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MY CYBER SELF:
IDENTITY PRESENTATION ON TIKTOK

Abstract. TikTok is a social network that has provided its users with a unique combination of communicative tools and, as a result, has laid the foundation for a new communication context for self-expression and identity presentation. The article examines how TikTokers' discourse, with the help of the app's technology, uses language means and other semiotic systems to present their self, to construct their online identities and to attract like-minded audiences. The study is based on 45 TikTok videos uploaded by different bloggers who were selected with the help of continuous sampling. The videos are analyzed by applying Critical Discourse Analysis and, in particular, Multimodal Discourse Analysis as frameworks for critical examination of verbal and nonverbal (images, soundtracks, clothes, etc.) means as well as contextual and intertextual structures of the TikTokers' texts aimed at online self-expression and identify-presentation. The research reveals that the TikTokers avail themselves with syntactic patterns typical of self-presentation in order to assert their preferred selves and construct their identities by purposefully breaking away from conventional master identities, e.g., they claim either to be sex-neutral, or to be able to combine stereotypically incompatible identities, or to deny having any identity at all. To reflect on their selves and convey their message to the audience, the TikTokers use texts that feature intertextuality and multimodality. The merge of multimodal semiotic means helps the bloggers to create a complex of techno-semio-linguistic materiality typical of social media. The bloggers succeed in combining these diverse means so as to develop the intended meaning, to mediate their identities to their audience and, finally, to create their own communities rallied around the constructed identities.
Key words: TikTok, identity, Critical Discourse Analysis, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, semiotics, intertextuality.

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МОЯ КІБЕР-ОСОБИСТІСТЬ: ПРЕЗЕНТАЦІЯ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ В МЕРЕЖІ ТІКТОК

Анотація. *TikTok – це соціальна мережа, яка надала своїм користувачам унікальне поєднання засобів комунікації та, відповідно, започаткувала новий комунікативний контекст для самовираження та презентації ідентичності. Стаття присвячена вивченню того, як тиктокери за допомогою технологій цієї мережі застосовують мову та інші семіотичні системи з метою презентувати себе, побудувати власні онлайн ідентичності та привернути до себе увагу однодумців. Дослідження ґрунтується на 45 відео з мережі TikTok, відібраних методом суцільної вибірки. Відео аналізуються за допомогою методів критичного дискурс-аналізу та, зокрема, мультимодального дискурс-аналізу, оскільки останній дозволяє розглядати поєднання вербальних і невербальних (зображення, саундтреки, одяг тощо) засобів, а також контекстуальних та інтертекстуальних структур текстів, призначених для вираження особистості тиктокерів та побудови їх ідентичності. Дослідження виявило, що тиктокери звертаються до синтаксичних конструкцій, типових для самопрезентації: таким чином вони заявляють про ідентичності, які вважають важливими, та конструюють їх шляхом цілеспрямованого ігнорування загальноприйнятих основних ідентичностей: вони проголошують або свою гендерну нейтральність, або здатність поєднувати ідентичності, які вважаються несумісними, або заперечують наявність у себе ідентичності як такої. Розмірковуючи про свою*

особистість та формуючи свої повідомлення для аудиторії, тиктокери використовують тексти, яким притаманні інтертекстуальність і мультимодальність. Поєднання мультимодальних семіотичних засобів допомагає блогерам створити техно-семіо-лінгвальний комплекс, типовий для соціальних мереж. Блогерам вдається застосовувати ці різноманітні семіотичні коди для донесення відповідного значення, розкриття своєї ідентичності перед аудиторією та, нарешті, створення власної спільноти навколо побудованої ідентичності.

Ключові слова: TikTok, ідентичність, критичний дискурс-аналіз, мультимодальний дискурс-аналіз, семіотика, інтертекстуальність.

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Social media platforms are the most prominent interactional Internet arenas that give its users powerful means to express themselves, to participate in the public sphere and, consequently, to influence the public opinions. Social media as communication loci have facilitated community formation and boosted connectedness within these new communities. This emergence of what Castells [6] terms "'mass self-communication' of networking platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok) offers a "stage for digital flâneurs", a place to "see and be seen" [2, p. 155] and provides effective tools "to galvanize the performance of online identity" [19, p. 201].

A social media network is defined by Ellison and Boyd [7, p. 158] as a communication place where participants can create identifiable profiles with user-generated content that can be publicly viewed and shared by many other users who are connected on the site. According to the scholars, the significance of social media lies in the socio-technical dynamics that has opened to millions of technology embracers who use it in order to share information, collaborate and socialize [7, p. 160].

As Galer [9] points out, TikTok has changed the way social media is consumed since it provides app users, especially the young, with the most powerful tool they have ever seen in social platforms where they are free to run amok and take on power [9]. TikTok describes itself as the leading destination for short-form mobile video, unique in its audio-visual format and conveniently flexible to autonomous content creation, self-presentation as well as presentation of individuals' own rituals of interests [12]. Hence, unlike other famous social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, TikTok has given its users the opportunity to freely create their own texts within "their control" and express themselves without experiencing the feeling of being "ostracized or disenfranchised by the traditional holders of power" [9].

The purpose of the article lies in highlighting how the bloggers on TikTok use verbal and nonverbal means to create the content aimed at constructing their online identity. The scientific novelty arises from the fact that though this social media is increasingly more popular among the youngsters, TikTok communication peculiarities have not been sufficiently analyzed, especially in terms of TikTokers' performance targeted at self-expression, self-presentation and construction of their cyber-self. The object is the discourse generated by the app users to market themselves by making their identity-related statements. The subject of the study is topics, language and nonverbal means employed by TikTok users to create the content of their videos and convey intended meanings. The material of the research is a sample of 45 videos posted by TikTokers in order to make themselves conspicuous online through presenting their personal features that, in the long run, construct their identities.

(1). The Internet has given online users various means to flexibly create online identities. It should be noted that presentation of one's cyber-self is, first, profoundly grounded on one's own choice of features to be mentioned and, second, may have little or no relevance to one's social roles in reality. Pseudo names, avatars, images, videos, sketches and language are all the elements that can be combined in a profile created by the user with the help of

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technology. These profiles are considered to be "virtual tool kits of possibilities" [4, p. 281] for "emerging adults' self-presentation and identity exploration" [15, p. 102].

As for the term 'identity', its most simplistic definition interprets identity as characteristics integrated in a person or group that make them distinct from others or, in Bucholtz and Hall's words, "identity is the social positioning of self and others" [5, p. 586]. Breakwell, in her turn, suggests that the process of identity construction is continuous and ever-lasting; it is hardly ever random, rather, it is guided by mannered and motivational principles referred to as "identity principles" [3, p. 24].

Earlier studies by the prominent sociologist Erving Goffman [11] put forward different types of identity: personal identity, social identity and ego or (felt) identity referring to the individual peculiarities that make a person unique [11]. Goffman's theory of self-presentation as conscious and unconscious self-performance can be "newly relevant when it comes to online platforms" [17, p. 202]. In this sense, the definition of online identity is not different from its traditional theory except it's in the virtual space. Hence, the present study can adopt the definition formulated by Kim et al. [14] which refers to the online identity as "a configuration of the defining characteristics of a person in the online space" [13, p. 1762].

"Speaker's identity is normally displayed by one's linguistic behaviour" [10, p. 43], so analyzing TikTokers' use of language forms to convey meanings, to create individual narratives, to make a statement about their belonging to a certain community [16] (or about their attempt to form a new community) facilitates understanding their discourse. It should be noted that discourse here is viewed as a phenomenon that includes "representations of how things are and have been, as well as imaginaries – representations of how things might or could or should be" [8, p.457]. According to Fairclough , plausible utterances of social practices may include social subjects, relations, values, instruments and imagined activities [8]. In this sense of social practices, we assume that TikTokers' discourse is not only potentially competent to define reality but also to shape a conceivable one. Critical

Discourse Analysis (CDA) is therefore applied to help decipher these language means used in this discourse.

TikTokers represent themselves and market their identity mainly through language. However, social media relates other accordance such as techno-semio-linguistic materiality of their online form, as much as to their design on a screen or their functionalities" [1]. Kress and Van Leeuwen [14] suggest a Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach (MDA) that employs semiotics to analyze such types of multimodal communication, i.e., those that integrate language with other resources (multiple modes of sound, photos, texts, graphs, icons, gestures, poses and audio-visual presentation in videos) to create meaning in multimodal (or multisemiotic) phenomena [14].

Consequently, to analyze this complex of multimodal expressions presented by TikTokers, the study employs MDA approach so as to ensure a better understanding of the entire set of semiotic codes used by these speakers to express themselves and represent their identity on TikTok.

(2). TikTok's features have offered the app users the power for identity creation as well as the ability to express who they are and what they care about. For example, blogger Woke Kindergarten posts a video that consists of several episodes (see description of the relevant visuals in brackets in the example below):

Yoooo! It's Ki again. After watching my first video you may wonder, is KI a boy or girl?!?!?! Well, I'm a dog lover (kisses a dog)*; I'm an athlete* (plays with the basketball)*; I'm the best in HIDE & SEEK* (hides behind a tree)*; I'm a photographer* (takes a photo)*; I'm a book lover* (has a book in her hands)*; I'm an avenger. Ok, maybe not an avenger but I'm an Avenger fan; I'm tree lover: I love you tree* (hugs a tree)*. So see! I have a lot of identities* (Text on screen: *so…many… IDENITIES!!!* (Emoji of admiration) *Can you name some of yours?*) *But boy or girl isn't one of them. I'M JUST KI AND I'M FREE BEING ME* (text on the screen: *from the binary.* (Black heart emoji)) [20].

The blogger uses the greeting "yooo" which is typical of teenagers' slang and introduces self as "Ki" which may be a real or a

nick name that lacks any gender categorization. The speaker does not employ any pronouns or nouns marked for gender: the TikToker consistently uses gender-neutral pronouns such as first-person singular *I* (or *me* for the object case), second-person pronoun *you*; the nouns the speaker attributes to self are gender-neutral (*lover, photographer, athlete*) as well.

The syntactic construction typical of self-presentation is
I + am + noun.

This is a typical syntactic pattern of self-presentation (e.g., *I am Julia/Ukrainian/Christian/a teacher*) but as a predicative the blogger uses nouns that focus on preferences for certain things (*dog lover, tree lover, Avenger fan*) or activities (*photographing, playing basketball*). Interestingly, the TikToker attempts to construct self-identity without referring to so-called master identities (sex, social class, ethnicity, religion, profession), i.e., without mentioning any conventionally recognized social groups. Moreover, the speaker categorically rejects the gender identity by emphasizing being free from this frame (*so...many... IDENITIES!!! But boy or girl isn't one of them*). Gender neutrality is enhanced in the video by the blogger's employing nonverbals, namely gender-undetermined facial expressions, body movements, unisex clothes, haircut and emojies displayed in the text on the screen. The text *I'm free from binary* is followed by the emoji of black heart which denotes the blatant rejection of the gender category. The capitalized *I'M JUST KI AND I'M FREE BEING ME* presented on the screen precedes the phrase *from the binary* attached to a black heart emoji. This capitalization is used strategically to tangibly deliver the desired meaning to the viewer and to assert the speaker's identity as a person outside the binary gender frame.

This self-reflection of the speaker's identity *So see! I have a lot of identities* is followed by an interactive question *Can you name some of yours?* to appeal to TikTok audience and to encourage them to participate in the discourse. Using this question as an interactive means that invites the audiences' participation and lays the ground

for a new community of like-minded people initiated by the TikToker. In other words, the blogger craves to shape a community and group identity around self and around features recognized as significant within this particular community.

Another TikToker expresses her identity in a text displayed on the screen:

Feeling like you don't know who you are. Like you aren't even a real person with interests and opinions etc. that aren't influenced by other people. Did you grow up in a place where you were meant to be seen and not heard? Did you learn to make your needs small to put theirs above your own? [18]

In fact, the text displays a case of identity crisis: the teenage TikToker lacks self-definition and expresses her feeling as being not *a real person*. Contrary to Ki in the example above, who affirms uniqueness by presenting identity as a fact (using the Indicative Mood of the Present Simple), this blogger uses slow motion and monotonous language that doesn't reflect assertiveness or certainty.

In this example we again find the syntactic pattern 'personal pronouns + the link verb to be + noun'. Yet, inserting the negation into the pattern signals the identity crisis (*you **aren't** even a real person*). In the sentence *you **don't** know who you are*, the negation is shifted to the modus unit.

Identity is based on the opposition '*I/WE vs You/They*', yet, in some contexts, this opposition may be modified. In the second example, *I* merges into *you* (so-called generic *you*), i.e., *you* includes both the speaker and the audience. Here, the opposition is verbalized by the blogger using such lexemes as '*other people*' and '*theirs*'. Also, *they* from the opposition are implied in the passive voice (*you **were meant**, to **be seen, not heard***) where the speaker is described as an object (passive= patient), while *they* act as the subject (active = doers).

The blogger's identity is extended from past to present. According to the principle of continuity postulated in the Identity Process Theory, (Breakwell (1986), identity evolves throughout one's lifetime without interruptions: my self today grows out of my self yesterday, i.e., my identity results from my past experiences. In

the example above, the current identity crisis is ascribed to the past experience, expressed with the past simple (*Did you grow up? Did you learn?*) in that the past has not produced any identity (*You don't know who are*). It is noteworthy that these interrogative sentences are, in fact, rhetorical questions and the expected answer of the audiences is *Yes, we did*. In other words, the presupposition here is that the audience has shared the same past experience, which allows the speaker to merge herself with the audience to the point when *you* equals *I*.

In the third example, the TikTok video shows a teenage girl with the text on the screen `I MAY BE 🏳️‍🌈 BUT`. What follows is the soundtrack in the background, namely a stanza from the song *This I Believe* (The Creed) by Hillsong Worship: "*I believe in God our Father; I believe in Christ the Son; I believe in the Holy Spirit; Our God is three in One*" [19]. While singing the words of the song with the choir, the girl displays different tattoos on her body (the cross, etc.) to assert her religious affiliation (see figure 1).
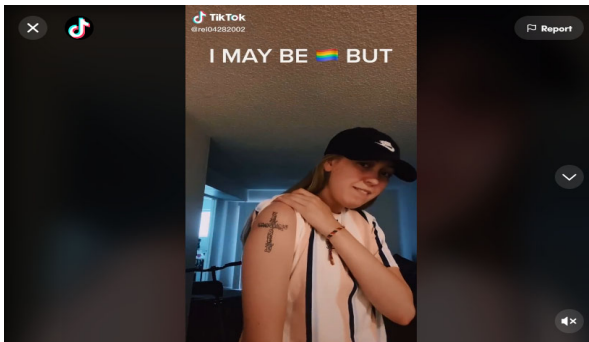

Figure. 1

This video is an example of intertextuality and multimodality since the blogger uses a blend of written and spoken language (slogan, song) and visuals (the LGBT flag, tattoos). When watching the video, the viewer's eye is first caught by the capitalized words on the screen with the rainbow flag, the symbol of homosexuality, which is the context within which the blogger presents her sexual identity. This visualized context is accompanied by various semiotic

modes (verbal, music, and visual) that are interrelated to create a complex of what Baldauf et al. [1] calls techno-semio-linguistic materiality typical of social media.

This audio-visual text integrated in the context directs the sense-making the blogger wants to unfold. In other words, it coheres what the traditional cultural norms used to stereotype as incompatible: homosexuality and religion. Multimodality tends convey meanings that are left open for the viewers to interpret. In a similar way, the decoding of meanings encoded with the help of intertextuality also depends on the background knowledge of audiences. Merging the LGBT flag, the cross, religious symbols as tattoos, the song with Christian content is a locus to merge both religious and sexual identities.

The amalgamation of both identities through this multimodal mediation is an attempt to normalize what has been always considered as paradoxical and thus to identify with the group and cultural scripts of the broader society. Thus, the blogger uses TikTok platform to present her homosexual and religious identities as compatible as to seek social acceptance.

(3). Applying the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis and Multimodal Discourse Analysis to the video material of the sample, the research sheds some light on the process of identity construction employed by TikTok bloggers.

The study has revealed that TikTokers use efficiently the set of tools provided by this social media: their texts are multimodal in that TikTok bloggers consistently combine signs of diverse semiotic systems. Thus, identities are constructed with the help of the syntactic construction 'I am + N', the 'I/We vs You/They' opposition as well as the use of past tenses that present one's identity (or its absence) as a result of life experience. Visual signs range from clothes and appearance to conventional symbols (emojis, LGBT colors), while auditory signs are represented by soundtracks. The latter makes some videos intertextual: bloggers boost their self-expression by using texts created by other people and, thus, state their affiliation with these people's ideas.

All these means are employed to make conspicuous a certain identity the TikToker intends to build a community around. Since bloggers compete for the audience, these identities should be unique and unconventional, which is achieved by the bloggers either claiming their gender neutrality, or asserting the ability to combine identities that are stereotypically regarded as incompatible, or by denying having any identity as such.

Thus, the research has shown Tiktok as a venue that provides users with a rather extensive set of technological tools for self-expression, identity presentation and community formation.

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