TikTok Capitalism: The Attention Economy and the Reproduction of Capitalism

Research Thesis

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by

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“what i’ve been up to lately”

The text “what i’ve been up to lately” appears on the screen in a white font and without capitalization. Beneath the text is Charli D’Amelio, an 18 year old “content creator.” With over 150 million followers, she is among the most followed creators on TikTok. In this TikTok post, D’Amelio sits in the middle row of an SUV with a pristine black leather interior. She gives her phone camera a short side-eyeing glance before lipsyncing along to the opening lyric of Lawsy’s song, “Hotel,” played in fast-forward with the phrase “Bitch, who the fuck?” The video hard-cuts and brings the viewer to a slideshow of twenty-one photos that are presumably meant to suggest what the young influencer has “been up to lately.” The slideshow is comprised of photos of D’Amelio and friends in a variety of settings that signal her fun, carefree, and youthful online persona, as if to answer Lawsy’s question, “who the fuck?” Included in the phone photographs are a desert landscape, a private ocean view, concert photos taken from onstage, and D’Amelio next to a photo ad of herself in a cosmetics store advertising her fragrance line “Born Dreamer” (Fig. 1). Several selfies of D’Amelio with her friends all flash by rapidly as the Lawsy song plays. Indeed, Lawsy’s music has become the aural backdrop to a variety of TikTok trends over the course of 2022. In this context, “Hotel” contributes to TikTok and D’Amelio’s messaging, for Lawsy himself became famous on the platform at the beginning of 2022 after posting his music accompanied by screenshots of his Soundcloud page. In “Hotel,” Lawsy raps about having sex and selling Percocet from a hotel room, reinforcing the sense that such posts are little more than public celebrations of such glamorous personas and autobiographical, raw “lifestyles.”
The impression that D’Amelio’s TikTok gives to its viewer through its visual material—the uncapitalized texts, luxurious SUV interior, and scenes of travel—combined with the lyrics of “Hotel” together show the ways in which is the young D’Amelio has been living a lavish, carefree, and cosmopolitan lifestyle. Many of TikTok’s most popular influencers such as Charli D’Amelio ask the viewer to relate to them while simultaneously displaying a lifestyle that is simply unattainable for most viewers. After all, how many people can walk into a makeup store and see their photo on display, or take selfies on private boats? By utilizing a variety of expressive forms that are common on TikTok and social media broadly—selfies, pictures of restaurant meals, bedroom settings—influencers can make themselves appear in ways that correspond to what Crystal Abidin calls a “calibrated amateur” or the “contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur…” (Abidin, 2017). The surge of TikTok’s growth in
2020 marks an intensification of “calibrated amateurism” as a practice and strategy that is used widely by influencers and to great success, if we are to measure by influencer followings and resulting opportunities from the monetization of their content. Though D’Amelio’s rise to TikTok fame at 150 million followers came largely through performing viral dances, a notable portion of her recent content has become advertisements for corporations and for her own entrepreneurial endeavors. Included in her recent paid partnerships are Amazon, Dunkin Donuts, Prada, and a variety of phone application and startup companies. D’Amelio also has a clothing line with Hollister, and the second season of “The D’Amelio Show” is now on the streaming platform Hulu.

TikTok is notable for the way that it generates questions that bind together internet celebrity, algorithms, the forms and functions of capital on the internet, and the intricate ways in which they are interrelated. The purpose of this thesis is to begin to address and link the following research questions: How has TikTok influenced the way that celebrities perform their lives online? In what ways does TikTok’s algorithm shape forms of sociality that are different from other social media platforms? What role does capital play in the operations of TikTok? D’Amelio is an exemplary figure in light of these questions, revealing her immense success in building a following and monetizing her content, in influencing popular culture, and in demonstrating a mastery of TikTok-specific practices as well as knowledge of how virality functions on the platform.

What is TikTok?

TikTok is a social media platform created by the technology company “Bytedance” and originally released in a limited international market in 2017. Bytedance is a China-based
company that owns a variety of social media platforms, most notably TikTok, which functions as
the international version of the “Douyin” application but also includes the popular Chinese social
platforms Toutiao and Xigua Video. After the international release of TikTok in 2017, Bytedance
acquired the lip-syncing video app Musical.ly, which has guided some of the popular forms of
content on the platform for music and dance performance. The content of TikTok, known simply
as “TikToks,” initially took the form of short-format videos—most often 10-15 seconds in
length—although the platform now allows videos up to ten minutes. TikToks are user-submitted
videos that can utilize a variety of video-editing tools made easily available by the platform’s
video editing features. Many of the available video editing tools encourage the direct
reproduction or response to previously existing content on the platform, as well as the internet
more broadly. These creator tools include “stitch,” “a creation tool that allows you to combine
another video on TikTok with one you're creating”; “duet,” “your video side-by-side with a video
from another creator on TikTok”; and “sounds,” which are simply audio clips from other TikToks
that can be used for the creation of new content (TikTok, 2023). Because of these tools, much of
the content on TikTok relies on reproducing trends, memes, and skit formats in a cyclical
fashion. All of this content is then organized onto a user’s “For You Page,” known as FYP, which
is experienced as a perpetual stream of TikToks; another video is always a quick vertical swipe
away. The FYP is curated for each user by TikTok’s proprietary algorithm, which measures user
engagement with the content of the FYP in order to create a stream of content that is meant to
accumulate the sustained attention of the user as the content becomes increasingly more
personalized to a user’s interests. When a user creates a profile, the FYP is populated primarily
by what is broadly popular among users across TikTok. However, as a user scrolls their feed and
provides engagement cues to the algorithm by watching certain kinds of content for longer
periods, liking TikToks, following users, and so on, the originally wide range of content narrows in the direction of the user’s observed interests. As a result, users often become more invested in the platform as the algorithm provides more targeted content from relevant TikTok subcultures and niches.

**Thesis**

Much of the scholarship on social media has focused on investigating social media platforms and the ways that they appear to bolster democratic ideals of participation and sociality (Burgess, 2006). However, critical internet scholars have critiqued scholarship that overly emphasizes the optimism surrounding social media’s effects on democratic participation and political awareness. As Internet and Social Media scholar Christian Fuchs argues: “The negative aspects of social media need to be further analyzed in order to temper the uncritical social media optimism that is an ideological manifestation of the search for new capital accumulation models…” (Fuchs, 2013, 26). Further critiquing the optimistic scholarship on social media that emphasizes information as freely available, Mike Grimshaw notes:

> The rise of self-publishing, blogging and open-access information has seen a claim and promotion of the creative commons, yet even if content is freely available, contributing can be at a financial cost and access is always determined by access to technology. As such, even the creative commons exists within various forms and experiences of capitalism…So digital society is capitalist society—and even so-called acts of resistance as creative commons are not separate from this. It is resistance from within capitalism… (Grimshaw).
The following thesis argues that while social media platforms broadly have been sites for the reproduction of capitalism, TikTok is both an exacerbation of prior phenomena and the site of new and distinct transformations to capitalism’s reproduction. First, although the use of algorithms that organize content on social media platforms is not new, the premise of an entire platform built around data observations and algorithmic curation is unique to TikTok. The algorithm shapes user experience and engagement on the platform to a point that users constantly negotiate, affirm, and reaffirm a sense of self and cultural identity through their engagement with, and consumption of, content on the platform. Second, while attaining influencer status could appear to be possible for anyone—something reinforced by the practices and aesthetics utilized by TikTok’s most popular creators—this possibility is in fact mediated by the same social, economic, and cultural powers that govern the world offline. Central to this thesis is thus the observation that varying levels of capital accumulation determine the possibility of an influencer’s ability to garner attention through various means—thereby their influencing status—notably by providing heightened visibility on the FYP.

In addition, the growth of TikTok has had a significant influence on popular culture outside of the internet, notably in its blurring of boundaries between digital life and “IRL” or “in real life.” Both the algorithm and the distinct video production tools TikTok gives users (the “stitch” and “duet” functions, the reproducible library of “sounds,” etc.) create a format that greatly rewards the reproduction of source material, and the further reproduction of reproduced content. Because TikTok encourages users to constantly engage with cultural materials in order to tailor the FYP to the interests and desires of the user, TikTok is at work in shaping the cultural identity of its users. Though the algorithm aims to curate a FYP that sustains the user’s attention,
the kind of content within a given niche is distinct to the short-video format that TikTok has created. This commonly takes the form of TikTok-born memes, sketch formats, dances, etc. and are often guided by selected musical clips or viral “sounds” from the library of pre-existing TikToks. The question that remains is how this reproduction of reproduced content then relates to TikTok as the site of new and distinct transformations to capitalism’s reproduction.

The Algorithm

The experience of using TikTok is one that is entirely guided by the platform’s proprietary algorithm. Upon opening the TikTok application for the first time and making an account, the user is immediately loaded into the algorithmically curated stream of TikToks on their FYP. With this presentation of viral content, the algorithm begins to observe the user’s engagement data. As the user engages with content in the variety of ways that TikTok makes available—likes, follows, hashtags, etc.—the algorithm will further determine the kinds of content that will be delivered to the user in real-time.

The Wall Street Journal pursued an investigation into the algorithm—“How TikTok's Algorithm Figures You Out”—in which their staff created over a hundred automated accounts with individualized sets of interests which were not explicitly disclosed to the app. Following one of the automated accounts with interests in “depression and mental health,” the article states that, “after 224 videos into the bot’s overall journey, or about 36 minutes of total watch time, TikTok’s understanding of (the bot) takes shape…from here on (the bot’s) feed is a deluge of depressive content—93% of videos shown to the account are about sadness or depression” (WSJ Staff). The article reproduces a critique that has become common in media coverage of the platform of the TikTok algorithm (see Griffin, Toper, Dias), which is tasked with increasing user
engagement: “Over time, the video choices become less mainstream, less vetted by moderators and sometimes more disturbing…Some of the accounts ended up lost in rabbit holes of similar content, including one that just watched videos about depression. Others were served videos that encouraged eating disorders, sexualized minors, and discussed suicide.” (WSJ). Media outlet “The Verge” notes that the algorithm’s features “can be innocuous …(but) can also be exclusionary. The app might not surface videos from the Black Lives Matter protests or may not recommend disabled or queer creators, if a user doesn’t specifically go out of their way to tune the algorithm in that direction” (Alexander).

The term “templatability” has been developed by social media scholars Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin to “describe how a combination of vernacular norms by elite users on a platform and algorithmic recommendation systems that value and promote these norms result in…specific aesthetic choices, ways of crafting content, and strategies of attention grabbing on social (media) that then become ‘templates’.” (Abidin, 2021, 59). The idea of templatability further reinforces the importance of content’s reproducibility on TikTok. Influencers and aspiring influencers create their content with reproducibility in mind, and in the context of TikTok this means that they must consider the templates that are currently popular on the platform. Influencers may make their intention of creating a new template with which other users can reproduce explicit, as with user @fatmik3tv’s TikTok “Episode 1” (Fig.2). @Fatmik3tv performs a short monologue in his TikTok: “See, here’s the problem buddy. You’re all the way over here in my business, but you need to be over there in your business. I’mma need you to back your car up and shut the fuck up” (@Fatmik3tv). With no other person or car in the TikTok, the humor of the video is in its recognition of how templatability works on TikTok; the original context of a template often has little effect on the way that it is used when it is reproduced by
other users. What matters more is that a sound is both “instantly appealing and widely recognizable.” (Abidin, 2021, 66). With nearly 2 million likes and thousands of TikToks that have used @Fatmik3tv’s sound, his goal of creating a viral sound was realized.

![Day 1 of creating a sound until it goes viral](image)

**Fig. 2 “Episode 1”**

The way that the TikTok algorithm shapes sociality on the platform makes TikTok distinct from other social networks. While other social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter also utilize algorithms to organize the content stream presented to their users, the effect of the algorithms on other major social media platforms is different than on TikTok. The major platforms that predate TikTok are primarily based around building social
networks, often but not always with other people known in varying degrees to the user outside of the internet. Communications scholar Aparajita Bhandari argues that in contrast to other popular social media platforms:

TikTok is designed in a way that encourages users to interact most heavily with two alternative entities: 1. A trending algorithm which presents users with videos ostensibly catered to their personal tastes and interests, and 2. with their own content and self-representations. This results in a model of public presentation that is most heavily informed by and directed toward the individual instead of an ‘audience.’ (Bhandari)

Due to the accessibility and specificity of TikTok’s in-app video editing tools, TikTok has created a new style of content production which is distinct to the platform.¹ As a result, TikTok users engage not through the traditional known social network but through media that expresses cultural identities in distinctly different ways than posting on other platforms. In other words, in the process of using TikTok both as a viewer and creator, a user is constantly in a state of negotiating their cultural identities and sense of self by engaging with an algorithm that attempts to understand the viewer’s interests in order to produce a stream of TikToks meant to capture their sustained attention, and responsible for distributing creator content on the FYPs of others. In this sense, TikTok is a social media platform that revolves around cultivating followers and accumulating attention like other platforms, but TikTok does this by catering to the user’s own sense of individualism—shaped by their content consumption—instead of a social network or

¹ The short-video content format has recently been replicated by the technology conglomerate Meta as “reels” available on both Facebook and Instagram
familiar audience. In short, the algorithm plays a critical function on TikTok since it performs the necessary task of organizing and directing the viewer’s modes of attention.

**Perspectives on TikTok**

TikTok has been the subject of a significant degree of interest, both in academia and in popular media, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic when TikTok’s use rose sharply. Critical discourse surrounding TikTok’s algorithm is especially prevalent, with focus on the “addictive” nature of the platform’s organization, with some media outlets going as far as likening it to “digital-crack-cocaine” (Koetsier), and others deeming the FYP as “one of the most addictive scrolling experiences on the Internet” (Zeng, Abidin, Schäfer). Another common critique of the algorithm in public media has to do with the way that the algorithm affects creator visibility on TikTok, as was the case in 2019 when leaked official TikTok correspondence showed that the platform had intentionally suppressed the visibility of supposedly disabled users—in other words, users deemed to have “facial disfigurement, autism, (or) down-syndrome” (Köver) by moderators in 15 second video clips—in an alleged attempt to limit cyberbullying on the platform. Media scholar Melanie Kennedy has critiqued the algorithm as something that suppresses and “render(s) some girlhoods hypervisible and others hidden in their shadows” (Kennedy), arguing that the algorithm creates a disparity on the online “economy of visibility” that disadvantages girls and women who do not fit into the “white, slim, normatively attractive feminine” ideals for which TikTok offers forms of hypervisibility.

The influence TikTok has on popular culture outside of the platform is another notable subject of study for scholars of TikTok. In the introduction to their 2022 book, *The Rise of TikTok in US Culture*, Trevor Boffone writes: “‘meaning-making practices’ begin on the app but quickly
migrates into other digital and analog spaces in our day-to-day lives… Our lives are increasingly intertwined between the digital and the material because we use a variety of web-based platforms to produce a digital version of everyday life” (Boffone, 2022, 2). On the effect of influencers on this phenomenon, Boffone further argues: “considering TikTok’s accessibility, it teaches us how to act…As TikTokers mimic, reenact, and reimagine the platform’s trends and its influencers’ activity, TikTok becomes embedded into our personalities…” (Boffone, 2022, 3)

**Influencers and The Attention Economy**

Influencers are an important component of the TikTok landscape. Content creators are able to accumulate followings into the hundreds of millions on the platform, materializing in countless hours of content and, in turn, likes, comments, and other audience engagements in huge quantities. With this level of cultural production comes an entire economy that is composed of several different parties: TikTok, the influencers themselves, their followers, passive viewers, and outside corporations and institutions. There are a variety of methods that allow influencers to profit from their content. TikTok has allocated 300 million dollars into its own “Creator Fund” which, as TikTok states, “gives TikTok’s best and brightest the opportunity to earn money with their creative talent.” (TikTok, 2019). The platform also allows for influencers and outside corporations to collaborate and monetize TikToks, which are often indicated by a “Paid Partnership” or “Sponsored” symbol near the video caption, though not all adverts make clear in explicit ways that the influencer has been paid or otherwise compensated for making the video. TikTok also features a live streaming function, similar to the streaming service Twitch.tv which allows users with follower counts greater than 1000 to stream live content that will be cast both to their followers and onto the FYPs of algorithmically selected users not following the streamer.
Streamers on TikTok are able to receive in-app “gifts” from viewers during their streams, most often as a reward for their creation of interesting or otherwise attention-grabbing content. These gifts are directly transferable to money through the app at half the value that the gift was initially purchased for by the viewer. Naturally, TikTok’s biggest celebrities have been able to move beyond the app into myriad other business endeavors, just as Charli D’Amelio has by starring in her own “The D’Amelio Show” on Hulu, a spot on Dancing with the Stars, and so on. Certainly, TikTok celebrities have had great success with these methods, with their own Forbes list stating: “The platform’s highest-paid celebrities collectively hauled in $55.5 million in 2021, a 200% increase from a year earlier” (Brown)--and both Charli D’Amelio and her sister Dixie take the first and second highest paying spots on that list, accruing a combined $27.5 million dollars. Forbes attributes the dramatic increase to “(influencer) efforts to broaden their fame beyond the platform that first turned them into celebrities” (Brown), although still 30-50% of their profits come from sponsored content on the platform.

Due to the massive scale with which capital moves through TikTok and its influencers, it would seem critical to explore the workings of TikTok’s economy. Moreover, understanding the way capital moves through TikTok is central to understanding TikTok’s role in the reproduction of capitalism.

One possible point of departure for interpreting this phenomenon is the concept of “cultural capital.” Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital--developed in his essay, “The Forms of Capital”--explains the way that capital exists outside of its economic form and manifests in the social world in cultural and social forms. For Bourdieu, cultural capital exists in three distinct states: the embodied, the objectified, and the institutionalized. For the purposes of this thesis, the embodied state of cultural capital proves most useful. Bourdieu argues that
embodied cultural capital “presupposes a process of embodiment, incorporation, which, insofar as it implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor” (Bourdieu, 1986, 18). In the case of TikTok, influencers invest their time in TikTok and the internet more broadly in order to develop a certain command of viral media and culture; these influencers understand the nature of viral content on the platform (whether it be dances, skits, memes, lip syncing, etc.) in large part because of the time they have spent on the platform, both creating and consuming content. Supporting this argument, Bourdieu explains of embodied cultural capital: “The work of acquisition is work on oneself (self-improvement), an effort that presupposes a personal cost, an investment, above all of time…with all the privation, renunciation, and sacrifice that it may entail” (Ibid). What follows from this investment is the accumulation of cultural capital, and in the context of TikTok, this suggests that influencers with more embodied cultural capital are able to accumulate larger followings as they produce content aimed at garnering the attention of their growing followings and other viewers on the FYP.

In the case of TikTok influencers like D’Amelio, it may seem that the workings of cultural capital as explored initially by Bourdieu might begin to explain their internet fame. However, TikTok scholar Crystal Abidin suggests a different approach popularized by Michael Goldhaber, one now informed by the concept of an “attention economy.” As Goldhaber asserts:

In a full-fledged attention economy, the goal is simply to get either enough attention or as much as possible . . . you build on the stock you have every time you get any, and the larger your audience at one time, the larger your potential audience in the future. Thus,
obtaining attention is obtaining a kind of enduring wealth, a form of wealth that puts you in a preferred position to get anything this new economy offers. (Goldhaber).

Abidin builds on this idea in the context of TikTok and the COVID-19 pandemic: “The way attention works online was undergoing a seismic shift, with TikTok Influencers pioneering new formulae for how one might ‘qualify’ to be a highly visible and thus successful creator on the app… But as the COVID-19 season unfolded, these shifts seemed to spread beyond TikTok to apply to the Influencer industry at large” (Abidin, 2020, 83). The framework of an attention economy is useful in the case of TikTok in the way it expands on Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital while emphasizing “attention” as a necessary commodity that allows influencers to accumulate cultural capital. Moreover, Goldhaber argues: “since it is hard to get new attention by repeating exactly what you or someone else has done before, this new economy is based on endless originality, or at least attempts at originality” (Goldhaber). Indeed, the economy offered by Goldhaber describes in part the way that virality functions on TikTok—that influencers must operate with a knowledge of what styles of content are currently popular on the platform in order to build and sustain their following, but that whatever content is popular on the platform at a given moment is in a constant state of change, especially as content ideas are appropriated and reimagined by creators. In short, the attention economy accounts for the way that influencers accumulate the cultural capital necessary to make content that is effectively captivating enough to garner the widespread attention of viewers, even as it emphasizes the ways that attention itself becomes a commodity produced by the viewer.

Within the attention economy, most viewers take part in unpaid, productive labor. As a user spends time on TikTok scrolling through the content on their FYP—containing unmonetized
and monetized content alike—they perform a value-creating activity. This concept has been
developed prior to the creation of TikTok by critical social media scholars like Fuchs: “The more
time a user spends on Facebook, the more profile, browsing, communication, behavioural,
content data s/he generates that is offered as a commodity to advertising clients. The more time a
user spends online, the more targeted ads can be presented to her/him.” (Fuchs, 2015, 27). Fuchs
goes on to argue that social media has emerged as a new strategy of capitalism to “commodify
disposable time, which explains the emergence of play labour, digital labour and prosumption.”
(Ibid). Indeed, TikTok is not the first site of this unpaid digital labor, but as its popularity has
surged globally in recent years, and with the effectiveness with which the application
successfully accumulates the sustained attention of viewers with any set of interests through
precisely targeted content delivery, TikTok marks an intensification of the phenomenon.

The attention economy is useful for understanding the workings of TikTok in that the
term does not distinguish between positive or negative attention in the accumulation of capital.
Andrew Tate, a former professional kickboxer, was relatively unknown outside of the sport until
he amassed over 4 million followers on TikTok between 2021 and August 2022. Tate developed
a distinct persona with his online performance, and his TikToks—which mostly feature outrageous
misogynistic statements, hyperbolic masculine performance, and displays of exorbitant
wealth—grew highly popular on TikTok. Though TikTok banned Tate’s account for violating
community guidelines in August of 2022, searching “Andrew Tate” on TikTok yields an
unending stream of reposts of Tate’s TikToks, as well as responses in the forms of duets and
stitches, months after his ban from the platform. Outside of TikTok, Tate runs “Hustlers
University” a subscription service that claims 168,000 current subscribers dedicated to
developing wealth through various means online. Tate’s TikTok campaign transformed him from
a relatively unknown kickboxer to a highly popular and deeply controversial internet personality. Even though much of the attention Tate received during this time from TikTok users and media outlets was intensely critical of Tate and his views, it remains that both the positive and negative attention he received during the campaign elevated his status in the attention economy and cemented both his content on TikTok and his cultural influence, despite the ban on his official account. As the case of Andrew Tate makes clear, the accumulation of critical reception is certainly a viable strategy in accumulating attention—and monetizable content—as an influencer in the attention economy.

**Conclusion**

At the time of writing, the future of TikTok’s availability in the United States is uncertain due to the possibility of a governmental ban of the platform. In defense of TikTok, the platform’s CEO Shou Chew posted from TikTok's official account citing that over 150 million Americans—nearly half of the population—use TikTok. Chew also states that 5 million businesses host TikTok accounts, and that TikTok employs over 7,000 Americans (Chew). Certainly, it would seem that TikTok has become a significant part of the United States’ economy and popular culture.

The notion of an attention economy proves a useful starting point for understanding how capital functions and is reproduced on TikTok, and thus the influences that the functions of capital has on the strategies and practices of influencers. The attention economy builds off the ideas of cultural capital offered by Bourdieu by emphasizing the role of attention in the accumulation of capital; a necessary consideration given the nature of TikTok and its algorithm as tools of garnering and directing the widespread attention of its user base. The implications of this are
broad, but the resulting changes to the way that fame is performed on the platform in contrast to prior models of internet celebrity is particularly notable. As well, the emphasis on attention as a commodity and primary focus of influencer, platform, and corporate accumulation strategies makes clear that the act of scrolling through one’s FYP is a value-creating activity that is exploited by these entities for the accumulation of capital in its various forms. These strategies of accumulation are both a continuation, or intensification, of what critical scholars have studied on other social media platforms and also the site of new contributions to capital’s reproduction.

As one of TikTok’s most popular influencers, Charli D’Amelio represents an exemplary figure for understanding the platform’s attention economy. D’Amelio has been successful in what Petter Törnberg describes as “the self… turned into an object of marketing and promotion…Performances of self are thus valued in likes and shares –‘influence’–that is in turn translatable to economic value.” (Törnberg). In “what i’ve been up to lately,” images of D’Amelio show the viewer the ways in which her sense of self is built on the consumption of the self: “our performances of self; our digital performances are construed through an assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance, activities, visits to iconic places, and other objects consumption” (Ibid). D’Amelio’s strategies of accumulating attention are unique to the platform from which she built her following; the choice of “Hotel”–a song made popular on TikTok–as a soundtrack, sped-up like many other popular songs on the platform that fit into the short-video format, combined with images that point to D’Amelio’s carefree and youthful persona or “calibrated amateurism,” together point to a form of media that is distinct to TikTok.

TikTok remains a dynamic and developing digital space. Trevor Boffone argues that TikTok “bolsters the status quo while also remaining a space of resistance and disruption. TikTok is filled with joy, escapism, pleasure, education, and community-building, even if the platform
bolsters systemic racism, classism, ableism, and the like” (Boffone, 2022, 4). The resistance and disruption to which Boffone refers offers a necessary direction for further research, especially since many of the questions surrounding the attention economy call into question notions of political agency on the platform. Nonetheless, investigating the possibilities for political agency on the platform must be done with a simultaneous understanding of the ways in which the platform remains deeply implicated in processes that reproduce capitalism.

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