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Being bound in a fieldsite: Cross-cultural methodological notes on doing digital ethnography on TikTok

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Abstract: Digital ethnography requires attention to ethical processes, data complexity, and social interactions, particularly on emerging platforms like TikTok. This paper draws on our research in Australia and South Korea, examining the challenges of defining a 'fieldsite' within a platform that is both segmented and fluid. In Australia, issues of settler-colonialism and multiculturalism complicate the concept of an 'Australian TikTok,' necessitating a focus on minority voices. In contrast, South Korea's cultural homogeneity and language create a more bounded data environment, yet the global rise of K-pop complicates data sampling as elements from Korean culture often lose their context. We discuss methodological insights for conducting digital ethnography on TikTok, considering researcher positionality and the influence of global research cultures.

Introduction

Since its launch in 2017, TikTok has fast become a mainstream app adopted by users across various backgrounds and demographics around the world. It is thus no surprise that it has also captured the interest of academia, and has become a key social arena to explore innovative research frameworks and methodologies from emerging voices in the field. However, given that several of TikTok's innovative features and its backend interface do not lend themselves easily to previously established qualitative research methods, scholars have had to innovate around how best to approach the platform on both the front and backends.

In this paper, we present an account of how two humanities and social science scholars who have worked both independently and collaboratively on TikTok-related projects grapple with methodological choices and conundrums. Considering our shared fieldsites between Australia and South Korea (hereafter Korea) across a dozen or so projects in the last four years, we compare and contrast our cross-cultural methodological fieldnotes on how to do digital ethnography in a fieldsite that feels at once boundless by possibilities and bounded by operational constraints. We begin by listing some key methodological considerations when embarking on qualitative research on TikTok, and how these can be addressed through key elements in digital ethnography. In the next section, we explicate the key issues that each researched faced in conducting our digital ethnographies of TikTok across various projects, highlighting our thought processes when identifying a 'field', and considering the potential parameters of a 'boundary' or 'boundedness' on social media, where multi-sited ethnography in a deeply networked environment can present a plethora of choices and feel overwhelming. Following this pre-fieldwork planning, we demonstrate the actual steps undertaken when attempting data collection on both Australian and South Korean TikTok cultures, highlight important contextual cues that factor into our analysis, and end with reflections on our methodological rigor, limitations, and future possibilities for TikTok research methods and pedagogy.

Studying TikTok qualitatively via key elements in digital ethnography

In prior work (Abidin 2024), one of us has offered that scholarship about East Asian internet trends has over the years progressed from 'Weird Japan' to the 'Korean wave' to 'Dystopian China'. For instance, where 'traditional Orientalism' (c.f. Said 1979) has been usurped by a 'techno-Orientalism' (c.f. Morley & Robbins 1995) that tends to imagine East Asian trends as being hyper-technical, these stereotypical perceptions have also splintered into market-specific postulations. For instance, 'wacky Japan' has been offered to explain how Japan tends to be framed as being 'bizarre' in juxtaposition to 'the West' as being 'normal' (Wagenaar 2016: 46). In Korea, 'banal Orientalism' (c.f. Haldrup et al. 2006) has been observed among everyday Korean phenomena that tend to be lauded as being exceptional for a global audience. Against the backdrop of China's rapid technological advancements, 'sonological Orientalism' (c.f. Vukovich 2012) and 'digital Orientalism' (c.f. Mayer 2019) have been used to describe how depictions and translations of contemporary Chinese cultures often seem to be filtered through a repressive and dystopian lens. On TikTok, where posts tend to be shared phatically to foster relationships and relate to others (Schellewald 2024), and where the algorithmic recommendation system often offers highly contextualized posts to users outside of the original or intended target group (Abidin 2020), the platform-facilitated context collapse that occurs on TikTok can induce scrutiny and cause conflict or misunderstanding about users and cultures (Fichman & Amidu 2024). To attend to these issues, we turn to digital ethnography as a useful methodological tool that prioritizes context and reflection to navigate these tricky terrains.

Ethnography and digital ethnography are the primary methodological tools originally founded in the discipline of anthropology, although in contemporary academia, their applications and adaptations span across various fields and disciplines. In its broadest and most general definition, ethnography is the systematic study of human cultures, and often involves ethnographers who seek to carefully uncover, document, and make meaning of the rituals, customs, mores, and practices of cultural or social groups. Before we proceed to map out how we conducted our digital ethnographies of and on TikTok, in this section, we consider some basic principles and strategies of conducting (digital) ethnographies, which can be adapted or augmented to be applied to social media platforms like TikTok.

Basic principles of (digital) ethnography

While there are many basic principles of ethnography, many of which can be and ought to be mapped onto our proceedings of digital ethnography, in this section we consider three items that are most critical to TikTok studies. Firstly, *cultural relativism* refers to the practice of understanding a culture or cultural group as situated in its own terms, values, moralities, and belief systems. It requires ethnographers to understand the lifeworlds of our informants and participants from their points of view, in order that we are able to study and analyse their phenomena in a manner that is contextually accurate and appropriate. The opposite of this is 'ethnocentrism', which is the practice of perceiving the world views of others based on our own internalized perceptions, and our preconceived notions of other cultures. An example of ethnocentrism is 'Orientalism' as studied by literature and cultural studies scholar Edward Said (1978), in which early studies of the 'East' – comprising the Arab and Asian nations – were often skewed and augmented by European scholars through their internal barometers of ideologies, which resulted in the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, over-generalizations, and a distortion of the cultural realities. This resulted in the early documented histories and studies of the 'East' by European scholars becoming imperialist works, which ultimately served to extend the constructed superiority of European colonists, and justify their attempts to extend their political influence and power over these nations.

Secondly, the *insider/outsider* doctrine asks researchers to consider where we are positioned in relation to the phenomenon they want to study. Depending on our vantage point, we will come away with a different stance or take on the issue, as a result of one's habitus (Bourdieu 1977), awareness, and privilege. This practice has its roots in feminist social theory, and is also known as the epistemology of standpoint theory (see Pohlhaus 2010). On the likes of TikTok, content that is promoted by the algorithmic recommender system relies on how the platform ascertains our profile as a user; this may rely on one's profile at sign-up, past digital footprints, and patterns of user behaviour. However, dependent on our sensibilities and sensitivities to various cultures, knowledges, and topics, we may or may not be able to glean insights from TikTok contents, seeing somethings where others can not, uncovering blind spots that remain hidden to others, or registering codeswitched speak in plain sight (see Abidin 2021a, Maddox 2024). As the methodological scholarship has pointed out (e.g. Bukamal 2022, Dwyer & Buckle 2009), being an insider allows us to exercise empathy and perceive matters from our informants' points of view, whereas being an outsider allows us to exercise accountability, and reliability. Between both stances, researchers can practice triangulation and corroboration to ensure that the data analysed and insights gleaned are as informed as possible.

Finally, *reflexivity* asks that researchers be attentive to our own habitus (Bourdieu 1977), and consider how we might situate our analysis of phenomena within the social, cultural, and political milieu of our own perception of events. Consider, for instance, how we might glean cultural

universals across different streams of TikTok data to come upon cross-cultural assertions about the practices of TikTok; examples include TikTokers' nuanced comprehensions of TikTok's algorithmic content moderation that has cultivated the rise of 'algospeak', or the creative play on words to circumvent platformed censorship (e.g. Schock et al. 2025, Steen et al 2023), TikTokers' strategic attunement to specific subcultures to cultivate celebrity on the platform (e.g. Abidin 2020, Kennedy 2020), and TikTokers' literacies around the fostering of visibility in light/spite of algorithmic imaginaries of how the platform works (e.g. Zeng & Kaye 2020, Zurovac et al. 2023). In order to perceive such insights, it would be useful to consider amassing context through background research before diving into active participant observation. To this end, (non-)participant observation might be a useful tool for consideration. Consider the work by anthropologist John Postill. Adapting from his work on the Spanish civic moment, 15M or 'indignados', he and visual anthropologist Sarah Pink (Postill & Pink 2016) suggest following specific people, objects, practices, and the like as a productive way of crafting a narrative or coherent viewpoint about a phenomenon. Adapting from them, we propose that on TikTok it is possible to follow:

- Viral reality: What actors choose to produce, consume, share
- Digital technologies: What devices, platforms, media are used
- Technologists: Who are engaged in the phenomena
- Field: How the phenomena are contained and bounded
- (Sub)fields: How the phenomena are expanded, remixed
- Genealogy: How the phenomena are lineaged

Conducting digital ethnographies on TikTok

In this section, we consider the empirical heuristics for developing and conducting digital ethnography on TikTok through our cross-cultural methodological notes, including how contingencies are mediated digitally and non-digitally, in relation to researcher positionality on TikTok, global politics of research cultures, and broader society. Specifically, we reflect on how we identify the cultural context of digital cultures in our projects; how we map out the situation context of TikTok in our projects; how we identify and bound a fieldsite on TikTok; how we conduct data collection on TikTok; how we code and analyse our data; and how we write up and present our data.

Identifying the cultural context of digital cultures in our projects

'Culture' is particularly challenging to define and identify in Australia. The complexities of Australian settler-colonialism, including marginalized Indigenous peoples and multicultural immigrants, and the use of English and multiple languages complicates the conceptualization of an 'Australian TikTok', and requires special care to prioritize minority voices. Further, given Australia's long history of multiculturalism and its rich migrant cultures, there is a plethora of cultural and migrant mixing that requires nuance to be attentive to. Scholars have argued that in Australia, 'physical appearance is [often] the primary cue for racial group membership… and remains the greatest factor in how mixed-race children are classified by others' (Rockquemore & Laszloffy 2005, p. 114). Some studies have identified the more distinctive combinations of racial mixing in the country, such as White/Asian Australians (Perkins 2007), while others have focused on how one's mixed-race appearance is important for staking authority over issues of authenticity or belonging (Kowal 2017), like Aboriginal/White persons. Still other studies have researched inter-Asian mixing in Australia, where racial features place individuals as being optically 'ambiguous', like being Chinese-Japanese or Japanese-Korean by racial roots but being Australian by enculturation and citizenship (Abidin 2017).

Mapped onto TikTok, different facets of Australian multiculturalism may 'out' themselves in a myriad of ways. In White contexts, various humorous memes see Australian TikTokers quickly differentiating themselves from White Americans and White Europeans through the stereotype of 'active wear' – usually body-hugging tops and tight leggings designed for physical activity – as athleisure, worn in all settings besides the context of actually exercising (see also Lipson et al. 2020). This is in reflection of the belief that Australians are an exceptionally fit nation of peoples (Australian Sports Council 2025), even well into old age (Lee & Fulloon 2024), compared to others. Without cultural knowledge, it is difficult to identity Australian Indigenous TikTokers from other First Nations peoples around the world (see Barnes 2024), unless they openly identify as such through self-referential markers (Carlson & Kennedy 2021) in their biography, through Australian Aboriginal visual emblems in their contents, or through verbal disclosure. As such, unless Australians explicitly identify themselves, popular discourse about us/them and Australianism on social media often focus on features that cross-cut racial phenotypes, instead focusing on the typical Australian catch-phrases and accents or dress styles. Perhaps this is best encapsulated through the recent rise of Australians in the K-pop industry, on whom fan discourse on social media often focuses. For example, in a myriad of TikTok conversations about BLACKPINK's Rosé, STRAYKIDS's Felix, or NewJean's Danielle, TikTok discourse tends to pick apart the validity of their Australianness based on their long-drawl vowels and their nasal timber, like the classic exaggeration of an Australian 'no' as 'naur' (Tang 2021).

Korea presents a different context. Korea's homogenous ethnicism and exclusive language shapes the boundedness of data points. As a language isolate that does not belong to any larger language families with other languages, the Korean language has been exclusively used mostly by Koreans, including (North and South) Korean nationals and Korean diasporas (Song 2006). Given the limited access to the internet and media censorship in North Korea (Ready 2019), Korean social media demarcated by the Korean language are most likely used by South Korean nationals and some Korean diasporic users. Thus, despite the globalness of the internet that helps users transcend physical boundaries, Korean online communities and social media are often characterized as 'Korean' (Cho 2012: 108), where the community and platform users use the homogeneous language (Korean), and specific Korean socioeconomic and historical contexts are deeply embedded in the media content and community norms.

However, the increasing global popularity of Korean media culture, especially K-pop on TikTok (e.g. Abidin & Lee 2023), complicates the sampling process as elements of Korean digital cultures (e.g. hashtags, audio memes, content) are frequently deployed out of context to stimulate virality and can constitute white noise. The exclusiveness of Korean social media has been challenged since the mid-2000s, and more so in the late-2010s, as the popularity of Korean media content, such as K-pop and K-drama, have led global audiences to learn and speak the Korean language and to partake in the local media cultures from afar (King-O'Rian 2021, Shim & Noh 2012). For example, global K-pop stans use Korean language and hashtags in the Korean language and generate a vast amount of content in Korean as the evangelism of their stars (see Abidin 2021b: 7, Aswad 2020). Notably, non K-pop stans often bandwagon K-pop related trends on social media or hijack and occupy K-pop related (Korean) hashtags to become viral. And this phenomenon is prominent on TikTok for its close working with the K-pop industry (Abidin & Lee 2023, Yoo 2021) and especially around when TikTok hosts K-pop concerts (i.e. TikTok Stage Concerts).

Mapping out the situational context of TikTok in our projects

Across various TikTok projects about Australian users and cultures, we have found it fruitful to begin by identifying a phenomenon whose temporality is unique (even if in part) to the Australian context.

For instance, given that the country is situated in the Southern hemisphere, TikToks about the annual bushfire season in Australia tend to spike in number during the December to February season, when the Northern hemisphere is typically experiencing its winter season. As such, TikTok content about Australian summers and bushfire seasons becomes easier to identify as digital ethnography pays heed to the context of temporality. New reports are also helpful for mapping out the situational context of a TikTok phenomenon – as with the bushfire season in Australia, coverage focused on the rise of young Australians serving as citizen journalists (Wilson 2019), of young Australians calling out politicians for their inaction (Judge 2020), and Australian firefighters performing viral dance videos on TikTok to spread awareness about fire safety (Rodd 2020), all suggesting that TikTok contents are central to shaping a dialogue about global warming and worthy of investigating as a network of discourse.

In another example, our studies of how COVID-19 impacted the landscape of discourse on TikTok (see Abidin & Robinson 2023) could zoom in on the Australian context for two reasons: Firstly, being geographically closer to Asia, where the pandemic first broke out, Australia was among the first nations to consider and implement lockdowns. As such, TikTok discourse around pandemic-related travel bans, self-isolation, and the spill-on effects on mental wellbeing and health preceded those from the other countries in the Northern hemisphere that also predominantly use English language on TikTok. Being among the 'first wave' of pandemic TikToks on the platform eased our identification of the phenomenon as a situational context for study. Secondly, being a country/continent/island surrounded by water, border closures were especially demanding on Australians who found themselves 'stranded' or 'locked out' internationally or even interstate quite early in 2020, which thus saw Australian TikTokers being among the first to raise this challenge on the platform for self-documentary and discussion (Abidin & Robinson 2023).

In Korea, the context may be just as complicated. When the Korean language does not fully serve as an identifier that demarcates a Korean TikTok, the question of how to bound the 'Korean media space' when conducting ethnographic research online becomes complicated. For example, when researching the Korean culture of K-pop on TikTok, it is difficult to figure out what is assumed to be written by and targeting Koreans unless the content posters reveal their personal information on the platform. Due to the preference for user anonymity of social media among Koreans, it is not only almost impossible to identify users' personal backgrounds but also unethical to pry into the information that the users might have intentionally hidden. Judging whether it is a 'Korean TikTok' is methodologically inappropriate and arbitrary since it is likely based on an ethnographer's 'common sense' and 'instinctive judgment' based on embodied cultural norms and prejudices about what is meant to be a 'Korean' and 'Korean culture'. This can result in ethnocentrism and reductionism by essentializing the studied into one-dimensional being, only through the eye of the observer. Thus, taking into account how 'Korean media space' has expanded and evolved in relation to the growing interest in Korean media culture in the world, it is necessary to re-define what 'Korean' means and how it functions in social media cultures.

Thus, in our research on TikTok in Korea, it was futile attempting to identify 'Korean TikTok' grounded on a narrowly-defined concept of South Korea around the Korean language, Korean nationality, or geographical boundary. Instead, we approached 'Korean TikTok' as a fluid concept that could be redefined in relation to a research scope, purpose, and method. In the context of our research, since our research focused on how TikTok culture in Korea develops in relation to existing Korean media culture – K-pop culture, we defined Korean TikTok as a Korean media space that is presented on TikTok via Korean cultures including K-pop in our case. Thus, our concept of Korean TikTok refers to a collation of TikTok contents that are presumably produced by Koreans using the

Korean IP addresses and other media content that is mediated by K-pop and TikTok, such as non-Korean K-pop fans' TikTok videos about K-pop. In this manner, we were able to approach Korean TikTok as a fieldsite where both Korean and non-Korean K-pop fans, and related actors of the K-pop culture and TikTok (e.g. K-pop stars, media press and industry) coexist and interplay in the imaginary space identified by K-pop.

Identifying and bounding a fieldsite on TikTok

Focusing on the interactive aspects within and across fields, and the fuzziness of constructing a bounded fieldsite, many ethnographers have posited the importance of doing 'multi-sited' ethnography (Hannerz 2003) and considered the 'field as a network composed of fixed and moving points, including spaces, people, and objects' (Burrell 2009: 189). Taking up this perspective, de Seta (2021) also briefly shares his digital ethnographic approaches of 'weaving fields as networks', such as being on multiple media platforms, engaging with different groups, and remaining in-the-loop about various sociocultural topics. In the case of TikTok, identifying different fields pertaining to cultural phenomena around TikTok and weaving them as a fieldsite is particularly important considering the 'noise' around TikTok. The global expansion of the app has yielded political and cultural controversies in the global society, including attempts to ban of the app over cybersecurity issues in India and the US (Chakravarti 2021, Thompson 2020) and moral panics around violent content on TikTok among the youth (Tidy 2021). These controversies, however, have been discussed mainly outside of TikTok by politicians and press, not by users themselves who dwell on the platform. The geopolitics around the platform for showing the unconventional paths of 'West-to-East' cultural flow further inflamed the controversies (Gray 2021). Since these controversies have shaped a discourse around the app and affected the decision-making process regarding whether to use it (e.g. Sommers 2021), digital ethnography should be designed in a manner that weaves different fields, including the inside-of-TikTok and the outside-of-TikTok.

In Australia, our project investigating the discourse of bushfire season on TikTok began with a larger socio-political context: The role of public service media (see Hutchinson 2015) and the ban of TikTok from Australian government devices (see Al-Khouri et al. 2023). Australia's main public service media, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), is chiefly responsible for mediating cultural development in the country (Hutchinson 2017). However, it is still growing in its role to 'harnes[s] social media audiences' to shape 'Australian cultural identity' (van der Nagel et al. 2023). There has also been intellectual dialogue and pushback against the blanket ban of TikTok as the government has (at that time) yet to present a 'clearly articulated, immediate and well-evidenced threat' and thus 'blacklisting consumer apps' would be 'inconsistent with the values of a democracy' like Australia (Hammond-Errey 2024). At the confluence of these two issues, our study drew together public discourse from ABC news articles and an original corpus of TikTok videos, contextualized against the backdrop of the 'digital gap' of public service media and the moral panics around the TikTok ban. In other words, our fieldsite contemplated the temporality of issues as they unfolded in the society, in the media, and on TikTok, and triangulated official/officious from the state against scholarly research and vernacular wisdom from the grassroots.

In Korea, discussions around TikTok have also happened outside of TikTok platform's boundaries, in relation to the global discourses around TikTok for weak security and censorship controlled by the Chinese government, and its youth-centered *choding* culture (see Abidin & Lee 2023) [초딩 문화, lexically meaning 'elementary school students', but widely used to derogatory call low-taste and immature children's culture]. When the Trump administration and the US press framed TikTok as a 'Chinese app' by raising suspicions against the app for its potential data leakage and Chinese

censorship (Thompson 2020), Korean news media repeated the American discourse of TikTok and provoked fear (e.g. Yoo 2020). Korean news media's framing of TikTok inflamed the negative discourse around the app, coalescing with existing anti-Chinese sentiments in Korea that associate Chinese culture with cheap, dangerous, and uncivilized images (Zhou & Kang 2020): e.g. '5 personal data that Chinese company TikTok is collecting from you' (Jin 2019); '"We can't trust China": China is at risk as TikTok is banned' (Kim 2020). Additionally, TikTok's youth-centered meme (Zulli & Zulli 2020) and less aesthetic 'cringe' culture (Verma 2021) make a contrast with Instagram's visual culture centering the middle-class lifestyle (for Instagram, see Leaver, Highfield and Abidin 2020). In tandem with the discourse that degrades children's culture as immature, irresponsible, unruly, and '*choding*' (Song 2005: 205), TikTok's youth culture only deepened the public's skepticism of the app for being a cheap and weird Chinese app. In turn, even though TikTok has closely worked with the K-pop industry and attempted to attract K-pop fans to the app since its launching in Korea 2017 (Kwon 2021, Park 2018), many postings in K-pop online communities document K-pop stans' hesitance to join TikTok for the fear of data leakage and its cringe culture:

> 'It's a Chinese app. So, I never installed the app. My idol band now will join some TikTok event, but please don't do. I won't ever install the app.' –comment about TikTok from *theqoo*)

> 'Just look at a few TikTok videos, you'll know this is a Chinese app. So cringe. Can't stand it. Very Chinese. I see why *chodings* like this app. It works for them.' –comment about TikTok from *theqoo*

In this manner, as discourses around the app and its culture emerged and were constructed outside of TikTok, it is crucial to identify multiple sites that are related to the platform and connect them as focal points of ethnographic work. As opposed to the traditional stance of bounding ethnographers to the clearly demarcated fieldsite, digital ethnography on TikTok should be designed considering the fluidity of the fieldsite's boundary that moves alongside the emerging discourses and cultural phenomena around the platform, while closely based on the research scope and purpose.

Data collection on TikTok

In the Australian example, we wanted to study what an 'Australian TikTok' looked like, how to find it, and what it might mean (van der Nagel 2023). To do so in a measured manner with pragmatic outcomes for the media industry, and while remaining grounded in empirical data per our interests as social scientists, we took as our case study the bushfire season in Australia, specifically what is colloquially known as 'Black Summer' during the 2019–2020 cycle of the crisis. This enabled us to corroborate offerings about how Black Summer TikToks could 'represent and shape an Australian identity' against the backdrop of the ABC being more 'formally responsible for the work of fostering the nation's cultural development' (van der Nagel 2023). For context, we commenced with a background study of how TikTok arrived in Australia, studying how the earliest news coverage in the country provided broad explainers on the platform. We focus on the chronology of these new articles by mainstream and alternative news outlets across both broadsheets and online websites, paying attention to the socio-politics and intended audiences of the outlets and how they framed TikTok for the unfamiliar reader. We also did our due diligence with a scholarly review of the research on cultural identity and networked publics as applicable to the Australian context.

To assemble our original corpus for study, we collected data from the Factiva news archive and on TikTok. On the former, we searched for *ABC News* articles published within our select timeframe of September 2019 to January 2020 that contained 'bushfire' as a keyword; these dates were

informed by research by a climate change communication research hub that identified the critical periods for Black Summer (Burgess et al. 2020). This eventuated in 1,269 results, from which every 12th article was selected at random for a corpus of 100 articles for closer study. On the latter, we searched a shortlist of phrases containing combinations of the words 'Australia' and 'bushfire' on TikTok's search function. Filtering for 'hashtags' – rather than the other available options like 'top', 'users', 'videos', and 'sounds' – we collected a sample of videos dated between November 2019 to January 2021, covering at least two bushfire seasons 2019–2020 and 2020–2021. Filtering for videos that were 'top viewed', we identified the top seven relevant hashtags for study, pointing to videos that ranged from 150,000 to 330 million views in total. To streamline a manageable corpus of videos for content analysis, we collected the top 20 videos for 5 of the most relevant hashtags (#australianbushfire, #bushfireaustralia, #australiaisburning, #bushfireseason, #bushfire) and top 10 videos for 2 of the generally relevant hashtags (#supportaustralia, #prayforaustralia). The final sample of 120 videos was collected, and metadata around their authorship and metrics were tabulated (see van der Nagel 2023).

For the Korea study, operationalizing digital ethnography on TikTok is conducted in broadly two manners: Directly engaging with the main field (TikTok) and triangulating TikTok with additional and supplementary work in other related fields. For example, in our study of TikTok in Korea, following the TikTok Stage account and doing longitudinal observation on its content, and other TikTok users' engagement with the real events and the account (e.g. likes, comments, views) constituted the direct engagement with the main field. Triangulating TikTok by exploring the outside-of-TikTok fields includes press archival research on TikTok in general, including specific news about the TikTok Stage events, and observation on other social media and communities – K-pop online forums and Twitter in our study of TikTok Korea – to see how people outside TikTok understood the platform. Doing this multi-site fieldwork across these different fields helped us understand a cultural phenomenon that manifested throughout a continuous space across the various fields.

Specifically, to understand how TikTok made its entrance into the Korean social media market and how it is perceived and positioned in Korean social media cultures, we have paid our attention to the events hosted by TikTok (i.e. TikTok Stage concerts) since July 2020, by being on multiple social media platforms – not only TikTok but also Twitter, YouTube, Instagram – and casually checking any posts about TikTok in a popular online community (i.e. theqoo) and local portal sites (i.e. Daum and Naver) where the most updated news and social topics are automatically presented to users, based on the portals' algorithms with allegedly news ranking manipulation (Kim & Moon 2021, Kwak et al. 2021). Being on multiple networks for ethnography involves several concerns that researchers should negotiate for themselves, such as where to draw boundaries for ethnographic work, how to engage with fields dealing with the lurker-participant dilemma (de Seta 2020). Additionally, to timely catch any news and discussion about TikTok that happened across the various media, extra work for 'being there and there' (Hannerz 2003) at the right time was required. This involved vigilant work to keep ourselves updated about social media news on TikTok, such as making notes and taking screengrabs whenever we found any Tweet threads or Instagram posts on TikTok or TikTok Stage's or K-pop singers' TikTok posts, regardless of whether it was after work or on weekends. While this spatiotemporal labor was crucial and useful in that it allowed us to remain in-the-loop about TikTok news, it not only conformed to the overwork culture of academia (Cannizzo et al. 2019) but also felt unclear when to stop and whether this vast amount of data would be useful. Thus, as Abidin and de Seta (2020) note, unclarities and unpredictable difficulties in conducting ethnography should be kept in mind as digital media and the ways of researching them are never fixed nor clear, but 'are constantly in the making' (Abidin & de Seta 2020: 5).

Coding and analysis on TikTok

In the Australian bushfire study, the 120 TikToks were coded and analyzed in two ways. Firstly, we calculated the engagement metrics for all 120 videos, accounting for the 'likes', 'comments', and 'shares' through mean, standard deviation, median, and maximum counts (see Table 3 in van der Nagel 2023). Secondly, all 120 TikToks were watched in full by two coders – one coder handwrote fieldnotes paying special attention to the visual templates, 'audio memes' (see Abidin & Kaye 2021), content themes, and visual emblems used, while the second coder paid special attention to the use of specific audio templates, 'sonic tags' (see Gentry 2022), and audio clips. What emerged were five types of 'templates' in which TikTok discourse was presented (see also Table 4 in van der Nagel 2023):

- Visual: Aerial footage, first-person footage, TikTok visual genres
    - E.g. A make-up artist face-painting emotional landscape scenes that transition from lush and happy to burned and somber
- Audio: Event specific, Australia-specific, fire-related music, viral audio
    - E.g. Footage of bushfires with an audio meme 'this TikTok is for Aussies only, follow my TikTok if you are Australia'
- Narrative: Personal accounts, reportage
    - E.g. Point-of-view footage of an aerial firefighter collecting water from a suburban pool
- Symbol and icon: Elements, scenery, native animals, people, recovery gear
    - E.g. Footage of rain behind text 'it's finnaly [sic] raining in Australia' with the sound of cheering in the streets
- Topic: Damage, rescue and care, donations, prevention and caution
    - E.g. Footage of a local Sikh community preparing food and then delivering it to firefighters

Based on multi-site digital ethnography in the study of a Korean TikTok, we generated the following themes and codes that were manifested in each field (see Table 1). Identifying different themes and codes in each field was crucial to understand how the various discourses and power dynamics within and outside TikTok work and shape a TikTok culture in Korea. Specifically, in the field of news press, we focused on how TikTok was framed by looking at news content and tones: Marketing-oriented, Geopolitics-related, Culture-related, K-pop paparazzi news. During the fieldwork on social media and online communities, we examined how TikTok is perceived and what discourses emerge and shared, perhaps in relation to the news framing of TikTok. By identifying negative concerns about the platform (e.g. data leakage, censorship), classed perception toward the platform's youth-centered culture, celebratory posts about the new culture, and informational posts about TikTok Stage or TikTok's collaboration with the K-pop industry, We looked into what are the barriers that stop people joining TikTok and what are the opportunities that people expect from their use of TikTok, and how these perceptions mirrors and change the construction of TikTok cultures. Fieldwork on TikTok focused on topics of content (whether it is K-pop related), how TikTok content engage with other users and K-pop stans on TikTok (whether it is informational announcement or is intimately engaging with others, constructing TikTok as a site of the star-fan parasocial relationships, or whether the content is simply bandwagoning the viral K-pop trend on TikTok, not necessarily being part of the K-pop friendly TikTok culture), and types of users (i.e. official TikTok accounts, K-pop celebrities, individual users). These themes and codes helped the study investigate the actuality of TikTok cultures, including characteristics of TikTok cultures, the ways that TikTok cultures have been shaped and are evolving.

Table 1. Themes and codes used in in an example of digital ethnography on TikTok

Field	**Themes**	**Codes**
News press	Framing of TikTok	Marketing-oriented
		Geopolitics-related
		Culture-related
		Outlier: virality-seeking K-pop paparazzi news
Social media & online communities	Perceptions or discourses of TikTok	Negative concerns about technologies
		Classed perceptions about cultural taste
		Celebratory (features, cultures)
		Outlier: Information sharing about K-pop
TikTok	Topic of content	K-pop related
		Non-K-pop related
	Engagement	Engaging
		Neutral (informational)
		Clickbait, bandwagon
	User	Official TikTok account (e.g. @TikTok Stage)
		K-pop stars
		Individual users

A close observation on the broader three fields based on the aforementioned themes and codes allowed us to understand how K-pop related TikTok cultures arose and developed despite dominant discourses and framing about TikTok in relation to sociocultural conditions (e.g. geopolitics, classed

cultural system). However, handling the vast amount of data, weaving the results of fieldwork in the three fieldsites into one coherent finding, and presenting them into an 8000-word manuscript style was challenging. Indeed, connecting dots between the news archival research and observation on TikTok was often reliant on our presumptions, which were not 'scientifically' proven by data. For example, our casual conversation with staff members in the social media marketing industry informally shared rumors about TikTok's marketing strategies (such as active collaboration with A-list Influencers and major consumer brands) to overcome the predominantly negative perspective toward the platform. This information suggested one way to situate a K-pop-centered TikTok culture within the Korean social media industry and geopolitics, but could not be 'verified' by our limited observation on TikTok from the collected news reports. Thus, in presenting empirical data in the 'final project', much of data gathered from the fieldwork in the outside-of-TikTok field were treated as secondary and auxiliary data and suggested as one of the factors that may have affected the shaping and evolution of part of TikTok cultures.

Digital ethnography, empiricism, and social construction

Media scholar Whiteman (2012) posits that online ethnographers should consider and note how they have situated themselves within the research process. Considering the flexibility, interactivity, and uncertainty of online cultures, she suggests the 'ethics-as-process' model where a researcher's positionality and ethics are constantly moving throughout the research process, interacting with data, research topics, methods, and the researcher themself (Whiteman 2012). In TikTok studies, presenting data with a researcher's reflexive positionality is similarly crucial since the entire research process is mediated by the researcher and the research scope and purpose, processed through TikTok's unique platform algorithms. TikTok algorithms generate customized content for individual users (i.e. 'For You' Page) based on users' previous digital footprints and engagement with other video content (e.g. viewing time, liking, commenting, and sharing) and user statistics particular to geographical regions (TikDragons 2020). For example, this means that the more you research Australian bushfire or K-pop aspects on TikTok, the more you are surrounded by said TikTok contents as recommended by the TikTok algorithms. Given that ethnography aims to build a fieldsite around a researcher so that the researcher can blend into the environment they explore (Hannerz 2003), digital ethnography is a methodology that perfectly suits to study TikTok taking into account TikTok's unique algorithms of personalized data.

However, it should be noted that the research environment surrounding the researcher on TikTok is the result of the researcher's active interaction with the researched (TikTok and TikTok culture), as opposed to an ethnographic environment where a researcher remains as a non-participant observer. Although we remained as 'lurkers' throughout the research process, never directly interacting with other users on TikTok in the form of comments, likes, or DMs, our research practices – such as searching for Australian bushfire content and constantly checking K-pop related TikTok content – affected the working of TikTok algorithms in the research and ultimately constituted another way of interacting with data and the research environment and thus of building a fieldsite. Considering the media environment where data are personalized by interactions between users, platform algorithms, and other socioeconomic conditions, media scholar Walker Rettberg (2020) highlights the importance of presenting data as a result of how a researcher has situated them within the research process. It is because the same data can be situated differently in relation to how a researcher interacts with the research environment, what research scope they are focusing on, and for what purpose.

In this vein, it was important to note that our findings of K-pop focused TikTok culture would show just one aspect of a myriad of TikTok cultures in Korea, rather than represent the entirety of TikTok cultures in Korea, which was somewhat artificially generated based on our ethnographic interaction with the data. In the same vein, our findings on Australian bushfire discourse on TikTok eventually focused on one audio template ('Fire on Fire') and one visual template ('Koalas') in our write-up, which were selected for best reflecting the general discourse of the crisis. In other words, in conducting digital ethnography on TikTok, researchers should keep in mind that they present their data together with the situation that they (might) have interacted with during their ethnographic fieldwork, acknowledging their positionality as a researcher-and-user on TikTok.

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