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ENGAGEMENT EXCHANGES AND THE COLLECTIVE PURSUIT OF VISIBILITY ON TIKTOK IN THE BRAZILIAN CONTEXT

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This paper examines the engagement practices of Brazilian users and creators on TikTok, a decentralized and collective practice where users collaborate to generate data and metrics through specific posts, aiming to help profiles become eligible for the platform's monetization program. The study explores how these practices, marked by diffuse collaboration and an ethic of reciprocity, reshape historical interaction patterns on digital platforms, adapting them to TikTok's unique context. By analyzing 123 videos, the research highlights the strategic use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) and data-driven tactics to "play the game" of TikTok's algorithm. This work is relevant to broader conference themes, such as platform labor, algorithmic governance, and the socio-economic implications of digital content creation, offering insights into how creators navigate platform affordances and monetization strategies in a highly competitive environment.

Methodological Framework

This study is part of a long-term research project on algorithmic imaginaries on TikTok, which began in 2022. In 2023, the research expanded to observe the introduction of TikTok's monetization program in Brazil. Data was collected over four consecutive days in January 2025 using the Instant Data Scraper tool to capture structured data from TikTok's web interface. The final dataset includes 123 unique videos after removing duplicates and irrelevant content. The analysis employed Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014), allowing categories to emerge organically from the data. The process involved open coding to identify initial patterns, axial coding to group codes into broader categories, and selective coding to integrate these categories into a coherent theoretical framework. Importantly, the study adheres to ethical guidelines, anonymizing

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user data and protecting participants' identities.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of 123 TikTok videos reveals three main categories: *engagement exchanges*, *monetization tactics*, and *narratives about monetization*. This paper focuses on *engagement exchanges*, a decentralized and collaborative practice where users mutually engage to boost visibility and meet TikTok's monetization criteria. These exchanges are characterized by a collective effort to generate data and metrics, often under the slogan "Let's monetize!" (*Bora monetizar!*).

Engagement Exchanges

Engagement exchanges are marked by a fluid and reciprocal dynamic, where users encourage mutual actions such as liking, commenting, and sharing to help each other reach the 10,000-follower threshold required for monetization. These practices are not centralized but occur organically within public posts, where users temporarily collaborate to achieve individual goals. For example, one video analyzed features a creator with over 10,000 followers who, after struggling to maintain visibility, proposes a reciprocal engagement strategy: "If you like, comment, and share my video, I'll do the same for yours." This call for mutual support garnered over 6,000 responses, with users commenting "I allow it" (*Eu permito*) to signal their participation. These collective-oriented discourses tend to reinforce a sense of shared prosperity and aspirational growth. For instance, another creator states: "Let's help new accounts reach 10k, 20k, 50k, or even 100k. We're getting closer every day, and we'll make it together!"

The use of GAI in these exchanges is particularly noteworthy. As Figure 1 illustrates, many videos employ repetitive, standardized content, such as static images of landscapes or animals, overlaid with text like "Let's monetize!" and "10K," referring to the follower threshold of TikTok's Creator Rewards Program. These videos often include automated voiceovers and electronic music, ensuring they meet TikTok's minimum duration for monetization. The repetitive nature of these posts reflects a strategic approach to maximizing engagement with minimal effort, as creators aim to exploit TikTok's algorithmic preferences for high-quality interactions.



Figure 1. Profiles entirely dedicated to engagement exchanges (using GAI) Creators on TikTok demonstrate a deep understanding of the platform's algorithm. They often share strategies with their viewers to help them engage more effectively. For example, one creator advises watching videos multiple times, as the algorithm prioritizes repeated views over single likes. Another creator outlines a step-by-step process for "high-quality engagement," including following, liking, commenting, and favoriting posts. As one creator warns, "But don't like all the videos at once! Let's not make our channel flop, okay?". These instructions show how creators internalize algorithmic knowledge and then translate it into practical strategies for their audiences to use.

Unlike *engagement pods* on Instagram—where creators collectively inflate metrics to "hack" the algorithm and sustain their livelihoods (Bonini & Treré, 2024; O'Meara, 2019)—TikTok's *engagement exchanges* focus on meeting platform monetization requirements, often neglecting the professional practices underlying content creation. While Instagram *pods* consider the centrality of labor in content creation, including partnerships with brands and sponsored content, TikTok's decentralized exchanges prioritize monetization eligibility, often relying on repetitive, GAI-generated content. This shift reflects a fragmentation of the concept of labor, where the pursuit of monetization overshadows discussions about the sustainability and working conditions of content creation. In the Brazilian context, TikTok's monetization is often framed as an alternative to the historical precarity of labor in Latin America, fueled by the platform's prosperity narrative and aspirational discourses that promise financial gains (Duffy, 2017). However, this emphasis on financial opportunities masks the exploitative dynamics of platform labor, leaving the realities of work unaddressed.

Theoretical Implications

The study situates engagement exchanges within the broader context of *platformization of cultural production* (Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2022), where creators are deeply embedded in platform infrastructures and subject to algorithmic governance. TikTok's opaque monetization policies and algorithmic recommendations create a power asymmetry, forcing creators to adapt their practices to maximize visibility and revenue. The use of GAI in engagement exchanges further complicates the relationship between creators and platforms, as it blurs the line between authentic content creation and algorithmic optimization.

The research also highlights the *ethical dimensions* of engagement exchanges, where reciprocity is both a social norm and a strategic necessity. Participants establish explicit rules to ensure mutual benefit, creating a fragile yet functional ecosystem of collaboration. However, this ethic of reciprocity exists in tension with TikTok's individualistic and meritocratic discourse, which prioritizes competition over collective success. For example, some creators publicly denounce users who fail to reciprocate engagement, reinforcing the importance of mutual support while also exposing the fragility of these collaborative networks.

Engagement exchanges on TikTok echo historical practices on other platforms, such as the "Follow Back" trend on Instagram, where users sought to inflate follower counts through reciprocal actions. However, TikTok's engagement exchanges are distinct in their focus on monetization rather than social visibility. This shift reflects the evolving affordances of digital platforms, where users adapt historical practices to new algorithmic and economic contexts.

Conclusion

TikTok's engagement exchanges reveal a complex dynamic. These practices, driven by the platform's monetization demands and aspirational discourses, involve diffuse collaboration and an ethic of reciprocity. The analysis highlights how creators adapt to algorithmic logics and renegotiate historical interaction practices on digital platforms. Reciprocity, a cornerstone of these practices, is constantly in tension with the individualistic and meritocratic logic of platforms that prioritize competition and the visibility of a few. Creators employ sophisticated strategies to "play the game" of the algorithm, such as creating viral audios, interacting with content, and managing data-driven engagement.

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