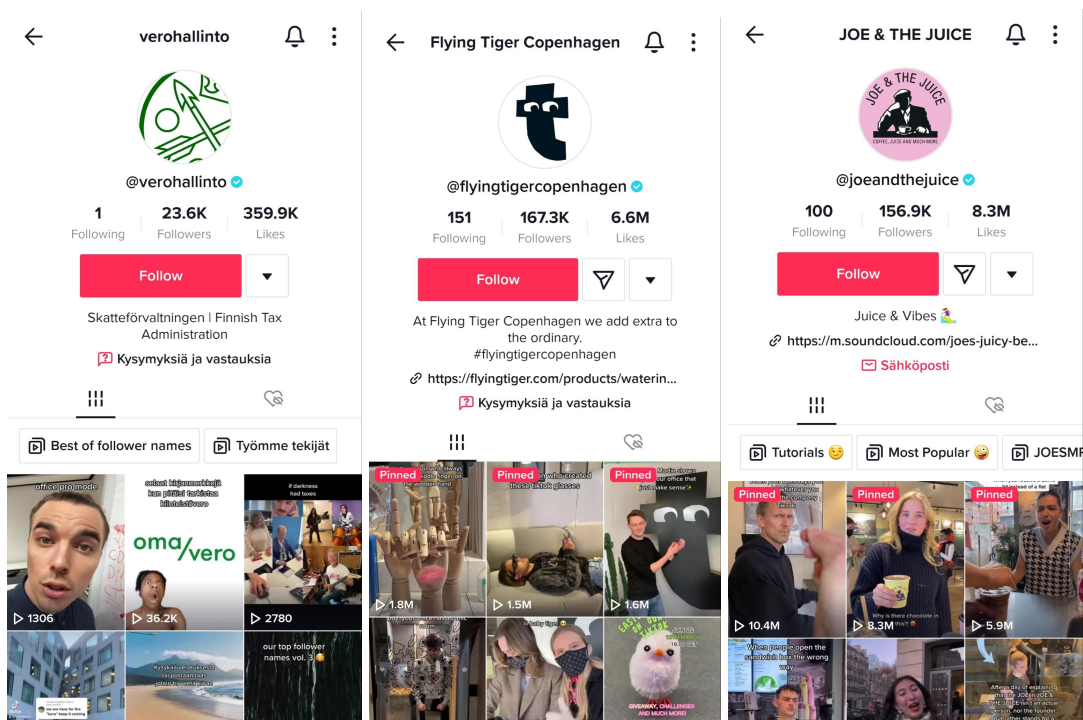
consumer engagement and customer relationships, but also internally within the company. The data collected from these brand examples is furthermore crucial to comprehend the brands' internal experience as a typical example of an outstanding TikTok performance. This further allows drawing implications for other brands to operate successfully on the platform.

3.3.3.1 Sampling

Purposive sampling was used in order to collect the brand data, which would provide insight into the explored phenomenon. More specifically, critical case sampling is chosen, since the focus is understanding each brand's experience on TikTok, allowing to make logical generalisations about what is happening, while statistical generalisations are not the objective (Saunders et al., 2016). Critical case sampling is used to observe the phenomenon, in this case, the brands on TikTok, and to create an interpretation of that reality (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This purposive sampling method allows for choosing the most relevant cases (Patton 1990 in Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Selection criteria was determined through TikTok content and user profile observations. Three brands, which had grown a large following and were popular on TikTok, were selected. Additionally, the engagement on the brand's content and interactions on comments, and number of likes and saves of the content were examined in order to determine popularity and preference among TikTok users, instead of only looking at the follower count. Sample size for the brand interviews was determined at three (3). Regarding reachable and successful brands on TikTok, the selection is already limited. However, because the main focus of the research is on consumer perceptions and the brand perspective is presumably supplementary, three interviews provide sufficient variability for operating sectors (public vs private) and business areas for the data. Although the minimum non-probability sample is generally regarded as five (5), data saturation was not regarded as critical to investigate the brand perspective topic of the explorative research design (Saunders et al, 2016).

Below, a description of each selected brand is presented and an explanation of why the brand was chosen. To be noted, Ryanair and Duolingo were considered as part of the purposive critical case sample because of their pioneering communication style and exceptional performance, however, neither one of the brands responded to the interview inquiry, and therefore they were not selected to be a part of the sample.



TikTok-pages of Verohallinto (2023a), Flying Tiger Copenhagen (2023a) and JOE & THE JUICE (2023a).

Verohallinto

Verohallinto (short: VH), *the Finnish Tax Administration*, is a governmental organisation operating in Finland. The organisation currently has around 5,200 employees (Verohallinto, 2022a). According to a report from 2021, the social media channels of Verohallinto grew by 45,000 in that year (Verohallinto, 2022b). These numbers do not take into account TikTok, however. Their TikTok account, as of March 2023, has reached 23,000 followers and gained over 360,000 likes on their videos. The brand declares in its strategy to its values to be “building trust, working together and embracing new ways of working” (Verohallinto, 2022c). They inform that one of their strategic goals is to “*create a positive customer experience in all tax-related matters*” (ibid). Verohallinto was a unique choice, operating in the Finnish public sector, as a taxation agency, and having extraordinary and fun content on the platform, which was clear through the comment section as well. The language of the content is Finnish, which limits the relevant target audience to only Finnish-speaking TikTok, hence the number of followers is significantly lower in comparison to Flying Tiger Copenhagen and JOE & THE JUICE.

Nanna Jussila and Riikka Kohtamäki, both communications specialists at Verohallinto, were interviewed as representatives of the organisation. Jussila and Kohtamäki do not appear on the brand content on TikTok themselves, however, they are a part of the communications team, which is responsible for planning their social media content. According to Jussila and Kohtamäki, joining TikTok was a natural step for Verohallinto in the continuation of their social media strategy. Throughout the years, the organisation has tried different social media channels, and TikTok was no different. The platform is still considered as an experiment from their perspective.

Flying Tiger Copenhagen

Flying Tiger Copenhagen (short: FTC) is a Danish retail store, the history of which dates back to 1988 (Flying Tiger Copenhagen, 2023a). Their very first store location, called Tiger, opened in Copenhagen Denmark in 1995. Today, they have physical store locations on a global scale, along with their online store (ibid). The brand states its values to be “*customer, ‘flip the world in its head’, fearless, heart, open doors and cake*” (Flying Tiger Copenhagen, 2023b). In terms of values, this means having a *customer-first*-minded, doing things outside the ordinary, fighting indifference fearlessly and overall having fun (ibid).

Flying Tiger Copenhagen was selected as their content on TikTok organic and seemingly suitable to the platform through the utilisation of trends and trending sounds. Additionally, the brand’s TikTok account was by far the largest among the sample brands, having reached over 6.6 million likes on their global TikTok account with over 100,000 followers at the time of the interviews (November 2022). In early March 2023, the follower count had already passed 171,000 followers. To specify, the brand also has several local TikTok accounts, which have unique content in different languages catered to specific operational markets. The main global account, however, is significantly more popular and successful. The brand had a lot of user-generated content (UGC) on the platform about new products, which had positive reactions.

Sara Gammelgaard (Global lead for social media), Jagoda Chodor (Social media specialist, TikTok creative lead) and Daniel Oum-Koechlin (Digital and Customer Journey Student Assistant, TikTok creative) were interviewed as the brand representatives for the data collection. Chodor is the creative force behind the brand’s TikTok account and alongside Oum-Koechlin, they are also the most recognised faces on the account. The brand’s TikTok account had been started before Chodor

joined the company, however, according to her the account was not doing well back then. She expressed that she was eager to take over the account, however, she was faced with internal company hesitation. Coincidentally during a maternity leave, Chodor could take the account under control and turn the FTC TikTok content strategy around. The TikTok content is filmed mostly at the company's head office in Copenhagen and features many FTC employees; the young but also senior managers.

JOE & THE JUICE

JOE & THE JUICE (short: JJ) is a Danish café and juice bar chain and franchise, started back in 2002 (JOE & THE JUICE, 2023a). Since its start, the chain has expanded to a global scale and in addition to Europe is also currently present in the United States, South Korea, United Arab Emirates and Australia. According to the company founder Kasper Basse, the brand strives “*to develop a culture that delivers an unseen level of meaningfulness in the intersection between our people and our workplace*” (JOE & THE JUICE, 2023b). Furthermore, as a company JOE & THE JUICE aims to improve at “igniting and inspiring everyone across the planet” (ibid). On TikTok, the brand has very interesting and brand-focused content, that has gotten many positive reactions among its viewers. Their global TikTok account has reached over 157,000 followers and gained over 8.3 million likes on their videos, as of March 2023.

Raania Hammoudan, a brand and communications specialist, was interviewed as a brand representative for JOE & THE JUICE in the data collection process. According to Hammoudan, the brand's TikTok journey was started by her own initiative on her personal TikTok account, while she was working as a *juicer* in Paris. The term *juicer* is what the brand refers to their café and juice bar employees. After the first video went viral, Hammoudan reached out to a brand manager from the head office and shared the success of the video. Afterwards, she was offered a position as a social media specialist and started the official JOE & THE JUICE TikTok account. Hammoudan still is the driving force behind the brand's TikTok and is practically the sole creator and innovator behind the content. According to her, the content is conveniently filmed downstairs to their head office in London, where they have one of their café and juice bar locations. The people captured in the TikTok videos are their employees or *juicers*, and it has not been difficult to convince them to participate, since many of them are students in creative fields themselves, according to

Hammoudan. JOE & THE JUICE had interesting, very brand-focused content, which had positive reactions among the viewers, which was why they were selected as the third brand in the sample.

Interview participants - Brands					
Brand	Short	Field	Likes on TT*	Interview date & place	Company representatives
Verohallinto (Finnish Tax Administration)	VH	Tax administration, public sector	360.9K	15.11.2022, Microsoft Teams	Nanna Jussila (<i>communications specialist</i>) Riikka Kohtamäki (<i>communications specialist</i>)
Flying Tiger Copenhagen	FTC	Retail, private sector	6.6M	28.11.2022, Head office of FTC; Copenhagen, Denmark.	Sara Gammelgaard (<i>Global lead for Social media</i>), Jagoda Chodor (<i>Social media specialist, TikTok creative lead</i>) Daniel Oum-Koechlin (<i>Digital and Customer Journey Student Assistant and TikTok Creative</i>)
JOE & THE JUICE	JJ	Hospitality, private sector	8.3M	12.12.2022, Microsoft Teams	Raania Hammoudan (<i>Brand & communications specialist</i>)

Table 5. Brand participants (*in March 2023).

3.3.3.2 Interview process

Two of the interviews were conducted online due to one of the brands being located in Finland and one in the United Kingdom. One interview was conducted in person, at the brand's office in Copenhagen. The interviews followed the same structure for interview guides as those with the consumers but were focused more on why the brands chose to operate on TikTok and how they approach brand authenticity on the platform. The goal was to gain insight into the perspectives of the brands and understand how they view TikTok as a tool for building their brand and reaching their target audience. Through these interviews, the study aimed to explore how the brands approach authenticity on TikTok and to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and strategies.

3.4 Data analysis

There should be a link between the research philosophy and the choice of methods to collect and analyse data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The interactive nature of qualitative data requires the data analysis to be an interactive process where analysing and interpreting the data begins already in the data collection stages (Saunders et al., 2021). To help with the ongoing analysis, analytic memos

were used. Analytic memos can be described as “sites of conversation with ourselves about our data” (Clarke, 2005, p. 202 in Saldaña 2015). They act as a “diary” about all thoughts and ideas that the researchers get during the process. Both of the researchers used their own notebooks during the whole research process where all thoughts, ideas and insights were written down immediately when they came to mind. Memos were also written down on the researchers’ phones whenever the notebook was not nearby. This memo writing supported both data collection in reaching saturation (discussed in section 3.3.2.1), and the coding process by supporting the generation of codes and categories (discussed below).

Aligned with the interpretivism philosophy, the abductive approach and the exploratory nature of this thesis, grounded theory is a suitable data analysis method. Grounded theory is most often used within indicative research, but can also be used in abductive research focused on testing and comparing new data and how this relates to previous theories. Grounded theory was developed as a process for analysing the interpretations and explanations of the meanings that social actors construct within interpretivism philosophy (Collis & Hussey, 2014). The analysis is done by “discovering” or generating new theories grounded in collected data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), this provides an emergent and systematic approach to gathering and analysing qualitative data through coding (Saunders et al., 2021). The analytic memos written during data collection supported the coding process by acting as a memory for ideas and interpretations arising in real time during the interviews.

3.4.1 Transcribing

Interviews of both brands and consumers were audio-recorded via Microsoft Teams during the interview and afterwards gone through by re-listening to the recording to make sure the transcriptions became correct and readable. Transcriptions were written strictly according to the words used by the interviewees, including terms and phrases used in spoken language. Additional clarifications to words and phrases were included if necessary and relevant to the context. Self-memos were also added to the margin of the transcripts, enabling the researchers to later in the coding and analysis process develop more accurate codes and categories (Saunders et al., 2016). Furthermore, brief transcript summaries were made after each interview to summarise the key points of what had been said in a brief text (ibid). Five out of 15 interviews were completed in a language other than English; The brand interview with Verohallinto was done in Finnish, along with

two (2) consumer interviews in Finnish as well, and two (2) consumer interviews completed in Swedish. All the rest of the interviews were conducted in English. The transcripts were transcribed in the original language of the interview, and the Finnish and Swedish transcriptions were translated into English after in order to have comparable findings from the coding process. Translations were completed to reflect the phrases and meanings from the original language as closely as possible. All transcripts in their original language and form can be found in Appendix 4 (consumers) and 5 (brands).

3.4.2 Coding

Coding of qualitative data refers to the breakdown of data into shorter sections or pieces of data called 'codes' (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Coding is an interactive process where the researcher moves back and forth between what has been said and the interpretations of that. The grounded theory coding method implies that codes are not based on any previous framework, as the findings should be 'grounded in the data' (Saunders et al., 2016). Coding can be done manually or electronically with the use of CAQDAS coding programmes (Saldaña, 2015). During the re-listening of the audio recordings and ensuring that the transcripts became correct, the initial coding stage, In Vivo coding, was done manually. When all of the transcripts were finalised and initially coded, these were uploaded to the CAQDAS coding software NVivo. NVivo was used to easier keep track of the codes due to a large amount of data. Altogether, 607 codes were derived from the 15 transcripts. The initial round of coding was done according to the In Vivo method. In Vivo is an initial coding method frequently used when analysing data following the grounded theory method as it focuses on identifying and labelling data without using preconceived categories (Saldaña, 2015). *In Vivo* means 'in that which is alive', hence this coding method is focused on capturing what has been said to feature the participants' voices to, in the best way possible, understand the context and tone in which it is being said (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). When coding according to the In Vivo method, it is therefore important to use bolding, underlining and highlighting for emphasising certain words and phrases (Saldaña, 2015).

The second phase of coding includes examining and deciding on which of the initial codes to use for developing an analytic and explanatory focus on the data (Saunders et al., 2016). Focused coding method (Charmaz, 2006) was applied to the second stage of coding, as this method focuses on re-coding initial data codes into a smaller number of more focused codes. Focused coding was

applied as this is more flexible and less prescriptive than other grounded theory methods such as axial coding and selective coding (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Additionally, focused coding is adopted from a constructivist ontology (Charmaz, 2006), which makes it applicable to this thesis as well. By using the focused coding method, the researcher can also determine which codes in the research are the dominant ones and which ones are less important, as some codes mentioned frequently in the initial coding process might prove to not be of great analytical potential (Saunders et al., 2016). The process of focused coding is not simple and linear, it requires constant comparison and interpretation of the codes, sometimes even re-coding of the data (Charmaz, 2006; Saunders et al., 2016). To enhance the credibility of the codes, the coding was done together by both researchers discussing and analysing each set of data before it was coded. An example of how coding was done can be found in Table 6.

Quote	In vivo code	Focused code	Theme*	Part of interview*
<i>“any brand that has a purpose, like I know that most brands have their main purpose is to sell, but I feel like if you're just like very true to your values and like show them to your community and like you build on it and you stick to it and you're being consistent with it and genuine, and actually like not only saying, but also doing stuff.”</i>	“Be true to your values and community”	Stay true to your values and purpose	Brand authenticity	Authenticity-consumers
<i>“being clear about your purposes”</i>	“Be clear about your purpose”			
<i>“not changing your values to get more interest”.</i>	“Don’t change values to get interest”			
<i>“if you have some sort of passion and purpose behind the brand, I think then you could really see the authenticity. But I think if you don't have that core purpose of a brand, I feel like the authenticity is-- It's a bit of an illusion.”</i>	“Have a passion and purpose”			
<i>“like for example, this museum was just like, so generally like invested about all the paintings and they wanted to share how the paintings were”</i>	“Being invested”	Invested & Caring		
<i>“that's really creative and authentic to me because they have to go that [extra mile], they really think about what they wanna do.”</i>	“Going an extra mile”			
<i>“brands are doing the little extra effort in trying to connect with me as well.”</i>	“Extra effort in trying to connect”			
<i>“Patagonia, for example. Yes, they are clothing brand, but their main message is about reducing the footprint and helping the world.”</i>	“Helping the world”			
<i>“I didn't really like it when companies say, oh, this lip gloss is so good and don't even like show what it looks like. I wanna see it. I wanna see someone try it and then... You can of course convince me, but. Yeah, I want to see that it's good that it works, not just say it.”</i>	“Don’t like when companies are trying to sell”	Not selling		
<i>“Or like this to oversell, like to be like the company is much better than everyone else and has much better products or something. More like saying ‘if you like this, you can buy our product’, and not ‘this is the best you can get’. It feels like too much.”</i>	“Overselling feels like too much”			

Table 6. Example of how the coding of data was done (*these refer to the themes that were explored in the interviews, enabling the researchers to find the codes more easily).

3.5 Quality of research

Within qualitative research, reliability and validity are the most common evaluation methods for determining the quality of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). To assess the quality of the research design and potential data quality issues, in the following section, the aspects of reliability and validity of the research are discussed.

3.5.1 Reliability

Reliability is concerned with the question of whether the results of a study can be repeated. If another researcher would conduct the same study and conclude with the same results this would mean that the “original” is reliable (Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2022). Reliability can be divided into external reliability and internal reliability. External reliability considers the degree to which a study can be replicated by evaluating the consistency of chosen data collection techniques (Saunders et al., 2016). Within qualitative research, and especially in qualitative research with interpretive philosophy deriving in social constructionism, the studies can often be difficult to fully replicate, as the realities of meanings are perceived to be based on subjective interpretations of the world. Furthermore, interpretive research does not focus on the generalisability of results and therefore pursues the replication of qualitative research instead of quantitative (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As consumers’ views and perceptions of the world are ever-changing, and the social media platforms are changing and developing on a regular basis, both consumer and brand perceptions of TikTok can change according to newly presented information or changed circumstances, which naturally affects external reliability. However, the research aims to learn about the new concept and develop insight into the topic through a grounded theory method. Therefore, the findings reflect the subjective views of the consumers, which are consequently analysed in consideration of existing literature.

In contrast, internal reliability considers the inter-observer consistency, i.e., the extent to which there has been more than one observer in the research who agrees about what is found (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As there have been two researchers studying the phenomenon in this research, internal reliability is considered to be of a higher level as agreements need to occur to reach acceptance for the conclusions of the study (ibid). After each interview, the findings were discussed between the two researchers to improve the data collection process further and evaluate the quality of the

collected data, by, e.g., adjusting the wording of the interview questions and utilising techniques to further improve rapport with the interview participants. The regular check-ins enabled making sure the interview techniques would produce as consistent findings as possible, to the relevant extent, by lowering participant and researcher error (Saunders et al., 2016).

3.5.2 Validity

Validity in qualitative research refers to how accurately the research captures and represents the phenomenon or concept being studied (Bryman & Bell, 20215). This refers to how accurate, meaningful, and applicable the study findings are and whether they can be applied to other contexts or populations (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Research validity is discussed in terms of internal and external validity.

A critical component of research quality is internal validity, which refers to how accurately the study results reflect the relationships between the variables examined (Saunders et al., 2016). Therefore, it determines whether the study design, methods, and analysis were robust enough to establish a causal relationship between the independent and dependent variables (ibid). Researcher bias regarding the internal validity of the research can be lowered, for example, through triangulation (Robson, 2002), which was applied in the research process. Triangulation was utilised to improve validity, mixed data collection methods were used (Saunders et al., 2016): interviews, for both brands and consumers, and observations. Furthermore, the findings were related back to the existing concepts and how they External validity in contrast assesses the study's ability to apply the findings to real-world situations and individuals, beyond the study participants in the research context through transferability (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Ensuring high external validity is crucial in research as it supports the applicability and generalisability of the findings of the research, which can impact the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of the study (Saunders et al., 2016).

4 FINDINGS

In the following chapter the findings of the data collection are presented, including both brand and consumer interviews, and observations from TikTok. The findings are divided into three themes, which were identified during the coding process. In the table below, the main themes, concepts and main findings emerging from the data are presented as an overview.

Findings overview		
Themes	Concepts	Main Findings
4.1 TikTok culture	How TikTok is described, including the culture and language of the platform	<i>TikTok is a fast-paced, addictive, fun and open platform</i>
4.2 Consumer Affordances of TikTok	Why do consumers use TT and what does it offer them	<i>Being yourself, Making memories, Community feeling, Joyful feelings, Escaping daily life, Getting information, Inspiration & learning</i>
4.3 Brand Affordances of TikTok	Why do brands use TT and what does it offer them	<i>Brand awareness, Community engagement, UGC content, Employer branding, Internal branding</i>
4.4 Authenticity	Consumer & brand perceptions of authenticity	<i>Being true and genuine</i>
	Consumer perceptions on brand authenticity	<i>Originality, Having clear passion and purpose, Genuine and caring (other than monetary purpose, small brands)</i>
	Consumer perceptions of authenticity on TikTok	<i>Community, Content style (relatable, unfiltered & fun)</i>
	Brand Authenticity on TikTok	<i>Transparency, being yourself, not selling, connecting with consumers, relatable, fun</i>
	Other views on Authenticity	<i>Contradicting views on BA and authenticity in general on social media platforms</i>

Table 7. Overview of the findings.

4.1 TikTok

The first theme of findings from the brand and consumer interview data explores essential aspects of TikTok as a platform, its defining attributes, and what it means for both groups to exist on the platform. Inherently, the culture of the platform and what the platform affords its users.

Overall, TikTok is described as an open, fast-paced, addictive, fun and ironic trend-based platform. The trends are generally based on generation Z humour and are also quickly changing. Anyone can join the platform and everyone has an equal opportunity of going viral there. From the consumers' point of view, TikTok is more free in its content in comparison to Instagram, by showing real everyday life, whereas Instagram is mainly seen as used for showing polished content and "highlights" of life. This is also supported by the brands, saying they have much more polished content on Instagram than on TikTok. The content on TikTok is generally also perceived to be more unfiltered and transparent and, therefore, more reliable.

In the interviewed sample, some examples of how the "openness" of TikTok was described are that the content is diverse and users see content from people all over the world, as well as being open for anyone to join.

C7: *"on TikTok, I get content from people all over the world, while Instagram is a little more narrowed."*

C6: *"it's not like one platform for one thing. It's like super diverse ... diversity of the content is like a main thing for me. I can always like find something and always be different and be hooked on to something else."*

JJ: *"I think TikTok is a very uniform platform and everyone has an equal opportunity to go viral." [...] "No one should be excluded. No one's, you know, too senior to be on a TikTok or too, you know, big or important [...] Everyone can have fun and everyone can contribute."*

Furthermore, TikTok is very fast-paced both content-wise but also trend-wise. For the consumers, the fast pace of the platform is well welcomed, as they state that they do not "have time" to watch longer videos. Several of the participants also mention that they have short attention spans.

C1: *"if I don't feel within the first 3 seconds that it's nice, I'll just go to the next."*

C6: *“I wish that they would not like push it too much because sometimes I just really wanna watch like 30-second video only.”*

C10: *“everything goes like that fast that you don’t have to wait or maybe unlike YouTube where you have to wait or something like that”*

Brands also mention that the fast-paced content on the platform performs well, but also that the trends are changing quickly.

JJ: *“Super like speedy would do insanely well, so I was like ‘hmm let me try and tend more towards what’s actually going on... especially cause you know trends come in and out so fast, so you gotta catch it in the moment. Hence why like if I if I say I’m gonna do this trend next week. By the time I will do next week it will be irrelevant.”*

The fast-paced nature of the platform also led to the platform being described as “addictive”, as the content on the FYP never ends, below are some examples of how consumers describe the addictiveness.

C8: [when describing the algorithm generated FYP] *“really good because then it seems to adapt faster. It’s good at the same time that when that page is so good for you, then it’s really addictive”*

C12: *“It’s so addictive that I don’t even notice that I’m someone for 3 hours. I browse something on TikTok, etc. when I could be doing something really useful in my life”*

C9: *“it’s almost a reflex or something like that, you sit on the couch and kind of watch a series that suddenly you zone out and then you open up TikTok instead of watching series”*

4.1.1 Culture & Language

When describing the culture of TikTok, fun, relaxed, light-hearted and *not too serious* were the most common characteristics. The language and tone of voice are also generally more fun, witty and ironic, and not too serious. Some examples include:

C9: *“TikTok should be this bit light-hearted. Funny. And sometimes you can see like Ryanair doing a funny TikTok like this which isn’t really advertising at all but the company has done something entertaining, often at the expense of themselves like this. “*

C12: *“my feed is kind of light-hearted and kind of fun and exactly the kind that isn’t taken too seriously”*

C1: “quirky, how they respond is so different. It's way less correct and I don't feel like there is like a social media team that has written the comments and really like ‘OK, now we can post it’. It's just-- it feels way more relaxed. [...] TikTok people are a bit more straight to the point and a bit more funny and silly.

C2: “There are certain words that only the TikTok community uses. [...] it's really hard to explain to someone who's not on TikTok. But my friends who are there, we can laugh about it and we use the same vocabulary that we see in TikTok comments.”

C4: “TikTok funny, more catered to Gen Z humour”

C3: “[...]the comments are always very funny[...]

C7: “humour in all its forms”

Brands also recognised the fun and ‘loose’ language and culture on TikTok.

JJ: “[TikTok is] a lot more looser and it's a lot more fun and casual. It's a lot more casual.”

VH: “[...] on Facebook the person is actually angry about things, but then on TikTok, there's kind of joking around, like poking fun.”

However, they also noticed that loose and open language can go two ways, as users may say whatever comes into their minds. VH also mentioned that in addition to the language and tone-of-voice being more ironic and about poking fun, the negativity on TikTok is also perceived as different to the negativity on other platforms, for example, Facebook, where people can be really angry in the comments. On TikTok, the tone of negativity is more sarcastic or *deadpan*. More examples of TikTok language from brand-consumer interactions in the comment sections are presented in Appendix 2.



Examples of the tone of voice in brand-consumer interactions on TikTok (Verohallinto on TikTok, 2023b; Flying Tiger Copenhagen on TikTok, 2023b; JOE & THE JUICE on TikTok, 2023b).

Because of this TikTok-specific tone of voice, Verohallinto mentioned that they do not have similarly strict rules for communication, which they use for other social media platforms. Although

the brand has general guidelines for communicating with consumers, they have found the suitable way of interaction on TT to be “more sharp”, implying a more *smart* and *quick-witted* tone of voice.

VH: “[*The chosen way of communication*] *It's conscious, let's put it that way. We haven't defined the tone of voice very precisely in any manual or brand manual, but a tone of voice that appreciates the customer; an empathetic presence is kind of like a guideline. Interaction on TikTok we choose a little... Maybe sharper.*”

Having a more open platform had resulted in experiencing “quite a lot of trolls”, as Verohallinto pointed out, and that being something different from other social media platforms they have tried throughout the years. Online *troll* is “a person who intentionally antagonises others online by posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

4.2 Consumer Affordances of TikTok

For consumer affordances of TikTok, the findings present eight distinct types, which were further divided into four categories. The summary of the identified consumer affordances on the platform is illustrated in the figure below (Figure 1).

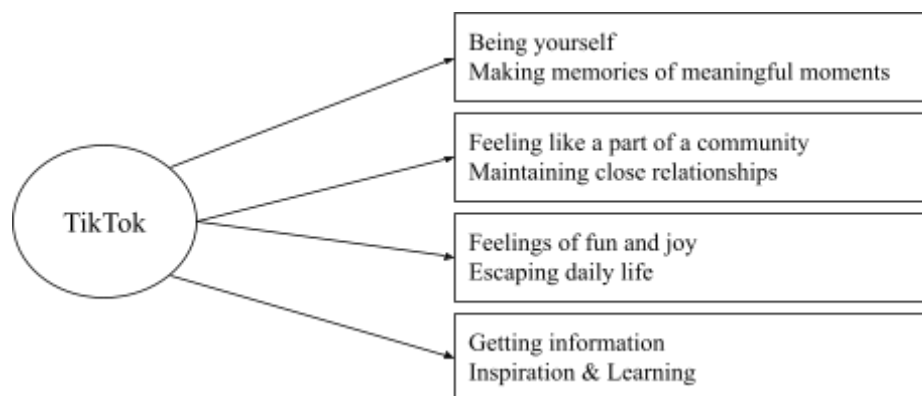


Figure 1. Summary of consumer affordances on TikTok.

4.2.1 Being yourself

As TikTok is perceived as an open and free platform, many consumers reported that they feel like they also can be their own selves on the platform. Some even mentioned that they did not want anyone that they know to see their TikTok profile, as these were so personal and could be perceived as awkward.

C12: *“content I have on TikTok is definitely more for people who I don't know and then maybe like for my friends.”*

4.2.2 Making memories of meaningful moments

The consumers, who have posted something on TikTok, mention that the videos they have posted are mostly as a memory for themselves to remember. Even though these videos do not get many views, the creators of the content still find it nice to have them as memories for themselves. For example, consumer 5 states that;

C5: *“I find it a really nice platform to make videos and make like memories, in a more-- You could see much more in a video than you can see through the picture. And it creates a much more feelings of, like, I remember how it was”*

And consumers 9 and 12 say that;

C9: *“if i go on a trip or something I usually make a little summary of it”*

C12: *“I have tried to make TikToks with myself, but they haven't really gone anywhere, but there's always someone nice idea, then I think it's nice to make them as memories, if for no other reason”*

4.2.3 Feeling like a part of a community

Almost all consumers mention that TikTok enables a community feeling. This is also partly due to the specific “inside” jokes, language and trends coming from the platform.

C1: *“TikTok has a more of a community feeling with some people you follow, if you really read the comments as well”*

C12: *“I don't comment and I don't necessarily send it to people that I know either; but in a strange way, I feel like a part of the community”*

Consumer 9 points out that while TikTok trends are fun and move quickly, the jokes usually do not translate to people who are not part of the community themselves, hence not finding them equally as entertaining.

C9: *“[...] if you mention [past trends] to someone who has no idea about it, it's not nearly as funny, whereas sometimes it can be some audio recording or, I don't know, some phrase you can say that just like anyone else gets and laughs and someone other who never heard it like this 'what?' ”*

The consumers also feel like a part of the community when they can identify others that also think and feel the same as them

C2: *“It’s more community based on TikTok because if I go to a comment section on one of the World Cup videos I can easily see that these are all people who understand the same jokes as me.” [...] “I feel I’m friends with all the TikTok comments there”*

C10: *“[...] affinity that if someone else feels like that or knows you have like the same kind of humour or something like that, then it’s fun to see that someone else also thinks like that” [...] “I sometimes do that if it’s a funny video or clip, so then I think it’s interesting to go in and see what other people think and how they’ve reacted.”*

C9: *“I imagine that sometimes a video can go viral just because many people think it’s stupid and then there’s a community in the comment section that thinks it’s stupid as well.”*

Furthermore, the algorithm of the platform also affords users to tap into different “parts” of TikTok, and the user can suddenly find themselves in a separate “hyper-community” relating to for example plants;

C11: *“I’m really impressed by the algorithm because as everyone has talked about before I joined the platform, it is amazing that you can you can keep scrolling for hours and then you can end up in this loop of ‘Ohh, now I’m on this part of TikTok where I look at plants and how to take care of my Monstera’”*

4.2.4 Maintaining close relationships

Many consumers stated that they have closer relationships on Instagram than TikTok and that the majority of people around them on TikTok are unknown users. The friend circle on TikTok is often much smaller on TikTok than on Instagram, and oftentimes only close friends are followed on TikTok, as compared to Instagram where many users follow more people.

C1: *“Feel like on Instagram you really follow a lot of friends but on TikTok, I don’t.”*

C10: *“On Instagram, I mostly follow my friends and on TikTok I don’t usually, I actually don’t have very many friends and so on TikTok who would post actively so I don’t usually follow that much friends on TikTok, but then usually I kind of send the video later on TikTok.”*

From the participants interviewed, it seems like maintaining friendships was an important affordance of the platform. Many report sending or sharing funny videos with friends on the platform, or staying in contact with friends from back home.

C11: *“the majority of people I know are on the platform, but very few of them post stuff themselves. So like when I interact with them, it's more because we're sharing stuff that we've seen and not posted anything ourselves.”*

C12: *“I feel that maybe I share quite a lot of TikTok with my closest friends Via TikTok. I think it's quite as convenient or more convenient than sharing the link and sending it on WhatsApp or Snapchat or something.”*

C8: *“Well, I have maybe five people to whom I share as often or not as much. I think there's a lot of messaging there, or it's just like that... It's not like we have conversations there, we don't talk about where we see each other and what we do, but we send videos and react to them.”*

C1: *“Since all of my friends are living in the Netherlands, I also see a bit like what's on their mind and what's funny over there. So I feel like I'm in a few different worlds on TikTok and yeah.”*

Consumer 8 also states that it's best when you haven't opened the app for a long time and then see that you have received messages from your friends or partner. This is because the thought that someone else has seen a video and thought of you gives positive feelings. However, through the trends and inside jokes of the platform community, problems in relationships may also arise as which can become a problem for friendships when someone does not have the platform;

C8: *“Well, that's when the group wanted to send me funny ones TikToks and when I browse a lot of these IG Reels, which are often TikToks, but they don't come to [Instagram] until later, so all these trends and others, you would be a little behind them, and it's just that it was that community it's just that social media is just for social interaction, so you don't want to join it, you want to get those messages and you just get from friends that 'this TikTok is so you', but I can't send it because you don't have the app.”*

4.2.5 Feelings of fun and joy

As being described as a fun platform, feelings of fun and joy were also mentioned in describing why the consumers use TikTok. These feelings of fun and joy include elements of being entertained,

happy, and humorous. The light-hearted and positive culture of the platform is what affords these feelings. Some examples include;

C4: *“feel like the main purpose for me and for going on TikTok is to be entertained and specifically have fun with it.[...] So I often get some obscure video that I think is hilarious, so I will go on there if I need like a quick fix, like some dopamine kick.”*

C6: *“[...] at the beginning I would say was more like for like fun and like using it with people and socialising. And then it really became an entertainment platform for me later on.”*

C12: *“they [the videos] make me laugh, and I'm like 'why am I laughing, I don't want to support this kind of activity ', but still somehow it's true - I don't know. It's like that a trend that has stuck in my mind because they are somehow just so funny. [...] I think I know I've seen such inspiring TikToks like just some 6-second videos where you are like someone completely to delight in it or get excited about it.”*

Instant gratification of seeing familiar fun content was also mentioned.

C11: *“[...] instant gratification of 'ohh I've seen this already and I know I like it', so I'm gonna keep watching more and then suddenly you're 3 hours in and you're still there on the same, watching the same content”*

Especially the algorithm was mentioned to be an active factor in affording the fun and connection on the platform;

C5: *“I think the algorithm on TikTok now is just like, I see the same kind of videos all the time, so it's just-- I'm tied into this world where it's all the same, and it's the type of videos that I want to see, and that just makes me more interested in seeing more. And affects me like-- It makes me happy and... Yeah, I would say that I get happy of seeing the videos. [...] I get more feelings from it, that I'm more connected to it than other platforms. But it's more like TikTok and Instagram that I could compare with, and I feel that I get it deeper connection from TikTok.”*

C9: *“Well, it's mostly like this... It's a bit like this catered to one's own taste, so I have a lot of cute animals like this and funny clips like this and I do not know some mother who, yes I don't know, but it's just plain entertainment like this.”*

4.2.6 Escaping daily life

In addition to feelings of joy and fun, TikTok also affords consumers the possibility to escape daily life. Many consumers reported turning to TikTok when needing to set their mind off something and use it for a pastime or when having a boring moment. This works well because the algorithm knows the consumers' interests and "feeds" these to the user, enabling each user to "*sneak into little worlds*" (C1) and "*see something other than just think about what we see around us*" (C10).

C4: "*Always, if I can't find a show or something that really can really, like, keep my mind going. And it's like, not quick enough or I need something that is definitely the best quick fix for you. Yeah.*"

C5: "*When you want to take your mind off of something, you can go to TikTok and just browse through videos and then you get so involved in the video so... And then you're not thinking of the other stuff [...] you kind of dream yourself away and always think of something better or nicer, and then if it's kind of in that little world.*"

4.2.7 Getting information

In addition to looking at fun content, TikTok is frequently used as a tool to find more about a product, service or company, and how something works, as well as a source of educational content. Learning and seeing how things are done were important topics for consumers to see on TikTok. Furthermore, TikTok is seen as a source of inspiration, for example, for travel destinations and things to do while travelling, new hobbies, home decoration and outfit ideas. For example, one consumer said that TikTok affords them to get information about what to do and see in Copenhagen;

C1: "*I think like things to do and see now I moved to Copenhagen, so I'm super keen on what's going on in the city.*"

Another participant mentioned receiving healthcare-related information through the platform during the Covid-19 pandemic.

C10: "*on TikTok that you get information quickly or quickly, like, see what's happening.[...] you wanted information about what is happening and everything about Corona, but also maybe in such a lighthearted way that there were so many people who made such funny videos or made jokes about something else*"

4.2.8 Inspiration & learning

Moreover, TikTok also affords users with inspirational and educational content that affords users to learn new things. The inspirational content mentioned was mostly linked to travel and lifestyle inspiration such as my day vlogs (video blogs), and shopping hauls (e.g seeing what others have bought).

C12: *“a lot of travel content, I think those videos are really nice to watch and you can get inspiration from there.”*

C11: *“inspiration of someone is showing how they live their life or what they're doing, and then that can be a source of inspiration to maybe change up how I do things or-- Yeah, learn, learn new skills or yeah.”*

C7: *“I think it's been entertaining to see when people do like "my days" [mini vlog a day]. And then, I think that maybe I get attached the most to those creators who have quite similar maybe, or you know that I can see that their everyday life looks similar to what mine does. [...] but I think what's fun about TikTok is that, OK, the algorithm means they do it to a certain extent for you, but you get such different kinds of content and that at least if you feed my feed, I get really inspiring things and I learn things there.”*

C5: *“I'm really into hauls. I like them a lot. So I get quite like-- Interested in seeing what the other people have bought from different clothing stores. [...] If I see like a video on TikTok showing off the dress and showing-- It looks more real and it's more 'OK, I can see how it is on' and how-- How you would style it [...] and that makes me more like 'ohh, this is nice' and you could do it like that and style it like this, and I'm more interested in actually buying it.”*

However, C5 mentions that even though it's inspiring to see on the platform, it rarely happens that the clothes are actually bought;

C5: *“[...] But even though I'm seeing it and I'm liking it, I actually, never buy things. I like-- I never see myself going to the store to, yeah, actually buying it. But I'm like, 'ohh, that's nice' and saving it for later, and then I kind of forget it.”*

Educational content was mostly in forms of so-called ‘how-to’ videos including tips and tricks for everyday life. C11 also mentioned just being able to see other’s opinions on topics or just what they are wearing:

C11: “I go into to maybe phases or days where I’m more thoughtful and more thinking, more about ‘ohh now I would want to see more of the in-depth content of people having opinions or debates’, or stuff like that to get a bit more substance instead of just having that superficial ‘look what I’m wearing today’ content, but I feel like it goes in waves” [...] “So whether it’s this is how you dress to go on a date, or this is how you put your makeup on for New Year’s Eve, or this is how you style your bedroom. If you wanna have this colour on the wall, this is how you do this workout exercise correctly.”

4.3 Brand Affordances of TikTok

When it comes to what TikTok affords for brands on the platform, four themes especially arise. These are *brand awareness*, *brand community*, *consumer engagement* and *brand trust* and showing the real-life *brand experience*.

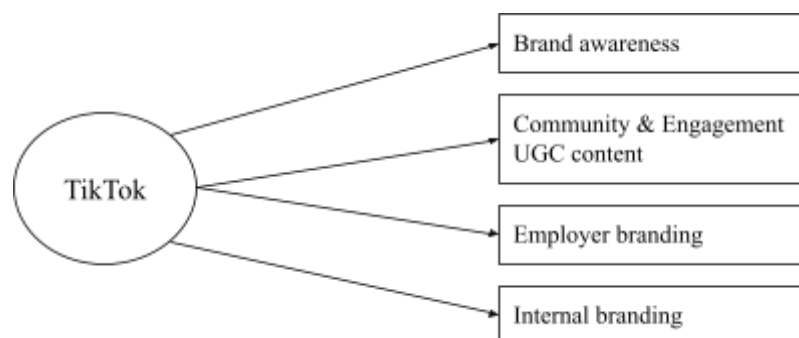


Figure 2. Summary of brand affordances on TikTok.

4.3.1 Brand awareness

In terms of *brand awareness*, the interviewed brands wanted visibility and exposure to their brand from TikTok especially. All three brands were able to reach out to a larger audience on TikTok than on any other platform, especially in the Generation Z segment, which they were unable to reach on other social media channels.

FTC: *“On TikTok, we can get a lot of awareness that we can't get in other places, we can create more community and how can we then measure that.” [...] “[...]brand awareness wise, you can get out to a huge audience with the platform that we don't really have.”*

JJ: *“I think it doesn't matter if we're trying to sell something, we're getting the name out there. We're becoming a lot more relevant and we're because it's so relatable. [...] We're influencing people who have no stores next to them, which is great for our expansion plans. So should we ever expand into an area that we've never been to before.”*

Flying Tiger Copenhagen also mentioned their rechargeable batteries selling out across several retail locations after a video, which they had posted, about the batteries received over 7 million views. This furthermore shows that brand awareness afforded by the powerful algorithm can lead to increased sales for brands. For Verohallinto, brand awareness affordance was especially interesting in terms of reaching out to customers (or in this case citizens) that had not yet had an encounter with the tax office.

VH: *“TikTok now clearly has a user community or from there you can catch even young people, even though they often have not yet had that many tax issues to deal with”*

4.3.2 Community and Engagement

Continuing on the community aspect, TikTok provides a strong community feeling for the brands. Especially for FTC, compared to other platforms such as Instagram, TikTok affords a tighter community feeling through its fun and engaging culture. The functional affordances of comments and having live streams also help in enabling this community feeling, as these afford the brands to speak directly to their customers, and engage and connect with them in a positive and meaningful way.

FTC: *“On TikTok, they talk to us directly like they ask us to respond to them, like, 'hey, can you say this?' [...] We don't have that on Instagram. I think I can say, quite frankly, there's some [brand community on Instagram] in Italy because it's a market where they love the brand already. We have a very high brand recognition... but it's still not like they talk to Flying Tiger, they like they talk to you guys on TikTok.”*

FTC: *“So we had our first live where he was just her and then like the week following her life, we had our own live in our cafe. It was Halloween. How we know and not so long ago,*

we had the Christmas one and I think it's just the way for us to interact with our uh customers or just our viewers like very straightforward.”

For VH and JJ, TikTok also provided a community feeling to some extent. JJ said they also have a lot of engagement with their community on Instagram. However, VH felt like they had more of a community on Instagram than on TikTok, where it felt that on Instagram they are chatting with their best friends, but on TT there are more “trolls”.

VH: “Instagram has been somehow quite wonderful, always like that like it would feel like being with fifty thousand besties and there's a group chat going on. And there's a bit more adult audience. [...] TikTok is different. There are quite a lot of trolls.”

Some consumers also pointed out that they feel a stronger community feeling with brands on TikTok compared to other platforms;

C5: “I think NA-KD is really good at just trying to connect with persons that loves their brand or likes the clothes and showing them off. And that— It creates a good environment or like a community as well, and where you feel that it's more down to earth, that you could be a part of it.”

When asked about how the brands engage with the community on TikTok, all three said that they try to engage as much as possible by replying to the comments and direct messages sent to them. However, FTC also mentions that it is difficult to engage with everyone on the platforms, as that would be a very time-consuming job, and the participants who work with TikTok also have other job tasks.

FTC: “It could definitely be for future strategy, to kind of implement the community management part, because now you guys need to spend your time on what you're good at and then the next part will be should we then hire someone who is trained by you guys... but then that's their job to kind of split it up and also acknowledge that it is a full-time job to be a content creator that goes a lot of energy into it.”

4.3.2.1 UGC content

For FTC and JJ, the strong TikTok community and engagement have also afforded a lot of user-generated content, which affords brand awareness in terms of earned media. When searching

for FTC on TikTok, the first videos that show up are not even the brand's own but made by regular consumers without getting monetary compensation for it.

FTC: “[...] if you look at *Flying Tiger, Copenhagen* in the search bar of TikTok, the first content that pops up is like not even ours. [...] It's like, yeah, people just doing their videos and then like doing something very that can gain so many views and I think what's interesting is that it's kind of a two-way street, like sometimes our TikTok impacts the sales and sometimes like we have the people from sales coming to us from oh, this is sold out, maybe we should push something.”

For JJ, especially their Tunacado sandwich has gotten a lot of attention after an influencer tried it, this has sparked consumers to attempt making the sandwich at home, affording the brand a lot of UGC and hence also earning brand awareness.

JJ: “Our Tunacado is trending in the US right now, so we've got a lot of people talking about it. And a lot of people making it at home. [...] This only became because of one, you know, creator in New York was like let me eat a Tunacado and then everyone's like ‘I want it now’ and it really shows how everyone's making their own versions of it at home.”

4.3.3 Employer branding

In addition to engaging with consumers and increasing brand awareness, TikTok also affords employer branding. All three brands mentioned this as a key affordance for them and mentioned that their job applications have increased after joining TikTok, and also increased positive perceptions towards working at the company/organisation, which was seen in the comment section of their TikTok videos.

VH: “[...] The number of applicants or the number of applications, there is a very concrete rise, there are more applicants and it is perhaps no other explanation for it now, then not immediately come up with other than the fact that the presence of social media and interaction there is related [...]”

FTC: “I would say that we get a lot of comments asking where should I send my CV. Yeah, especially under the video of the CEO. OK. Like ‘I wanna work there’ and I would say that in every video where we talk more about us working here, not the customer experience, people come and like ‘I wanna work there, where can I send my CV.’”

JJ: *“We're always trying to make [working at JJ] a desire. We try and present [the brand] as a desirable place to work. Which it is. And I also think because you know the demographic of people who watches. TikToks are very young people. It's the perfect kind of is our target audience for people we wanna hire and people we want to engage with us and be our guest as well so it works out really, really well.”*

For Verohallinto, showing the people behind the brand also feeds their goal of becoming perceived as an approachable authority instead of a distant figure.

VH: *“We want to be an approachable authority, that has been our goal for a long time. It serves us, our goals, terribly well. We have found over the years that humour is a very effective way of getting our message across”*

4.3.4 Internal branding

Being on TikTok has also started an internal discussion within the companies. Both FTC and JJ describe making TikTok videos (TikToks) as something fun, and that this also contributes to internal bonding between the employees within the company. However, the brands also mentioned that their TikTok presence, in the beginning, created some internal scepticism, especially among older employees. Later on, the perceptions changed, when the content received positive reactions and success was reached. A common denominator for all three interviewed brands is still that the people creating the TikTok videos have gotten the full trust of the upper management to create TikTok videos, with little to no boundaries.

FTC: *“I just think about the fact that I'm making content with a friend and like, we're just like, obviously having a lot of fun over here shooting it like, I know that I laugh a lot then like, I know that it's just a time for me in the week to have, like a break and do something a bit more fun.”*

JJ: *“The kind of content that tends to perform, and they're the most fun to film and the most easiest to film. And so, I've noticed, like all the videos that I spend immense time working on and a lot of energy were performing poorly. And then the ones that I'd make in seconds and like you know, it should be really fun, really organic, really natural.”*

4.4 Authenticity

The second part of the chapter discusses the concept of authenticity from the perspective of consumers, brands and the platform TikTok. The findings are divided into the following categories:

1. Consumer and brand perceptions of authenticity
2. Consumer perceptions on brand authenticity
3. Consumer perceptions on authenticity on TikTok
4. Consumer and brand perceptions on brand authenticity on TikTok

The summary of our findings is seen below in figure 3. In the analysis (chapter 5), we relate the authenticity on TikTok to the affordances of TikTok for consumers and brands.

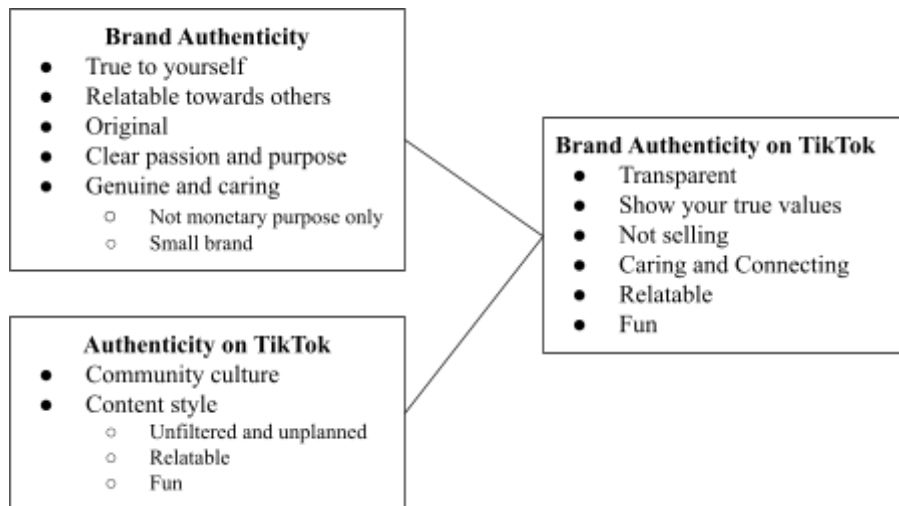


Figure 3. Summary of authenticity findings.

4.4.1 General Perceptions of Authenticity

In the following section, consumers' general perceptions are explored and to what authenticity means for them. The impressions of authenticity relate to being true to yourself and genuine towards others. Authenticity as a general concept was widely viewed as an individual characteristic in relation to the surrounding world.

4.4.1.1 True to yourself

Based on the consumer and brand responses, the concepts of *authenticity* or *being authentic* can be summarised as being real. Both from the consumers' and brands' perspectives, being authentic is about *being yourself* and showing it. Furthermore, recognising who you are and not copying others

are aligning with the concept of authenticity. Some examples of how consumers describe what 'being authentic' means for them include;

C11: *“authenticity is strongly related to just being yourself, umm, whatever that means at whatever time”*

C12: *“Being authentic to me means that even as a person you are who you are, you stand behind what you like or what you want to do. And you're proud of it, I guess.” [...] “you recognize it as who you are and who you want to be, and then you sort of bring it out.”*

C8: *”don't be ashamed of who you are, you dare to be yourself and show it in the way you dress, maybe who you hang out with, what you put on social media in general. You don't try with your behaviour to please others but to be more own yourself.”*

C3: *“[authenticity is] not blatantly copying [others]”*

Authenticity for consumers was also related to speaking one's truth and saying what they think. As consumer 1 points out, authenticity to them is “that you give your own opinion and that I trust you, that it's your own”. Consumer 6 agrees that “saying what you think or doing what you feel like” is to be authentic.

When asking brands about what it means to be authentic, the key point was to be true towards yourself as well as a brand, i.e. showcase your values in everything you do. For example, Verohallinto as a state organisation extends its values to social media, so *“the point at which an individual customer or citizen is dealing with us is, in whatever way, it is, however, for example, smooth, of course, preferably good, even perhaps a positive event, an experience or encounter.”*

4.4.1.2 Genuine and relatable towards others

In relation to being yourself and showing it to others, authenticity does not equal perfection. Consumers know that life is not perfect all the time and seeing something relatable as this in social media affords a perception of authenticity. As consumer 12 pointed out, showing also the negative parts of life is authentic and genuine to them.

C12: *“where you see that someone also shares such negative things or something like, 'well today I woke up, it wasn't a good morning and I had to go to work and it was annoying, and I saw this. But then again, this nice thing happened', so maybe that's how I at least recognize myself that it's real genuine like on behalf of private individuals.”*

Consumer 3 also points out that they have found people to be more aware of the image they are creating, resulting in being “less polished”.

C3: “I think more and more people are aware of the picture that they're creating, and at least I think in my circles, it becomes less polished [...] and in that sense maybe a bit more authentic.”

Subconclusion: When asking the participants (both the consumers and brands), what authenticity means to them, the two main themes identified were being true to your values (‘being real’) and being relatable and caring towards others. Staying true to your values was exemplified by consumers as staying true to who you are and also showing this to others no matter the environment around you. Similar things were mentioned by the brands, relating to the brand values and identity as staying true to who you are. Relatability was described by not being fake or showing off as too polished, consumers are aware that life is not perfect all the time and therefore something that comes off as too polished is not perceived as relatable to them because they know it's not how real life is.

4.4.2 Consumer Perceived Brand Authenticity

Expanding on the general perceptions of authenticity, findings on consumer perceptions of brand authenticity are presented. Our findings reveal that consumers value brands that are invested and caring. Brands that go the extra mile and put in the effort to create a positive impact are seen as more authentic. Authentic brands are consistent in their actions, have a clear brand identity, and are sensitive towards others. The history of the brand does not affect its authenticity as much as its current actions and efforts, however, smaller and local brands are also seen as more authentic and easier to trust, as they have a closer connection with their customers and can be more vulnerable. Trust and vulnerability play a crucial role in building an authentic brand image that resonates with consumers.

4.4.2.1 Originality

As participant 9 mentions, originality or instead *not copying*, is another factor in an authentic brand. Furthermore, cheaply made and poor-quality ads lower the consumers’ ability to see the brand as authentic.

C9: “[...]cheap versions of a real product like this, for example, Dyson airwrap. There are hundreds of small companies that make a cheaper version of the same thing and then I don't think it will be as authentic because it is an exact copycat of the real thing” [...] “But it becomes so obvious, and I think it becomes simply poor quality and then I don't trust the product either.”

4.4.2.2 Have a clear passion and purpose and stick to it

As with describing authenticity in general, consumers also explained authentic brands are true towards themselves and stick to their values. Having a clear passion and purpose also helped the consumers to distinguish between an authentic and inauthentic brand;

C6: “any brand that has a purpose, like I know that most brands have their main purpose is to sell, but I feel like if you're just like very true to your values and like show them to your community and like you build on it and you stick to it and you're being consistent with it and genuine, and actually like not only saying, but also doing stuff.”

C3: “being clear about your purposes” and “not changing your values to get more interest.”

C11: “if you have some sort of passion and purpose behind the brand, I think then you could really see the authenticity. But I think if you don't have that core purpose of a brand, I feel like the authenticity is-- It's a bit of an illusion.”

This also relates to not showing a more polished picture of the brand;

C5: “You're showing your true colours, so you're showing your how things work. And not trying to make everything seem more perfect than it is.”

One consumer also mentions that a brand can be authentic even when the consumer does not like the brand. Explaining it from the perspective that even though the identity and values of the brand do not align with the consumer's, it can still be an authentic brand when it is true to its values.

C6: “[Authentic brand is] true to their identity. [...] It could be also in the negative way. If I see a brand like in a negative way and they are acting that way. Well, it's not that they are not being authentic. They are being very authentic, they're just not a good brand.”

Furthermore, the aspect of having a clear purpose also stretched to brands caring about other stakeholders. Consumer 11 mentioned Patagonia as an example of an authentic brand because their main purpose is about reducing the footprint and therefore fighting climate change.

4.4.2.3 Be genuine and caring

In addition to being clear about your values, passion and purpose, being a genuine brand is authentic, and includes having genuine interests as well as being open without glamorising things.

C10: *“genuine interests, that you come from a genuine place when you sort of show off your company and that it sort of shows and that you don't try to hide anything or glamorise anything.”*

C6: *“Being genuine and open with people and you're not trying to hide anything, you're just saying what you think or doing what you feel like.”*

Relating to being caring, participant 2 also mentioned Mikkeller as being authentic because even though they are a big international brand, they still focus on their Danish audience on TikTok.

C2: *“It's just the fact that Mikkeller seems authentic to me because they are forbidden. And I'm actually not sure if this is on purpose, but they are focusing on their Danish audience. Even though it's an international brand and instead of making videos about their beer, that could reach the whole world. They're making a lot of videos about their restaurants in Copenhagen and I think, feel that, is very authentic.”*

4.4.2.3.1 Other than monetary purposes

Relating to the genuine interests and purpose of a brand, the purpose should not be to make money and sell. Although commercial purposes are recognised as natural for brands, it is not seen as authentic.

C11: *“So it's coming from a place of competitive advantage in business instead of coming from a place where I actually want to do something to make a difference. And I think that for me with brands and companies, it's so crucial, especially in the long run.”*

Authentic companies are true to their values and have other purposes than monetary:

C12: *“Those people who have been creating it, they also have the same values and the same idea behind the company. I hope if it is now someone other than to make a profit or something like that. Well, I think it's also something that you can really easily bring out in*

your brand. But I also think it takes time when it is sometimes taken out of context that... Or that it can become like a marketing gimmick that 'yes we are really genuine, and we are a really sustainable company, and we do this and this because we care about this and this'. But yeah, maybe that kind of sincerity would be what I would summarise. What is being authentic."

4.4.2.3.2 Small brands

When describing an authentic brand, many consumers also felt that authentic brands can mostly be smaller brands, as these are true to themselves and are often not using sponsored ads, but instead they influence in a more genuine way. Smaller brands are also trusted more than bigger brands. As consumer 10 mentions, they are more sceptical towards a bigger brand and how authentic the brand can actually be.

C10: "small businesses find it easier to be authentic or come across as authentic. Whereas since big companies, I'm at least a little more sceptical about how authentic they can be. Or so that it feels like it's slightly harder to believe that they wouldn't have something behind it like selling or some ulterior motive."

C4: "I also feel like a lot of smaller brands are the ones that are new brands emerging now, maybe from young people or young creative minds and they did grow up with this, so that it's easier for them to be authentic on TikTok. So, because they understand the media and the social media of that, and they also don't have a lot of resources"

According to consumer 4, a smaller brand is also more authentic as it usually shows vulnerability and presents itself in an open and honest way:

C4: "I think it's exactly because they mainly speak from the heart because, umm, again they don't have a lot of things to go through to do that. They have to sell who they are, because it's them and no one else like. So I think it is because it's much more vulnerable because it's a small brand and it just started and you just have to be like 'well here I am and this is what I do' and 'here's how I do it'."

Consumer 6 gives a summarises what brand authenticity means to them as this:

C6: "any brand that has a purpose, like I know that most brands have their main purpose is to sell, but I feel like if you're just like very true to your values and like show them to your

community and like you build on it and you stick to it and you're being consistent with it and genuine, and actually like not only saying, but also doing stuff.”

Subconclusion: Asked to describe an authentic brand, the same values of being real and staying true to your values and not copying others were mentioned. Consumers specifically mentioned that an authentic brand should have a clear passion and purpose, and stick to this purpose, ie. staying true to the brand values, in any situation. This is also related to not showing a polished picture of the brand either. Interestingly, one consumer also mentioned that as long as the brand is very clear about its purposes, it can be authentic even though the purpose itself might not be something that the consumer perceives as authentic. A purpose that the consumers did not find authentic was if the brands were only trying to make money. This is not authentic as when the brands only want to make money, they do not care about their community or other stakeholders, implying that the feeling that a brand actually cares about them is very important if a brand wants to be perceived as authentic by consumers. Consumers also tend to find small brands as more authentic than big brands, as the small brands are more dependent on their customers and therefore need to put in more effort to keep them. This effort is not putting a lot of resources into marketing and advertising, but rather creating a community around the brand so that consumers become familiar with the brand, their purposes and what they are about. When consumers feel like the brand genuinely cares about them, they are also more likely to show loyalty back and support the brand.

4.4.3 Consumer perceived authenticity on TikTok

Following the findings on consumer perceived authenticity, consumers' perceptions which authenticity on TikTok are discussed. The principal characteristics of platform-related authenticity to consumers in the sample consisted of the sense of community, and the style of content, which is unique to TikTok.

4.4.3.1 Community

The community aspect is one of the aspects of making TikTok feel authentic. As consumer 6 describes it, the small communities inside TikTok are authentic to them.

C6: “There's like small TikTok communities. I feel like, if you're there like those ones are usually very authentic, because they are targeting actually a micro-segment of the market,

and they are serving them properly because that's their identity and they serve consumers that match their identity.”

Another consumer also mentioned that these smaller communities also enable a more direct connection, offering a feeling of authenticity.

C4: “connection [on TikTok] is much more direct, much more clear, because it often is a smaller audience also”

4.4.3.2 Content style

The content style of the platform is also a main part in communicating authenticity. Consumers say that video content is harder to fake or photoshop, and therefore they perceive videos as more authentic than pictures. As TikTok is predominantly a video platform, consumer 5 feels it creates “more emotions and deeper connection”. Consumer 4 further points out that connections on TikTok are more “direct”.

C7: “[...] see it, or it feels like in video format you kind of can't [fake it], especially if you now take such ‘my day’ videos, which I watch a lot on, so you kind of can't fake it, at least not the ‘vibe’ that's in the video. That everyone has their own style and that will probably come across.” [...] “it's easier to fake those pictures on Instagram. Like it doesn't take a lot of brain cells for you know to photoshop the bodies or like different stuff. But to do it on video and so is a completely different thing. At least I can photoshop pictures but not videos.”

Furthermore, video content was said to create more emotions and therefore a deeper connection to the creator than what a picture can do.

C5: “It's kinda like two-sided because I think of it as more real when I see the videos and it creates more emotions and a deeper connection than just seeing a picture. Then at same time there's so many videos that are, I know that are sponsored and aren't really like true. And that's-- That's something I'm aware of, but I don't... I tend to not care that much about it actually.”

4.4.3.2.1 Relatable content

The content style of the platform also offers a feeling of relatability, which is authentic to the participants as this is something similar to them.

C1: *“individuals are a bit more authentic to me[...]because you also know that it's one person making all the TikTok contents.”*

Consumer 10 also says that if the content is not relatable at all she usually skips it because then they are not interested in it.

C10: *“[...] like stuff that isn't relatable at all or something like that. I usually just sort of skip that quickly, but then. Yes, I think it's quite easy to just see what you're not at all interested in and stuff like that, then it's easy to just skip it.”*

4.4.3.2.2 Unfiltered and unplanned

The way videos are able to be perceived as relatable and therefore create a deeper connection and feeling of authenticity can be described by the content of the videos. Overall, TikTok is perceived as a fun and open platform, this also shows in the content created on the platform. Authentic content on TikTok is described as unfiltered and unplanned, showing a funny moment or just real everyday life. Especially compared to other social media platforms, the content on TikTok really stands out for consumers in being so real and unfiltered.

C9: *“unfiltered really that it can be a funny moment, you haven't caught or even know you've filmed or one like you use filters and stuff and you edit a lot more on Instagram and like this not because you can maybe have filters like that, but maybe you edit the lighting or something like the characteristics of the photo. But yeah, I'd probably say it's kind of unplanned in a way, more unplanned on TikTok.”*

C8: *“shows more real everyday life, and then mothers make videos while their children poop around and scream, yes, I like that kind of thing, because it's just like the real, genuine everyday life.”*

4.4.3.2.3 Fun

Fun content is furthermore described as authentic on TikTok first of all because that is the kind of content that the algorithm is more likely to catch, therefore making a fun video more likely to go

viral. One consumer exemplifies this by not being able to buy yourself likes, instead, the likes come organically if the content is fun and authentic to the platform, making it more authentic.

C2: *“if you don't make a funny video, you don't get a lot of likes. You cannot buy yourself to likes by having something in a commercial place.”*

Fun content is also perceived as authentic as this is often unpolished but not serious;

C12: *“At least my feed [on TikTok] is kind of light-hearted and kind of fun and exactly the kind that isn't taken too seriously, that I think TikTok makes quite a lot of content where you yourself do something really stupid. Then you're like 'look what I did again' and 'what's going on here', somehow there's such an authenticity to it, a side that I like very much.”*

C1: *“funny video shouldn't be polished”*

Furthermore, consumer 4 also points out a community feel to the fun on the platform, describing that there is a difference between the “fun” on TikTok compared to other social media platforms.

TikTok having a ‘Gen Z -catered’-humour:

C4: *“Because something is being TikTok-funny and another is being Instagram-funny, I feel like, or Facebook-funny.” [...] “TikTok is, I feel like, more obscure and also maybe more young, like you can reach out to a Gen Z audience if you're a millennial often. Whereas Instagram is more millennial and Facebook is more maybe Gen Y, or something like that. So, I also feel like because there's a difference in the way that you laugh at things and there's humour, things like that. So, if you do find a way to specifically tap into that humour form. Maybe that will work.”*

The brands also recognise the importance of creating this unfiltered and unplanned content in relation to the fast-paced trends that might only be relevant for a day or two, but not the next week;

FTC: *“from the beginning we had a content plan for TikTok. So we tried to plan ahead, but from testing, we've seen that it's not working you can't plan ahead with TikTok. You just have to be like, OK, today we posted this before this TikTok, you have to tap into trends real quick. And then and now, we don't do any like strategy, we just go with the flow.”*

JJ: *“[...] our TikTok is, I will come up with it on the day [...] and probably not anytime sooner. I will especially cause you know trends come in and out so fast, so you gotta catch it in the moment. Hence why like if I say I'm gonna do this trend next week, by the time I*

will do next week, it will be irrelevant. And so because you've got such a short time frame to catch a trend and be relevant and post in it. That's why I have to do everything super last minute. But it works out for the better as well. It's a lot more fun. I also don't know what I'm gonna post and I kind of like that. It's spontaneous. It's exciting.”

Subconclusion: Overall, consumers mention that the content they see on TikTok can be perceived as more authentic due to the format of the content. The objective perspective to this is that videos are harder to fake and photoshop than pictures, enabling a more realistic image of what is going on in the video. Secondly, from an existential perspective, the content is often perceived as authentic as it is relatable in some way showing scenes of real, genuine everyday life that consumers can relate to. TikTok also has a strong community culture that enables a feeling of authenticity for consumers. On the platform, they feel like they can be part of several different *micro-communities* that become authentic, as they serve specific groups with authenticity by connecting people with similar interests and identities.

Furthermore, consumers mentioned the fun on the platform that comes from both the trends that are based on general entertainment, but also through the language or ‘tone-of-voice’ on the platform, which is described to be funny, quirky and not too serious. The consumers could not explain why the fun was authentic to them, generally, it was mentioned as authentic because it is authentic to the platform, as the language and culture of the platform are fun and more relaxed than other platforms.

4.4.4 Brand Authenticity on TikTok

In the final part of the authenticity findings, consumer and brand perspectives on authenticity on TikTok are discussed. Seven different aspects of perceived brand authenticity were identified. These are *transparency*, *showing your true values*, *not selling*, *being caring* and *connecting*, *being relatable* and *being fun*.

4.4.4.1 Transparency

Transparency, as in seeing *behind the scenes* of a brand, was seen as interesting and authentic for brands. For example, the brand Ditur communicates about their products in a different way on TikTok than they do on their Instagram. The brand is able to communicate about “the ugly”, which

becomes more personal. Seemingly mundane processes, such as packing orders interest consumers, as seen in consumer 2's response.

C2: *“Ditur, they post some videos from their inventory and from their packaging department. Umm, they like the founder is like come let me show you our new inventory or the packaging. And I feel I know their whole office now. I know how their inventory looks like and their office.” [...] ”it's really interesting and I think that's authentic. Yeah, because they show how they package their order. And we see kind of the behind side of how things are. Umm. As a consumer, that would really like that.”*

C2: *“[I enjoy seeing videos of Ditur watches,] because when I watch those videos, and I'm serious when I'm saying this, I feel like there are a little bit more authentic if I can choose that word because he can say, oh, this is our most ugly watch in our webshop. No, they don't do that in a product placement on Instagram models or football players, they always showed the most beautiful things, but I also want the brand to tell us what is the most likely thing. You know what I mean because it becomes more personal to me.”*

Consumer 1 also explains that they do not want to see selling arguments about the product, but rather see how it works and be the judge of it themselves. The brand should be open with what the product is instead of talking about it with fancy marketing words.

C1: *“I didn't really like it when companies say, oh, this lip gloss is so good and don't even like show what it looks like. I wanna see it. I wanna see someone try it and then... You can of course convince me, but. Yeah, I want to see that it's good that it works, not just say it.”*

Consumer 5 views brands, which involve employees in videos and show off the whole company in videos, to also be authentic as the type of content further allows to understand the brand as a consumer, and shows that the brand is open to showing ‘the inside’ of the company to the outside world.

C5: *“trying to involve their employees in videos, and trying to show off all like the whole company, and then you get more feeling of what this company is about.”*

Brands are also showing transparency through content showing ‘behind the scenes’ of the company, and the everyday life of employees at the office. VH mention that there is a big difference between

the career stories and their content on TikTok showing their office, as in the career stories the office is often shown in a more fancy way than what it is on TikTok.

VH: *“There is a big difference between that and the kind of career story videos that have often focused on the role of work. And perhaps in a certain visual way, where you're in a fancy office environment, wearing a suit, for example, and walking around in slow motion, going 'bautsika wow wow'. So this is like a really different outcome. And yes, this kind of authenticity is interesting to show.”*

Furthermore proving that transparency is what the users of TikTok value, JJ's most viewed video on TikTok (with 25 million views), is actually just a short few-second video of Hammoudan pointing an apple stem, like a wizard wand, at her manager, together with a trending sound at that time. A screen capture of the video can be viewed in Appendix 3. Hammoudan explains that the video was successful, because of the way the trend was utilised in the context of the JJ brand.

JJ: *“‘your boss says you can do whatever you wanted to on the TikTok account’, and him like looking confused at the heavy little trend. So on-trend. Then it was like with a senior person at our, you know, at our company was a very authentic video as well and it just blew up, and once he saw that, he was like ‘OK, cool’.”*

4.4.4.2 Be yourself, show your true values

Interestingly, “being yourself” and “showing your true values” were only mentioned by the brands when talking about brand authenticity on TikTok. Even though consumers mention this as a general part of authenticity and brand authenticity, they do not mention it in regards to brand authenticity on TikTok. For brands, showing their values and purpose can be seen in the content they make on TikTok, and this makes the content more authentic.

VH: *“[...] the entire tax administration's common strategy and common values are reflected in everything we do, no matter what we do[.] Which makes it more likely that the point at which an individual customer or citizen is dealing with us is, in whatever way, it is, however, for example, smooth, of course, preferably good, even perhaps a positive event, something like an experience or encounter.”*

FTC describes this as interpreting their overall brand statement in different ways;

FTC: *“create moments that matter. It's like our overall statement and that fortunately for us can be translated in a lot of different ways. So if on instance we went out on TikTok and tried to be high fashion, that wouldn't be brand authenticity, but there's a lot of ways you can make-- Be true to your brand and so I think we're being brand authentic in different ways and different platforms” [...]“it brand authenticity first, knowing that what is your core statement and then also being true to the channels.”*

FTC further exemplifies this with their value to support the LGBTQ-community, which does only not limit to Pride month;

FTC: *“Like we're very much LGBTQIA+ friendly on TikTok and I think it was a chance that we took that like, yeah, pretty important and very authentic is like for example, when it's pride like.” [...] “We're out there when it's not pride, we're still out there like there's still our Pride tote bag. There's we still have Pride products. It's just it goes beyond just jumping on the like ‘Ohh this is the month to make money’.”*

While JJ brings up the importance of showing the fun and youthfulness of their brand;

JJ: *“[...] shown by the TikTok that we are. Like young. We do like to have fun to, you know, to appropriate sense. And we do like to, you know, build great relationships with each other with each other in bonds.”*

4.4.4.3 Not selling

When it comes to brand content on the platform, consumers feel like it is more authentic when brands are not trying to sell anything, but instead focusing on building their brand image.

C10: *“It's not like pushy marketing on TikTok and it doesn't feel so much like they're trying to sell something, for example, but it's more like maybe they're creating an image of that company.”*

C9: *“maybe it felt more authentic because it doesn't directly advertise ‘buy flights here’ directly.”*

This idea is further supported by consumer 10, who describes an authentic brand to be one which rather presents itself and its products, rather than pushing a message onto the consumers and *forcibly selling*.

C10: *“Or like this to oversell, like to be like the company is much better than everyone else and has much better products or something. More like saying ‘if you like this, you can buy our product’, and not ‘this is the best you can get’. It feels like too much.”*

The brands also mentioned that TikTok is more authentic to them as it enables them to show their true identities without trying to sell something. Here it is important to note that VH does not sell anything as a public organisation, hence they did not mention the point of not selling on TikTok.

JJ: *“I actually really prefer this authentic, you know, strategy of just being, you know, just being a brand and showing what you're really all about. And I hope TikTok doesn't reach a point where it becomes commercialised as well.”*

FTC: *“you need to be brand authentic first and then you need to be channel authentic” [...]*
“You can't really just take one and then put it in everyone's throat or so. This is as much Flying Tiger as you guys are.”

4.4.4.4 Connecting with consumers

According to several of the consumers, brands are authentic on TikTok because there they have made an effort in connecting with the consumers and going ‘the extra mile’ in trying to connect with them as well, as this shows the genuineness of the brand. Examples of what consumers said are;

C5: *“I care a lot about how they use consumers and trying to connect to many persons and seeing that it's not just one type of a consumer, one type of consumer and trying to share content with as many as possible, and reaching out. So in a way, they're [authentic]”*

C1: *“Like for example, this museum was just like, so generally like invested about all the paintings and they wanted to share how the paintings were.”*

C2: *“that's really creative and authentic to me because they have to go that [extra mile], they really think about what they wanna do.”*

This close engagement with the community furthermore affords the brands with brand trust and loyalty, as consumers are able to come closer to the brand and see ‘who are behind the brand’ and what the brand is.

C11: *“If it's a good company, they have values, and they have this red thread going through, and I feel like I'm a part of a community, if I use their products or their services or... Yeah, yeah, I feel more attached. Uh, more loyal, I would definitely say.”*

FTC: *“On Instagram, we don't have those senders the same way, so people [on TikTok] they call you by name, they're like 'slay Daniel'. And so it's also a good way of creating that authenticity, it's not the brand speaking only, it's you guys speaking on behalf of a brand and working here. And I think that makes a huge difference in how you can speak on the different platforms.”*

4.4.4.5 Relatable

Whereas being relatable was not specifically mentioned regarding brand authenticity for consumers, it was mentioned by one consumer as perceived brand authenticity on TikTok. This relatability was however not related to the brand's values or identity per se, but more that they are relatable to the others on the platform.

C10: *“maybe more relatable. It feels like they should be able to kind of...no but kind of just in some way so that the people who work there that they are kind of the same as I know is like that they watch the same videos that I do because they also have made it with that trend.”*

Brands mentioned relatability both in regards to being authentic but also being authentic on TikTok. All three brands had experienced relatable content to be crucial to be authentic to their audience. Content that the consumers can relate to, for example, shopping at a store, is positively received.

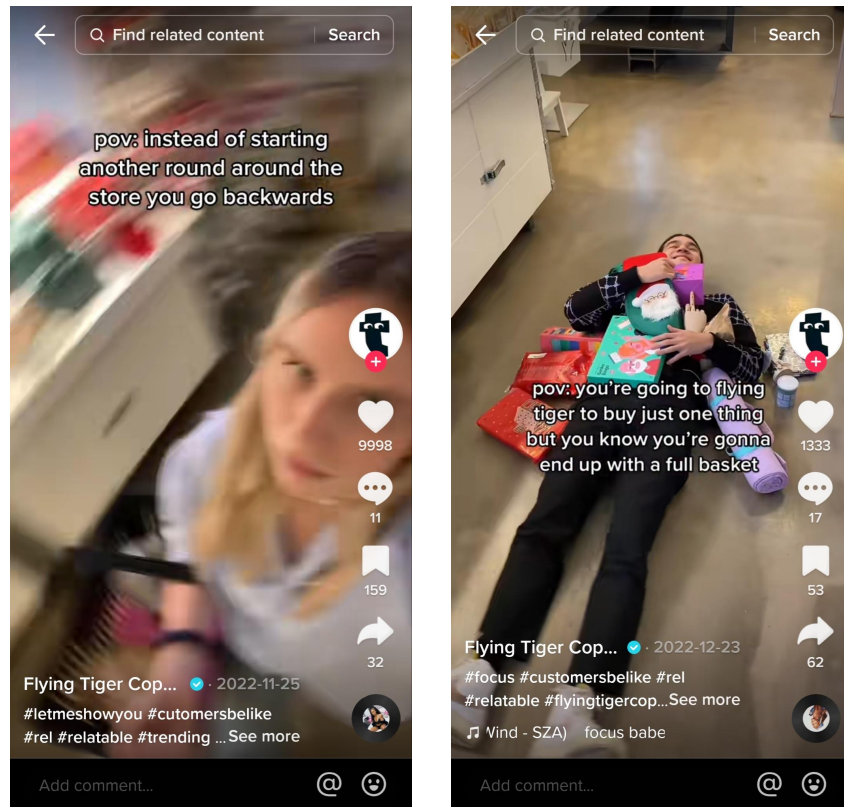
VH: *“This is what we were looking for, but we want to show the everydayness of everyday life, humanity, in the most identifiable way possible.”*

JJ: *“We're becoming a lot more relevant and we're because it's so relatable.”*

Showing the customer journey was an example of how the brands can show relatability on TikTok.

FTC: *“I think what's interesting is that like when you go to a Flying Tiger store, you have an experience which is like pretty unique and easy for us to poke fun at [...]I guess people just like 'ohh, I've done that'. Just something better recognized and ohh yeah. And they wanna talk about it.” [...] ”the videos where we show customer experience, relatable stuff, this is what goes to the For You -page mostly”*

For example, in the content examples below, FTC showed the relatable experience of “going to the store to just buy one thing”, but end up making impulse buys and needing a basket at the end. The example on the right portrays an example where a customer starts to browse the store in the opposite direction to the norm. FTC is know to have a specific flow to their store, so going *counter-flow* is relatable from their own experience, or having witnessed it.



Examples of relatable customer journey content by FTC on TikTok (FTC on TikTok, 2022a; FTC on TikTok, 2022b).

(*POV = point of view)

JJ was also showing relatability in terms of being relatable to both the customers by filming the content at their real locations and also making the content relatable to the whole hospitality industry. A vast majority, if not all, of the videos on the brand’s TikTok account, is filmed in a JJ bar.

JJ: “All of them I get filmed behind the bar [...] So it's not fake. It's not a little studio or anything, it's just you know, a normal bar with normal juicers, the juices orientate a lot as well because you know, just leave come and go” [...] ”try and make it relatable to everyone

in the hospitality industry, but also the Joe Twist is the way that it's like kind of presented the way it looks”

JJ further points out that being a part of the user base on TikTok enables easier relatability towards their viewers on the platform.

JJ: “me being a Gen Z'er myself, I'm only 21 so I like I love the platform as well. Like I, I relate to all the users because I am one of them. You know I am a consumer as well.”

From the interviewed brands' perspective, relatability was also achieved through having recognisable faces on their content. FTC mentioned them having discussed the possibility of getting a mascot to be the face of the brand. However, they ended up having their two younger employees as the brand representatives on TikTok. In June 2022, FTC were in the process of reviewing their TikTok strategy and contemplated whether they should include a mascot as the famous brand Duolingo also does on TikTok (see examples in Appendix 2 and 3). However, the consultant told them to not do so, as Chodor and Oum-Koechlin are already the faces of the brand on TikTok, and that works well. VH also mentions that its strategy on TikTok is about humanising the brand rather than building the brand, by showing the real lives of their employees.

VH: “It's about humanising the brand rather than building the brand. We are, in fact, in the lives of all people, as it were, inevitably involved. And maybe it can then be quite valuable that we are treated quite neutrally or at least we have no reason to fear if it works right. Or we can be approached, we can be asked really stupid questions.”

4.4.4.6 Fun

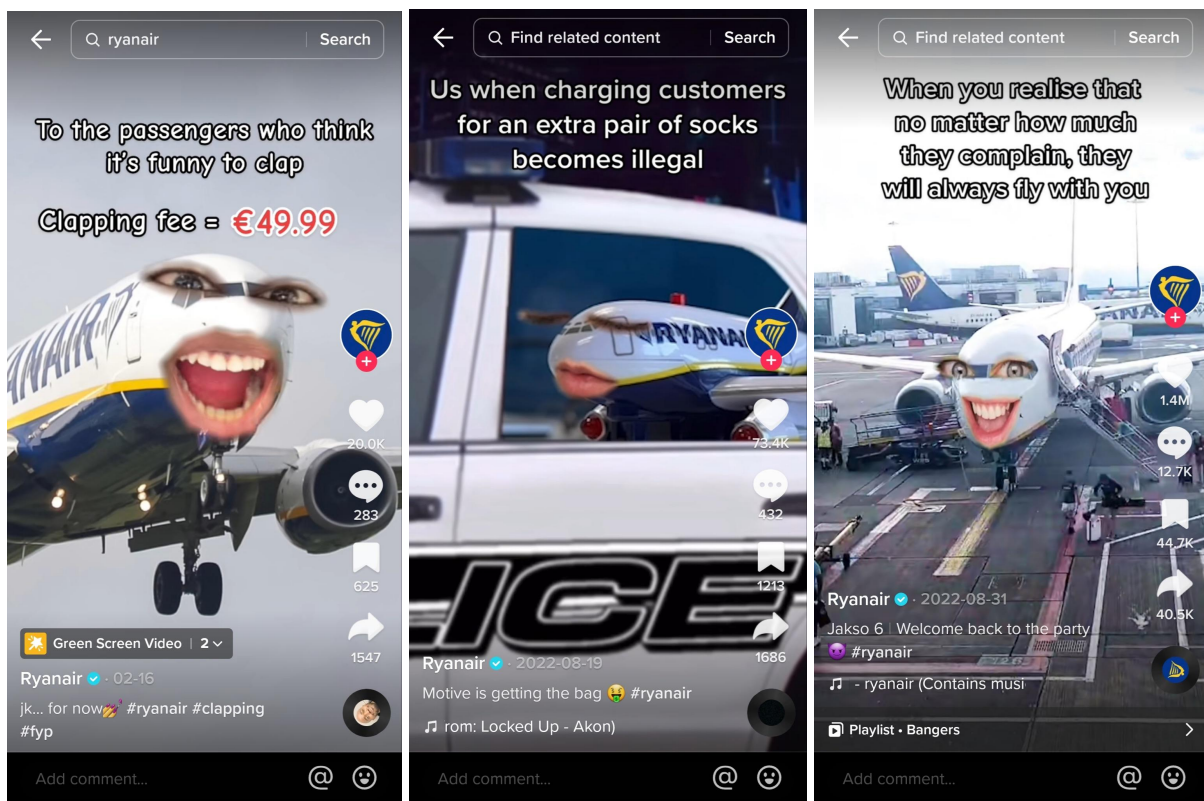
The relatability is also seen through fun and joyful content, which consumers perceive as authentic. The brands did not specifically mention, however, that fun content would show authenticity from their perspective. According to consumer 7, Ryanair's TikTok content is an example of a fun and authentic way to present the brand, by utilising trends and creating “meme content”, which fits the image of the brand. In comparison, the same fun content would not fit, e.g., Finnair (a Finnish airline), because it would not be “on brand”.

C7: “[Ryanair's content on TikTok is] a pretty comical way for them to market themselves. That they make lots of different meme content and use all the sounds that are trending at the

time. Then I got a Finnair ad actually right before that, but Finnair as a brand wouldn't jump on those trends, because it kind of doesn't belong to their brand.”

Consumer 12 also mentions Ryanair as an example of a brand, which creates a lot of fun and relatable content. Three examples of such content, based on observations, can be found below the following quote.

C12: *“As I recall, it was just some kind of green screen where there is a Ryanair plane and then there are the eyes and the mouth, and something happens there. So, I stopped and thought ‘what is really going on here, can this really be, that this whole company and brand has made such a funny video of what some private individuals usually do’. Maybe that’s how it stuck in my mind especially then. It was different.”*



Examples of content on TikTok by Ryanair. Videos were posted on 16.2.2023 (Ryanair on TT, 2023), 19.8.2022 (Ryanair on TT, 2022a) and 31.8.2022 (Ryanair on TT, 2022b).

Authentic brands on TikTok have a common denominator: making fun of themselves. This can be seen in content, where the brand recognises its shortcomings and things that might have been criticised or commented on. As seen above in the examples of Ryanair’s content, the brand is

poking fun at its “shortcomings” which they are known for. These include, for example, extra charges and poor service, which were recognised by the consumer interviewees as well.

C2: *“Ryanair does the same. They make fun of their really bad service and standards, and I really like that. They wouldn't do that again in a product placement.”*

C7: *“Ryanair can sort of just joke about the fact that they have such cheap flights and that people put on like 40 layers of clothes to get in.” [...] “they can joke about themselves and such sick accusations that are made about them, that it's not like they're trying to hide something about themselves at least in my eyes makes it more authentic.”*

To consumers, this type of self-ironic content is perceived as fun, although at first unexpected and somewhat surprising. Both C12 and C3 mention that seeing Ryanair's content on TikTok surprised them at first, before realising that it was actually Ryanair's real account.

C12: *“[...] when I think quickly about it, so is Ryanair, because they make it so much fun content and somehow they are so trendy– like that included and they do so much for it, but they are mocking themselves for it, so I think it's so funny because they know... I just don't understand. [...] They just know how to perfectly use the trends and what people might think about the brand also, but then they to make it like so funny.”*

C3: *“I think it's first I was wondering whether it was real. Uh, I think it was about making themselves like a joke on themselves for having a very bad landings. Uh, and I couldn't really imagine that the brand would call out themselves. Uh, so I thought it was a fake account at first, but then it wasn't.”*

JJ talks about the experience of interacting with consumers through popular negative comments, by responding in a self-ironic manner, which turned out to be successful.

JJ: *“People always gonna like confront yeah negative things it's like nothing you can do about it and everyone's entitled to their opinions as well. [...] what's funny is that then I made a video being like ‘us just trying to make our TikToks’ and then like the comments in the back be saying ‘that's this huge number pounds worth’, and it got two point something million views. So I was like okay this also works. I can just block the people mock us and you know, we also get loads of views, just fight them a little bit.”*

Subconclusion: Brand authenticity on TikTok is explained as a brand connecting with consumers on the platform, is transparent, and not selling. Being transparent was exemplified as showing more what is going on ‘behind the scenes’, for example, videos from inventories, or brand being transparent in not only showing and talking about how good their products are, but also showing for example their ugliest product. Furthermore, transparency was related to the brands being transparent in how their offices look and offering the viewer an insight into the company in that way. The brands are perceived as being caring and invested by genuinely connecting and engaging with their community and other consumers on TikTok. Consumers also perceive brands that do not try to sell anything on the platform as more authentic than brands that do, the interviewed brands also back up this by stating that you should be authentic to the platform first, showing what you’re all about as a brand, instead of trying to push sales. This genuine connection is also related to not selling, i.e. creating ads or content that directly tries to convince the consumer to buy. Rather, brands are perceived as authentic on TikTok when they follow the trends and culture of the platform.

4.4.5 Other views on Authenticity

Lastly, a few indications on consumer scepticism towards brands and their authenticity arose. In addition to not having a purpose of selling, some consumers implied that because all companies have a lucrative purpose, it is therefore difficult for brands to be fully authentic in a competitive world.

C5: *“The reason why I can't like say like one brand that is really authentic is because I feel that there– There are so many brands that always have like something about themselves that, like, I feel that it's such a, like, competitive world that they are always like trying to get people to buy. And it's difficult for me then to say that someone is not.”*

C3: *“No, I don't think [brands can be authentic]. 'Cause they also have– they'll always have a purpose of selling”*

C8: *“The companies also try maybe a little more to look as genuine as they are everyday life, but... From the point of view of companies, it however, the fact is that they have to get that money and make that income, so they definitely have to think a lot– Or I think that every publication that the companies make is really considered and thought out.”*

Furthermore, consumers were also aware that authenticity sells, and since most brands want to be perceived as authentic, it makes it difficult to distinguish, what really is genuine and what is not.

C11: *“I think also the problem the last couple of years has been that a lot of people know that authenticity sells, so that celebrities have been accused of ‘ohh, you’re crying on camera because you seem more genuine and more real but you’re only doing it to get likes or to get more attention’, which blurs the line between is it a front where you’re trying to be authentic or are you actually being real right now? And I guess that’s something you’ll never really know with social media, and you won’t know until you talk to people for real.”*

Consumer 10 and 8 mention being sceptical toward brands and their marketing altogether. According to these participants, advertisements are difficult to trust, since they tend to have a hidden agenda. As consumer 8 recognises, it is challenging for companies to balance the contradiction of being honest about weaknesses while staying competitive.

C10: *“I myself am quite sceptical about companies and their marketing. But maybe... I don’t think companies can be completely authentic but they can maybe make an image of being authentic. But that it’s never that genuinely authentic because it always feels like there’s some ulterior motive in promoting themselves as authentic”*

C8: *“[It is difficult for brands to be authentic] because they have to advertise, and that’s exactly what they can’t do with their own company or to say directly that ‘our weaknesses are, by the way, that blah blah blah’. But if you leave them unsaid, you can easily call them fake and that they are lying.”*

Consumer 5 furthermore mentions that sponsored brand videos create feelings of mistrust as these show that the brand is not genuinely caring about connecting with its consumers. To try to get consumers forcibly to buy felt “fake”. According to C5, sponsored content with discount codes is however appreciated when the purchase intention had already occurred. However, it does not generate authenticity, even if they already like the brand.

C5: *“It’s most that I feel mistrusted in a way that it’s— They’re just trying to get people to buy. Umm. But that’s, as I said, like if I’m in a purchase stage or if I’m thinking of, ‘I need to buy something from this brand’, I would go actively on TikTok to find that sponsored video, find that 20% off and buy it and then I would be like... It wouldn’t be good, like, it wouldn’t be that authentic as well. But if I’m not at that stage and I’m more like just browsing through TikTok, seeing videos and seeing a lot of sponsored videos from brands and I feel this*

mistrust in a way that 'so they're just trying to get people to buy, this is not real', this is more fake in a way, that they're not interested in creating that connection with the consumer"

Inauthentic to try too hard

C1: *"I feel sometimes with the company they're trying so hard to make the TikTok funny or authentic. And I don't think that, it just doesn't really work" [...] "when some of the sounds are trending and then they try to hop on a trend and do. Yeah, like make a video with popular sound and do like dance or, I don't really know how to describe it, but then they try to hop on this trend and you just see that they're trying too hard."*

Or it can be perceived as inauthentic when it tries to be something else;

C4: *"[Presenting the brand in a certain way] Stop trying to be something you're not. Stop trying to be funny. You're a jewellery brand. Like, does that make sense?"*

When talking about authenticity on social media platforms, both consumers and brands recognise different presentations of oneself between different platforms. As consumer 8 points out, nowadays it is really easy to hide the reality behind filters on the platforms, which has generated a lot of inauthentic and polished content. Consequently, the self-representation on different platforms may also differ depending on who follows them on social media.

C8: *"It's really easy to hide the reality. And just the makeup and all [...] I think a lot can be seen now content, about how all bodies are good, and makeup covers so much and just like that. [...] The one who looks the best on [social media] really has the most problems in life, and I think there's a lot of empty content. It's a bit tiring for me because there's so much of it." [...] "I have a different image of it too, what I want to give to my friends. And maybe I don't want my employers, friends, relatives to all be in the same place. Even if it would be the most convenient..."*

Secondly, when discussing authenticity specifically on platforms, the importance of being authentic to the platform was also seen as crucial. However, simply reposting content from one platform to another does not guarantee authenticity. The brand must also show its authenticity on the specific platform to truly connect with its audience. Authenticity helps build trust with consumers and helps the brand stand out and differentiate itself from others in the competitive market.

FTC: *"brand authenticity is to be authentic, but also on the platform that you are."*

From the brands' side, this is seen as a different style of content and different strategies on different platforms:

VH: *“On Instagram we have a big— that audience is established, maybe we've been on our way with a big part of the followers for a long time. The trends don't even really intersect at least at the same point, that it would feel a bit silly.”*

FTC: *“when it comes to Instagram. We had or we still have like, a really strict guidelines, so products have to be on the way background like it's very you know it's almost perfect here. Yeah, like it has to be very perfect, while TikTok is you know just more down to earth.”*

JJ: *“that tends very differently towards our Instagram platform, which is obviously a lot more commercial, a lot more polished. That we have actual graphic designers working on who you know, spend hours and hours of time you know producing assets and graphics [...] whereas the Instagram is something that's a lot more refined, a lot more polished. So that's how it differentiates from the other channels, I think.”*

So, when it comes to the authentically perceived content, it is important to not only be authentic to the brand, but also be authentic to the platform where the brand content is residing. According to FTC, TikTok is more authentic compared to other platforms, because the content is not as polished there as on other social media platforms, and the platforms afford brands with the possibility to talk with consumers. Consumer 2 regards brands present on TikTok to be more authentic. This they explain to be because brands *have to* be authentic on the platform. This *demand* for authenticity comes from the brands needing to follow the TikTok-trends and the culture in order to exist there. This puts the brands in a more equal position with the individual users of the platform.

C2: *“I do think brands on TikTok are more authentic because they have to. So for them to get good likes. They have to work in with the algorithm.” [...] “they have to follow the trends. And one of the problems lets say if you don't make a funny video, you don't get a lot of likes. You cannot buy yourself to likes by having something in a commercial place.”*

However, the question of whether TikTok is more authentic than other social media platforms generated a mix of responses among the consumers, as not everyone perceived TikTok as more authentic than other platforms. The most authentic “content” was said to exist in real life.

C11: *“I think platforms-wise I think it's you can find authentic content, but I don't think it's— It will never be as authentic as if you met up with someone and talked to them.”*

5 ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the findings will be analysed through the findings on affordances of TikTok, perceived authenticity on TikTok, and lastly, combining which affordances support this authenticity. Additional new literature, which supports the analysis, is also introduced..

5.1 The Affordances of TikTok

TikTok as a social media platform with its technological features offers identity, social, affective and cognitive affordances. These findings align with Zhao et al., (2013) findings on social media platform affordances as well. In addition to these affordances, we also identify the cultural affordances of the platform. Furthermore, the platform algorithm affords brands with brand awareness, employer branding and internal branding. An overview of the affordances of TikTok that relate to perceived brand authenticity on TikTok are shared by both consumers and brands is shown in Figure 4. These affordances will further be discussed in this chapter.

Affordances of TikTok		
Technological affordance →	Cultural affordances →	Personal Affordance
Easy for anyone to create content (videos) on the platform	Open culture	Identity (Being and expressing yourself)
Easy to search for content on the platform		Cognitive (Information, inspiration and learning)
Users can easily comment, like, share and direct message each other on the platform	Caring community culture	Social (Relationships and community)
Fun filters and sounds are available to use on the platform.	Fun culture	Affective (positive feelings and escapism)
AI-supported algorithm	For brands: Brand awareness	

Table 8. The Affordances of TikTok.

5.1.1 The cultural affordances of TikTok

Through the findings, it is evident TikTok is a different social media platform than other social media platforms frequently used within the sample. In addition to identity, social, affective and cognitive affordances of social media platforms, the notion of cultural affordances is added to bridge the gap between the technological and personal affordances of TikTok. Cultural affordances

derive from enriching an artefact with the cultural values from which it arises, which can only “be recognised by a member of the culture which created it” (Turner & Turner, 2002, p.6). Within the context of social media, cultural affordances can be described as both cultural affordances of technology; what a social media platform “could offer to users to either reinforce established cultural values and meanings or to destabilise them”, and as affordances of the cultural: “what an ideology that is holistically and deeply embedded in a community and consciously or subconsciously maintained by community members could provide to affect individuals’ ways of doing and thinking, including ways of designing and using technology or a social media platform” (Sun & Suthers, 2021, p. 3022)

The cultural affordance of technology on TikTok is created by the artificial intelligence-supported algorithm of TikTok that drives trends based on emerging cultural transformations (forces), emerging user interest (signals) and high-participatory planned and unplanned prompts (moments) (TikTok, 2023a). Through this cultural affordance of technology, the TikTok culture has been born. The cultural affordance, together with the technological features of TikTok, offers affordances related to identity, sociability and emotions as well. These will be described in the following parts.

5.1.1.1 Open culture – Identity & Cognitive affordances

The open culture of TikTok, together with the technological features of content creation, affords users with the freedom to express their true selves on the platform, as the videos are more likely to reach users with similar interests and therefore make the users feel safer in expressing themselves as they see other people similar to them doing the same. Brands also report that they can express themselves freely on TikTok and that this makes TikTok more authentic for them to be on than other platforms. Expressing oneself on social media platforms relates to the identity affordances of self-disclosure and revealing one’s identity (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Moreno & D’Angelo, 2019). With the specific platform culture, an open brand management style has been crucial for the brands to be successful on TikTok. The brands report that so-called “classical marketing content”, which may work on other social media platforms, does not work well on TikTok. This is also seen in the observations on TikTok. Instead of focusing on selling, brands must focus on branding and being close to their community on Tikok. Consequently, the idea that brands on social media should take a more open approach in their management, as social media platforms are originally intended for consumers, and not brands (Fournier & Avery, 2011), is strengthened.

Furthermore, the open culture together with the functional affordance of information sharing, an easy search function, and the algorithm afford consumers information and inspiration. This finding supports Zhao et al. (2013) finding that social media can support cognitive processes and Whiting & Williams' (2013) findings that information seeking is a popular motivation to use social media.

5.1.1.2 Community culture – Social affordances

It is TikTok's functional features such as comments, direct messages and TikTok, and the caring community culture on the platform, that enable social affordances such as creating relationships (connecting with new people), maintaining close relationships (sending videos to friends). With its specific "Gen Z" humour, language, tone of voice and trends, a feeling of being a part of the 'TikTok community' arises for both brands and consumers. Through the open culture of the platform, consumers feel free to express themselves. The AI-generated algorithm is able to create a feeling of belonging by identifying the interests of the users and then showing content relating to those interests (Karizat et al., 2021). This means that users with the same interest will see the same kind of videos, and be able to connect through them inside the platform, leading them to feel like a part of smaller sub-communities through similar interests (Mathieu-Phillips, 2022). Compared to Facebook, where the user actively has to search for groups to join, TikTok automatically provides each user with the opportunity to become part of ephemeral 'hyper-communities' (Kozinets, 2002) inside of the platform through its algorithm.

In addition to finding sub-communities on the platform, consumers also mentioned that they can feel like a part of a bigger community, even though the other users are unknown to them. On TikTok, a video that has started a trend, and videos that apply that trend to other contexts, can get even millions of views and likes in a short time with the help of the algorithm. To the "outside world", these trends, sounds and TikTok-specific challenges are unfamiliar and often do not make any sense, consequently becoming more of 'inside' values and practices for the TikTok community. Interestingly, many consumers said they do not follow many friends on the platform. The only ones they followed there were very close friends, but compared to Instagram where they follow a lot of friends and relatives, the case was not the same on TikTok. The platform is used by people from all over the world, which furthermore enables users to see more diverse content than on ,for example, Instagram. Regarding the theory about networked individualism (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), this

finding is interesting as the users of TikTok seem to think they are part of a group, but in reality, they are just parts of different social networks around them. Still, these ephemeral relationships with strangers make the individuals feel like part of a community. This proves the shift away from traditional communities based on similar history and background, and instead, what matters is the similar interests here and now.

Postmodern consumers look for feelings of belonging through communities that together act as authoritative performances for enhancing the feeling of belonging (Arnould & Price, 2000; Kozinets, 2002). These communities can also apply to brand contexts when the brands are able to support consumers in their identity formations (Holt, 2002). In contrast to Muniz & O'Guinn's (2001) notion of brand communities being highly social and structured on collective identities and discussion, the TikTok community can rather be conceptualised as a brand public. Brand publics are often used in the context of social media as a term describing how consumers create value around a brand. Brand publics are social formations structured on individual and collective effects built on interest and mediation rather than being structured on collective identities, interaction and discussion (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). Networked individuals (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) create short-term networks and connections to other individuals. Several studies on social media have also confirmed this, arguing that social media seems to be mainly used for sharing one's own perspectives instead of actually building collective identities (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). TikTok affording a community feeling, can therefore be called a brand public assembled by the diversity and variety of its users who, over time, develop their own rules of continuity (Lury 2004; Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016).

The social affordances of TikTok create good opportunities for brands to engage with their community or just TikTok users in general by replying to comments, interacting with UGC content and having live videos where they can interact in real-time with the viewers. FTC mentioned the live videos as a successful example of how they were able to connect with their community and say they want to do more of those in the future.

5.1.1.3 Fun culture – Affective affordances

Fun is a complex phenomenon that offers different meanings for different people (McManus & Furnham, 2010). In the dictionary, fun is often related to pleasure, enjoyment, and excitement

(Cambridge dictionary, n.d.). Within positive psychology research, the concept of fun has been related to concepts such as joy, hope, and flow have been mentioned as emotional components regarding what makes us happy (McManus & Furnham, 2010). For these reasons, fun is described as an affective affordance of TikTok, as the content on the platform affords users positive feelings of fun and joy. Fun is also afforded by TikTok's fun and ironic tone of voice, which is based on Gen-Z consumer culture. The positive feelings that the platform affords the users also explain why many mention that they use the platform as a temporary escape from real life. In line with Katz & Foulkes (1962) and Korgaonkar & Wolin (1999), the escapism of social media is also highly present in the context of TikTok. It can be assumed to be one of the main drivers of why the platform has gotten such a popularity among Generation Z, who are said to be the most sad generation so far (Sparks Akers, 2022)

5.1.2 Other brand affordances

In addition to the affordances for brands linked to the culture-specific contexts of TikTok, the interviewed brands mentioned that TikTok gives them great brand awareness. Brand awareness is afforded by the AI-supported algorithm which enables brands to reach out to several users on the platform. TikTok also affords the brands with brand awareness through a lot of UGC content created on the platform. Brands are able to engage with this content directly on the platform and create value in that way (see Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2022), this creates more brand trust for the consumers as well (see Sedalo, Boateng & Kosiba, 2022). Furthermore, an outcome of being on TikTok is positive employer branding. The TikTok presence also has enhanced the internal bonding between colleagues in the company. Employer branding and internal branding are not perceived to be affordances of TikTok per se, as these are outcomes rather than enabled actions of TikTok. Implications of these outcomes will be discussed in managerial implications chapter 6.3.

5.2 What does brand authenticity mean in the context of TikTok?

When analysing what brand authenticity means in the context of TikTok, it is first essential to address the platform-specific culture. In order to be authentic on TikTok, brands also have to follow the values and culture of this environment. TikTok has a unique community culture that does not exist to the same extent on other platforms. This 'TikTok culture' is socially constructed by the users and their cultural values, and is generally perceived as open, fun, and not too serious. For brands to be perceived as authentic on TikTok, they have to follow these cultural 'values' in their

existence on the platform as well. Related to previous perspectives on brand authenticity studied through the objectivist, constructivist and existential perspectives (Morhart et al., 2015), this study suggests that brand authenticity on TikTok is individually and subjectively determined based on a mix of iconic and existential cues. Iconic cues relate to the extent to which a brand is true to the cultural values of TikTok and communicate them, and existential cues relate to how these iconic cues enable existential feelings for each individual. These findings also support Fouladi, Ekhlassi & Sakhdari's (2021) findings on brand authenticity on social media, implying that perceived authenticity is subjectively created through existential cues coming from mostly iconic cues. In contrast to Fouladi, Ekhlassi & Sakhdari's (2021) findings, as well as most other research on brand authenticity, we did not find indexical cues of a brand to have an effect on brand authenticity in the context of TikTok. We summarise these findings in the figure below.

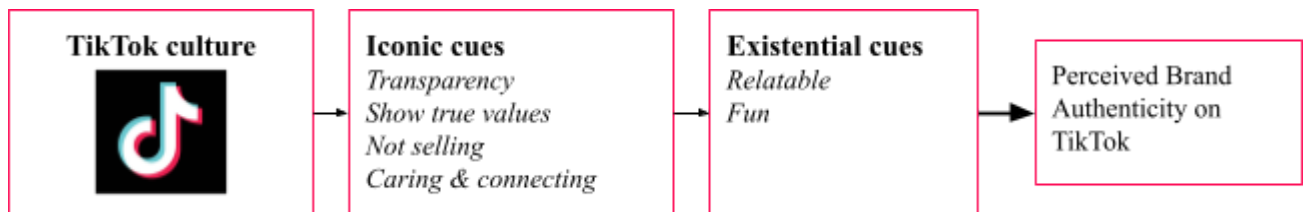


Figure 4. Antecedents of Perceived Brand Authenticity on TikTok. Own creation.

5.2.1 Iconic cues

The iconic cues traditionally relate to the extent that the brands on the platform are able to communicate something that is indexically authentic (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). However, in the context of TikTok, the cultural values of TikTok are socially constructed iconic cues reflecting the cultural values of the TikTok users (mostly Generation Z). As consumers assess the authenticity of brands in social media through an assessment of iconic cues communicated by the brand (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018; Fouladi, Ekhlassi & Sakhdari, 2021), authenticity impressions on TikTok are created when the brand communicates cues referring to the culturally reflected and co-created values of the platform.

5.2.1.1 Transparency

Brand transparency is an iconic cue which directly refers to the open platform culture of TikTok. Transparency is not a new dimension to brand authenticity per se. In a study on how young brands create authenticity, Guèvremont (2017) found brand transparency to be highly relevant, especially

when young brands do not have a long history or heritage to provide the traditionally studied indexical cues of authenticity. In her study, brand transparency is described as “a brand that follows heart and instinct in all decisions. It openly and spontaneously shares its emotions as well as its weaknesses, imperfections, doubts, and mistakes.” (Guèvremont, 2017, p. 510). On TikTok, the authenticity of this kind is shown through brands posting videos about things the outside world would otherwise not see. For example, *behind-the-scenes* videos from companies’ inventories and offices, as well as talking about poorly performing products, as C2 demonstrates, Ditur talks also about their ugliest watches, related to showing imperfections in Guèvremont (2017). This transparency is not recognised to the same extent on other social media platforms, therefore creating an aspect of authenticity unique to TikTok. Even if the brand is not transparent on other platforms or media, they ‘have to’ be it on TikTok in order to fit in and be perceived as authentic. Therefore, transparency is an iconic driver of brand authenticity on TikTok. Nevertheless, it should also be mentioned that it would be inauthentic for a brand to communicate something they are not in real life. In line with Holt’s (2002) contradictions to postmodernity and the implications for brands, brands should also be transparent and not only communicate it, to not risk losing brand trust among consumers.

5.2.1.2 Showing your true values

Interestingly, showing your true values (brand context: showing the brand’s values) was mentioned in relation to authenticity in general for both consumers and brands, but only the brands mentioned this in relation to TikTok by showing their values on the platform. Consumers did express that they can not only be themselves through the open and welcoming culture of the platform, but also through the feelings of belonging to each other. Consumers in the interviewed sample also express themselves by creating videos of memorable experiences, which can be seen as self-authenticating acts by creating and sharing one’s own self-narrative with the community (Arnould & Price, 2000). However, consumers do not seem to recognise that brands are also showing themselves and their values there. Instead, they recognise the other features of the content, such as being on trend or fun, which are features related to TikTok’s culture. This implies that evidence-based indexical cues relating to long history or a rich heritage of proven quality, as Beverland (2005) suggested, do not matter for brands on TikTok.

Nonetheless, consumers expressed that brands with an established heritage and long history (for example, Finnair, mentioned by C12) would not be perceived as authentic on TikTok, because it would contrast their brand image. This kind of continuity and showing the same brand image on all platforms is often discussed in brand authenticity literature (see Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015). However, we want to emphasise that the findings do not suggest this to hold while operating on TikTok. The same content that fits TikTok does not work well on other social media platforms, and vice versa. This is again because of the strong community culture that TikTok has, which is not present on other platforms to the same extent. Posting a video relating to a TikTok trend on another social media platform may therefore create a risk of losing brand meaning to older customers, as they may not recognise this “new” way of being for the brand. Hence, we stress that for brands not to become perceived as inauthentic, they should follow the culture of each specific platform instead of excessively focusing on posting the same content on various platforms.

5.2.1.3 Not selling

Both consumers and the brands mention the fact that TikTok has not (yet) become commercialised like many other social media platforms (such as Instagram or Facebook), which makes it more authentic because then the brands show “what they are all about” (FTC) instead of just trying to make money. The value of not being marketed at is not surprising among postmodern consumers, as postmodernity is defined by an overall scepticism towards marketing messages from brands. Postmodern consumers want to be in control of what they choose to consume and therefore want to take distance from brands, forcibly showing them with marketing-related cues (Holt, 2002). Some implications of marketing scepticism or scepticism towards brands also became clear from the participant interviews. For example, brands can never be fully authentic because their ulterior motive is always to sell and make money either way.

According to Guévremont (2017), brand virtuousness is a strong driver of perceived brand authenticity. Brand virtuousness relates to the higher-up noble values of a brand and commercially disinterested intrinsically motivated brand activities, consequently defining a brand that has high values and is motivated by a genuine desire to bring people together and make a positive impact in society (Guévremont, 2017). While the consumers in the sample mentioned that the values of a brand do not matter much regarding perceived authenticity on TikTok, points of brands having other than purely financial interests, i.e., not selling, were mentioned. However, these were not mentioned

in relation to the brand's values but related to the brand's content on TikTok. Therefore we classify 'not selling' as an iconic rather than indexical cue. The finding on the notion of not selling as being part of perceived brand authenticity on TikTok can also give further support for Hasan, Qyauum & Zia's (2022) findings that influencer marketing and UGC are more authentic than classical marketing methods. It is evident that consumers do not want to be directly sold at.

5.2.1.4 Invested and caring

Being invested and caring was mentioned for brand authenticity in relation to TikTok and outside of TikTok, with examples being that brands are authentic when they genuinely want to create a connection with their community. This finding about being caring and connecting towards the community is also in line with Morhart et al.'s (2015) conceptualisation of brand authenticity as a brand that is "motivated by caring and responsibility (integrity)" (p. 203), and Guèvremont's (2017) dimension of brand authenticity for a young brand, brand proximity, described as when a brand genuinely cares about creating familiarity and closeness with the community. This makes the brand seem more authentic to consumers because they feel closer to it. When feeling closer and familiar with the brand, and feeling that the brand also genuinely cares about them, consumers are also more likely to create a stronger relationship with the brand and hence stay loyal to the brand (Fournier, 1998). Both brand transparency and virtuousness signal brand proximity (Guèvremont, 2017)

In the networked society, there has been a shift from traditional communities to so-called "hyper-communities" (Kozinets, 2002; 2015). These hyper-communities are short-lived ephemeral relations that can exist within the interactive ecosystem environments of social media platforms. As built on the cultural values of Gen Z, brands on TikTok can also become part of producing this culture. When it is able to create relationships within such communities, it creates an impression for the members that the brand is also genuinely caring and invested in the community (Holt, 2002). The finding that brands that are invested and caring on TikTok are also perceived as authentic therefore does not come as a surprise when looking at authenticity from a postmodern perspective.

5.2.2 Existential cues

In addition to iconic cues that relate to the brand's communication style on TikTok, existential cues to brand authenticity were also found. The identified existential cues are perceived relatability and fun.

5.2.2.1 Relatable

Being relatable was described by consumers as authentic on TikTok and authenticity in general, but interestingly not in regards to perceived brand authenticity outside of TikTok. However, it is possible that this was something that the consumers did not come to think of when being asked how they perceive an authentic brand. Brands mentioned relatability both in regards to being authentic but also being authentic on TikTok. This shows an interesting aspect of brand authenticity on TikTok compared to previous research on brand authenticity, for perceived brand authenticity on TikTok, the brands should both be authentic towards themselves, but also towards the platform they are on. As TikTok has an open and relaxed culture with content relatable to the TikTok community, the content that brands post on the platform should also be that. For consumers, relatability on TikTok is afforded by content that shows elements similar to them, without being polished or very planned. It is also afforded by brands doing trends and brands showing the people behind the brands as the consumers then know that these are also fellow individuals as themselves who also ‘have to’ follow trends on TikTok to be successful there. Relatability in relation to brands on TikTok can therefore be seen as brands being equal to the consumers as other individuals and not as big enterprises.

Examples of how relatability is seen on TikTok is through content that consumers can relate to as it is other individuals doing it. In this way, consumers also see that there is a human behind a brand, and they have to follow the same trends and “rules” on the platform as everyone else. An interesting aspect of the existential cues of relatability is brand anthropomorphism, which Morhart et al., (2015) mentioned to be an existential driver for perceived brand authenticity. Brand anthropomorphism refers to giving non-human entities, such as brands, human-like features (Epley, Waytz & Cacioppo, 2007). Brand anthropomorphism is frequently seen in marketing, for example, making the coca-cola bottle hourglass more distinctive and memorable (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012).

In addition to human-like traits, brands often also have human-like identity traits (see Aaker, 1997), which consumers tend to create relationships with (see Fournier, 1998) or communities around (see Muniz & O’Guinn, 2009). When brands can be identified as persons, these provide self-referential cues to consumers and support these in their construction of self-identity (Rose & Wood, 2005). Therefore, the higher the brand is anthropomorphised, the more likely it is for consumers to recognise the brand’s values which increases brand symbolism and consequently provides

existential authenticity in the brand experience (Morhart et al., 2015). The purest examples of brand anthropomorphism on TikTok that the consumers mentioned are the Ryanair examples with putting eyes and a mouth on an aeroplane. Other examples of anthropomorphisation on TikTok and being relatable through this, is showing the employees of the brand, creating a connection for the viewer to see that the brand is “made of” people similar to themselves.

5.2.2.2 Fun

A new aspect of perceived brand authenticity is the notion of fun. Fun was not mentioned in regards to authenticity other than authenticity on TikTok by consumers and brands. Fun and escapism have been studied in consumption contexts relating to existentialist cues of authenticating acts before (see Belk & Costa, 1998). Already four decades ago, Holbrook & Hirshman (1982) noted the importance of hedonic cues such as fantasies, feelings and fun in consumption. However, these cues seem to have been largely forgotten on other social media platforms such as Instagram for example, which both consumers and brands describe as polished and more refined and narrow when it comes to brand content.

As TikTok’s mission is to “inspire creativity and bring joy” (TikTok, 2023b), it was not surprising to find that users and brands perceive the platform as fun. Not only does this notion of fun on TikTok enable users to temporarily ‘escape’ real life, but it is also a moderator of emotional brand attachment creation when brands can create feelings of fun and joy (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer & Nyffenegger, 2011). When seeing a fun video that a brand has made, the feelings that the brand (video) generates act as self-referential (existential) cues to consumers’ authenticity formation. Such existential cues to brand authenticity have also been shown to have a positive effect on emotional brand attachment, especially when these feelings relate to the desired ‘actual self’ (vs. the ‘ideal self’) for consumers (Malär et al., 2011). Emotional brand attachment has substantial effects on brand equity and is, therefore, an essential construct for marketers to consider (Park et al., 2010).

5.3 How are the affordances of TikTok supporting this authenticity?

By analysing the consumer and brand perceived affordances on the platform, we draw the following conclusions regarding which affordances enable perceived authenticity on TikTok. By analysis, the informational affordance for consumers, as well as the affordance of brand awareness, employer branding and internal branding, did not relate to perceived brand authenticity on TikTok.

Furthermore, the cognitive affordance of getting information and inspiration did not reflect in the perceived authenticity either. Therefore, we do not include those affordances here. An overview on the perceived brand authenticity on TikTok through the affordances of the platform is shown below in Table 9.

Technological affordance →	Cultural affordances →	Personal Affordance →	Perceived BA on TT	Authenticity cue
Easy for anyone to create content (videos) on the platform	Open culture	Identity (<i>Being and expressing yourself</i>)	Showing true values Transparency	Iconic
Users can easily comment, like, share and direct message each other on the platform	Community culture	Social (<i>Relationship and community</i>)	Not selling Invested & Caring	Iconic
Fun filters and sounds are available to use on the platform.	Fun culture	Affective (<i>positive feelings</i>)	Relatability Fun	Existential

Table 9. Affordances of TikTok, which enable perceived brand authenticity on the platform.

Combining the perceived brand authenticity on TikTok with the identity affordance, our analysis finds that the identity affordance of the platform is a driver behind perceived brand authenticity factors of *being transparent* and *showing one's true values*.

Brand authenticity elements on TikTok that relate to social affordances are the elements of *being invested and caring*. In this way, brands create closer relationships with their consumers and community. The social affordance of the community culture also includes the notion of *not selling* on TikTok. Brands are an equal part of the community and should not be perceived to have a monetary interest from their fellow community members. The not selling element of authenticity could also be linked to the identity affordances of the platform, as the brands say that it enables them to be their authentic selves instead of trying to sell something. However, we have chosen to have it linked to the social affordances of the platform as it could be interpreted as the brands caring more about the community when they are not trying to make money on them.

The platform has humour and language based on Gen Z culture and humour and is assumed to bring out a communal feeling of joy. Therefore, the fun is seen as a culturally authentic affordance of TikTok. Through the notion of creating positive feelings for consumers with fun and relatable content, TikTok creates self-referential cues for consumers, which creates a notion of existential authenticity for these users. Therefore, the affective affordance of fun relates to the existential authenticity cues of *relatability* and *fun*.

6 DISCUSSION

This study focused on finding out what the concept of brand authenticity means in the context of TikTok and which affordances of the platform enable this perceived authenticity. Even though brand authenticity was studied more from the consumer perspective, brands were also included in the data collection process to gain insights into how they use the platform, and what the responses and implications to their performance on TikTok have been thus far.

In the current digital age, the concept of authenticity has become a topic of discussion and debate. Individuals have different views on what authenticity looks like on social media platforms. While there is no right or wrong answer, it is clear that perceived brand authenticity on social media is an important aspect that consumers consider in their consumption decisions. TikTok is a consumer-based platform, and therefore, the premise to be perceived as authentic on the platform comes from the consumer culture. The consumer-perceived brand authenticity in the context of TikTok therefore relates both to being authentic towards TikTok as a brand, but also to the brands on TikTok. Being authentic to the platform implies following the ‘rules and values’ of the platform’s community’s culture. One could say that TikTok serves as an assembled interactive system environment whose values and meanings are co-created and under constant flux by the platform users (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2022). Hence, the experiences on the platform are also interactively co-created with the other stakeholders in this ‘ecosystem’. Brands and consumers on TikTok co-create the TikTok brand, and the culture of the platform therefore becomes socially constructed, and perceived brand authenticity on the platform relates to the extent to which brands can create impressions of the socially constructed platform culture.

Contrasting to previous studies on iconic cues to brand authenticity, relating to promotional cues such as advertising that create impressions about something perceived as indexically authentic, such as the essence and virtue of a brand (Brown et al., 2003; Morhart et al., 2015), TikTok and the culture of TikTok could be seen as the indexically authentic object. However, following the philosophical underpinnings of this research, taking the ontological stance of social constructivism, realities are subjective and created individually, and there is no such thing as an objective reality. As a consumer-based social media platform, the culture and values of TikTok are reflected by the culture and values of the user group. Therefore, we do not see the culture of TikTok as one objective reality, as the culture is constructed by the cultural values of the users of the platform.

TikTok's biggest user group are individuals who belong to Generation Z. Therefore, the culture of the platform also reflects the values of this user group. While Generation Z still refers to very young consumers, this consumer group has not yet been studied to a thorough extent. Therefore, this study investigates perceived brand authenticity from the sociological perspective of postmodernism. Marketing scepticism has become a growing concern in the postmodern world, and consumers are becoming increasingly sceptical about the authenticity of advertisements and brand representations, as they cannot readily distinguish between those who are genuine and those who are just acting. Advertisements, in particular, are frequently viewed with suspicion, as they are seen as an attempt by the brand to advertise rather than build a connection with the consumer. Due to this scepticism, it has become more common for companies to present an authentic and carefully crafted image that reflects reality. As postmodern consumers quest for authenticity and are tired of the polished content on other social media platforms, such as Instagram, it is not a surprise that TikTok, which is built on consumer values, is generally perceived as more authentic and fun than other social media platforms. Thus, brands on TikTok should also be open to this quickly changing process of meanings and values to be perceived as authentic to both the platform and the consumers that they wish to target.

Some consumers also mentioned that they do not think brands can ever be fully authentic as they always have a money-making motive behind them. Few even expressed that they feel like the brands which are "trying too hard" to be perceived as caring and fun on the platform, make them seem, in fact more inauthentic, as it simply does not fit with who the brand is, and shows that the brand is not genuine. Also, the consumer interviews demonstrated that consumers generally see all brand-produced content as advertisements, even when they are not directly trying to sell anything or are simply presenting their products. This raises a challenge for brands in being fully authentic, as there seems to be favouritism towards user-generated content instead of brand-generated content on TikTok. However, by showing values that were true to the platforms' values (which are based on consumer values), brands are also perceived as more authentic there if they are authentic to these values. The findings show that brands, who are aware of and understand the platform's culture, are able to be perceived as authentic on the platform.

This “not selling” aspect in perceived brand authenticity conforms with the concept of a postmodern consumer. As one of the interviewed brands, Verohallinto, does not have a commercial purpose, being a governmental tax agency, it raises the question of whether it, therefore, has an advantage on the platform. While there seems not to be prerequisites for a brand (public vs private sector, commercial vs not) to be successful in the platform, even the commercial brands of the sample, Flying Tiger Copenhagen and JOE & THE JUICE, contributed their achievements on the platform to their non-commercial focus, highlighting their brand identity in the context of the relatable trends, rather than wanting to, for example, increase specific sales. In the case of Verohallinto, it cannot sell anything or even attain consumer preference over a competitor. Since it is a government agency, all citizens must deal with them. Hence the brand can only raise awareness and create trust. “Not selling” is also something which is generally regarded as a consumer characteristic, which in combination with the increased marketing scepticism, suggests that brands are expected to become equal to individuals in order to be accepted on TikTok. This strengthens Holt’s (2002) argument that brands must, in order to be perceived as authentic, be commercially disinterested.

Being equal and relatable as a brand is furthermore shown through brand anthropomorphism on TikTok. When the brand becomes more human-like by perceiving the brand and its identity as an individual equal to a consumer, the brands are also perceived as more authentic as these indicate symbolic self-referential cues to the consumers of being an active participant in the platform community, instead of being a passive, one-sided communicator. Through the algorithm of TikTok affording consumers to see content relating to personal interests, using TikTok can also serve as a self-authenticating act for consumers, through which they perceive it as more authentic (Arnould & Price, 2000). Consequently, the same applied to brands that participate on the platform delivers the same effect and value as it does to the consumer. Nevertheless, authenticity remains a crucial aspect of online interactions and self-expression, and it continues to be an essential topic of discussion in our digital world. However, they acknowledged that the authenticity of social media can never truly compare to that of real-life interactions and experiences.

We recognise that it is likely that the antecedents of perceived brand authenticity on TikTok could be the same in other contexts as well. However, the strong community culture of TikTok might be a challenge to replicate on other social media platforms as it is also the smart algorithm on the platform that affords general user interests to spread within the TikTok community. If TikTok were

to disappear today, another platform with similar features would likely be born, as TikTok is built upon consumer interests, and these interests do not disappear along with the platform.

As the extent of the research is presented, significant conclusions of reality cannot be made. Some of the concepts that arose from the data would require a more broad and thorough exploration of the theoretical concepts. However, as the research follows an inductive theory approach, the gathered insights sufficiently contribute to the theory while the research aim is fulfilled. The limitations, theoretical contributions, managerial implications of the research, and suggestions for future research are discussed in the sections below.

6.1 Limitations

As with all research, this research also has a few limitations. Because of the explorative nature of the research, the selected samples are small for a true grounded theory, and the results would need to be tested and explored among a larger more heterogeneous sample, in order to be generalisable in larger contexts. A larger sample would also give further insight and different perspectives on the studied phenomenon.

Furthermore, both of the researchers are a part of the “TikTok culture” as well. Hence, the interpretation of the findings is not completely unbiased. However, this allowed for a more open discussion with the participants, as the inner workings of the platform are baseline understood by the researchers. The interviews could therefore focus more on the individual subjective experiences and perceptions, instead of explaining the basic functions of TikTok. Also, the prior familiarity with the platform enabled a deeper analysis and understanding of it and allowed a more thorough conceptualisation.

Another limitation of this research is that it only considers perceived brand authenticity from an inside and outside perspective on TikTok, and does not consider what the users of TikTok afford TikTok as a platform. In other words, it only considers Gibson’s (1977) perspective of affordances of being afforded to actors by the environment, but not what the individuals of the environment afford the environment itself.

Lastly, this research does not consider or reflect on the negative sides of TikTok or other social media platforms. Some negative aspects of TikTok came through in the interviews, but due to time constraints and the scope of this research, these are not discussed. Furthermore, it does not address the current discussion around the possible banning of the platform (see Purcell, 2023). However, even if TikTok were deleted tomorrow, the findings of this research relating to authenticity, escapism, connection with brands and community would arguably not disappear, as the findings regardless provide a fascinating insight into the older Generation Z'ers and their perceptions and search for brand authenticity.

6.2 Theoretical contributions

This research offers a new perspective on brand authenticity introducing the importance of being genuine to the platform as well, the so-called 'platform brand authenticity'. Previous studies on brand authenticity have not reflected the medium where the brand exists, especially in social media. The platform has an important part in creating perceived brand authenticity. If brands are not authentic towards the platform's culture and values, they cannot be perceived as authentic. The results of the study conform with Morhart et al.'s (2015) concept of brand authenticity, however, as seen in the analysis, the framework is a contribution itself to research on social media platform-related brand authenticity. Brand authenticity has not been studied previously in platform-specific cultures, which brings a new perspective to the existing theory on brand authenticity.

6.3 Managerial implications

As the findings of the research suggest, in order to execute a successful TikTok strategy of being perceived as authentic on the platform, a brand needs to become a part of the TikTok community first, through observing, understanding and integrating into the platform culture. The research finds that there is not any distinct limitation for a brand to be authentic on the platform as long as the brand is authentic to the platform community and culture. To be authentic to the platform culture, the brand content should follow the themes of fun and relatability through the trends. A valid question for a brand to ask itself therefore would be "how can we relate ourselves to the trends on the platform?". To be able to respond to the fast-paced TikTok trends, the brand needs to have solid internal trust towards the creators of the brand content. Flexibility is a favourable quality for a brand to possess. However, the ability to be reflexive and flexible is suggested as a managerial-level

prerequisite to successful activity on TikTok. Especially with the management of the brand, be bold to get to a personal level with your customers and engage with them.

Furthermore, an active engagement on TikTok has proven to afford brands with a lot of UGC content and brand awareness through it. However, all the brands mention that the time they have to engage with their community is limited. Hence it is suggested that brands understand the value of this engagement and invest in people to engage with their audience on TikTok. A close relationship and feeling that a brand genuinely cares about its consumers has been proven to afford emotional brand attachment which leads to increased brand trust and loyalty.

When making content that is TikTok-relevant, the brand is able to get a great deal of brand awareness for free. The extent of the impact of TikTok (brand activity) for direct sales is difficult or even impossible to measure, hence many brands are not daring to follow suit. Managers need to at look aside from the financial goals as traditional marketing measures do not work the same with postmodern consumers, the focus should be on the brand through showing brand values if a brand wants to be relevant to consumers of the Z-generation. Presumably, this perspective on branding is here to stay. Seeing TikTok as a long-term financial strategy instead of quick sales is therefore extremely important. A strong brand that consumers trust is more likely to overcome potential crises. The future cannot be reliably predicted. However, based on the analysis, it seems that authentic participation on TikTok has the potential to create brand value among Generation Z in the long term. It is also important to note that employer branding and internal branding are secondary benefits seen from being active on the platform. As the benefits of being on the platform are not directly correlated with increased sales, created value originates from positive perceptions of the brand and its authenticity, as authenticity continues to be substantial within marketing, and this kind of value creation should not be disregarded.

Marketing scepticism is also an important aspect which arose from the collected data. Although brands cannot directly affect brand content being regarded as marketing or an advertisement by default, brands are still accepted on TikTok, as long as it conforms to the platform culture. However, marketing scepticism among Generation Z is an increasing concern that is important for brands to consider and respond accordingly. Therefore, *non-selling* brand activities appear to be critical for reaching the young consumers in an effective and authentic manner.

For many brands, being fun is not generally incorporated in the inherent brand identity or communications, which is a TikTok-specific necessary for a brand to adopt. A freer and more trusting management style further allows to understand and engage with the consumers, primarily through and on TikTok, the platform's unique characteristics need to be implemented as part of brand authenticity, as branding exists in a postmodern hyperconnected world. Relevant to consider as a brand is how to become part of the communities, or through brand anthropomorphism, "*how can we as a brand be like an individual?*" and incorporate the individualist perspectives of the brand as a part of brand communication strategy on the platform.

6.4 Future research

For future research studies, we recommend looking into exceptional brand cases, e.g., Ryanair or Duolingo, and how their brand authenticity is perceived on TikTok. Moreover, a further exploration of the perception of fun in brand communication and how this affects the customer-brand relationship is proposed, since it seems highly relevant in the context of postmodern branding.

This consumer sample of this research mainly consisted of (Northern) Europeans, and other geographical markets or even other European areas could be relevant to be researched, to investigate any possible cultural differences in perceived brand authenticity, and whether the consumer affordances of TikTok differ depending on varying demographics, in larger heterogeneous samples.

According to the findings of this research, fun is seemingly essential to the authenticity of TikTok as a social media platform, however, its origin could be a subject of future studies, where other prominent social media platforms are studied in comparison. Moreover, the concept of *platform brand authenticity* arose from the analysis, the approach would require further examination and conceptualisation, for example through the perspective of a co-creational lived experience ecosystems (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2022), which was not possible to accomplish within the limited scope of this research.

7 CONCLUSION

The research concludes that brand authenticity on TikTok is achieved when the brand is authentic to the platform. This means brands need to communicate the values of the TikTok community, which are based on consumer interests. In other words, brand authenticity on TikTok is achieved through iconic cues reflecting the values of the platform, which align with existential cues, as the platform culture is based on the values of consumers. Existential cues of authenticity refer to relatability. Therefore, brands need to see themselves as equal individuals to consumers and not as corporations, as brand authenticity on TikTok is achieved when a brand is relatable to the consumer. This relatability occurs through being relatable towards the community, not selling, being transparent, being caring and connecting with the users of the platform. These elements of brand authenticity are all afforded by the open, caring and fun culture of TikTok. If brands do not have a genuine interest in connecting with their customers, but only want to sell and make money, TikTok is not the correct place for them to be at. TikTok may not enable direct sales for brands, however, in the long term, it is a great platform to build up brand trust and brand attachment. In the postmodern world, where consumers are bombarded with marketing messages and hence increasingly looking for consuming brands that are authentic to them, creating strong brand relationships built on trust and mutual understanding, is the way for a brand to surrender and stay relevant in the future.

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