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## PLATFORM PR – THE PUBLIC MODERATION OF PLATFORM VALUES THROUGH TIKTOK FOR GOOD

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TikTok claims it wants to “inspire creativity” and “spark joy” (ByteDance, 2023), Meta aims to “bring the world closer together” (Haupt, 2021), and YouTube aspires to “give everyone a voice and show them to the world” (YouTube, 2023). Platforms state that they want to do *good*. However, they regularly get international attention for being *bad*. Such accusations often relate to social media data scandals, from MySpace’s data leaks (2013) to Facebook’s data breaches (2013, 2019) and WhatsApp’s scandal relating to their Privacy Policy update (2021). The misuse of social media data is covered substantively in journalistic and academic work (see Bacallao-Pino, 2015; González et al., 2019; Griggio et al., 2022; Weiss-Blatt, 2021). In response to such allegations, platforms have declared their aims to be more transparent and socially responsible, taking steps such as establishing transparency reports, giving academics access to data, and creating social campaigns. Yet initiatives to counterbalance these backlashes, such as YouTube’s Black Voices Fund or TikTok for Good, are rarely investigated.

This project explores “TikTok for Good.” The social initiative developed out of #EduTok, a campaign launched in 2019 to counterbalance “potentially harmful content” (Zeng & Kaye, 2022). Other campaigns from social media platforms have similar histories: Douyin’s #positiveenergy campaign to promote more “appropriate, patriotic content” was a response to the Chinese government’s criticism of pornographic content on the platform (Chen et al., 2021) and Facebook’s “Data for Good” data sharing campaign was a response to data leaks. In this social initiative, TikTok curates and promotes causes that “inspire” and “encourage” – from the benefits of knitting for OCD, to sustainable farming, to gentle parenting. Videos get published on the designated TikTok account @tiktokforgood in cooperation with TikTok creators producing content in line with what the platform aims to promote:

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*Our idea is simple...use TikTok to do good. TikTok wants to inspire and encourage a new generation to have a positive impact on the planet and those around them.*  
(ByteDance, 2023)

Although platform initiatives' content is often not on the top of your For You Page (FYP), competing with algorithmically curated content (Gillespie, 2014), such social initiatives are fruitful sites for unpacking the values a platform aims to promote, namely what they try to center as important or worthwhile.

Two bodies of literature inform this study: research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and research on platform moderation. CSR, “a term that spans a variety of practices employed by corporations to exhibit ethical business conduct” (Boxman-Shabtai, 2019), is not a new phenomenon. Corporations have always claimed they have responsibilities toward society, yet the framing of these responsibilities has changed over time (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019). Focusing on the intersection between CSR and social media, scholars have explored how companies strategically use social media to promote their initiatives and how users relate to such campaigns. For example, researchers have examined users' attitudes toward influencer CSR marketing (Li, 2022) and user engagement with companies' CSR campaigns (Austin & Gaither, 2016). Studies have also explored how companies implement more traditional CSR values such as sustainability or well-being through social media campaigns (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2022). However, research in this area generally evaluates their success through user perception of communicative values such as authenticity and engagement (Balasubramanian et al., 2021; Li, 2022). This strain of research adds to our understanding of the importance of social media for corporate social responsibility, yet research has evaded looking at CSR initiatives taken by social media platforms.

The second body of knowledge informing this study relates to platform moderation. Platforms have become “unavoidably curators” (Gillespie, 2022) of public discourse, negotiating the competing interests of different stakeholders (Gillespie et al., 2020; Gorwa, 2019). Building on work about the disciplinary power of ranking algorithms by Bucher (2012), Zeng and Kaye (2022) introduce the concept of “visibility moderation,” defined as “the process through which digital platforms manipulate the reach of user-generated content through algorithmic or regulatory means” (p. 81). They point out that TikTok governs through visibility, arguing that the platform promotes content that nudges creators towards “social justice campaigns, particularly those that promote the platform's overall corporate image by serving socially responsible goals” (p. 83).

To further explore these socially responsible goals, I investigate the concept of “visibility moderation” through the lens of platform values. Previous research on the construction of platform values through social media policies found five core values across five platforms, including TikTok: expression, community, safety, choice, and improvement (Scharlach et al., 2023). Yet, platforms limit their burden to execute these values by selectively assigning responsibility for their enactment, often unloading these responsibilities onto users. Social initiatives function as a pivot point, allowing for a closer look at a platform's explicit promotion of values, and the division of responsibilities for their enactment. The following questions structure this study: What types of content does the “TikTok for Good” initiative promote? What values are

associated with the initiative? And who is responsible for promoting these values? Altogether, these questions will allow me to understand what the *good* in “TikTok for Good” actually means.

## Method

To address these questions, I adopt the definition of values by Heinich (2020), who treats values as tangible objects and underlying principles. Based on previous work by Hallinan et al. (2021), I work with the notion of “values-as-goods: those (tangible or abstract) objects that have consistently been deemed worthy of appreciation such as art or friendship” (p. 7). First, I will perform an inductive analysis answering the questions “What is defined as good?” and “Who is in charge of promoting good?” for each video (n=180) to understand what values are promoted in TikTok for Good. Combined with a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012), this will allow me to systematically identify patterns in the topics TikTok promotes, including what types of creators are promoted and the groups of people they address in the videos.

## Preliminary results

An initial analysis of 50 videos led to three observations. Similar to the results of previous research on platform policies (Scharlach et al., 2023), the enactment of promoting values is overwhelmingly a private act. It requires the viewer to actively do *good*, whether by reducing plastic waste, using inclusive language, or spending money for a social cause. TikTok for Good is about how people can improve their daily lives. However, it evades raising more critical questions about potential legislative changes that would move responsibility from a personal problem to a structural one. Second, videos promoted through the TikTok for Good initiative circle around topics of sustainability, mental health, education about a specific subject, building community, and spreading awareness. These topics promote values aligning with current social issues. At the same time, videos such as “good animal news of today” potentially mask political issues associated with anything that is not inspiring or *good*, such as the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, which was not part of any of the videos. Lastly, it raises the question of what responsibilities an initiative of a social media platform should carry. Can TikTok for Good do more than just *inspire* and *encourage*? Should a platform do more than provide a space to promote *good*?

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