



The TikTok phenomenon: An exploratory study of how Targeted Short-Form video is meeting the needs of social media users. What does this mean for brands?

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ABSTRACT

As TikTok continues to gain traction amongst social media users, brands are challenged with ways to effectively communicate with consumers on the platform. With growing academic interest in TikTok the goal of this exploratory study was to determine the needs that TikTok's targeted short-form video content meets in order to inform digital content strategy. By understanding these needs, brands can work towards piecing a digital content strategy that is geared towards building brand resonance. The study comprised of six Millennials and Generation Zs who are active TikTok users based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Through semi-structured one-on-one interviews, the researcher was able to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic and provide insights that can guide content strategy for marketers looking to include TikTok in their social media strategy. The research revealed TikTok's potential as majority of participants had been influenced to purchase a product/service they had seen on platform, nevertheless, the data also highlighted brands' overall ineffectiveness in leveraging the platform. This demonstrates the value and necessity for scholarly research surrounding TikTok in the field of marketing.

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1 Chapter 1: Introduction

This research paper is an exploratory study into the TikTok phenomenon. As more consumers choose to watch and engage with content on the platform, it is vital for marketers to understand and harness this shift in social media consumption. The aim of the study is to provide marketers insight into the platform by focusing on targeted short-form video and how this content tactic is satisfying the needs of social media users.

The following section provides a deep dive into the study's context and rationale; detailing the relevance of the topic as well as its importance in the field of marketing. Thereafter, the problem and purpose of the study are expanded upon in order to establish the gap for the research as well as provide valuable guidance for the research. An overview of the research methodology is then outlined to provide context into how the investigation explored these concepts through the research. These concepts were studied using Katz's (1959) Uses and Gratifications Theory. Additionally, this study rested on McLuhan's theories (McLuhan, 1964), which place a focus on not only the content of the medium but the medium itself in the context of its cultural matrix.

Finally, the paper's structure is outlined to provide a brief overview of what to expect in each chapter.

1.1 Background and orientation

As acknowledged by Lehmann-Haupt (2020), Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press was hailed as a pivotal moment in history as Gutenberg ushered in the "information revolution". From this first breath of mass media to the internet age, society has witnessed media breakthroughs such as spoken words on radio to visuals on television (Noll, 2007). Persuasive communication and branding has greatly leveraged the evolution of media which has a long history that parallels major shifts in society, economics, politics and technology (Mas-Manchon, Lopez-Gonzalez and Guerrero-Solé, 2020).

"Marketing is a race without a finish line", as Kotler (2003: 22) once said rings true as advertising has had to adapt to changes in the context of both society and technology. Thanks to the printing press, newspapers made it possible for the first advertisements to reach the masses (Sampson, 2017). Then came the television, which allowed brands to exchange audio-visual material to better interact and form connections with consumers (Kuyucu, 2020). Today, digitalisation and connectivity has forced brands to re-think their marketing strategies and practices (Kotler, Wong, Saunders and Armstrong, 2004).

The internet laid a foundation for yet another pivotal moment in history, the rise of social media (Kaplan, 2018). Furthermore, Web 2.0 meant users were now able to access audio-visual content on mobile devices (Costa-Sanchez, 2017). This introduced a new dynamic as media consumption was no-longer a one-way conversation but rather, one where individuals could join the discourse and shape communication (Apuke, 2016), creating a new dynamic and relationship between consumers and brands (Mas-Manchon et al., 2020).

According to Kumar and Lakshmi (2012), successive eras in society have required brands to develop effective methods of communication, with social media being at the helm in the twenty-first century. Over the years, a number of social media trends have emerged, one of which is the increasing popularity of short-form video and recommendation systems (targeted content) across platforms (Bird, Durham, Holcomb and Thakar, 2019; Li, Liu and Ren, 2019). One particular social media platform that has shown tremendous growth by utilising targeted short-form video is TikTok (CB Insights, 2020): TikTok defines itself as the destination for short-form videos (Google Play, 2021) and has also revealed its strong reliance on recommendation systems for its current success (TikTok, 2020; Zhao, 2021). Today, TikTok is one of the most downloaded mobile applications globally; setting a record

as the most downloaded mobile application in a quarter; a spike that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chapple, 2020).

In South Africa, TikTok leads as the second most downloaded mobile application (Kemp, 2021). As consumers continue to gravitate towards TikTok, it is critical for brands to tap into the opportunity provided by targeted short-form video as a content tactic to better connect with consumers. However, as highlighted by Vinerean (2017), brands must be strategic in how they build connections with consumers, marketers must comprehend the factors that impact social media consumers in order to construct a mutually beneficial relationship. This notion highlights the necessity of understanding the relationship between social media users, TikTok and targeted short-form video to strategically make use of the platform.

1.2 Rationale

Media consumption is continuously changing, and in order to comprehend this evolution for brands to leverage, it is necessary to analyse the medium through which content is shared (McLuhan, 1964; Kapoor, Tamilmani, Rana, Patil Dwivedi and Nerur, 2017). As previously mentioned, targeted short-form video has played an integral role in TikTok's success (CB Insights, 2020; TikTok, 2020), therefore, these features were chosen as the study's premise. By investigating TikTok and the elements driving its success, we are then able to gain a better understanding of consumers and their relationship with social media and what this means for brands and content strategies.

A study undertaken by Bhandari and Bimo (2020) worked to establish whether TikTok was fundamentally different from other popular social media networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. According to Bhandari and Bimo (2020), TikTok offers a unique experience that places a focus on users repeatedly engaging with self-defined content (targeted content) rather than interpersonal engagement that can be associated with other popular social media networks. Termed as the "algorithmised self" (Bhandari and Bimo, 2020), this form of content consumption has taken the world by storm as illustrated by TikTok's popularity (Herman, 2019). In addition to targeted content, TikTok's growth has also been bolstered by short-form video (CB Insights, 2020). As underlined by Wang (2020), mobile short-form video on social media applications is growing in popularity for a variety of reasons, one of which is its capacity to engage viewers' sense of immersion. In recent years, marketers have had to figure out how to effectively leverage short-form video on social

media in order to develop a connection with consumers and cultivate a positive brand mindset (Liu, Li, Gao and Zhang, 2019).

While TikTok is demonstrating widespread consumer interest, academic research regarding the platform remains limited. A Google Scholar search for "TikTok" between 2017 and 2021 yields 9180 items, while a search for "Facebook" yields 1 290 000 results in the same time-frame (Keywords searched:15 June 2021). A similar search on EBSCO Host yields 4178 results for TikTok while a search for Facebook delivers 57 118 search results. This demonstrates the paucity of scholarly information surrounding TikTok, emphasising the necessity of this research. When "TikTok" was searched on Google Scholar once again in the same time frame four months later (Keywords searched: 30 October 2021), the number of results had risen to 14 000, indicating that academic interest in the platform is growing. These results however, represent a worldwide search, demonstrating the possible scarcity of academic research regarding the topic in the context of South Africa.

1.3 Problem statement

Media consumption habits are changing at a fast rate and brands that do not adapt to the changing media landscape risk becoming obsolete (Espinoza, Cevallos and Tusev, 2017). As reported by Ehlers (2021), TikTok provides significant reach to enable consumer engagement, however, utilising TikTok has proven to be vastly challenging for brands as they learn to navigate and understand the platform. As more social media users gravitate towards TikTok, marketers need to understand the needs that are being met by the elements driving TikTok's success. By understanding these drivers, marketers may then effectively and strategically leverage this medium and platform to drive brand success. With limited academic research surrounding the platform (as noted previously), this study aimed to fill in existing knowledge gaps from the perspective of social media consumers to provide insights that may guide digital content strategy.

1.4 Purpose Statement

As brands attempt to ride the wave of the TikTok phenomenon, they are challenged with finding ways to effectively communicate with consumers (Ehlers, 2021). The purpose of this study was to acquire a deeper understanding of the TikTok phenomenon by specifically exploring how targeted short-form video is addressing the needs of social media users to

guide digital content strategy. This paper worked to understand this shift using Katz's (1959) Uses and Gratifications Theory in conjunction with McLuhan's media theories.

1.5 Overview of Research Methodology

This study employed an exploratory qualitative approach with a sample frame of Generation Zs and Millennials who are active social media and TikTok users based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Through online semi-structured interviews, data was collected and qualitative content analysis was selected as the most appropriate analysis tool, allowing the researcher to develop a systematic categorisation process to find themes and patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). A line by line coding system (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout, 2014) was utilised whereby the researcher read through all material and colour coded key words, phrases and ideas relevant to the research questions.

1.6 Structure of the paper

The next sections will provide analysis into the topic at hand now that the aim of the study, research problem, rationale and context surrounding the topic have been established. Based on existing research, Chapter 2; the literature review, gives an in-depth comprehension of the key concepts, offers an overview of the worldview, provides insight into the study's problem, as well as how this problem relates to existing research. The 3rd Chapter delves into the study's research methodology; this is where pertinent research questions and objectives are highlighted as well as how the research was conducted and findings thoroughly analysed. Furthermore, limitations and delimitations are presented to identify circumstances beyond the researcher's control as well as restrictions specified by the researcher. The findings are examined in depth in Chapter 4 in the context of the broader research problem, as well as the theoretical background. This chapter also gives an outline of the research findings' validity and trustworthiness. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with a review of how the study answered the research questions, application for marketers, and how this study contributed to the existing body of knowledge in the field. Finally, insight into the ethical considerations and how they were addressed in the study is provided.

2 Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of a literature review is to assist in the acquisition of knowledge of a topic based on existing research; by knowing the primary theories that fall under a specific topic, the researcher may then explore the topic from a frame of reference (Hart, 1998). The goal of a well-written literature review is to build credibility in a specific field of research by demonstrating to readers, that the researcher has a thorough understanding of the key concepts in order to address a topic (Bryman, 2012b).

This paper is an investigation of the TikTok phenomenon and how targeted short-form video is meeting the needs of social media users, with the purpose of determining what this means for brands. As a result, the study's key concepts were media and media consumption, social media, and digital content strategy. Despite the fact that short-form video and recommendation systems are both present on social media, both concepts were worth examining in order to obtain a better understanding to address the research problem.

Conceptualization of key concepts

The following key concepts were developed and defined to provide a consistent frame of reference to address the study's core research question and, as a result, the problem statement (Section 1.3).

2.1.1 Media and Media Consumption

As discussed by Bonney (2013), media can be defined as the means that make is possible for the dissemination of information through platforms such as television, radio, digital media etc. Media consumption on the other hand, refers to a “media diet” and involves the activity of individuals or groups interacting with the content disseminated by media platforms (Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan and Eisenberg, 2006; Bayindir and Paisley, 2019)

2.1.2 Digital Content Strategy

Digital content strategy, according to Razina, Al-Husban, Ahmad and Ross (2019), is a continual process developed at a strategic level with the purpose of addressing user and

business needs through creative that is relevant to the target market, provided in a timely manner, and monitored to determine success.

2.1.3 Social Media

As explored by Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson and Seymour (2011), social media allows users to construct online communities where ideas, information, personal messages and other content can be shared via means of electronic communication.

2.1.4 Recommendation Systems (Content based)

As stated by Benabdelouahed and Dakouan (2020), recommendation systems can be classified as artificial intelligence (AI); whereby predictive analytics make use of machine learning and statistics to analyse behaviour and make forecasts. According to Lops, Gemmis and Semeraro (2011), while there are a variety of recommendation systems, content-based recommendation systems refers to a tailored content user experience, and was therefore the main focus as this study concentrated on targeted content.

2.1.5 Short-Form Video

According to Google Support (2021), short-form videos are under 10 minutes long, however, this may not be the case across all social networking sites. TikTok defines itself as the 'destination for short-form videos' (Google Play, 2021), however, video content is limited to three minutes on the platform, exposing the fluidity of short-form video. TikTok content was classified as short-form video for the purposes of this study.

Following the development of a consistent frame of reference for the key concepts identified above, the following section delves deeper into these concepts and also provides the theoretical underpinnings on which the study is anchored. In addition, the following section also provides an understanding of the study's problem based on existing literature.

2.2 Media and Media Consumption

In order to explore media and media consumption as a key concept, it was imperative to establish a common understanding of the terms 'media' and 'media consumption'. As discussed by Bonney (2013), media can be defined as the means that make it possible for the dissemination of information through platforms such as television, radio, digital media etc. Mass media is observed as a large group of people engaging in similar content consumption (O'Shaughnessy, Stradler and Casey, 2016). McLuhan (1964), uses the term media interchangeably with medium and technology, asserting that media becomes an extension of man. Furthermore, Nity and Singh (2017), report that media is a reflection of society, depicting a representation of how society functions. For example, the printing press era brought about an age of enlightenment due to the nature in which information was shared (Moran, 1971). More recently, as discussed by Briggs and Burke (2010), the rise of the internet has flourished in tandem with globalisation. These definitions begin to form an understanding of media and provides a frame of reference; therefore, for the purpose of this study, media was explored as the dissemination of information, additionally, media was also studied as an extension of man due to its reflective nature.

As underlined by Bonney (2013), media may be classified as either traditional or new media. Because this study looked to explore the TikTok phenomenon, a fairly new phenomenon; it was important to establish a shared understanding of new media. According to Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant and Kelly (2009), new media comprises of six characteristics; digital, interactivity, hyper-textual, virtual, networked and simulated; TikTok can be classified as new media as the platform meets all the above mentioned characteristics. The term new media emerged to represent the rapidly changing world of communication and media in the late 1980's, along with this shift, other societal transformations such as globalisation and post-modernity were observed (Lister et al., 2009). It has however, been argued that new media has brought about the end of mass communication (Chaffee and Metzger, 2001). As studied by Chaffee and Metzger (2001), the internet has provided a platform that gives users the power to control both content creation and content consumption, therefore shattering the cornerstone of the ideology of mass media. Furthermore, the proliferation of available channels made possible by the advancement of technology fuels the de-massification of media by allowing market segmentation and the ability to target niche audiences; as emphasised by Chaffee and Metzger (2001), research must therefore explore "what people

do with media, rather than what media does to people" as the freedom of content consumption is in the hands of the user.

As media and media consumption evolves in tandem with societal shifts, consumer behaviour has shifted dramatically as a result of technological advancements, necessitating the evolution of marketing communications (Dwivedi et al., 2021). As discussed by Kotler et al. (2004), technology advancements have hastened the shift to new communication environments, forcing marketers to reconsider the role of various media and communication mix instruments in the globalisation process. Media and media consumption is therefore an important aspect to explore when looking to understand consumer behaviour; the following section expands on this idea as the study looked to find the most appropriate theoretical foundation.

2.3 Theoretical Foundation

As studied by Valkenburg and Oliver (2020), in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of media consumption and its effects, a number of media theories have materialised. The top cited theories (Bryant and Miron, 2004) include Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1969), Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1973), Diffusions of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 1962) and Media System Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976).

The Cultivation Theory suggests that individuals who are regularly exposed to a certain media such as television are more likely going to be influenced by the messages displayed (Valkenburg and Oliver, 2020). For the purpose of this study, this particular theory was not used as it grapples with media's influence on human perceptions, attitudes and beliefs (Shrum, 2017) rather than how media works to meet the needs of the audience. Diffusions of Innovations Theory originates from the study of communication and looks at the way in which ideas and products are adopted (Rogers, 1962). Because the goal of this paper wasn't to study the rate at which TikTok is being adopted by society but rather, how targeted short-form video is meeting the needs of social media users, this particular theory was not utilised. Instead, a closer look at the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959) and Media System Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976) was undertaken to select the most suitable framework.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959) is a study of the way in which individuals consume media. According to Katz (1959), this theoretical framework begs the question 'what do people do with media, rather than, what does media do to people'. This theory is grounded on the idea that users utilise media to fulfil their specific needs, these needs can be broken down into five categories: affective needs, cognitive needs, social integrative needs, personal integrative needs and tension free needs (Katz et al., 1973). On the other hand, the Media System Dependency Theory studies the effects mass media has on audiences by looking at cognitive, affective and behavioural effects (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976). As summarised by Valkenburg and Oliver (2020), the Media System Dependency Theory hypothesises that the more an individual relies on media to fulfil their needs, the more significant and influential media becomes in their lives.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959) is particularly applicable in light of the study's context, which is to investigate the TikTok phenomenon and how targeted short form video is serving the needs of social media users. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959) is a widely utilised theoretical framework in analysing media as underlined by Ruggiero (2000); this theory assumes that the audience is not passive, but rather, actively involved in interpreting and incorporating media into their daily lives (Katz et al., 1973). Furthermore, the theory emphasises the idea that media sources therefore compete against one another to fulfil viewer gratifications (Katz et al., 1973). This idea can be linked to new media's capacity to supply users with a limitless array of content options, emphasising the need for marketers to understand the needs of social media users when developing a content strategy that looks to gratify its target market.

As emphasised by O'Donohoe (1993: 52), the relationship between brands and audiences are becoming increasingly complex; whereby research should begin to uncover what "consumers do with advertising rather than what advertising does to consumers", in other words, what value are brands delivering to consumers rather than, how brands are influencing consumers. This idea is crucial in determining how TikTok as a medium may be used to foster relationships between users and brands by acquiring a better understanding of the needs met by the platform.

The purpose of this theoretical framework is to explain how individuals use media to gratify their needs, to comprehend the motivations behind media behaviour, and to identify the repercussions of those needs, motivations, and behaviours (Katz et al., 1973). In

identifying the above, this theoretical framework consists of five categories based on cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative and tension free needs.

Cognitive needs

Cognitive needs are concerned with the attainment of knowledge and information, as well as the concept of discovery and curiosity (Mondi, Woods and Rafi, 2007).

Affective needs

Affective needs speak to the need for emotional fulfilment such as moments of pleasure or aesthetic experiences (Tanta, Mihovilovic and Sablic, 2014).

Tension free needs

Tension free needs, also used synonymously with 'escapism' refers to an individual's desire to escape or relieve tension from society and self (Karimi, Khodabandelou, Ehsani and Ahmad, 2014; Tanta et al., 2014).

Personal integrative needs

Personal integrative needs revolve around the idea of self-esteem, social status and the idea of seeking credibility within society (Stafford, Stafford and Schkade, 2004; Mondy et al., 2007).

Social integrative needs

As studied by Blau (1960), social integrative needs relate to an individual's need to connect with other people or communities via mutual attraction or interests, this concept can be linked to the need for affiliation (Tanta et al., 2014).

2.4 Digital Content Strategy

Now that we have a better grasp of media, media consumption, and the theoretical foundation that underpins this research, it is crucial to tie these elements back to digital content strategy to explore how brands can leverage the shift in media consumption towards TikTok. As discussed in Section 2.2.2, digital content strategy, according to Razina et al. (2019), is a continual process developed at a strategic level with the purpose of addressing

user and business needs through creative that is relevant to the target market, provided in a timely manner, and monitored to determine success. As highlighted by Vinerean (2017), the internet's interconnectedness has forced brands to increasingly focus on building a consumer-centric experience, with the goal of providing a value-driven brand experience. A content strategy aids in “understanding the gap between your user experience and your customer’s needs, introduce and fix it” (Razina et al., 2019) – This demonstrates the relevance of Katz's (1959) Uses and Gratifications Theory in connection to the study's goal of identifying the needs fulfilled by TikTok's targeted short-form video in order to guide digital content strategy.

As brands alter their marketing communications approach to reach customers with content they are eager to interact with, digital content strategy has fast become a vital aspect of digital marketing (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Digital content strategy, however, extends beyond content to focus on the point of delivery and dissemination of marketing material in order to stimulate conversion to a business-building outcome (Holliman and Rowley, 2014). As a result, rather than solely focusing on content, this implies the importance of exploring the channel through which content is delivered. As underlined by media theorist McLuhan (1964: 3), “media study considers not only the ‘content’ but the medium and the cultural matrix within which the particular medium operates”. McLuhan (1964) additionally places an emphasis on how different media becomes an extension of self; transforming mankind as well as the environment.

However, the limitation provided by McLuhan’s theories is the historical period in which they were hypothesised. Although McLuhan’s theories have stood the test of time (Landes, 2020), the text makes no explicit reference to social media or modern day marketing tools. Therefore this begs the question, can social media be classified as a medium? Can TikTok as a social media platform be classified as a medium? On the other hand, it can be argued that McLuhan’s theories couldn’t be more relevant in today’s media landscape. Since technology has enabled the delivery of highly personalised content (Chaffee and Metzger, 2001), the idea that media becomes an extension of man begins to seem plausible. As McLuhan (1964) himself uses the terms media, medium and technology interchangeably; for the purpose of this study, social media will be considered as a medium that represents the extension of man and therefore, TikTok is the medium in which content is delivered.

The relationship between consumers and brands has become an increasingly popular topic in the fields of marketing and consumer behaviour (Raut, 2015). As studied by Keller (2001),

brand resonance can be defined as the “intensity or depth” of the bond that consumers have with brands, as well as their continued engagement and allegiance to that brand (brand loyalty). As a result, generating brand resonance in a competitive market gives brands a competitive edge and enhances reputation (Latif, Islam and Noor, 2014). However in order to build brand resonance, Keller (2012), emphasises the importance of a comprehensive understanding of consumer needs. The goal of this study is to identify and investigate the needs met by TikTok's targeted short-form video content. By understanding these needs, brands can work towards piecing a digital content strategy that is geared towards building brand resonance.

2.5 Social Media

Having gained a firm grasp on digital content strategy, it is necessary to examine social media in order to contextualise the TikTok phenomenon and provide a greater frame of reference for the study.

As explored by Edosomwan et al. Seymour (2011), social media allows for users to construct online communities where ideas, information, personal messages and other content can be shared via means of electronic communication. As investigated by Appel, Grewal, Hadi and Stephen (2020) social media consists of a broad category of communications system whereby if a website enables the user to create content or network with other users, the platform can be referred to as a social media platform. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration that the term social media does not solely refer to popular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. But rather, the ability to interact and contribute on internet platforms (Hoffman and Bublitz, 2017; Appel et al., 2020). For the sake of this study, social media was defined as an online environment that allows numerous parties to communicate.

Despite its relatively brief existence, social media has produced tremendous societal effects, one such example involves the culture of connectivity (Van Dijck, 2013). According to Van Dijck (2013), the growth of Web 2.0 allowed users to move a great number of their daily activities into the online space. This included activities such as conversations amongst friends, sharing of images, video consumption etc. The rapid evolution of social media has also offered brands with an endless array of opportunities to engage with consumers (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014).

Although a vast interlinked ecosystem of platforms exist online, the focus for this study was on social networking sites (Dhingra and Mudgal, 2019). In order to study the TikTok phenomenon, it was important to categorise the platform on this 'vast interlined ecosystem' to establish a consistent frame of reference. According to Lister et al. (2009), social networking sites can be categorised as new media that allows user interaction and includes platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and so forth (Dhingra and Mudgal, 2019). Furthermore, these platforms are web-based services that enable users to establish a public or semi-public profile inside a system that allows users to generate a list of other users with whom they have a relationship or connection (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Therefore, TikTok can be classified as a social networking site as the platform enables social interaction with other users (Goswami and Sharma, 2021) as well as the ability to create a public or semi-public profile where the user can curate a list of users to follow.

Social networking sites give a platform for brands to deepen their relationship with consumers by opening up a channel of contact that allows for discussion, collaboration, and content creation (Castillo-Abdul, Bonilla-del-Rio and Barriopedro, 2021). As a result, social networking sites have become an essential channel for brands to engage with their target market for a variety of purposes, such as discovering new audiences, promoting products, and cultivating relationships (Stelzner, 2013; Kumar and Singh, 2020). Furthermore, social networking sites have allowed marketers to tap into user behaviour and preferences in order to better understand the impact of campaigns (Song, Lee and Kim, 2019).

As discussed in the problem statement (Section 1.3), although TikTok has proven to provide significant reach to enable consumer engagement, brands are challenged with learning how to effectively utilise the platform (Ehlers, 2021). In addressing this challenge, brands must be strategic in how they form connections with consumers by exploring the factors that drive social media users (Vinerean, 2017).

Now that we have established a greater sense of social media and where TikTok fits in this context, the following section will provide an understanding of the variables that have driven the platform's success.

2.6 Recommendation Systems (Targeted Content) and Short-Form Video

Traditional advertising mediums such as television, radio, and print have limited targeting capability, as brands spend large sums of money on consumers who are unlikely to be

interested in the content offered (Fourberg, Tas, Wiewiorra and Godlovitch, 2021). Online marketing, on the other hand, has provided brands with the opportunity to capitalise on the potential of targeting (Fourberg et al., 2021).

In 2020, TikTok revealed the platform's reliance on recommendation systems (targeted content) in creating individualised experiences on the mobile application (TikTok, 2020). As stated by Benabdelouahed and Dakouan (2020), recommendation systems are classified as artificial intelligence (AI) whereby predictive analytics uses machine learning and statistics to analyse behaviour in order to make forecasts. In other words, producing content that the user is most likely to relate to based on their previous activity (Benabdelouahed and Dakouan, 2020). According to Lops, et al. (2011) while there are a variety of recommendation systems, content-based recommendation systems refers to a tailored content user experience, and was therefore the main focus as this study worked to explore "targeted content". TikTok recommends video content based on three key factors; "user interactions, video information, device and account settings" (TikTok, 2020). Therefore, all these elements work together to provide tailored short-form video content to maintain relevance to the user. Through The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959) this paper worked to explore the role recommendations system plays in fulfilling the needs of the user and how brands can leverage and shape digital content strategy.

According to Costa-Sanchez (2017), Web 2.0 has not only brought about participatory media but also the concept of multimedia. This audio-visual era along with the introduction of smartphones has led to an increased consumption of multimedia (Costa-Sanchez, 2017). As explored by Van Dijck (2013: 110), when Youtube was introduced in 2005, it became an alternative to television, the platform became a "shift in user routines, a new type of content and a radical overhaul of the traditional broadcast industry". This therefore illustrates the potential influence that short-form video on platforms such as TikTok may have in shaping media consumption as social media consumer needs shift.

According to Zhang, Wu and Liu (2019), short-form video has increasingly grown in popularity, however, establishing a cohesive definition of this content form has proven to be challenging. According to Google Support (2021), short-form videos are under 10 minutes long, however, this may not be the case across all social networking sites that provide short-form video content. TikTok defines itself as the 'destination for short-form videos' (Google Play, 2021), however, video content is limited to three minutes on the social networking site, exposing the fluidity of short-form video. As studied by He, Hu, Zhou and Wu (2020), short-

form video distinguishes itself by “mobile friendliness and popularity dynamics”, and not only the duration of the video. This emphasises the flexibility of short-form video as well as the significance of academic research to better understand this concept.

Introduced in 2009, social networking site Vine popularised short-form video content; this platform allowed users to upload 10 second videos and drove seamless sharing across various platforms (Liu et al., 2019). Soon after Vine was released, other platforms utilising short-form video were developed; one such example is "Musical.ly", a social networking site that was eventually absorbed by ByteDance and converted into what is now known as TikTok (Klug, Evans, Qin and Kaufman, 2021). Due to TikTok's rapid growth, other social networking sites quickly responded by launching competitor features such as Instagram Reels and Youtube Shorts (Abidin, 2020). Short-form video mobile applications, however, vary from their rivals in that they are entirely built for users to connect with and through user-generated short-form video content rather than with each other, according to Klug et al. (2021). This idea places an emphasis on the opportunity provided for brands to engage with consumers as these platforms foster and drive content engagement rather than peer engagement.

2.7 Conclusion

Ultimately, the goal of this literature review was to establish a frame of understanding of the essential key concepts based on current research. The aim of the literature review was to additionally decipher the theoretical underpinnings of the study issue and to analyse the research challenge utilising references to existing literature. The literature review was broken down into sections to discuss the key concepts relating to the research topic; these key concepts include Media and Media Consumption, Digital Content Strategy, Social Media, Recommendations Systems and Short-Form Video. Furthermore, this section also took a deep dive into the most relevant theoretical foundation and framework to best assist in unpacking the TikTok phenomenon; upon exploration of various theories and frameworks, The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959), as well as McLuhan's theories were selected as the most suitable means to provide a better understanding of the topic. However, this literature review uncovered the complexity and fluidity of media, applying media theories that were conceptualised in different eras and forming connections to digital content strategy has proven to be challenging as media is constantly evolving.

The literature review uncovered a number of crucial aspects that helped guide the research; this includes the role technological advancements and its capacity to segment markets has played in the de-massification of media (Chaffee and Metzger, 2001). This has meant that digital content strategy has had to employ a customer-centric brand experience as users hold the power to choose what they consume (Vinerean, 2017). As highlighted by Razina et al. (2019), content strategy helps to identify the gap between a brand's experience and its customer needs, this provided the researcher direction when observing the TikTok phenomenon as the research looked to explore the needs met by targeted short-form video on TikTok to help guide content strategy.

3 Chapter 3: Research Methodology

As discussed in Section 1.3, media consumption habits are evolving at a fast rate and brands that do not adapt to the changing media landscape risk being left behind (Espinoza et al., 2017). As brands work to leverage the TikTok phenomenon, adapting to the platform has proven challenging (Ehlers, 2021). In order to address this challenge, gaining a better understanding of the needs that drive social media users is imperative. With its increasing popularity but limited academic research, this paper worked to fill in existing knowledge gaps surrounding the platform in order to guide digital content strategy.

To fill in these gaps, the following section highlights pertinent research questions and objectives that helped guide the research.

3.1.1 Research questions

So as to address the key issues identified in the problem statement (Section 1.3), the primary research question for this study is as follows:

How is targeted short-form video on TikTok meeting the needs of social media consumers?

To further break down the research, the secondary research questions for this study were:

- What needs does TikTok's short-form video content satisfy for social media consumers?
- How is TikTok's targeted content serving the needs of social media consumers?

- How can brands leverage TikTok's ability to satisfy the needs of social media consumers?

3.1.2 Research objectives

Using Katz's (1959) Uses and Gratifications theory, the aim of this study was to identify what needs TikTok's targeted short-form video content is satisfying for social media consumers. The following objectives were met by conducting qualitative research to explore underlying patterns of individual experiences and the meanings associated with the TikTok phenomenon.

The objectives of this study are stated as follows:

- To determine what needs TikTok's short-form video content meets for social media consumers.
- To investigate how TikTok's targeted content is serving the needs of social media consumers.
- To explore how brands can leverage TikTok's ability to satisfy the needs of social media users.

the following section provides a suitable research paradigm, this section worked to determine the paradigmatic assumptions as well as the nature of knowledge and how it affected the choice of research approach.

3.2 Research paradigm

According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., (2014), research paradigms assist scholars in adopting a certain method of investigating a phenomenon relevant to a given field. By selecting a paradigm, the researcher is then able to identify what questions are worthy of examination and the techniques necessary to establish acceptable information (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). According to Lather (1986), a research paradigm is inherently reflective of the researcher's worldview; it is made up of abstract concepts and ideals that make up the researcher's perspective. A research paradigm can be observed through three primary research paradigms: positivism, interpretivism, and critical realism (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

When striving to comprehend a phenomenon, positivism is objective and relies on verifiable facts as well as causal relationships (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). On the other hand, interpretivism looks to gain an in-depth understanding of human behaviour by studying the meaning and purpose that people place on their own behaviours and experiences (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Finally, critical realism borrows elements from both interpretivism and positivism, critical realism focuses on explaining and understanding rather than making predictions (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The goal of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the TikTok phenomenon, specifically exploring how targeted short-form video content is meeting the needs of social media consumers. As a result, the interpretivist paradigm was embraced, as this viewpoint aims to explore the meanings people place on behaviour – in this case, the needs of social media users.

Interpretivism takes into consideration that human beings are constantly changing and that the environment has a continual impact on individuals (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Thus, interpretivism contends that truth and knowledge are subjective as they are dependent on lived experiences and understanding (Ryan, 2018). There are three main philosophical traditions that influence the interpretivist worldview; these include hermeneutics, phenomenology and symbolic interaction (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). According to Bryman (2012a), hermeneutics concerns itself with the meaning of social action, phenomenology focuses on how individuals make sense of the world they live in and lastly, symbolic interaction holds that human action has little meaning on its own, asserting that humans assign meaning to human action based on a system of common understanding (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the TikTok phenomenon by placing a focus on how targeted short-form video is meeting social media consumer needs, therefore, this paper primarily utilised the phenomenological philosophical tradition as it grapples with the interpretation of human actions from the point of view of an individual or group (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

3.3 Research approach and design

Unlike quantitative research which rests on numerical data, qualitative research seeks to understand how individuals build meaning and make sense of their experiences and environment (Flick, 2007; Merriam, 2009). As established by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), qualitative research entails an interpretive and naturalistic approach of studying the world we live in, this implies that researchers investigate phenomena in their natural surroundings with the goal of understanding these occurrences in relation to the meanings individuals

assign to them. The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the TikTok phenomenon from the perspective of the user. A qualitative research approach aided the researcher in investigating the TikTok phenomenon by offering insight into attitudes and behaviours as it pertains to targeted short-form video on TikTok.

To further guide research, five qualitative approaches were explored; as outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018) qualitative approaches include narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. In exploring the TikTok phenomenon, phenomenology was selected as the most appropriate theoretical guideline; as Lester (1999) explains, phenomenology aims to reveal phenomena via the experiences of the subjects in a particular context. In the case of this study, a phenomenological design brought individual experiences to the forefront, enabling the researcher to enlighten and provide a foundation to guide digital content strategy.

According to Sue and Ritter (2012), social research is often categorised as exploratory, descriptive or explanatory. Exploratory research aims to identify a problem, define concepts and create a hypothesis while descriptive research seeks to describe individuals/groups, products or events (Sue and Ritter, 2012). On the other hand, explanatory research aims to delineate why particular phenomena take place in order to predict future occurrences (Sue and Ritter, 2012). When there isn't a sufficient amount of information regarding a phenomenon and a challenge that has been identified, exploratory research aims to form an understanding of said topic at various levels of depth (Boru, 2018). Therefore, this study utilised an exploratory approach as an occurring phenomenon with limited academic research had been identified; this approach aided in providing an understanding of the TikTok phenomenon and the role targeted short-form video is playing in meeting the needs of social media consumers.

3.4 Population and sampling

As described by Wiid and Diggines (2013), a population refers to a total number of individuals or entities from which data can be extracted from. A population of interest in research may be defined as the target population of a study from which essential data addressing a particular topic can be obtained (Majid, 2018). Furthermore, the nature, size, and distinguishing characteristics form the study's population parameters (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). As stipulated by Asiamah, Mensah and Oteng-Abayie (2017), several criteria are utilised in a methodical way to narrow down the general population to the most qualified

individuals; this research exclusively focused on TikTok users in South Africa, majority of which are Millennials and Generation Zs (Kemp, 2021). The following section delves deeper into the sample selection process.

According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014), a sample is a subset of a population that is thought to be representative of the entire population; therefore, the population was further streamlined on the basis of age range and region due to the study's focus on branding, influence, time and resource restrictions. Millennials - ages 23 - 38 and Generation Z - ages 7-22 (Dimock, 2019) were chosen as an applicable parameter based on the following: according to Muliadi (2020), the bulk of TikTok users are Generation Z, these individuals have fuelled the growth of TikTok similarly to the way in which Millennials formerly fuelled the growth of other social networking sites such as Instagram and Facebook. Therefore, as TikTok's largest age-group user, it was imperative to gain insight into this age group's usage motivations. Furthermore, as the largest age-group in South Africa according to The Department: Statistics South Africa (2018), Generation Z was chosen as the target population due to the age group's rising influence on individuals of all ages and how they engage with brands (Francis and Hoefel, 2018).

Millennials were additionally chosen as part of the target population. As analysed by Joe, Sayyed and Gupta (2020), millennials hold tremendous buying power and therefore tend to heavily influence marketing strategy. As the second largest population and most active social media users in South Africa (Department: Statistics South Africa 2018; Kemp, 2021), it was imperative to gain an understanding of this particular age-group's motivators in order to gain an understanding of how targeted short-form video on TikTok is meeting their social media needs. It is important to note that because gathering data from an entire target population is challenging (Majid, 2018), it is essential for the researcher to differentiate between the target population and the accessible population (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Due to time and resource limitations, the study was limited to six interviews. As reported by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (2020), Johannesburg represents South Africa's economic hub and therefore a key geographical focus for brands. As a result, the sample frame was made up of Generation Z and Millennials who are active TikTok users based in Johannesburg, South Africa.

To help select the aforementioned sample, non-probability sampling was utilised. As stipulated by Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014), non-probability sampling is generally used in exploratory qualitative research as it does not necessarily concern itself with generalising findings, instead, non-probability focuses on the number of interviewees required to acquire a thorough grasp of the study topic at hand. Selection was based on quota sampling as this method gathers participants on the basis of predetermined criteria with ratio of characteristics in mind (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan and Hoagwood, 2013). Finally, selection was also grounded on purposive sampling as this method gathers participants on the basis of pre-selected criteria (Palinkas et al., 2013) such as geographical location and age range.

Thus, the study group consisted of three Millennials and three Generation Zs who are active TikTok users based in Johannesburg, South Africa. These participants were sourced via the TikTok platform, through the researcher's social network as well as referrals from interviewed participants.

As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2018), a unit of analysis rested on a phenomenological approach studies numerous individuals who share a unified experience; in this case, a shared experience of targeted short-form video on TikTok and social media as a whole. Moreover, a unit of analysis can be characterised as the "who" or "what" for which data is analysed and conclusions are drawn from (Sedgwick, 2014). Therefore, the unit of analysis for this study was a single Millennial or Generation Z participant.

3.5 Data collection

As emphasised by Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014), data collection plays a critical role in the overall quality of a research study. Having established a qualitative approach, the objective of this study was to identify underlying patterns of individual experiences and the meanings connected with the TikTok phenomenon. Qualitative research designs as previously mentioned often employ an ethnographic, case study, grounded theory, or phenomenological approach which all provide the researcher with an opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of participants in their natural environments (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). In contrast, unobtrusive research, is used when a researcher aims to examine social behaviour without interfering with the subjects (Babbie, 2002).

This study made use of a phenomenological philosophical tradition as it grapples with the interpretation of human actions from the point of view of an individual or group (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), field research allows the researcher to observe phenomena in its natural context in order to acquire the necessary data, therefore, field research was adopted for this study. The purpose of this research was to learn about human experiences in relation to the role targeted short-form video plays in meeting the needs of social media users and what this means for brands, therefore it was crucial to gain an understanding from the user's perspective and lived experiences.

Focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and observation are common methods used by researchers to effectively gather data for qualitative research (Phillips and Stawarski, 2008). According to Ennis and Chen (2012), focus groups consist of several participants performed with the goal of expanding on the viewpoints of the participants on a given topic; focus groups allow participants to expand on one another's thoughts while also allowing the interviewer to discover common group understandings (Ennis and Chen, 2012). One-on-one interviews on the other hand, allow the researcher to learn more about the culture, worldview and beliefs of participants regarding a topic, this approach gives the interviewer an opportunity to further explore an idea to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic at hand (Ennis and Chen, 2012; Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Lastly, observational research is a technique that involves observing subjects and noting any changes in their behaviour (Phillips and Stawarski, 2008). With the goal of gaining an in-depth understanding of social media needs, it was imperative to provide the researcher an opportunity to expand on ideas while conducting field research, therefore, one-on-one interviews were selected as the most suitable approach.

Furthermore, one-on-one interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured; a structured approach uses specific questions and leaves little room for deviation, semi-structured interviews allow for some flexibility while still maintaining an interview structure, and finally, unstructured interviews are more conversational and have little to no structure (Phillips and Stawarski, 2008). This study made use of a semi-structured interview process as this method allowed the researcher to pursue ideas in more detail due to its open ended nature (Parveen and Showkat, 2017). Semi-structured interviews include a series of essential questions that help define the topics to be examined while also allowing the interviewer to deviate to follow an idea (Gill, Stewart, Treasure and Chadwick, 2008). This method was utilised as it allowed the researcher to explore ideas and form insights that will

aid in exploring the role short-form video on TikTok is playing in meeting social media needs and henceforth, what this means for brands.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all six interviews were conducted digitally through Google Meet. Interviews were both recorded and transcribed simultaneously. A test interview (Annexure E), was undertaken in order to refine interview questions (Annexure D). Upon review, more questions regarding branded content were included in order to explore what the TikTok phenomenon means for brands (Annexure F). A one-on-one interview approach gave the interviewer enough flexibility to discover and expand on ideas and thoughts, while maintaining a structure in order to compare and contrast findings between participants. This method additionally allowed the interviewer to clarify certain points and was carried out until data saturation was achieved. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), interview scheduling can improve the data's "reliability and credibility", therefore, an interview schedule was utilised to guide the interviewer upon conducting research (Annexure D). The interview was broken down into multiple sections; to begin, the interviewer established credibility and expanded upon the purpose of the study. This was followed by a process of establishing credibility of the participants based on the identified parameters. The interview schedule then explored the participants' views on short-form video content as well as recommendation systems (targeted content). Finally, the closing sections looked to identify motivators of TikTok consumption based on The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959) as well as uncover participants' views of brands on TikTok.

3.6 Data analysis

Data analysis refers to a systematic practice that allows researchers to methodically assess data to illuminate understanding on a given topic; the objective is to give meaning and organisation to the massive amounts of data available (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport, 2011). In qualitative research, the goal is to analyse the data in order to identify patterns and observations that address the objectives of a study (Savenye and Robinson, 2005). As discussed by Creswell and Creswell (2018), the majority of qualitative phenomenological research studies tend to use a data processing strategy that focuses on finding "important statements, textual and structural description". Therefore, for the purpose of this study, an emphasis will be placed on unearthing meaning by recognising patterns via insightful statements as well as textual and structural descriptions.

Researchers have several data analysis methods at their disposal (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014); qualitative content analysis is used to uncover themes within a text and focuses on the variety of possible interpretations of a phenomena rather than its statistical significance (Zhang and Wildemuths, 2005). On the other hand, discourse analysis takes a linguistic approach that according to Maree (2007: 102) works to understand the “meaning of the spoken and written word”. Conversation analysis focuses on speech interaction and looks for patterns in language (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014), while semiotics is primarily concerned with signs and the formation and attachment of meaning to them (Fourie, 2009).

Qualitative content analysis was utilised as the most appropriate analysis tool for this study as this method attempts to interpret the material via a systematic categorisation process to find themes and patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). As previously established, TikTok leads as the second most downloaded mobile application in South Africa (Kemp, 2021), as consumers continue to gravitate towards TikTok, this study worked to analyse this trend by gaining a thorough understanding of the role targeted short-form video plays in meeting the needs of social media consumers and finally, what this means for brands. As a result, it was critical to uncover patterns in experiences shared by participants.

As underlined by Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014), researchers must transcribe raw data in order to organise the findings; depending on the study’s research questions and objectives, researchers might then eliminate superfluous information. Due to the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews, the researcher only extracted relevant material from the raw data addressing the topic at hand. According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014: 236), it is critical to define the coding unit to be examined; this refers to the fundamental unit of text that the researcher wishes to examine; such as “words, phrases, symbols, sentences or paragraphs”. In order to analyse the data, sentences and key words were chosen as the most appropriate unit of text, this method was selected based on the pattern of responses. As discussed by Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014), developing categories or a conceptual framework aids researchers in coding the data and can be classified as either deductive or inductive. Inductive analysis involves the creation of a categorisation matrix based on the data whereby, deductive analysis is based on an existing theoretical framework (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen and Kyngäs, 2014).

For the purpose of this research, deductive content analysis was utilised as the study rests on The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959). As expanded upon in Section 2.4, this

theoretical framework consists of five categories based on cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative and tension free needs and was used to guide the coding system. According to Maree (2007), coding your findings entails a thorough examination of the data, including all meaningful and significant elements. A line by line coding system was utilised whereby the researcher read through all material and colour coded key words, phrases and ideas relevant to the research questions (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

3.7 Conclusion

In summary, the research methodology outlined how the researcher intended to conduct research in order to address the research problem and knowledge gaps. To begin, the primary and secondary research questions were established to provide direction. This was followed by a discussion around the study's interpretivist worldview as it sought to gain a deeper understanding of human behaviour by examining the meanings that the sample frame assigns to their motives for using TikTok. Qualitative research using a phenomenological approach was devised in order to unearth insights; since this would bring individual experiences to the forefront to be explored. This section also worked to construct a sample frame by investigating alternative sampling approaches and parameter motives, the study focused on Millennial and Generation Z TikTok users in South Africa. Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were chosen as the most suitable research method to efficiently collect information from participants where qualitative content analysis was utilised to analyse the data through a systematic categorisation process to uncover patterns in behaviour. Finally, in exploring the most effective content analysis methods, a line by line coding system was established where deductive content analysis using The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959) provided direction.

The limitation and delimitations provided in the research methodology outlined above must be highlighted when conducting research to identify possible constraints to assess potential study flaws (Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2018). Therefore, the following section provides a discussion of the limitations and delimitations provided in the research methodology.

3.8 Limitations and delimitations

According to Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018), limitations of a study concern potential weaknesses that are usually out of the researcher's control; these factors are usually closely

associated with the chosen research methodology. Due to the constraints of a fast approaching deadline, the restricted time period limits the opportunity to gather a large pool of data. With the goal of using semi-structured one-on-one interviews for data-collection, this time-consuming method limits a larger sample size given the time-constraints. Qualitative Data analysis can additionally play as a potential limitation as Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018) point out; because qualitative approaches cannot be reliably replicated in comparison to controlled experimental circumstances, this therefore means data may not be verifiable.

Delimitations on the other hand, are essentially the limitations set by the researcher to help define and create boundaries for the context of the study (Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2018). The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959) works as a delimitation as the framework provides five elements in which data collection is constricted to. Secondly, McLuhan's media theories were developed in a significantly different time-period; while McLuhan's work will greatly aid in defining concepts in relation to media studies, the nature of media is ever-evolving. Therefore, creating interpretations based on ideas developed during a different historical period may not be effective in interpreting the fairly recent TikTok phenomenon. Furthermore, this research aims to primarily utilise the phenomenological tradition; this may potentially serve as a weakness as the researcher works to interpret the data, the idea that the research is more of an interpretation rather than factual may falter validity. Finally, the goal of this study was to give an analysis of the TikTok phenomenon in order to provide brands with insight into the needs addressed by short-form video content; nevertheless, the sample frame may not be comprehensive enough to provide effective guidance for brands to leverage.

4. Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

According to Kemp (2021), TikTok leads as the second most downloaded mobile application in South Africa. As consumers continue to gravitate towards TikTok, this paper worked to understand this shift as well as what it means for brands using Katz's (1959) Uses and Gratifications Theory in conjunction with McLuhan's theories. The purpose of this study was to enable marketers to understand the role TikTok is playing in meeting the needs of social media users in order to guide digital content strategy.

The following chapter details findings from the data collection outlined in Chapter 3. Qualitative content analysis was utilised as the most appropriate analysis tool for this study as this method attempts to interpret the material via a systematic categorisation process to find themes and patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). These findings are discussed in detail in the next section.

4.1 Cognitive needs met by TikTok

As identified in Table 1, amongst all needs underlined in The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959), cognitive needs were identified as the most common need met by TikTok (frequency of 37 across all responses and participants). Cognitive needs are concerned with the acquisition of knowledge and information, as well as the concept of discovery and curiosity (Mondi et al., 2007). As a result, the concept of acquiring new knowledge, a pleasurable style of information consumption, and material that inspires personal interest are among the most prevalent themes. Due to TikTok's short-form video format, participants commonly expressed appreciation for the succinct method in which information is delivered. As discussed by Subramaniam (2018), due to consumers' constant exposure to information, marketers have had to confront the reality of shorter attention spans and modify strategies appropriately. This idea is supported by participants' need for succinct video content, as Participant 5 pointed out, impatience plays a big influence in the individual's preference for TikTok's short-form video approach while Participant 6 has recognised its impact on their attention span:

"It [TikTok] is kind of shortening my attention span" – Participant 6 (Generation Z)

Table 1: Cognitive needs met by TikTok

Framework: Cognitive Needs Total = 37		
Theme	Frequency	Verbatim Quotes
Informative/Learning new things	17	"It's actually a place to find out new things. It's a different way of digesting information." - Participant 2 (Gen-Z) "I think it's, it's informative and in a creative way." - Participant 3 (Mill) "Yes it has helped me with my investments, I actually set up an entire trust based on what I learned on Tiktok, and how to structure it, and how to use it." - Participant 1 (Mill)
Enjoyable/preferred form of information consumption	11	"I think it's a way to consume information in a way that's, like, engaging." - Participant 2 (Gen-Z) "What I like about short form videos, is just that it gets straight to the point, it's precise, and which often means that it has to be impactful." - Participant 1 (Mill) "If I'm not sure I'll go onto TikTok. I don't even go on Google anymore. I'm so impatient... it's easier to comprehend what someone is trying to show you because of how fast it is." - Participant 5 (Mill)
Curiosity/content that sparks personal interest	9	"oh, you know what, maybe I should give that a try, or I should buy that and have my own experience with it seeing it looks so good" - Participant 3 (Mill) "You'll still be within the scope of what you're looking for [on TikTok], but maybe more interesting than what you would find on Instagram" - Participant 3 (Mill) "The person is either trying to just tell you the most important parts of the subject that he just wants to let you know. That is what actually brings you back." - Participant 6 (Gen-Z)

While curiosity was a major incentive for installing the social media platform, knowledge acquisition was a major driver for continuing to use TikTok. This was coupled with the platform's capacity to allow participants to discover useful material due to its use of recommendation systems. This idea was demonstrated as 5/6 participants cited simply being curious or had seen TikTok trending across other platforms. All participants were able to identify specific instances where TikTok was able to provide insight or knowledge that can be applied outside of the mobile application; one such example is in Participant 1's ability to establish a trust and investment based on guidance provided by content on the platform. With cognitive needs identified as a leading factor coupled with appreciation for short-form video, this indicates participants' need for concise content that provides personal value; a key factor to consider when brands look to connect with social media consumers.

4.2 Affective Needs met by TikTok

Following cognitive needs, affective needs were determined as the platform's second most fulfilled need and will be discussed in the following section (frequency of 34 across all responses and participants). Affective needs are concerned with feelings, sentiments or emotional connections and experiences such as pleasure (Tanta et al., 2014). The most prevalent theme found across the coding system was the emotional gratification gained from TikTok's entertaining content.

According to all study participants, TikTok offers entertaining content tailored to individual preferences, creating what Participant 2 (Generation Z) refers to as a **"binge-worthy"** experience. Participant 4 (Generation Z) describes the platform as a **"bit like a black hole"** as it suggests all the content the user might enjoy. The results indicate that this pleasurable experience can be described as addictive, as most participants can often be found spending hours at a time on TikTok; a media consumption habit that has largely replaced the time spent on other social media platforms as described by Participant 6 (Generation Z):

"I'm thinking back to before I downloaded TikTok I used to use Snapchat every now and again but I used to be very active on Facebook, now I never go on Facebook, basically. And Instagram"

Table 2: Affective Needs met by TikTok

Framework: Affective Needs Total = 34		
Theme	Frequency	Verbatim Quotes
Entertaining/Gratification is experienced	22	"TikTok was just the entertainment aspect of it, that just sort of short videos that were pretty explosive and full of funny content that I found. and TikTok seemed like the perfect platform with short bursts of entertaining videos."- Participant 1 (Mill) "If you're looking for a good laugh for example, TikTok has a very unique way of luring you into whatever what would be funny content to you." - Participant 3 (Mill) "It's tricky, when I see a sponsored ad. I typically scroll immediately passed them. But on the other hand if I see a video of a brand just posting a video on their own TikTok and not sponsored or anything, that's more intriguing to me and more entertaining." - Participant 4 (Gen-Z)
Tailored content	12	"I just know it's the one stop shop for short, impactful videos, depending on what you'd like tailored to you...I actually see why it's good because it's for me. And it's, it's giving me exactly what I want to see, it knows exactly what I like"- Participant 1 (Mill) "I think it's great. Honestly, it's a bit like a black hole, I'd say, because it's so good. It's suggesting all the things you like." - Participant 4 (Gen-Z) "So when content comes in, it almost comes in tailored for your experiences, whereas these other media platforms, sort of throw everything on there and it will be up to you to, to choose." - Participant 3 (Mill)

As the single most prevalent theme across all themes uncovered, It is critical for marketers to focus on the emotional needs of social media users satisfied by entertaining content, as stated by Nabi and Oliver (2009:167), "This is understandable given that most entertainment is, indeed, a leisurely pastime performed in the quest of pleasure." Users who seek pleasurable experiences on social media are usually left satisfied after using TikTok due to the platform's ability to deliver tailored experiences of pleasure. The ability for brands to engage target consumers on TikTok is demonstrated in this study; for example, Participant 4 (Generation Z) described an experience with airline brand, RyanAir, in which the brand re-enacted trends on TikTok from an airline perspective:

“when they’re [brands] funny about it, it makes it more intriguing”.

4.3 Tension-free Needs met by TikTok

Tension-free needs have been identified as the third most popular need TikTok has the ability to meet (frequency of 29 across all responses and participants). Tension-free needs refer to an individual's desire to escape or relieve tension from society and self (Karimi et al., 2014). Within this category, easy media consumption, binge-worthy content and the need to escape or distress have been identified. Findings indicate that the ease of consumption plays an imperative role as participants enjoy TikTok’s ability to deliver targeted short-form video content without much effort, as underlined by Participant 1 (Millennial):

“TikTok provided different kinds of short-form videos and just the speed in which the videos came without me having to go search and load the video”.

Additionally, binge-worthy content was identified as a tension-free need due to its immersive nature; according to Starosta and Izydorczyk (2020), the fundamental motivations of binge-watching, which is similar to playing video games or reading, may involve immersion and transportation into the story. As previously mentioned, the vast majority of users binge-watch TikTok content, this presents a great opportunity for brands to connect with users as participants tend to spend hours on the platform and fully immerse themselves.

Table 3: Tension-free needs met by TikTok

Framework: Tension-Free Needs Total = 29		
Theme	Frequency	Verbatim Quotes
Ease of content consumption	12	"One thing I've learned is that they're [Short-form video] pretty addictive because, like, It doesn't require that much attention span." - Participant 6 (Gen-Z) "TikTok provided different kinds of short form videos and just the speed in which the videos came without me having to go search and load the video." - Participant 1 (Mill) "I think its super, super good like it just, it's so easy to watch." Participant 4 (Gen-Z)
Binge-worthy content	9	"I think there's something special about the way TikTok work, because somehow, if you open up your TikTok account, you're gonna be in there for hours." Participant 3 (Mill) "I use TikTok the most. Because I generally binge it, Like, I'll go for hours on and on and on." - Participant 2 (Gen-Z) "I think I spend the longest time on TikTok, because of just the general feed and how it works. It's so easy to just keep on like going down and down and down." - Participant 5 (Mill)
Escapism / Distress	8	"I'm on TikTok, it's, it's escapism. I escape through TikTok. If I need a good laugh I know that's where I'll go." - Participant 3 (Mill) "I end up spending a lot of time [on TikTok] especially when I'm distressing and just relaxing, and just want to not read, and not have to do any critical thinking, it's just bliss." - Participant 1 (Mill) I went through a breakup. TikTok would literally suggest motivational as well as videos to calm anxiety and I help you deal with it. - Participant 4 (Gen-Z)

Participants tend to appreciate TikTok's capability to help them escape and destress. The platform provides a way to escape reality and the tensions of society, which leads to prolonged usage, as participants noted. Furthermore, 5/6 participants shared scenarios in which relatable content was able to provide advice in helping relieve reality's tensions; one such example is provided by Participant 4's (Generation Z) experience of a breakup, in which TikTok shared motivational content that was able to ease the participant's anxiety and deal with tension. The idea of escapism presents both an opportunity as well as a challenge, Participant 1 (Millennial) notes that"

"I don't want to Yeah, that's not what I'm there for, I want to chill, I'm not there to be marketed to."

Therefore, brands will have to tread carefully when attempting to connect with consumers on the platform, it is crucial that content does not add to the tension users are seeking to escape.

4.4 Social-Integrative Needs met by TikTok

The social-integrative needs of social media users were among the least met by TikTok (frequency of 17 across all responses and participants); social-integrative needs relate to an individual's need to connect with other people or communities via mutual attraction or interests (Blau, 1960). The majority of participants were drawn to TikTok because of its widespread popularity on other social media platforms; participants wanted to learn more about TikTok and remain in the know. However, the need to connect with others was not a compelling reason to remain on the platform as this was led by cognitive, affective and tension-free needs. A re-occurring pattern amongst participants was the idea that other social media platforms were more suited for keeping up with friends, for example, Participant 1 (Millennial) states:

"I just get on Instagram to post and then scroll for about 10 minutes and see maybe what, what my friends are posting."

The findings show that rather than deliberately striving to become socially integrated inside TikTok communities, the platform offers valuable material that participants might use outside

of the application to enhance connections and friendships. This role however, is played by other social networking sites such as Instagram and Facebook.

As expressed by Participant 3 and Participant 5 (Millennials):

“TikTok is more about the feeling it gives me. It’s an intrinsic kind of platform, to, like, fulfil myself, inwardly.”

&

“On Instagram, I’m now getting a feel of what other people are doing. And then Facebook. It’s also getting a feel of what other people are doing”.

5/6 of study participants note that various platforms are utilised for different purposes; for example, platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Whatsapp are largely used for social-integrative purposes, allowing individuals to gain insight into the lives of family and friends. Participants are not concerned with social-integration while on TikTok; these findings correlate with a study undertaken by Bhandari and Bimo (2020), which worked to establish whether TikTok was fundamentally different from other popular social media networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. According to Bhandari and Bimo (2020), TikTok offers a unique experience that places a focus on users repeatedly engaging with self-defined content (recommendation systems) rather than interpersonal engagement that can be associated with other popular social media networks. Termed as the “algorithmised self” by Bhandari and Bimo, 2020, this form of content consumption has taken the world by storm as illustrated by TikTok’s popularity today (Herman, 2019). Although McLuhan’s theories were developed in a significantly different era, the idea that different media becomes an extension of self (the “algorithmised self” - Bhandari and Bimo, 2020); transforming mankind as well as the environment couldn’t ring more true today. As more people gravitate towards TikTok, there is a transition taking place in the world of social media. It is critical for brands to understand this shift because, as the data shows, participants are seeking material that connects inwardly rather than on the premise of being socially integrated.

Table 4: Social Integrative needs met by TikTok

Framework: Social Integrative Total = 17		
Theme	Frequency	Verbatim Quotes
Trend-related	6	"There was a buzz about it [TikTok], people were making videos and I was just curious to see what's going on." - Participant 3 (Mill) "On TikTok, I may have missed something that was trending, but I can still find it somehow, whereas on Instagram if I've missed something that was trending. I have actually missed it." - Participant 2 (Gen-Z)
Relation to others	5	"The nice thing is that because of the smaller communities on TikTok, you can now be yourself... What am I going to see today that I don't know and then it's also that validation that people are actually doing this and that." - Participant 5" (Mill) "You can get advice on relationships and what to do, friendships, You know, yeah I can definitely say it has benefited me in my real life." - Participant 6 (Gen-Z) "Literally like, helped me so much. It's hard to explain, you know, because when you're sitting alone in your room, and you can't talk to anyone or something, you open TikTok and there's someone talking to you saying you know, it's not so bad. It's kind of saved my life in an aspect." - Participant 4 (Gen-Z)
Social integrative needs are met by other social media platforms	6	"As for Instagram. When I go on Instagram, maybe I'm looking more for what other people are up to, who's posting about what. What's, the general interest in people's lives right now. So, as opposed to TikTok, TikTok is more about the feeling it gives me. It's an intrinsic kind of platform to, like, fulfil myself, inwardly." - Participant 3 (Mill) "Facebook was the platform where I'll find like, I'll get a reminder of my friends birthdays. If I delete Facebook, how am I going to know?" - Participant 5 (Mill)

4.5 Personal-Integrative Needs met by TikTok

Lastly, personal integrative needs were of the least fulfilled need on TikTok (frequency of 5 across all responses and participants). Personal integrative needs revolve around the idea of self-esteem and social status (Stafford et al., 2004). According to Hussain et al. (2019), personal integrative needs “relate to firming credibility, respect, status, confidence and stability”. As a result, according to participants, TikTok is not inherently a platform that caters to self-esteem and social status demands. Participants recall cases where TikTok was able to offer self-improvement material with the objective of inspiring confidence, however, this was not identified as a common thread across research findings. Personal integrative activity involves the idea of self-presentation, as users depict and create a desired persona on social media where content works to highlight positive behaviours and attributes, according to Kearney (2018). This therefore means, participants are not primarily using TikTok to affirm credibility and status within society, this idea could be related to the concept that majority of participants utilise TikTok to meet tension-free needs. As previously mentioned, tension-free needs express the desire to escape or relieve tension from society and self (Karimi et al., 2014). Thus, affirming that credibility and status on the platform works against this desire.

Table 5: Personal-integrative needs met by TikTok

Framework: Personal Integrative Total = 5		
Theme	Frequency	Verbatim Quotes
Self-improvement	5	“I have so many videos saved in my phone of like workouts... I just want to like, start working out but like I want at home workouts and then I wanted recipes for smoothies. So it was just giving me all of those details, which was awesome.” Participant 5 (Mill) “You actually can become more open minded to certain perspectives and the way other people view things about the world.” - Participant 6 (Gen-Z)

4.6 Brands on TikTok

The goal of this research was to determine how targeted short-form video content on TikTok meets the needs of social media users using the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, et al., 1973). 5/6 participants noted that although all social media platforms are intended for various purposes, TikTok has become a significant platform where extended periods of time is spent consuming media. This illustrates TikTok's potential for brands, yet the majority of participants pointed out brands' ineffectiveness when it comes to utilising the platform. When questioned about their overall sentiments about advertising on TikTok, all participants either emphasised a lack of interest in branded content and frustration towards advertisements on the platform. For instance, Participant 1 (Millennial) exclaimed:

“I skip every single advert that comes on TikTok, every time I literally, even when it starts and I can feel that it's an advert and I look at the bottom and I see paid ad, I just scroll up”

When asked about brands advertising on TikTok, Participant 4 (Generation Z) stated:

“It's tricky, when I see a sponsored ad. I typically scroll immediately past them.”

Although the majority of users have been unable to connect with brands on TikTok, all research participants have either purchased a product or used a brand after becoming aware of it on the social media network, further emphasising the true potential for brands on TikTok. For example, Participant 2 (Generation Z) mentioned that they:

“saw a post about Maropeng boutique hotel, my friend and I have planned a trip to go there.”

Most participants had in fact connected with brands, however, it is crucial for brands to grasp the following message stated by Participant 3 (Millennial):

“The reason why I'm on TikTok is not really to go looking out for stuff to buy. It's just that I came across those two and I like the idea of them”

This idea seems to be the general consensus in the research findings, participants noted that other platforms tend to flood users with branded content as well as advertisements and therefore, TikTok provides a space to break away from this form of content. It is crucial for brands to work towards catering for the cognitive, affective and tension-free needs in order to provide value for consumers.

Table 6 displays significant topics raised by respondents when asked how brands could better use TikTok to connect with consumers:

Table 6: How brands can better connect with consumers on TikTok

Key Quotations	Key-words and Ideas	Frequency
“Get more organic advertising, without making it seem like it's an advert.” Participant 1 (M) “Um, they need to approach it from a human standpoint, in my opinion...no one wants to see any serious advertisements and stuff like that.” Participant 4 (Z) “I think just showing how they create their products...But I do think the more they share, it's easier to form a connection with anything, let alone a brand. If you know more about it.” Participant 5 (M) “I think that it would be better when it isn't scripted. And that person is just giving you the genuine experience.” - Participant 6 (Z) “I'm assuming her content on Instagram is different from her content on TikTok. TikTok is like a lot more natural, I love that, it was just like, worth watching.” – Participant 2 (Z)	Organic content	3
	Genuine experiences	5
	Non-scripted	3
	Human standpoint	2
	Behind the scenes / How-to	5
	“None-serious” advertising / stirring away from typical advertising	5

As illustrated in Table 6, the most prevalent themes for content that has the ability to connect with participants include genuine experiences, behind the scenes and how-to content, as well as “none-serious” advertising that stirs away from typical advertising. Consumers describe authenticity in a brand experience as original, accurate, organic, where content offers a sense of connectedness, according to Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani (2021). As identified in Table 6, participants are seeking genuine content that is non-scripted and organic as key terms centre around the notion of producing an overall authentic experience. As discussed by Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink (2008), “authenticity has become the cornerstone of contemporary advertising”, it is therefore crucial for brand marketers to determine how their target customer characterises authenticity. According to the themes uncovered in the research, brand communication should be integrated with elements that satisfy cognitive, affective, and tension-free needs as participants are looking for authentic material that can provide value.

4.7 Validity and reliability / trustworthiness

As studied by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the trustworthiness of qualitative research can be identified through a study’s credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility and transferability determine if a study’s findings are reliable, are of quality and can be applied to a variety of situations (Korstjens and Moser, 2017). Dependability hinges on the stability and consistency of the findings over a period of time, whereas confirmability grapples with the neutrality and the degree to which findings can be confirmed by other researchers.

The study’s credibility was established by the level of information acquired; a test interview was undertaken to ensure that the problem statement and research questions were thoroughly addressed. The richness in information can be seen in the capacity to identify themes that directly determined the needs of social media users. Furthermore, this research has built credibility by recording interviews and including a transcribed raw data set that correlates to the findings in this study (Annexure G) allowing readers and other academics to fact-check the data presented.

Transferability, as defined by Anney (2014), relates to the extent to which the findings of a research study may be applied to other situations. One of the ways in which this paper worked to establish transferability was through its reliance on what is considered a

popularised theoretical framework according to Ruggiero (2000), The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959). As a consequence, the reader will be able to compare results and methods of approach to a large pool of research publications that have leveraged the theory. Additionally, while the goal of the research was not to generalise findings, the research sought to provide insight into the TikTok phenomenon in order to guide digital content strategy. Therefore, transferability remained a priority for this study. Lastly, the degree of detail provided in this study worked to ensure interested parties gain a thorough understanding of the foundation of the study, the process of data collection and finally, interpretation of findings. However, it is also important to note that the research was conducted in the context of South Africa, therefore, the findings of this study may or may not be transferred to other demographics.

As defined by Bitsch (2005), dependability relates to the consistency of findings across time. When auditing dependability, auditors examine the researcher's process of inquiry by looking at raw data, interview schedules, and so on. As discussed in Chapter 3, a thorough process of inquiry was outlined to provide the reader an overview on the consistency and validity of the research. Furthermore, an external supervisor, Peet Engelbrecht, was in charge of overseeing the research process from inception to finalisation to identify potential flaws that may render the study none-dependable.

Finally, a study's confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings of a study can be verified by other researchers (Baxter and Eyles, 1997). This process ensures that the findings and interpretations of the study are not made up, but rather, a direct representation of the data collected. As mentioned in Section 3.8, interviews were recorded as well as transcribed simultaneously to maintain evidence of findings. The interview schedule as well as transcription of all interviews were included in the Appendices to allow peer audit.

Maintaining integrity and accuracy in qualitative research has proven difficult, as Wallendorf and Belk (1989) point out; as findings and interpretations are based on the researcher's worldview. As a result, qualitative researchers might bend findings to suit a narrative. Therefore, the preceding section sought to justify the techniques used to assure this study's trustworthiness, validity, and reliability.

5 Chapter 5: Conclusion

As brands strive to leverage the TikTok phenomenon as consumers flock to the platform, they are faced with the difficulty of determining how to successfully harness the platform (Ehlers, 2021; Kemp, 2021). The study's premise was based on initial research into the TikTok phenomenon which revealed that recommendation systems (targeted content) and short-form video were the two elements driving platform success (TikTok, 2020; CB Insights, 2020). This research discovered a knowledge gap in academia, as evidenced by the scarcity of scholarly knowledge about TikTok (Section 1.2, Rationale). In order to close this gap, the current literature on the subject was examined, and a suitable theoretical framework was established to guide the research. Finally, qualitative research and thematic analysis were employed to derive insights to help guide brand strategy. The following sections will provide an overview of how findings addressed the research questions, the study's implications, a critical evaluation of findings and in closing, the study's ethical considerations.

5.1 Concluding answers to the research questions

The goal of this paper was to explore the TikTok phenomenon by studying how targeted short-form video is meeting the needs of social media users in order to provide guidance for digital content strategy. To address this topic and the research problem associated with it, research questions were developed (Section 1.3.1). Having applied The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959) to guide the course of investigation, the following section provides answers to the research questions identified in Section 1.3.1.

- **What needs does TikTok's short-form video content satisfy for social media consumers?**
- **How is TikTok's targeted content serving the needs of social media consumers?**
- **How can brands leverage TikTok's ability to satisfy the needs of social media consumers?**

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959) served as a framework, allowing the findings of this study to effectively meet the study's objectives. The findings of this research revealed participants' openness to recommendation systems. Where privacy and the collection of data has been highlighted as a major concern for social media consumers (Yerby, Koohang and Paliszkiewicz, 2019), TikTok's targeting abilities have been greatly welcomed by all participants, in fact, 5/6 participants expressed an awareness of TikTok's recommendation algorithm and its effectiveness. This key finding illustrates the platform's ability to transform attitudes around data collection on social media; for example, Participant 1 (Millennial) states:

“I used to think that it was manipulation with the data, but now that I'm into TikTok, I actually see why it's good because it's for me. And it's, it's giving me exactly what I want to see, it knows exactly what I like.”

All of the participants agreed that TikTok's personalised content has an influence on their platform usage, with users spending more time viewing TikTok content and less time on other social media platforms. According to participants, TikTok's targeted content satisfies the desire for a personalised experience more especially in cases where participants are looking to escape reality, acquire relevant new knowledge in an enjoyable manner, and consume entertaining material that is considered pleasurable to the participant.

When it comes to short-form video content, similarly to TikTok's capacity to deliver targeted content, participants strongly felt that short-form video plays a crucial role in time-spent on the platform. All participants stated that the platform's use of short-form video and ability to quickly skip through content results in extended periods of usage. Participants highlighted their need for a succinct, stimulating and creative content experience as major drivers to continue using the platform. Due to the nature of short-form video, content is compelled to get to the point quickly and in a creative manner as noted by participants.

With these two features working in tandem to re-enforce the TikTok experience, the platform provides a great opportunity for brands to connect with their target market. For one, TikTok's ability to connect users to their preferred content means brands will potentially be exposed to users who have indicated an interest into a particular brand's line of content, increasing the likelihood for users to engage. For example, Participant 3 (Millennial), expressed an interest in hair related content:

“I like watching hair styles, right, how to do particular hairstyles.”

When asked whether they had purchased or tried products seen on TikTok, Participant 3 (Millennial), relayed being in the process of purchasing hair clip-ons discovered on TikTok. This demonstrates TikTok’s ability to expose users to content they are interested and engage with as well as products or services that align with these interests. However, findings indicate that brands have been far from effective in leveraging TikTok as 5/6 participants actively choose to not engage with sponsored content. Therefore, it is key to note that content that may work on other platforms may not work on TikTok as participants are seeking to escape typical advertising content as seen on other platforms. Participant 5 notes:

“Some of the adverts that I see are just, what’s the word, overdone. It’s just seems too fake.”

More and more brands are seeking to create consumer-centric experiences, as a result, this has meant that content strategy, while addressing business goals must produce content that is relevant to the target market (Razina et al., 2019; Vinerean, 2017). Brands, therefore, must concentrate on discovering the gap between the brand user experience and the needs of consumers (Razina et al., 2019). Brands looking to strategically leverage TikTok must ensure they understand their customer’s needs and ensure content delivered meets the target market’s cognitive, affective and tension-free needs to create a value driven experience.

5.2 Implications of findings for future practices

TikTok, as indicated in the findings, is showing tremendous potential for brands. All participants in the study expressed instances where they had been influenced to purchase a product/service they had seen on TikTok, with some expressing intention to purchase in the future as well. This study has not only illustrated the potential of TikTok as a strategic social media platform but has also revealed how the platform is meeting the needs of social media consumers. These findings shed light on the TikTok phenomenon by emphasising the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the platform: targeted short-form video. As the second most downloaded mobile application in South Africa (Kemp, 2021), brand

managers who are seeking to better understand the platform can refer to the findings of this study in both justifying the platform's potential but also, in guiding digital content strategy. Academically, this study identified the scarcity of scholarly knowledge surrounding TikTok in the context of South Africa. The goal is that this study will inspire future research in order to provide an even more comprehensive understanding of TikTok.

5.3 Application for Marketers

As discussed in Section 2.5, brands that place a focus creating consumer-centric brand experiences have the ability to grow brand resonance (Latif et al., 2014). The following key characteristics indicate preferable content on TikTok and may be used by marketers looking to include TikTok in their social media strategy.

- Brands must deliver authentic content to form connections on TikTok.
- Traditional forms of advertising as seen on other social media platforms are ineffective, creativity plays an integral role in sparking brand interest.
- Entertaining content is key on the platform, brands can strategically leverage TikTok trends from the perspective of the brand to drive engagement.
- Value driven content plays a vital role in brand interest on TikTok, consumers are looking to learn from the content they consume.
- Content creation on TikTok is unique to the platform, for example, what works on Instagram may not be successful on the platform. Therefore, brands must tailor create content for the platform.

Before attempting to leverage the TikTok phenomenon, It is crucial for marketers to gain a first-hand experience of TikTok (Ehlers, 2021). While the platform has demonstrated great potential for brands, marketers need to fully comprehend TikTok's unique culture to benefit.

5.4 Conclusions

To conclude, one of the most prevalent themes to emerge from this study was the growing need for tailored experiences for consumers. This notion placed an emphasis on McLuhan's theories surrounding the role of media in society. McLuhan hypothesised that media becomes an extension of man (McLuhan, 1964). This idea rings true in modern day media consumption habits and more specifically, in the context of TikTok. Bhandari and Bimo (2020), coined the term "the algorithmised self" to define the way in which users consume media on TikTok. This term worked to describe the way in which users constantly interact

with self-defined content led by recommendation systems (Bhandari and Bimo, 2020). As a result, when brand managers seek to connect with users on TikTok, it is important to consider the platform as the extension of the target market and thus, treat messaging accordingly.

5.5 Ethical considerations

In research, ethical considerations guide the way in which the researcher acts and analyses the topic at hand (Resnik, 2011). As stipulated by Bryman and Bell (2007) some of the key ethical considerations when conducting research include full consent, confidentiality, anonymity, respect of the participant, complete honesty of study objectives and safe environments whereby participants will not be harmed in anyway. Therefore, this study performed due diligence by processing a study request form, followed by a VEGA ethics checklist and consent forms for all participants. All interview participants provided informed consent and all information collected was confidential and was solely used for the purpose of this research paper. Furthermore, the researcher provided truthful findings and full transparency throughout the course of the study.

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7 7. Appendices

7.1.A Final Research Report Summary Document Table

7.2 B: Ethical Clearance Form

7.3 C: Informed Consent Forms

7.4 D: Pre-Test Interview Schedule

7.5 E: Pre-Test Interview Transcription

7.6 F: Final Interview Schedule

7.7 G: Interview Transcription

