

*Young people's identity formation in  
social media's fast-paced consumer  
culture  
- a sociocultural psychological  
theorisation*

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## Summary in Danish/Resumé på dansk

Brug af sociale medier er efterhånden et udbredt fænomen i vestlige samfund, særligt blandt unge mennesker. Fælles for mange sociale medier er, at de i høj grad benytter sig af personaliserede algoritmer for at udvælge indhold, der skal præsenteres for en given bruger. Særligt ses dette på det sociale medie TikTok, der også har ageret inspiration for andre platforme ved implementeringen af det, der i forbindelse med specialafhandlingen kaldes 'kortvideo-baserede sociale medier'. For unge mennesker gør det sig samtidigt særligt gældende, at de benytter sig af kulturelle ressourcer (så som sociale medier) i en tid, der er karakteriseret af mange brud i tilværelsen, og dermed også deres forståelse af verden, og ikke mindst sig selv – deres identiteter.

Sociale medier argumenteres for at være - på lige fod med alle andre strukturer i det moderne samfund - bundet op på en kapitalistisk og konstant vækst- og tidsoptimerende logik, samt en tilhørende forbrugsorienteret kultur. Det betyder, at meget af det indhold, der præsenteres på sociale medier, også skabes med dette in mente; uanset om der er tale om eksplicit reklame og marketing, eller mere implicite forbrugsorienterede beskeder.

Denne forbrugsorienterede kultur er dog også blevet kritiseret i en lang årrække, også inden for psykologien, for at have en række negative konsekvenser. Disse ses, blandt andet, i forhold til trivsel og mentalt helbred for de individer, der lever i denne type kultur. Nogle af disse kritikker omhandler - meget vedkommende for identitetsdannelsesaspektet - hvordan mennesket risikerer at udvikle en iboende fremmedgørelse af sit eget selv og forholdet til andre, samt en frygt for at blive gjort irrelevant og 'flydende' i en verden, hvor selv fysiske omstændigheder som tid og sted har ændret form og betydning.

Dette speciale stiller skarpt på, hvordan man kan betragte dynamikkerne mellem identitetsdannelse – særligt i ungdomsårene – fra en sociokulturel psykologisk vinkel, bruger-kulturen og dens udfoldelse på det sociale medie TikTok, og de eventuelle konsekvenser disse faktorer måtte have på trivsel, ved at danne en overordnet, præliminær

teoretisering, der søger at forbinde disse aspekter, med udgangspunkt i problemformuleringen: *"Hvordan kan de(n) forbrugorienterede og hyppigt skiftende kulture(r) på sociale medier forstås at influere identitetsdannelsen hos unge mennesker?"*, og ved besvarelsen af dets tilhørende undersøgelsesspørgsmål: *"Hvad er nogle af de (teoretiske) mekanismer og indvirkninger af denne indflydelse?"*.

Denne undersøgelse er ydermere blevet informeret og kvalificeret af forudeksisterende empiriske data, bl.a. fra neuro- og kognitionspsykologiske studier vedrørende emnet. På baggrund af den præsenterede theoretisering, præsenterer specialet ligeledes en række metodologiske forslag til, hvordan videre undersøgelse af emnet kan udføres. Disse metodologiske forslag indeholder både kvantitative metoder, bl.a. i form af dataindsamling af indhold fra platformene, samt kvalitative metoder, der søger at uddybe forståelsen af, hvordan brugere (og ikke-brugere) oplever platformen, mhp. tidligere og nuværende trends, modstandsstrategier, samt platformens overordnede indvirkning på trivsel, med udgangspunkt i de fremlagte teoretiske faktorer.

## **Reading guide**

This Master's thesis consists of two parts: part A and part B, in accordance with the curriculum for the Master's programme in Psychology at Aalborg University. Part A is a stand-alone manuscript for a scientific paper, written with the potential of publication in a relevant peer-reviewed journal in mind. Part B is an additional report that serves to frame the paper, by including processual considerations, metatheoretical perspectives and reflections, and further perspectives on the topic of the paper, that are otherwise not normally considered in the formulation of a scientific paper. I recommend reading part A first, as part B references parts of the paper, and many perspectives of part B are not relevant without the context of part A.

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## Part A

# 1. Introduction

*”For a generation that grew up mediated, transforming the world through pop culture was second nature. The problem was that these fixations began to transform us in the process.”* (Naomi Klein, 2002, p. 109)

These are the words of Naomi Klein, in her book *No Logo*. In this book, Klein offers a comprehensive journalistic account and analysis of how the branding of goods has led to corporate occupation of spaces, their (sub)cultures, and subsequent changes in the job market infrastructure in North America.

In 2024, this statement still appears to be true, and not only specific to North American cultures. The key differences rather appear to be how this mediation has changed with new technologies. One technology that has had a large impact on societies around the globe, is the smartphone. The, for a lot of people, always-on-personal computer and communications device has about every tool that a human being needs on hand to fulfil their needs; among these, the ability to communicate with both dear and unfamiliar ones; both on one-to-one basis, but most certainly also on a massive scale through ‘social media’. Social media can be defined as virtual sites, where the main purpose of interaction is to network and create content communities with other named users (Bagger, 2021).

On some social media, there is not only potential for the creation of such networks and communities. Here also lies the perceived promises of an algorithm, which contain both entertainments, and the potentials of mass exposure, fame, and a stream of income for the people willing to provide the entertainment (Bagger, 2021; Carah, 2014; Jain & Arakkal, 2022). This is especially the case for what may be called ‘short-form video-based social media platforms’, where the algorithm takes on a particularly significant role in both user interface and experience (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

The dynamics of these platforms have led to the formation of very large and international subcultures, whose diffusion is mostly determined by the social media’s algorithm (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022), and this is where the problem area of this paper lies.

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Social media algorithms can be considered a constantly changing billboard of advertising, both explicitly, but also implicitly through more subtle messages of materialistic and consumerist messages that are pushed by the algorithm, with the goal of profit in mind (Barta et al., 2023; Hearn, 2010; Montag & Elhai, 2023).

Consumerism has been argued to cause psychological distress and moral dilemmas for a time that surpasses the emergence of social media platforms (Bauman, 1998; 2007; 2009; Rosa, 2010; 2015; Kramer, 2006), but recent concerns have been raised to the emergence of extraordinarily short ‘trend-cycles’ or ‘micro-trends’ on social media, although the dynamics of these have not gathered much attention in academic literature as of yet. These terms refer to content on the platforms that heavily promote the consumption of certain goods for a fairly short period of time, and the subsequent action of purchasing these goods by the users, only to deem them “out” or irrelevant after a short while (Suriarachchi, 2021).

This paper explores how consumerist messages, as they are presented on short-form video social media platforms, can have an impact on the identity formation of young people, who are particularly active users of the platforms (Jain & Arakkal, 2022; Montag, Haibo & Elhai, 2021). Youth is considered as a period in psychological development, where a person is particularly sensitive to social/cultural messages, often resulting in interesting and diverse youth subcultures (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Boffone, 2022). And it is (at least in part) in the participation of these subcultures that young people negotiate and develop a firmer sense of identity (Erikson, 1968; Gardner & Davis, 2013; Montag, Yang & Elhai, 2021; Zittoun, 2012).

Thus, it is relevant to conceptualise how these messages and their format appear to interact with the formation of identity, and which effects this interaction may also have on the well-being of young people.

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## *1.1 The social media platforms in question*

The main interest of investigation of this paper is the mobile application TikTok, as it largely exemplifies the features of short-form video-based social media platforms. In this section, I will present the platform and existing empirical findings on how this type of social media, especially TikTok, is used by young people. I do so to situate the topic of the paper within the known aspects of user-platform-interactions.

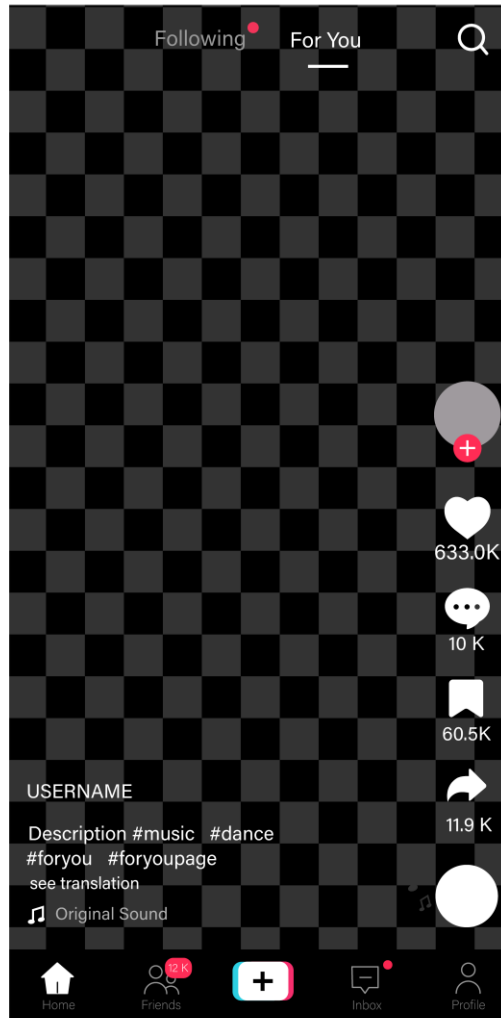
TikTok, as it is known today, was launched in 2017, but saw an increase in popularity during the lockdown periods of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2022 (Kennedy, 2020; Klug, Kaufman & Evans, 2023), and is currently particularly popular among younger users (particularly, those under the age of 25) world-wide (Jain & Arakkal, 2022; Martinez, Brammer & Punyanunt-Carter, 2023; Montag, Haibo & Elhai, 2021). In Denmark alone, Statistics Denmark found that 80 % of their population of 16–19-year-olds were using TikTok in the first half of 2023, as well as 60 % of 20-24-year-olds (Jacobsen, 2023).

The interface of TikTok is designed to present the user with a variety of visual and short-video materials, and offer a user interface that is generally considered highly immersive (Jain & Arakkal, 2022; Zeng, Abidin & Schäfer, 2021). When logging in to the app, the user is first presented with a ‘For You’-page, which presents an automated flow of “random” videos, according to the logic of the algorithm (Martinez, Brammer & Punyanunt-Carter, 2024; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Faltsek et al., 2023; Jain & Arakkal, 2022). The content presented to the users of the platform is thus highly individualised and based on the assumed interests of the user (and in consideration of the platform’s own agenda(s)) (Jain & Arakkal, 2022; Martinez, Brammer & Punyanunt-Carter, 2023; Zeng, Abidin & Schäfer, 2021). The “groups” that the user will be associated with due to the algorithm’s logic, are sometimes referred to as ‘sides’ of TikTok; a grouping of certain kinds of content, presumably based on the use of hashtags and other semantic expressions associated with specific pieces of content (e.g. captions and comments) (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Buffone, 2022).

Interface design-wise, the main part of the screen interface is filled out by the video presented, and the user only has to flick their thumb to be presented with new video

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content, and buttons to interact with the content (options to ‘like’, share, comment and save on the content) can also be reached easily using the right thumb (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022) (see figure 1, where a mock-up of the interface as it appeared in May 2024 is pictured).



**Figure 1 Mock-up of TikTok’s interface- Designed, By Suneo from [https://pngtree.com/freepng/tiktok-interface-design\\_9004537.html?sol=downref&id=bef](https://pngtree.com/freepng/tiktok-interface-design_9004537.html?sol=downref&id=bef)**

Meta, the company behind the platforms of Facebook and Instagram, along with the company Google’s video-sharing platform YouTube, have also adopted features that are very similar to those of TikTok. They offer a subsection of their platforms (called Reels and YouTube Shorts respectively), which present the user with curated short-form video content in a similar fashion to TikTok (Chiossi et al, 2023). These platforms also offer an “infinite”, automatically flowing feed, where they present new

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content also based upon the calculations of the platform's algorithms (Hendrikse & Limniou, 2024). Instagram and TikTok are particularly similar as they have an overlap in their active user base group, both in terms of age and motives for use, and in their focus on presenting audio-visual content (Hendrikse & Limniou, 2024).

When posting content, the user is offered integrated tools that allow to edit their videos and add personalised stickers and/or visual effects, elements of augmented reality, and background music, with a fair amount of ease. The platform also allows for users to 'stitch' or 'duet' their content to other's as well, meaning that responses to other videos is an integrated part of the platform itself (Martinez, Brammer & Puyanunt-Carter, 2023). At the same time, the platform restricts direct messaging between users to only be available for other users in their immediate network (Klug, Kaufman & Evans, 2023). Other usual features of social media profiles are cut off as well; users are identified by a profile picture, a username, a nickname and a very short bio, and their metrics of following and likes (Klug, Kaufman & Evans, 2023). Some also argue that TikTok is more akin to traditional television than social media sites in this sense (Faltesek, 2023).

This means that users are highly encouraged to form their social networks in the "open", rather than in private, fostering a unique culture among TikTok-users. This is expressed in the emergence of 'challenges' or 'trends' (videos which are created with a certain set of rules, structure, elements and/or themes in mind), which have become a popular part of the platform (Faltesek, 2023; Klug, Kaufman & Evans, 2023). The contents of these challenges or trends can be anything from performing a certain dance, to "put a finger down if you relate to something said in this video" and/or longer lifestyle challenges.

Furthermore, trends also find themselves taking form in 'aesthetics'; a phenomenon where many elements of life can be gathered into a sense of a coherent lifestyle, that have a certain look or aesthetic quality to them (TikTok itself has as of May 2024 a 'channel' called "List of Aesthetics"). These aesthetics are, similarly to other types of trends and challenges, assimilated (and loosely negotiated) on the platform through many means of grouping, as presented at the start of this section (Sweeney-Romero, 2022).

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The format of TikTok and other platforms like it, have been found to be particularly effective for capturing the audience of young people for extended periods of time (Hendrikse & Limniou, 2024; Montag, Yang & Elhai, 2021). The contents of the platforms can carry a great significance in both communication with others, and perhaps also serve as a point of larger cultural reference for the young person orienting themselves in their new role(s) as (soon-to-be) adults (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Hendrikse & Limniou, 2024; Montag, Yang & Elhai, 2021) – something that can very much be considered an important inquiry in to the psychology of young minds.

Empirical studies have pointed out that users often centre the experience of the algorithm as a key part of their experience on TikTok (Schellewald, 2023), and have a heightened awareness of it compared to that of other platforms, perhaps due to the centring of this exact feature in the design of the platform (Jain & Arakkal, 2022; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Molem, Makri & Mckay, 2024). This feature also appears as somewhat empowering for the users in terms of their perception control over the platform, due to their awareness of it (Klug et al., 2021). This allows for them to feel as though they could make meaningful choices and shape what the platform would present them with (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Molem, Makri & Mckay, 2024).

Users generally find it useful that the platform “gets to know” them, even if they do not actively engage with the social aspects of the platform (likes, comments etc.) (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Thus, they describe having some sort of relationship with the platform, as it develops its idea of who they were (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Molem, Makri & Mckay, 2024). They also describe feeling frustrated or very surprised, if the platform failed to recognise that they had already seen certain content or presented them with something unexpected (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

A large aspect of the user-experience on the platforms, is the existence of ‘influencers’; users who have large followings and may be economically and/or materialistically compensated by either TikTok or brands from making content. For the latter, the business arrangements made between the influencer and the brand often centre explicit or implicit promotion of products (Bagger, 2021). Users have expressed that the “reliability” of influencers and other users in general, makes the platform more engaging, and also find that these influencers are more accessible to them than (traditional) expert sources on various topics (Molem, Makri & Mckay, 2024). In line with this, studies

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employing ‘Uses and gratification theory’ also find that especially entertainment and affective needs are the primary explainers, when trying to map which of these are the most important to the users (Klug, Kaufman & Evans, 2023; Montag, Yang & Elhai, 2021).

Users are also known to form what is termed as ‘parasocial relationships’ with others, meaning that the relationship is a distanced and more or less imagined, and is formed by a less prominent user, towards a more prominent user who in return is not (equally) aware of the particular existence of the less prominent user. These relationships can become particularly vivid on social media platforms, as the less prominent user can consider themselves in a closer proximity to the subject of their parasocial relationship (Ao et al., 2023; Klug, Kaufman & Evans, 2023).

Regarding posting content on TikTok for “regular” users, the platform is generally considered one that fosters a great amount of creativity and self-expression, particularly in participation with others (Darvin, 2022). The tools for editing the content, and culture of interacting with other content (whether it be through ‘stitching’, hashtags, ‘challenges’ etc.) makes the platform engaging for anyone, large following or not. The culture on TikTok also allows for the users to discuss their everyday lives freely, and users also describe that this is a primary feature of the platform, as well (Klug, Kaufman & Evans, 2023). Even sensitive topics of (mental) health and personal crisis are regular parts of the platform, allowing users to both speak their minds freely, and relate to others who may be experiencing something similar to them (Klug, Kaufman & Evans, 2023; Martinez, Brammer & Puyanunt-Carter, 2023). And thanks to the algorithm and tools of the platform, finding and forming these networks of connections appears very easy (Papacharissi, 2013).

As can be derived from the findings above, the effects of using TikTok-like social media are varied and, in some cases, somewhat pervasive. Young people form relationships with both other users and ‘influencers’, and, as already suggested, may even form relations with the mechanisms of the platforms themselves. They express “themselves” and in return also find themselves back (Darvin, 2022; Papacharissi, 2013). But exactly how developed is this ‘self’ of the young person, and more so, how does this constant reflection impact the formation of this ‘self’ or identity?

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It has been proposed that the way users interact with content can create what they term an ‘algorithmized version of self’ (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020; 2022); one where the user reflects on themselves in terms of the content they interact and are presented with, allowing for a sense of identity formed within the bounds of the platform. This is also the case, when the user reflects on themselves in a more critical way, e.g. if a user perceives that their identity is not “accepted” by the algorithm (Karizat et al., 2021). Others have discussed terms such as ‘networked selves’ (Papacharissi, 2013) and ‘the algorithmic crystal’ (Lee et al., 2022) as their own phenomena, although it is found that a need for further development of theory and methodology regarding these aspects is needed (Ionescu & Licu, 2023). And it is that which I will explore in the following sections of this paper.

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## 2. A sociocultural psychological conceptualisation of identity

As stated above, it can be argued that social media use can have profound effects on the young person's formation of self or identity – but what exactly is the matter of identity? There are numerous definitions of what such a matter consists of, although there is a common understanding within psychology that identity is the constant sense of a self, that a person has throughout time. It can also be argued that numerous identities may also be held by a single person, depending on their association with social groups and cultures (Brinkmann, 2008). In this section, I seek to define a coherent concept of identity, informed by the field of sociocultural psychology.

Sociocultural psychology as a field considers human beings' social life and shared meaning-making (culture) as a central part of the human psychology, as the human mind travels through irreversible time and space. The theorists of this field thus stress the importance of observing and analysing these interactions in the scientific study of the mind, as expressed with cultural artefacts (signs and tools) (Cole, 1996) – elements that are central to the use and experience of social media as outlined above.

To define this concept of identity, I take departure from Svend Brinkmann's (2008) conceptualization of identity. I will supplement this conceptualisation with a developmental life-course perspective (Zittoun, 2007), which centralises the importance of ruptures and the use of symbolic resources to navigate through – or transition from – these ruptures, as a model of the process of developing an identity.

Identity can be considered the ability to carry out a constant self-interpretation regarding two dimensions of the individual's positioning in the world; 1) how they seek to obtain *correspondence* between their set values and moral standpoints, and 2) how they achieve *coherence* throughout life, enabled by the construction of a stable self-narrative across time (Brinkmann, 2008, p. 22, 71). I will unfold and situate these aspects in the following, as they will be central to the conceptualisation of identity used in this paper.

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Central to the definition and reasoning of the first dimension of correspondence is the notion of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ evaluations (as conceived by philosopher Charles Taylor), based on the main thesis that the individual defines themselves – or carries out its’ self-reflection – in reference to whether they believe they are doing good in terms of the morals they identify themselves with, or not. These morals, which are always grounded in normative assumptions that the person makes of the world, termed the ‘inescapable frameworks’ (Brinkmann, 2008).

The theory behind the dimension of correspondence also reflects the philosopher and priest Søren Kierkegaard’s juxtaposition of the aesthetician vs. the ethic. The *ethic* is concerned with reasoning of their actions, within the greater frame of “the common”, or living up to the social order – the inescapable frameworks - whether this is pleasurable for the individual or not. This framework is also relatively stable over time (Brinkmann, 2008). This type of reasoning can be coupled with the notion of a *strong evaluation*; one which is made with a sense of morality in mind (Brinkmann, 2008, pp. 50-51).

This notion of moral based self-interpretation is (especially in consumer cultures) often confused with or replaced by a self-interpretation, where the individual seeks to find and define itself through the means of aesthetics, or consumer goods. The *aesthetician* is constantly seeking pleasurable experiences and having their desires met, but is never able to *reason* their actions, as they are purely based on desire and passion (or caused by these). These desires and passions can also be constantly fleeting from moment to moment, and carry no sense of coherence (Brinkmann, 2008, p. 42-45). This type of evaluation, or decision that is made on the basis of aesthetics, is classified as a *weak evaluation* (Brinkmann, 2008, pp. 49-50).

The second dimension of identity, coherence, is influenced by the works and philosophies of hermeneutics, narrative psychology, and the framework ‘Positioning Theory’. It focuses on the temporal elements of identity, which are (as previously mentioned) central to the sociocultural psychological understanding of the mind (Brinkmann, 2008). The individual’s narrative is structured around its own development throughout time, and will develop according to hermeneutic principles; that is, a constant interchange between the individual’s experience (of their actions and being-in-the-world)

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and reflections of understanding and interpreting these experiences, which then in turn inform and change future actions and experiences and so forth (Brinkmann, 2008, pp. 35-37, 55-56).

This reflection will happen through the means of narratives, and positioning within their perceived rights and duties. As the individual experiences the world throughout time, these narratives will then change. However, this is at the same time in relation to the dimension of coherence, that allows the person to identify with their former narrative selves (Brinkmann, 2008).

While Brinkmann's conceptualisation of identity is concerned with (meta-)theoretical frameworks that constitute an identity and offers a perspective on how it is also constituted through positioning, a further perspective on how identity can be studied throughout a person's life-course in "real-time" practice (as, for example, when the person uses social media) can qualify this further. This section will seek to do so, primarily through the perspective of Zittoun's framework of life-course psychology.

This perspective characterises the individual's development during their life-course, between continuity and series of *ruptures* to their understanding of the world (Zittoun, 2007, p. 195; 2012, p. 523). Human beings always seek to maintain coherence in identity throughout changes, and ruptures are then experiences that challenge what is taken for granted. This requires that the person experiencing the rupture can find new meanings that allows this rupture to be integrated into the context of their own life. The person will then *transition* to a new understanding of the world through this rupturing experience (Zittoun, 2007, 2012).

Some of these ruptures could be thought to be the change in levels and places of education, the change from being a student to becoming a worker, bodily changes and/or legal coming of age; facts which are inevitable most (and for the last two, all) young people. It can also be sickness, changes to the structure of immediate family, making and breaking of friendly and romantic relationships, among many others. Simply put, experiences which may profoundly need for a reorientation of the individual in order to transition through it (Zittoun, 2007).

However, I also propose that the notion of a 'rupture' does not necessarily need to have this characteristic of making drastic changes to the life situation of the individual, in

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order to have an influence on the formation of identity. In fact, I believe most, if not all, of us experience smaller ruptures in our everyday lives, that change how our life trajectories ultimately play out. Zittoun herself also addresses this in her theory; many smaller and rudimentary experiences in daily life may cause learning and shifts in orientation and identity – the relevance of a rupture is simply defined by it being “*experienced as such by a person*” (Zittoun, 2007, p. 186).

Youth can thus also be considered a liminal time between childhood and adulthood, marked by many changes, and the transitioning through a variety of ruptures to their life situation. A young person will likely also seek *symbolic resources* to help them navigate through these changes and ruptures (Zittoun, 2007, p. 199; 2012, p. 524). These resources allow for the individual to distance from the restraints of the here-and-now, and enter the imaginative world of symbols where past experience can be put into context through narrative, and where everything is possible in the future (establishing a sense of coherence). These symbolic resources can be accessed through the interaction with symbolic objects that capture shared ideas, meanings, and beliefs (Zittoun, 2007).

Youth is also a time where the individual gains *symbolic responsibilities*, as they develop more mature psychological functions (Zittoun, 2007, p. 198). These responsibilities are the result of the young person now starting to be held accountable for what they decide to consume by other people and are also taken more seriously when they give their opinions, although youth can also be considered a period in which one is given more societal freedom to explore different options. It is thus also a time where the young person has a heightened focus on their identity and self-perception, as they also develop a *system of orientation* which they can use evaluate their cultural experiences (what can also be considered as the dimension of correspondence) (Zittoun, 2007, p. 198).

Identity is thus defined as the ability to use, as well as the process of utilising a set of somewhat constant values or morals, that a person interprets themselves (and their world) within, to create a coherent sense of self throughout time; both past, present and future. In youth especially, this process is to be understood as grounded in the use of symbolic

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resources which makes this interpretation possible through the abstraction of time and space.

I would like to make a few points here on how social media can be thought to influence the formation of identity, accordingly to the conceptualisation of identity formed above. Contents on short-form video based social media like TikTok can first and foremost be understood as symbolic (and to some degree social) resources. The young person with access to social media, has access to a wide variety of cultural information and these potential resources. These resources are informed by and negotiated within the culture and social structure that the individual is situated within, as they also form the sphere of possible ways of life through law, infrastructure etc., which I will touch upon in following sections of this paper.

It is crucial to the formation of identity that the individual is faced with ruptures, and it is also an unavoidable fact that these will take place. As I have also just outlined, the young person is faced with the expectations of symbolic responsibility when managing their navigation through these aspects of life, but also granted the freedom to utilise these symbolic resources more freely than someone considered an adult would.

I argue that these ruptures can paradoxically occur using the symbolic resources that were otherwise supposed to be helpful in the process of transitioning. Symbolic resources contain culturally relevant information, and this information may also contain messages regarding what is deemed “right” or “good”, on both moral (as narratives will most likely contain normative messages) and aesthetic levels; what may be termed as *micro-ruptures*, in order to distinguish them from what may then be called *main-ruptures*, as previously presented.

The pacing of these micro-ruptures has generally been somewhat “slow”, minimising the amount of them encountered. I would argue that they have typically also been related to already very familiar cultural narratives, making the properties of this type of rupture manageable to orient oneself in and ultimately transition through and with.

I would thus also argue that these facts have changed with social media, and especially with TikTok. The presentation of new content is made very fast-paced and unpredictable, and technically, anyone from anywhere may present almost any idea at any time. It could also be thought that the algorithm may serve to help cement certain beliefs, only to change its agenda when it finds that the confirmation of these beliefs gets too

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boring and disengaging. So, what the young person might have thought to be right yesterday, could be the wrong of today, making it difficult to form such a stable orientation of self.

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### 3. The societal perspective

While this paper is primarily concerned with the psychological life and well-being of the (young) person, it is only fitting (as the definition of identity offered above also highlights) to address the structure of the social world that this life takes its place in – and most of all, what the incentives and structures causing these constant micro-ruptures may be.

This section will be dedicated to presenting a psychosociological analysis of how the development of technology plays a key role in the acceleration of life-tempo and the ‘liquidity’ of society, and how this is believed to impact the individual's ability to form meaningful relationships with both the artefacts and the people they interact with. This exact analysis is offered – albeit using different terminology and stressing different components of society as key factors – by sociologists Hartmut Rosa and Zygmunt Bauman. What these theories also have in common is the fact that the main instigator of (post-)modern developments is industrialism and the subsequent globalised and capitalist structure of society (Rosa, 2010; 2015; Bauman, 1998; 2000; 2013).

Modern society can be considered as one which is largely characterised by the notion of social acceleration; that is, the society and the actions of and within it as situated in historical time. Rosa, the originator of this thinking, proposes that acceleration can be considered in terms of the number of activities that can be executed and achieved within a certain amount of time, and is expressed in three dimensions; 1) technological acceleration, 2) acceleration of social change (also named the ‘structural motor’), and 3) the acceleration of the individual’s ‘pace of life’ (the ‘cultural motor’) (2010).

These dimensions are theorised as parts of a circular structure, which starts with the invention of technology that allows for social structures to change at a faster pace. These structures then impact the life of the individual and causes changes in the cultural norms of the society in which these technologies and subsequent structural, social changes are in action (Rosa, 2010).

The rationale, or the driving motor, for this acceleration is the capitalist logic of ‘time = money’; technologies were thus invented with this logic in mind. This theoretical framework is thus also to be considered one which is critical of this capitalist structure and is derived from Marxist theory, although the mechanisms can be considered as mostly self-driven at this point in time (Rosa, 2010; 2015). Another rationale that could

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be considered a driver of this development is the notion of the ‘attention economy’; material resources nor time to produce these are scarce in privileged societies, but the attention of potential consumers is (Abidin, 2021; Goldhaber, 1997; Simon, 1971).

*Technological acceleration* is characterised by development of the: “*intentional, goal-directed processes of transport, communication, and production*” (Rosa, 2010, p. 16). The acceleration in this aspect that Rosa refers to, is the fact that with modern technologies, the notion of space seems to contract and therefore holds less significance when orienting oneself in the world (Rosa, 2010). For example, where we once needed physical places to be with each other, we now have a host of non-physical places where we can still have a social life and exchange information; things such as e-mail, phone calls and SMS, online video calls, virtual workspaces and, as the topic of this paper would suggest, social media platforms.

These technologies also allow for us to do more things in the same amount of “historical time”, thus allowing for an increase in productivity and subsequent economic growth, due to a larger output of goods (and perhaps services) (Rosa, 2015, pp. 29, 31).

When technologies allow for a faster infrastructure of spreading information (and thus ideas), new opportunities for the social structures of our world occurs and may thus cause *the acceleration of societal change*. Rosa also categorises this as the pace of which: “*change themselves are changing*” (2010, p. 11) and defines it as: “[...] *an increase in the decay-rates of the reliability of experiences and expectations and by the contraction of the time-spans definable as the ‘present.’*” (2010, p. 18).

In other words, this can be considered in the terms of how relevant a given piece of information is deemed culturally relevant. Examples that Rosa gives us of this, is the relevance and stability of certain opening-hours of shops, the addresses and phone numbers, and civil status of others. Even attitudes and values are at question within the same generation of people (Rosa, 2010).

If we refer back to the conceptualisation of identity I previously presented, this is perhaps where the clashes between the inherent need to form an identity and the structures of society really start to become apparent. From the perspective of this paper, examples of this could be the rate at which certain fashions go through what is known as a ‘trend cycle’, how long certain lifestyle choices are deemed “right”, when doing a certain

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challenge is deemed appropriate, and the peaks of fame, or “relevance” of specific influencers on the platforms.

These societal changes will likely translate into the practices of the individual person, and their *pace of life*, defined in terms of the activities conducted by individuals, how the individual experiences these activities, and their perceptions of time. As Rosa points out, a lot of people experience a lack or scarcity of time, as they perceive this pace as very high, and the amounts of activities to perform as endless (2010).

This scarcity of time can be seen as constituted by the individual’s need to optimise the amount of “life” that they can live within the span of their own lifetime, seeing as the structures mentioned above now make it possible – if not expected – that a person lives “multiple lives” within one. Where larger commitments such as partnerships, jobs and homes were once seen as binding for large parts of life, if not for the entirety of it, most individuals of Western societies are now given permission culturally to make the span of these commitments shorter, if their privilege allows for it. Even commitments to smaller and more menial tasks and duties are being condensed and are sometimes performed simultaneously (Rosa, 2010).

The fact that the rationale of (economic) growth has not yet left the equation, means that the technological solutions that should otherwise have given the individual more time, have resulted in an increase of expected output of the same tasks. As Rosa also explains in this quote: “(...) *there is no point of equilibrium since standing still is equivalent to falling behind (...)*” (2010, p. 32).

Two main criticisms of this structure are presented by Rosa himself; that society becomes inherently desynchronised, and the notion of alienation (borrowed from Karl Marx’ terminology) (Rosa, 2010).

The criticism of desynchronisation emphasises the fact that different institutions of society no longer work within the same pace, and different generations will live vastly different lives, undermining both the cultural and symbolic aspects of life, and ultimately the relationship between the different generations. This itself can have an influence on the individual as proposed in the definition of identity offered in this paper, as these parts of life can be considered key constituents in the formation of an identity (Rosa, 2010).

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The criticism based in the notion of alienation is also one that is of psychological relevance, and poses that individuals experience a profound sense of distancing from concepts such as ‘space’, ‘things’, ‘actions’, ‘time’. As a result, the relationship between our self and others become alienated, due to the relationships to these aspects of life and the world become warped and constantly change meaning in the compression of space, time and action/experience. This causes the individual to find themselves in a difficult position when trying to relate to others, and vice-versa; and ultimately, when trying to relate to their self (Brinkmann, 2008; Rosa, 2010).

The notion of time can thus be considered central to the experiences of humans (and meaning-/sense-making within these spheres of time) (Brinkmann, 2008; Zittoun, 2007; Lee, Katz & Hancock, 2021). What this time is directed at and how it’s experienced, perhaps also from the point-of-view of cognition, must then be considered important, to understand what impact TikTok might be thought to have on the psyche. Often, there will be discrepancies between users’ perception of the time they spend on the platform. This is both in terms of what effects the use of time on the platform at all has on them, and how the quantity of historical time is experienced in regard to perceived amount of time spent vs. actual time spent, as reported by users (Burnell et al., 2021). The effects of the immersive feeds have also been known to invoke a ‘flow’-like state, where the user, among other effects, experiencing a distorted sense of time and become unaware of their self-consciousness and changes in their surroundings (Zhao & Wagner, 2023); something which disables a position of agency in relation to usage. Users even describe using TikTok for this exact reason; to distort time (Roberts & David, 2023).

These observations made can thus be considered in relation to how the individual may also be considered as alienated from the concepts of time and space, and ultimately, their own actions in some cases, when using social media. But how does this perhaps turn into an alienation of the self and others?

A perspective on this is offered by Bauman, who presents a critical view on globalisation (which is made possible by the compression of time and space through technology) and the state of *liquidity* that he finds characterises this borderless and mostly spaceless modern society (1998, pp. 77-79; 2000, pp. 1-3). This liquidity reflects itself

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in the structures of society; the job market, housing market, but also the cultural and individual structures of living (Bauman, 1998; 2013).

The analysis of a liquid modernity is also one that is concerned with ‘consumer culture’, as modern society can be considered as one that is in part defined by its inherent *consumerism* (Bauman, 2013, p. 25). In a consumerist society, consumption can be considered both in relation to overtly commercialised goods (or what is otherwise conventionally considered objects or commodities), or more covertly to human experiences, even going as far as seeing the relationships with others as something that can be consumed, similar to objects (Bauman, 2013, p. 6). The individual is thus suspended between an existence as both an object or *commodity* to be consumed, and a subject, a *consumer*, themselves (Bauman, 2013, pp. 6, 11-12).

A key driver in this development is the notion of *desire*. Bauman describes desire as a kind of wish that can never be fully fulfilled or satisfied, as the fulfilment of the desire will ultimately lead to the emergence of a new desire (1998, pp. 78-79, 82-83). And in the globalised, liquid modernity, this exchange of these desires can happen at a very fast pace, especially for the person who is considered a ‘good consumer’: “*For good consumers it is not the satisfaction of the needs that one is tormented by, but the torments of desires never yet sensed or suspected that makes the promise so tempting*” (Bauman, 1998, p. 82).

‘Desire’ is a much-discussed concept in the field of psychology as well. One of the most prominent figures discussing this concept is Sigmund Freud, who Bauman himself also refers to in his book: ‘Does Ethics Have A Chance In A World Of Consumer?’ (2009). Here, a definition of identity like the one offered in this paper is described; that is, constituted by morals and the notion of reasoning one’s actions rather than actions being caused (Bauman, 2009).

Within this notion lies the fact that the conflict between the innate *pleasure principle* and the (socially) developed *reality principle* is an essential part of human life; and in consumerist society, the balance between these principles are reversed from their normal structure (Bauman, 2009, p. 50). Whereas the pleasure principle is typically the one being restrained by the reality principle, the reality principle is governed by the pleasure principle, or the desires of the person in the consumerist society - especially in a society, where the notion of being “good” or “valued” is linked to the notions of desire-based consumerism (Bauman, 1998, p. 82; Bauman, 2009, p. 50) Thus, the

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conflict of desire and reason is deepened, causing much anguish for the individual who is stuck between a rock (reason) and a hard place (desire), no longer able to identify which is which, if such distinctions even exist within the realm of consumerism.

This would, understandably, make it significantly harder for the person to make reasoned decisions situated in morals, and perhaps even form morals or a stable sense of identity; something that is, at the same time, considered central to human life (Brinkmann, 2008; Bauman, 1998; 2009; 2013).

Social media, and especially the emergence of TikTok and features on other platforms that seek to emulate it, can be seen as a technology of further acceleration, that increases the already fast pace of information sharing on the Internet; and an effective one at that. This has, naturally, been utilised as a space for advertisements, both overtly and covertly (Abidin, 2021; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Young people form (parasocial) relationships with “influencers” on the platforms, who offer guidance and advice in all aspects of life; what to eat, how to work out, what to read, how to study, how to dance and so forth (Ao et al., 2023; Sweeney-Romero, 2022).

This development can be seen as a prime example of how the individual and their relationships become commoditised, and at the same time act as consumers; if they obey the agenda of the algorithm, they may obtain an increased amount attention and recognition from their viewers consuming their content (and the products that they may or may not promote in said content) and money (Abidin, 2021; Ao et al., 2023). This subsequently allows them to obtain, or consume, the means of keeping themselves relevant within the attention economy (Abidin, 2021); avoiding the obsolescence of liquidity (Bauman, 1998; 2000; 2013). At the same time, they become commodities themselves; to their viewers, to the brands they interact with and the social media platforms they publish their content on.

The viewer and their attention is also being commoditised; the more they interact with the content, the more money can be demanded from brands wanting to use the platform (Abidin, 2021; Li & Tu, 2024), as they are being exposed to consumables, and thus a potential breeding ground for desires to be fulfilled and dissatisfied over and over (Hearn, 2017).

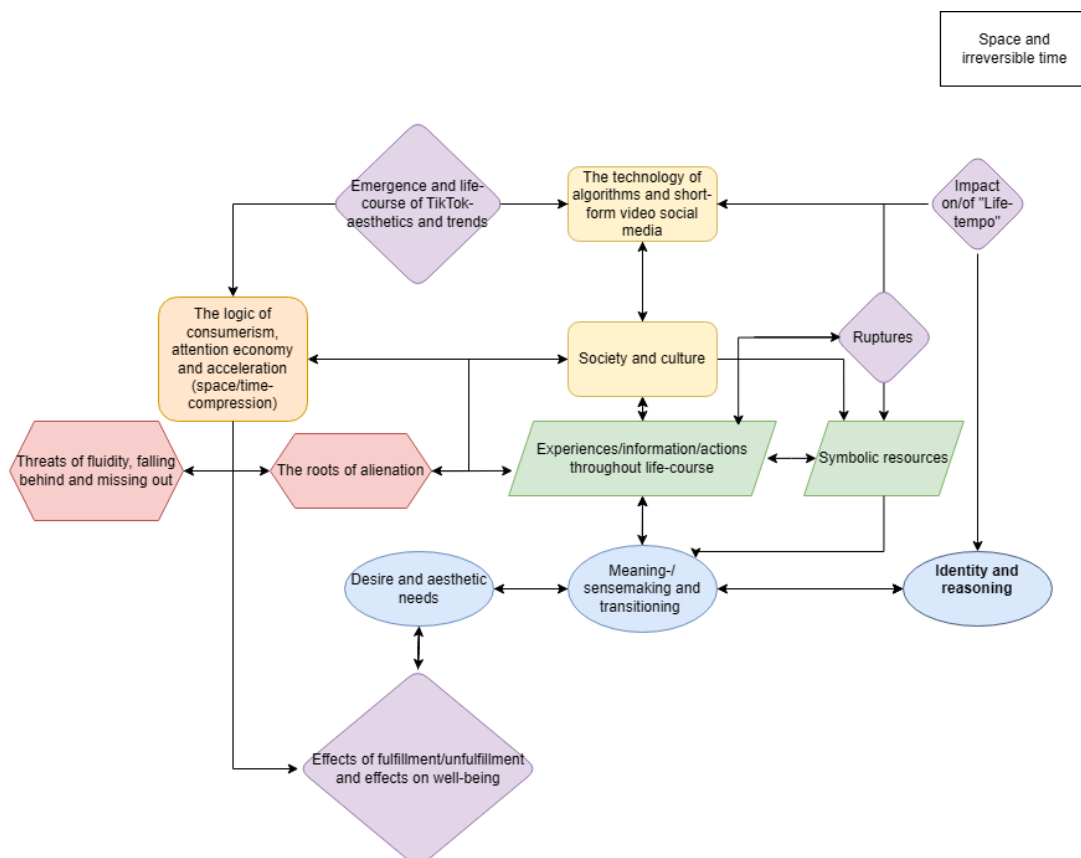
On social media, the pacing of the algorithms, and the impossibly large amounts of content that is being produced - perhaps especially thanks to the fact that the content

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is short-form, and that some level of authenticity is preferred, meaning that less time will be needed to polish it – means that no idea will (probably) ever have time to completely settle, either. If the user is not satisfied with one suggestion, another one that will perhaps suit their tastes better will come up shortly (Martinez, Brammer & Punnant-Carter, 2024). And if that taste changes tomorrow, so will the offerings.

## 4. Discussion

I have now outlined the theoretical concerns regarding TikTok as a co-constituent in young people’s formation of identities, and presented some empirical perspectives on the use and influence on the platform as well. Figure 2 offers a mapping of the overarching model of the connections of these presented factors, in order to supplement the understanding of the arguments presented through visual means. In this section, I will unfold the implications of this theorisation.



**Figure 2 Overview and visualisation of the presented theorisation**

First, I will touch upon the relations between identity and other elements of the individual’s psychology; these elements are characterised by blue ellipses on the model. As can be seen on the model, I conceptualise and juxtapose desire apart from the notion of identity. I also propose that desire may be considered the ‘aesthetic’ or desire-based aspect of the psyche, and constitutes its own part of how the individual makes sense of the world. Marked with green parallelograms, are the elements of existence which are on the border of the psyche and embodiment of the individual, and those of socio-cultural interaction.

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In relation to this proposition, I think it is important to note that this means that the aesthetic qualities of the psyche are then to be considered as a normal and rightful, part of the psyche; not an enemy or something that must ultimately be eliminated, as might otherwise be derived from the arguments that are to follow. My argument is rather that on social media, the relationship between the aesthetic qualities of existing as a human being, and the very core, identity, of this experience is being flipped on social media, and is in exact accordance with the criticism raised of the consumerist society in itself. On social media, which are conceptualised as part of society and culture, marked with yellow, rounded boxes on the model, this relationship is even made explicit, through what is even literally named as ‘aesthetics’.

As previously touched upon, TikTok-aesthetics are not only defined by certain visual factors, but also have elements of lifestyle attached to them. This means that actions and everyday habits do not need to have a reason, a personal moral grounding, but are also made accordingly to the desire to live up to a certain, generalised aesthetic; a result of the logics of consumerism, attention economy and acceleration, marked with an orange, rounded box, to mark its relation to society and culture, but also its subsequent negative consequences, symbolised by the red hexagons. At the same time, in order to live up to the requirements of these aesthetics in terms of the visual qualities, it is a crucial to own the items and be in the places that are central to them.

The life of these aesthetics may be viewed from the perspective of a ‘trend cycle’, as proposed earlier, considering that aesthetics are often ‘trending’ topics on TikTok. If this is the case, it means that obsolescence of the popularity of a certain aesthetic is imminent. It is also completely unpredictable, due to the facts of the personalised algorithm that will try to make the decision of when it is time to give up this lifestyle, and the goods and spaces that have now served their purpose, for good. And you may also have been granted its replacement; a brand-new aesthetic way of life to live by, rather than following the coherence already established.

We see the real-time consequences of this development, not only in our social and psychological environments (as I will also return to in a moment), but also reflected in our immediate, ecological environment. ‘Ultra-fast-fashion’ retailers, and most notably the company Shein, is experiencing increasing popularity and revenue (McMorrow et al., 2024). Their business model is built up around tracking the trends of social media platforms real-time, to forecast which items will be popular, and has established supply

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chains that allows the company to produce items shortly after these trends have been spotted, or “on demand”, as Shein claims on their own website as of May 2024 (Shein Group, n.d.).

Shein claims that their business model is established to minimise overproduction and waste, as the products are made in accordance with the desires of consumers: “*customers can access what they want, when they want it, and all at affordable prices*” (Shein Group, u.d.).

Social media has then, thanks to this business model, also mostly overcome the barriers of space and time, in terms of invoking direct consumer action among their users, even when it comes to the more individually creative and innovative (rather than brand-driven) content presented on the platform. But while Shein may claim that they limit waste on their behalf, their entire business model is, according to the theoretical framework presented in this paper, based off an inherently wasteful mode of being and acting, that lacks an element of correspondence with one’s values.

This means that the waste will not necessarily be due to deadstock at factories, but rather becomes an issue when consumers decide to get rid of the items, after they have served their purposes to them. This effect is then very difficult, if not impossible, to measure accurately. Furthermore, this dynamic between retailers and platforms like TikTok also accelerate this mode of consumerist, aesthetic, and desire-based way of life, which has effects that go beyond those measurable in materials.

Many of the presented theories above focus on how the structure of the consumerist society causes distress to the individual. Brinkmann points to a profound confusion of identity (2008), to which Rosa points to the sense of alienation of the self and others (2010). Bauman and Freud furthermore point to the fact that the dissatisfaction associated with the constant attempts to fulfil desire once and for all is destructive to the self, while also trying to deal with the threat of obsolescence (Bauman 1998; 2013).

Links between consumerist and/or materialist ideals and impacts of mental health and well-being have not only been made by sociologists or on a theoretical level but have been cause for concern in empirical psychological studies as well (Isham et al., 2022; Rütelionė et al., 2022). While this impact may be positive for some individuals, findings mostly point in directions of a negative impact on mental health and well-being, across a wide variety of populations (Rütelionė et al., 2022).

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But exactly how is the effect of TikTok so pervasive that we should consider it as a significant part of identity formation? The reasoning for this can be found in the cultural significance of TikTok and platforms alike. TikTok is considered a source where one can get “up to date” (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022); and subsequently, a source of an inherent ‘fear of missing out’ is also experienced (Sindermann, Montag and Elhai, 2022). A fear that is well-reasoned in the realm of threats of becoming liquid, and where the world is always running its course in a steady pace.

TikTok is also a (virtual) space where many peers spend significant amounts of time, gathering all sorts of culturally significant symbols. A space where one may also carry out a one’s self-reflection, that can be especially impactful in times of crisis and rupture, especially to the young mind. But it is also a place that may take part in creating the condition for these fears and negative impacts on well-being. A space where one’s identity is constantly up for debate, in order to retain attention, and can thus constantly be disturbed by micro-ruptures. A perspective on how this space, and the implications that it appears to have on the formation of identity, may then be studied will be offered in the following section.

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## 4.1 *A proposal of methodology*

TikTok, and other platforms like it, is a site of many causes for further investigation, as we have now established. Attention has already been brought to the fact that digital media platforms are both very useful, but perhaps also difficult sources of inquiry of the social world. They can change their interfaces overnight, utilise different modes of communication mediums and have their own unique structures and culture(s), but are at the same time also innately connected to one another (Rogers, 2019; Schellewald, 2021).

Content emerging on one platform can be re-posted on other platforms to reach other target groups, perhaps changing its form to fit this group better as well. Methodologies that wish to study these platforms must thus be “native” to these platforms, meaning that they are specifically designed to extract the exact kind of data that is wished for, created for that particular platform (Kross et al., 2021; Rogers, 2019).

On the model presented in relation to my discussion, I have marked potential areas of inquiry on with purple rhomboids. I will now unfold these areas, and situate them in methodological considerations, in relation to the proposed theory.

### 4.1.1 The inquiries of impact on/of pace of life, and the emergence and life-course of trends and aesthetics

Rosa’s theory of social acceleration was itself one that also sought to form the basis of a sociology that could be empirically supported and/or contested, with a grounding in the concept of time. Social media platforms lend themselves well for this exact purpose, as they are very real-time hubs of ongoing and “trending” discourse within (certain groups of) society, regarding everything from macro-level aspects of politics or micro-topics of personal lifestyle (Schellewald, 2021).

They may also be useful in tracking and determining how these areas of life impact one another, by comparing the trends of one to the other in terms of their time as trending on specific platforms, within certain demographics.

This study could be situated in both quantitative and qualitative methods, using specialised monitoring software, that serves to track these trends in terms of their contents and their life-cycles, and structured surveys and/or semi-structured interviews (both

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individual and focus groups ones) that track the perceived relevance of the trends in as close to real-time as possible, and also how the pacing of TikTok and similar platforms are generally perceived by the users. The effects measured by this study will also help decide the magnitude of the issue proposed by this paper, as the theorised hyper-acceleration of time is considered a key component.

#### 4.1.2 The inquiries of the effects of micro-ruptures on life-course trajectory, identity and well-being

TikTok may be considered a site of particularly frequent and identity-disrupting messages – or, micro-ruptures. However, this is only a theoretical perspective, that would be qualified immensely by empirical insights in relation to this notion. A central criterium to the notion of a rupture is that it is experienced as exactly that; and that a subsequent transition will then follow.

I thus propose that longitudinal, qualitative studies among young social media users, and moreover older users, that have had time to reflect upon their time spent, and effects of their social media use retrospectively, may provide valuable insight to these aspects, in what is already known as ‘situated audience studies’ (Schellewald, 2023). The focus of these studies should be on aspects that may help determine whether the young person has had experiences using the platform that may be categorised as a rupture, and what a subsequent process of transition may look like.

These insights would greatly benefit from being situated within the general life-course trajectory of the young person, and what main-ruptures that this young person may also be transitioning through. Another qualification could also be made by assessing whether social media may be considered cultural resources through these main-ruptures as proposed.

This study could also benefit from analysing these transitions, in terms of how the person both structures the dimensions of coherence and correspondence, but also utilises these dimensions in its design and/or analysis. The goal of this would be to map out points of resistance and resilience towards otherwise harmful effects. I therefore also propose that studies focusing on young people who have explicitly chosen not to engage with social media may qualify this study even more, to further deepen the understanding of these points of resistance, in relation to compliance.

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I propose this added element of resistance, as this may also profoundly shape the way the platform tries to engage users, and vice-versa (Karizat et al., 2021). Furthermore I believe that, psychology, especially in relation to sociocultural psychological enquiry, should not only be a science of understanding and finding ways to make individuals comply, but rather a science that enables resistance and empowered, informed actions, as active agents (Awad, 2021; Darwin, 2022), by providing insights like the ones proposed here.

Furthermore, if we want to grasp the (theoretically proposed) clustered effects of consumerism, social media use and individual well-being of the young person, we might do so by focusing our attention to how the notion of desire also impacts the experience and actions of young people on social media, in relation to the notion of identity-based reasoning, and perhaps also gain insight into where these notions overlap, as well as potentials for promoting positive dynamics between them.

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## 5. Concluding remarks

TikTok and other short-form video-based social media can be considered important sites of inquiry, when discussing young people and the formation of their identity. Identity is, in the context of this paper, to be understood as the fundamental moral standpoints and temporally stable narratives that a person uses to orient themselves with and create meaning out of their experience through irreversible time and space.

The implications of forming an identity while spending substantial amounts of time on social media are, according to the theorisation presented, far-reaching and complex. They reach beyond the individual, highlighting structural, sociocultural and environmental factors.

However, these factors have also existed long before TikTok. The main argument of this paper is thus not one that suggests that the elimination of social media platforms would ultimately lead to the solution of any problems proposed in this paper. The argument is rather to be understood as the need to explore the rapid pacing of these social media platforms' messaging, and how this pacing could have even further consequences to the formation of identity in young people, as a co-constituent in the larger structures of society; not as a stand-alone, end-all-be-all issue in itself. The theoretical framework proposed in this paper therefore conceptualises the influence of social media, as they may be seen in context of, and interaction with, these complex structures.

This paper has also proposed a concomitant methodology, that can both qualify and help further develop the proposed theoretical framework. Moreover, it has made inquiries in to exactly how influential short-form video platforms are to the formation of identity in youth. It also considers how this influence may be resisted, diminished and/or changed, as the current findings of this paper and included literature suggest that this may very well be beneficial to the well-being of young people. This methodology situates the study of social media use and identity formation within the aspects of time (and pace of life), as well as ruptures to the life-course.

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## Part B

# 1. Introduction: The situated rationale behind the paper

The beginnings of this thesis perhaps developed in the haze of the corona virus epidemic of 2020-2021. I was an aspiring youth politician and activist, fighting a battle to combat the ongoing epidemic of mental health struggles amongst my peers. I remember at this time and age, that the people of older generations, who we conveniently had named the “boomers”, were busy analysing and discussing how this was our own fault; we lacked character, discipline, and manners, we were too busy looking at our phones, were too preoccupied with ourselves and most of all, we were spoiled, in the most literal sense of the word. Somehow, we (and perhaps our parents) were at fault ourselves.

Meanwhile, we were comforting ourselves in a world of utter uncertainty, in the sanctuaries of our rooms or often small apartments, only interrupted by the few walks we allowed ourselves with closest ones, and the occasional visit to a restaurant or shop while breathing through face masks, whenever the statistics made it possible.

A few years prior to this, the app musical.ly, mostly occupied by young adolescents dancing to short snippets of pop-hits, turned into the app ‘TikTok’, as its content became more diversified. Before this time, Instagram had its prime as the main social media platform for young people’s mass communication among networks of friends and strangers, with its easily accessible and very visual picture content platform. Now, something started to shift: People no longer had much to post in terms of aesthetic pictures of their daily lives and outings, but they still had things to say, jokes to make and dances to dance (Boffone, 2022). TikTok, the new short-form video platform, began to become a big source of entertainment for young people of many ages. With its, already then, sophisticated and time-absorbing ‘infinity feed’, a lot of people suddenly found themselves spending hours on the platform (Kennedy, 2020).

A lot of things transpired in the homes of young people, as we realised that we had been released of the pressure of having to blend in with the public and, at the same

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time, suddenly had a surplus of time to kill at home, while waiting for the world to open again. We (especially the young women) started experimenting with deceptively elaborate-looking coffees, different creative hobbies, learning new skills, interior design and maybe most importantly to the paper that you have just read: Fashion and makeup. No longer did we have to care if an outfit was “socially acceptable”; we would not go outside in them anyway. Yet, we still shared our experiments among ourselves, cue the use of TikTok (Kennedy, 2020).

The fast-fashion retailers (think H&M, Primark, Zara and others) soon caught up with this, and started releasing new, more experimental styles. But they were soon faced with a new competitor: The ultra-fast-fashion retailers, and most notably, the company Shein ramped up its business model. They had figured out a way to make their supply chain incredibly fast and responsive to the demands of emerging fashion trends on the platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, while also offering their goods at a very low cost. Now, the opportunity to cycle through trends at an even faster pace than before had emerged, and it was seemingly utilised to its fullest.

Concerns regarding the impact of fast-fashion retailers on both human rights and environmental matters had already been raised a long time ago, but these causes for concern would only become more prevalent with this development, the connections between these matters and the psychology of the individual contributing to the development had yet to be made. At the same time, young people are also increasingly concerned with these matters, possibly contributing to the problem of well-being discussed earlier.

Returning to the here-and-now, this issue is still prevalent; an increasing number of young people experience a decrease in their well-being, and this also reflected in figures regarding the formal diagnosing of mental health issues (Jeppesen et al., 2020). At the same time, TikTok and Instagram (who has now implemented features similar to TikTok), are still a main source of entertainment and social interaction for many young people. More studies and reports emphasised that maybe the boomers were right; we look too much at our phones. But exactly why would this be the case? Also, are the mechanisms of this potential cause and effect so simple, that well-being would drastically increase if social media were to disappear?

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And when I in 2023 followed an elective with the name ‘Climate psychology’, suddenly, something clicked; perhaps social media themselves were not the issue in themselves, but rather the effects of being bombarded with consumerist messages and sources of new desires on these platforms. An effect that had a history that surpassed the lives of young people of this day and age and was also very much so an issue for the field of psychology. A field that, unfortunately, has its own fault in creating these issues in the first place (Kramer, 2006, Matz et al., 2017). I thus set out to participate in the reparation of this, starting with this thesis. A thesis which poses the question: *“How can the consumerist and rapidly changing culture(s) of social media influence be understood to influence the identity formation of young people?”* and wishes to explore this by asking: *“What are some of the known (theoretical) mechanisms and impacts of this influence?”* at the same time.

## ***1.2 The development of the underlying problem formulation***

The first question I asked myself when conceptualising the thesis was: *“Which influence can algorithm-based information and communication technologies be understood to have on young people?”*

I realised that this question was very broad and vague, and decided to try to make it more precise, focusing my work on specifically social media: *“How can social media be understood to have an influence on identity formation, especially during early youth years (ages 16-20)”?*

However, something was still lacking. ‘Influence’ could be understood in many ways, but there were, naturally, limitations to the unfolding of this. Also, youth is a period that does not lend itself well to be conceptualised in terms of specific ages when studying it theoretically, as has also been touched upon in my paper. Rather, youth is better characterised by the features of such a period (Zittoun, 2007). This was especially true for the investigation that was ahead, where part of the theoretical framework held the implication that the formation of identity has certain properties at this time, which were of primary importance.

As investigations went on, some particular topics re-emerged in my readings (and, when reflecting on the topic, also from my own experience); those of consumerism, acceleration (of time and space), and on the side of social media, that had yet to be

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discussed in research literature, specifically pertaining to the use of social media; the issue of rapid consumerism and materialistic values.

At the same time, my intentions with my thesis became more apparent to me, in terms of what the goal(s) of writing it was. I wished to be able to propose a methodology, that would allow for further insight into the matter, and thus proposed my final main research question, that I believed would make a substantial foundation for such a methodology:

*“How can the consumerist and rapidly changing culture(s) of social media influence be understood to influence the identity formation of young people?”*

I also wished to further strengthen and clarify this by answering the question of:

*“What are some of the known (theoretical) mechanisms and impacts of this influence?”*, so that a proposed methodology would be situated in existing and relevant knowledge, and also be clear on which aspects appears to be the most appropriate and relevant to investigate as of the current state of knowledge.

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## 2. Theory of knowledge of the thesis

In the paper, I was primarily concerned with the sociocultural aspects of psychology, going as far as to dedicate a somewhat large section of the paper to sociological theory. In this section, I will address this decision, along with the general aspect of the theory of science behind this field.

To examine the topic of the paper, I thus engage my thinking in a variety of different, but also related fields, approaches, and paradigms of scientific inquiry, that contain their own *theories of knowledge*. A scientific paradigm, or a specific theory of knowledge, can be defined by a set of philosophical assumptions about the properties of (certain kinds of) reality, also known as ontology, and subsequent assumptions of how the truths and properties of this reality may then be studied, also known as an epistemology. Within certain paradigms, different methodologies may then be developed to carry out these studies, in congruence with these basic assumptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I will first start out by outlining the general paradigmatic point of departure of this thesis, as it is important to have these conceptualised first.

In philosophical terms, a central juxtaposition of the notion of ontological reality is that of complete (or naïve) realism, or that of complete constructivism. An inquiry may then fall into any position in between these positions, as they may be considered two points of a line (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The position of realism prescribes that reality is objective; it consists universally true, non-negotiable, and generalisable facts, that may then be uncovered through systematic testing. Anything which may not be considered in these terms, or be studied through means of testing are not part of reality; at least not in scientific terms. Realism also has close ties to the notion of materialism (not in the sense used in the thesis up to now, but rather in physical terms), meaning that reality is also something which may be seen, touched, and heard by oneself, and thus also manipulated physically (although instruments may sometimes be needed in order to do so) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

On the other hand, constructivism prescribes that there are multiple realities; not in a literal sense, but rather that reality is a multi-faceted concept, and that there may exist different perspectives on a phenomenon that can be equally ‘real’. This means that ‘truths’ are also subjective entities, which can also be psychologically and socially

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negotiated. Truths can, on this side of the ontological spectrum, also be relative to one another; also known as the position of relativism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

This thesis is largely leaned towards constructivism. This approach is based on the fact that the issues addressed, are ones that are concerned with the intersection of technology (an artefact, and something which is considered generally very material), and sociocultural factors of the human psyche (whose materiality is debatable). The subject matter of the thesis could also have been tackled with an analysis conducted in the traditions of a variety of fields within psychology, perhaps some more realist in their orientation. Especially neuropsychology and cognitive psychology comes to mind, which are also, the latter of which contribute to the empirical parts of my analysis of the problem addressed in the paper. But it is also because that this topic has already been paid attention to regarding these fields, that I decided to put these neuro- and cognitive psychological perspectives into a broader context which has not been given a lot of attention in literature yet.

An important thing to note in this context, is that within the lines of constructivism, a paradigm or a certain approach is then just a perspective from which one can view a certain matter (whether it be physical or abstract), and not an ultimate truth about the world. The perspective taken on by the observer will be, amongst other things, largely be informed by their interests in the subject matter (Flick, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Certain scientific paradigms have been given names, that allow for (more or less) clarity in what assumptions have been made for a certain inquiry, but scientific paradigms are not only limited to these named groupings; as long as a scientific inquiry is based off these assumptions of the world, one could argue that they constitute their own paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Central to the paper, and what ultimately constitutes alignment of these theories, is the field of sociocultural psychology, and partly the paradigm of phenomenology, which I will first go in to describing first in terms of its theory of science. In regard to the sociological theories presented, the paradigm of social constructivism also constitutes structural parts of the theoretical and methodological framework I present in the paper. However, these do not stand alone, as I also borrow information from empirical findings from the fields of cognitive psychology, and later in this part, neuropsychology,

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regarding how the individual perceives time in relation to social media use. I will therefore present these paradigms briefly, to address the differences and similarities in their view of reality and therefore, how one can acquire knowledge within these paradigms.

This mix of scientific paradigms is also known as an ‘eclectic’ approach, which comes with its own advantages, if done with consideration. I will therefore dedicate the last part of this section to touch upon this approach, and what purpose this approach has served in relation to the paper.

## *2.2 Sociocultural psychology and the paradigms of social constructivism and phenomenology*

The field of sociocultural psychology is widely considered to have its roots within the field of ‘Völkerpsychologie’ (translation: ‘folk psychology’) as described by Wilhelm Wundt; the first person to distinguish himself as a psychologist. Wundt is more broadly known as a forefather of modern psychology, but often in reference to his development of experimental psychology as conducted in psychology laboratories (Cole, 1996).

Wundt himself, however, distinguished these two ways of conducting science within psychology, by referring to psychological functions in terms of ‘lower’ functions and the ‘higher’ functions (Cole, 1996, p. 28). That is, those who are who are universal and can therefore be studied methodologically in a laboratory setting and those who are developed and expressed in social and cultural settings (meaning and context are added in these settings), respectively (Cole, 1996, p. 28). While the field of sociocultural psychology has of course developed – especially since it found common grounds as a field in itself – it is this thinking that is still at the heart of it (Cole, 1996).

The foundations of psychological scientific enquiry can then have vastly different methodological foundations because the substance of what is studied is also different. In sociocultural psychology, an important ontological assumption is that there is a reality, which exists within the interactions of human beings, that has a matter of its own that is larger than the sum of the ‘lower functions’, in Wundt’s terms, that can be studied in a laboratory setting.

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Part of the thinking engaged in within the field of sociocultural psychology has its basis within the paradigm of phenomenology, as was also the case with the conceptualisation of identity proposed in the paper (in reference to Brinkmann, 2008).

Ontologically, phenomenology assumes that ‘reality’, for human beings (and perhaps uniquely so) is constituted by a ‘life-world’, which contains the sociocultural backgrounds for our situatedness in the world, and precedes the individual and their reflections of the world. It also assumes that human beings not only *are* in the world as biological phenomena, but rather *exist* in the world. This means that they actively make sense of their existence, and thus experience whole phenomena of the world, rather than single stimuli, due to their ability to reflect (Brinkmann, 2008); an ontological assumption akin to that of the field of sociocultural psychology. Epistemologically, the knowledge of interest is then the interaction between this life-world and the individual being, in regard to certain phenomena (Brinkmann, 2008).

In relation to the theory of knowledge of sociocultural psychology in general, we see that while ‘lower functions’ can also be considered very real and important, they are not a central matter of enquiry of this field. Central to this notion of perhaps a ‘higher function’, is that human beings also share a central feature in their psychic makeup; that of the ability and need to make sense or meaning of their experiences, and that this is made possible with the use of symbols and actions which are socially and culturally shared and communicated among humans.

Epistemologically, this means that the arrangement, communication and acting of these meanings through symbolic and/or embodied means carry meaningful pieces of knowledge about the human psyche. However, different methodological standpoints may be attached to this approach.

An example of this from the paper could be how Jerome Bruner’s narrative psychology that narratives have a certain structure but are also sources of knowledge in and of themselves. On the other hand, Positioning Theory poses a theory which stresses that the context around a given narrative – or storyline – makes up part of the knowledge that can be acquired from an interaction, while the exact structure of what may be considered a narrative or storyline is not specified as such (Brinkmann, 2008).

It is still important to note that other paradigms or approaches can carry knowledge important to understanding how human beings manage to make these exchanges with

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one another, to then develop the broader frameworks that make it possible to analyse the human psyche “in praxis”. In the context of one of the main theories of the paper written for this thesis, this can be seen very easily when taking a closer meta-analytical look at Zittoun’s framework of life-course psychology.

The framework is largely based on the thinking of the cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget, who stipulated that meaning making largely depends on the ability to categorise phenomena into more tangible groupings, and to develop these categories to become more appropriate over time through assimilation and accommodation. This develops as the individual encounters, to them, strange situations that are not already appropriately categorised (what is reflected in Zittoun’s theory through the notion of ruptures and subsequent transition). Piaget also noted that more complex categorisations become possible as the individual’s cognitive abilities matures to the degree of abstraction (which Zittoun attaches to the individual’s ability to make use of symbolic resources) (Zttoun & Cerchia, 2013).

### 2.2.1 Social constructivism

Social constructivism is a positioning within social sciences, which stipulates the ontological standpoint that knowledge is socially constructed and negotiated. This also means that society and social structures, are constructed phenomena, rather than objective truths; it is thus closely related to the broader paradigm of constructivism. It does not hold any position on whether there may be other facts that carry objective truths, meaning it is not a completely constructivist stance either; however, it is emphasised that the meaning of these objective truths does not imply any natural or objective order of anything (Collin, 2015). The epistemology of social constructionism then prescribes that the facts about the social world must be found in the actions (whether discursive or physical), that constitute the very matter of society (Collin, 2015).

We see this thinking reflected in both the thoughts of Rosa and Bauman. There are not inherently ‘real’ properties, or a universally ‘true’ order to any of the mechanisms they describe in their societal analyses, although they do express normative and moral statements of what a ‘good’ life is, and thus what a ‘good’ society would look like; and how the current state of society makes this impossible, implicating some degree of (moral) realism to their ideas.

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The social constructivist thinking thus also implicates normative considerations, when conducting science; a consideration which I have also had with this thesis, also in regard to what I wish to accomplish, and how I wish to accomplish it with the theorisation and methodology presented.

## *2.3 The fields of cognitive and neuropsychology*

These fields of psychology contain paradigmatic assumptions that are significantly different to those of sociocultural psychology and sociology, and stem from the tradition of experimental psychology as mentioned above (Cole, 1996). Neuropsychology, and to some extent cognitive psychology, are concerned with the psyche as an objectively measurable, and therefore broadly generalisable phenomenon (Pinel & Barnes, 2018). The ontological standpoint of the inquiries made within these fields is thus one leaning towards realism; that there are universally real, objective, and measurable truths about the psyche that can be extracted and understood scientifically. In neuropsychology, the epistemological assumption is then that this truth may be measured by means of measuring the activity of the neural networks, and by studying the biological functions of these networks (Pinel & Barnes, 2018).

Within classical cognitive psychology, the epistemological assumption is rather that valuable knowledge lies within studying how certain psychological functions are carried out under certain conditions, and that a classification of these functions may also be made based off these studies (Cole, 1996; Matlin & Farmer, 2017), though some cognitive psychologists have taken on more constructivist perspectives on cognition (e.g. Piaget, who was named earlier) (Flick, 2018).

These fields often interact with each other and is formally paired within the fields of biopsychology and cognitive neuropsychology (or, further removed from the associations with the field psychology, cognitive neuroscience) (Pinel & Barnes, 2018). The methodology of these fields are often strictly structured experiments, developed with the principle that one needs to determine exactly what is being tested within the experimental design, with the aim of being able to compare each single case with the others, and conclude an average and/or generalisable result within predetermined parameters and populations (Pinel & Barnes, 2018). Thus, the assumptions of these fields do generally not align with the overall paradigm of the thesis.

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A study conducted from the point of view of this paradigm, in relation to the proposed research question, could e.g., focus on the more material aspects of interacting with TikTok and similar platforms. This could be expressed in the embodied responses of the brain, when performing certain actions or having certain thoughts in relation to consumerist messages on TikTok, or focus on how cognitive functions are expressed – perhaps differently – when also interacting with a smartphone device.

However, I argue from a sociocultural psychological standpoint that these functionalities, even if determined through systematic and non-organic testing, do construct valuable knowledge about significant parts of the psyche and the development of identity; thus, they must also be considered real in and of themselves. I will expand further on this argumentation in the following section, where the approach of eclecticism is discussed.

## *2.4 The approach of eclecticism*

Eclecticism is an approach which allows for a researcher to include knowledge, regardless of their paradigm or otherwise determined sets of assumptions, in order to answer a question. The eclectic approach I have devised my thesis from is generally informed by the notions of hermeneutic phenomenology, which centres the dynamics between (pre)conceptions and the interpretation of a certain phenomenon.

When taking on an eclectic approach in accordance with this logic, it is generally important to keep the intentions and interests of a scientific inquiry in mind, as these are not given by the inherent ontological and epistemological properties of the inquiry in mind. A typology of such has been brought forward by Jürgen Habermas, who has categorised scientific inquiries into three broad domains; ones with an interest in technical knowledge aspects (concerned with matters measurable with instruments), practical knowledge (concerned with interpreting social interaction between human beings in-action) and emancipatory (concerned with critical reflections of past doings). The emancipatory interest is within the fields of social sciences also tied to what is known as ‘critical theory’ (Nielsen, 2020), also reflected in the perspectives of the paper.

In reverse effect, knowledge gained by enquiry carried out within one domain of interest may also serve as sources of knowledge within the other domains, with respects

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to what can serve as legitimate knowledge in the terms of a specific paradigm, if the intention and implications of this transfer is made clear.

The focus of this paper has been on gaining primarily practical knowledge, regarding how we may understand identity and the interactions between the formation of such an identity and the use of social media. However, as I have also outlined, I do so with an underlying emancipatory interest in mind; that is, to be able to then take on a critical view on social media, and evaluate whether the current practices of social media consumptions are sustainable or ought to be changed; hence, my inclusion of critical, sociological perspectives as well as my methodological proposal of including stances of resistance.

Another way of determining the intention and relevance of a scientific inquiry is to consider which part of a research process a certain piece of information is supposed to constitute. Processes of scientific inquiry may be considered as inductive, or ‘bottom-up’ or deductive, or ‘top-down’ processes (Brinkmann, 2015).

In an inductive approach, the research question is concerned with observations, that the researcher believes may be included in some sort of general order (a theory). In a deductive process, however, there may already exist theories that seek to encapsulate certain phenomena, and the research question may then be concerned with either contesting this existing theory by testing it out in experiments, or perhaps even by going through the inferences made by the theory philosophically, in order to determine whether it seems plausible, purely based off logic and common sense (Brinkmann, 2015).

What may characterise an eclectic approach, however, is the fact that one can decide to switch between these two directions (again, with an emphasis on doing so intentionally), and to go through a hermeneutic process of inquiry (Brinkmann, 2015); a process which may also be known as ‘triangulation’ (Flick, 2018). This is also reflected throughout the paper.

The research question of this thesis, which originally stemmed from personal experience and anecdotal observations of discourse, had also already been discussed and studied scientifically by others, both philosophically and empirically. Thus, theories regarding the topic had also already been formed.

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However, I found that a gap between these pieces of knowledge – which, if bridged, could make for a new and perhaps more holistic understanding of the questions that may be asked in the future – existed. This gap was how one might understand the relationship between well-being among young people, social media use and consumerism, which could be bridged the notion of identity; especially, if identity is to be understood in the terms from which I have decided to define it. I thus did not set out to necessarily contest the theories and pieces of knowledge produced within the field, but rather to contextualise and add to them, to make them more appropriate for further investigation. Then, the matter at hand – if permitted the opportunity – will now be to switch the direction of inquiry again, and determine whether this theory has any truth to it.

I decided to search for further empirical perspectives into this; the studies included throughout the paper, that helped me specify exactly which aspects of future inquiry may be important to study in this new context. Ultimately, this ended up in the formation of an introductory and contemporary theory, together with a subsequent proposal of methodology to further qualify this theory.

I therefore ultimately believe that the inclusion of a broad variety of knowledge via an eclectic approach has strengthened the paper, as the theory I propose can also be seen as a collection of knowledge already gained, in order to be able to progress this research further, rather than being blind-sided to perspectives that could actually be considered relevant in creating a, metaphorically speaking, high-definition picture of the issue at hand.

However, as my next section will also somewhat touch upon, this approach did not come without any issues. When any information is technically relevant and legitimate – especially when gathered and produced within the realms of a legitimate scientific method (whatever that may look like) – it can be difficult to then set limitations to relevant information.

In the context of the paper, I decided to only include perspectives which I saw as directly linked to the matters of the research question. This also meant that I did not go into detail about anything that would afford an investigation into an entirely new research question. This also means that ultimately, I cannot claim to have made an entirely holistic and encapsulating theory on the entire topic of social media and impacts

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on the psyche, either (as I had otherwise set out to do with my second iteration of the problem formulation), but have managed to cluster some topics, which have mostly been discussed by themselves, into a larger coherent context.

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## 3. Further perspectives

There were several perspectives I decided not to include in the paper, as they were found not to be fitting completely to the theoretical framework of arguments, I ultimately focused my thesis on. If given more time and permitted a broader scope in terms of the length of the article, these perspectives could have broadened the scope of the issue from a sociocultural, critical and constructivist point of view. These perspectives include (but are likely not limited to) the perspectives of underlying power structures; and in relation to this, matters of the intersectional relations between socio-economic class and feminism.

In the following sections, I will offer a rudimentary insight as to how I conceptualise these perspectives in relation to the topic in this section.

### *3.1 Social media and power structures*

For this section, I draw most of my thinking from that of Michel Foucault and his typology and analysis of technologies. These are conceptualised as the following 4 categories: 1) technologies of production, 2) technologies of sign systems, 3) technologies of power and 4) technologies of the self (Brinkmann, 2008). I believe that social media can be considered within the realms of the latter 3 of these, depending on what aspects of social media are emphasised.

The primary concern of the paper viewed social media as both a technology of sign systems (one that enables meaningful communication), but subsequently also one that becomes a technology of the self, as the individual expresses and imagines the world through these signs. I have, however, not gone much into the notion of social media as a technology of power; one, which causes individuals to submit (although I do touch upon this shortly in the paper).

Algorithms are a technology that holds potential powerful influence; but in order to behold this influence, I also find that a further examination of what an algorithm *is*, is needed. That will be my concern in the following.

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### 3.1.1 What is an algorithm as a subject of social and psychological research?

The ‘algorithm’ is a very central component of the user experience of TikTok and general framework of the theory proposed in the paper, but it is mostly defined in terms of its technical purposes on the platform. However, it may furthermore act as a site of interest itself, when considering it as a subject of scientific inquiry,

Tobias Matzner, a professor for ‘Digital Cultures and Digital Humanities’, has proposed that there are two general, but also opposing tendencies when discussing algorithms as such a subject; a tendency to view them as an abstraction, and one as a subject of dissolution.

An algorithm viewed as an abstraction is one which is often implicated in complex structures of meaning, e.g. when speaking of concepts such as ‘*algorithmic culture*’ or ‘*algorithmic governmentality*’ (Matzner, 2024, p. 1800). They thus become the expression of an intention or task carried out by the creator or executer of the algorithm, ignoring other potential outcomes and aspects of interacting with the algorithm as a user (Matzner, 2024).

The tendency of dissolution of algorithms, is one which emphasises the technical and material parts of the algorithm, while not necessarily emphasising the intentions or interactional aspects of these. This tendency is especially reductive when considering that the user interface design will often serve to hide or obscure the exact functionalities of these algorithms, which also influences the functionality of the algorithm itself in return (Matzner, 2024).

Matzner’s main argument, which I also agree with, is that these tendencies should interact with one another, as complementary parts of a bigger picture (2024). A study by Karizat and colleagues suggest the existence and importance of ‘Algorithmic Folk Theories’, which are powerful influences in the way people shape and act on their identities, in relation to social media (2021). This study sought out to unveil the abstractions that users carry of the algorithm, regardless of whether the technicalities of the algorithm (which may be discovered through dissolution) are to be considered factually oppressive, and how these beliefs ultimately impact the individual regardless.

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When dealing with social media algorithms as subjects of sociopsychological research, it is therefore important to consider both the technical aspects of how they function, and how these technical aspects align with certain intentions, in addition to how these intentions are received and dealt with by the user. This also means that complex research designs that address both the (technical and material) dissolution of algorithms, the abstracted intentions of the algorithms in relation to this design, but also the very experience of the algorithm are called for.

### 3.1.2 Exactly where are the affordances for power embedded in the algorithm?

As mentioned in the paper, the use of social media can have profound effects and potential consequences on the cognitive functioning and well-being of the user. In the paper, I briefly explored how cognitive functions regarding attention and orientation in time is influenced, but the effects may go even further than what I described in the paper. Studies argue that the setup of TikTok and its algorithm has a mechanism that is akin to that of the “random reinforcements” known from gaming machines (Jain & Arakkal, 2022, p. 896). This argumentation is found within the lines of neuropsychology, which describes how these mechanisms are designed to allow for “dopamine hits”, or the release of neurochemical signals of perceived (opportunity to achieve) accomplishment when the user comes across content that they enjoy in particular (Jain & Arakkal, 2022, p. 896; Pinel & Barnes, 2018).

This effect has been studied, as it is thought that (especially mentally and/or socioeconomically vulnerable) individuals can develop an “addiction”-like behaviour in their use of the platforms (Martinez, Brammer & Puyanunt-Carter, 2023), which has been studied commonly under the term ‘Problematic Social Media Use’ (PMSU) (Hendrikse & Limniou, 2024). Studies also report that this effect is a common cause of apprehension against the app among non-users (Lu, Lu & Liu, 2020; Montag, Yang & Elhai, 2021). In the current definition of PMSU lies three main criteria: 1) inability to control use, 2) functional impairment, 3) (Chamberlain et al., 2016); thus, users can lose some degree of agency when it comes to deciding how much time they want to engage with the app. Furthermore, an experimental study on prospective memory and the retaining of intention has shown that the constant context-switching of short-form

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video platforms like TikTok, can have a significant degrading impact on these cognitive functions (Chiossi et al., 2023).

Some studies have, however, contested the idea that social media use overall could cause these problematic habits and negative impacts on well-being (Kross et al., 2021), and finds a need to distinguish between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ usage (Hendrikse & Limniou, 2024). This line of argumentation could though be criticised for individualising these issues (Docherty, 2021), on a platform which does not centre agency in the first place.

In addition to this, young people often use social media platforms like TikTok to orient themselves in news and current political movements (Boffone, 2022). Studies have, at the same time, shown that the format of short videos profoundly change information processing, and may also cause information overloading (Sindermann, Montag & Elhai, 2022). TikTok has been known to influence opinions and create what is known as ‘echo-chambers’ on social media (Sindermann et al., 2020; Boffone, 2022), making the risk of polarisation of ideological standpoints greater as well. This risk is even greater when considering how the platform could technically, and might already be, favouring certain ideological attitudes within different demographics (Sindermann, Montag & Elhai, 2022); and also be able to do so without making it immediately obvious (Matzner, 2024). The platform is also at risk of presenting content, that presents and diffuses false information, or ‘fake news’ (Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022).

It is argued that digital literacy and the ability to critically reflect on sources of information is a crucial skill that should also be taught in formal education (Kurz et al., 2022; Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022), but with the amount of information that goes through the minds of users (and especially young and more impressionable users), it is likely that cognitive biases will inform the information processing (Sindermann, Montag & Elhai, 2022). These cognitive biases could be those of the ‘mere exposure effect’ and ‘confirmation bias’; biases that causes one to subconsciously believe that an information is correct, simply because it has been presented multiple times, and one which biases information that confirms already established beliefs, respectively (Matlin & Farmer, 2017; Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022).

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### 3.2.3 Using this power for ‘good’?

Foucault himself emphasises that ‘power’ can and should also be considered a productive force, and necessary in the structuring of social relations (Brinkmann, 2008). As Positioning Theory also emphasises, a position of power also not only prescribes and attributes rights, but also comes with notions of responsibility. Such a responsibility could be to use one’s position of power for the ‘good’ of the people, who are the subjected to this power (Brinkmann, 2008). Power (also in the context of short-form video based social media) is thus not a force that is to be considered inherently evil or needs to be annihilated as such, but rather be subjected to stringent ethical and moral standards and responsibilities.

Some studies on the affordances of TikTok have pointed out that the platform may be used for more sustainable and constructive purposes, and for example emphasised how the platform may play a meaningful role in promoting educational content. As I presented in the paper, users find content presented on TikTok more approachable, and this also goes for legitimate experts, who may use the platform to present their knowledge. This makes gaining accurate and perhaps otherwise complex knowledge easier to grasp and digest, as well as potentially sparking an interest in researching the topic presented in further detail (Molem, Makri & McKay, 2024; Zeng, Schäfer & Allgaier, 2021).

Furthermore, the platforms may also be used to spread accurate information and awareness on issues such as public health, as was seen throughout the corona virus epidemic (Klug, Evans & Kaufman, 2023), and currently in relation to mental health (Motta, Liu & Yarnell, 2024).

In terms of more personally beneficial effects, TikTok and similar platforms may also act as a virtual ‘safe space’ for marginalised groups, where they may also establish symbols that help them interact and perhaps establish political movements for causes important to them in real life (Bhatia et al., 2021; Divon & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2022; Martinez, 2022; Skinner, 2022). This aspect will also be touched upon in the following section.

However, significant philosophical issues arise when speaking of the values of ‘free speech’, as these possibilities mentioned would likely be most effective if the

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guidelines of content permitted on the platforms were to become more stringent, thus also slowing down the flow of input of content presented. This issue could be circumvented by implementing labels that flags certain content as questionable or potentially harmful, but this would still require something very significant: That the platforms take very clear, moral stances, and are very explicit about the boundaries of these stances; or in other words, make their position very transparent and well-known. Something which is not necessarily the case now.

### *3.2 The perspective of socioeconomics and feminism*

The issues raised in the paper pertain to consumerism, and the critique raised can be considered one which questions capitalism as a societal structure. Bauman writes about the new classes of tourists and vagabonds in his theory of the globalised, liquid society; those who move by their own choice, and those who are forced to move around, respectively (1998). I find that this notion is important, especially as I also argue that algorithms on social media can serve as technologies of power.

In this section, I will outline how socioeconomic factors and gender dynamics (and to some degree, also matters of racism) may play a role in social media consumption for different groups (Karizat et al., 2021), thus changing the trajectories of potential micro-ruptures and subsequent consequences. I do so from an intersectional rationale, where a relationship between capitalism and sexism is considered established, and where these factors are seen as intermingling with one another.

Being on social media is itself a privileged position; the presence requires that one has access to an electronic device and the Internet, which again permits access to the platforms. Presence on these platforms is not without benefits, either. There are opportunities for people to change their lives drastically and gain more resources throughout their lives would have ever allowed for, in terms of social mobility (Jaramillo-Dent, Contreras-Pulido & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2022) Marginalised groups can (theoretically, at least) gain influence, as everyone is allowed to post anything within the realms of the community guidelines (Skinner, 2022). This has also been reflected in many social movements, which may even have been identified by a hashtag; fx. #MeToo and

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#BlackLivesMatter (Jeppesen, 2021). Participation might also, simply, be a means of enriching social relationships, both virtual and ‘in-real-life’ (Schellewald, 2023).

Like most other social media platforms before it, TikTok also plays a role in perpetuating beauty standards, which can in turn cause issues with mental health due to unhealthy habits regarding eating and exercising (Dahlgren et al., 2024, Raiter et al., 2023), as well as promotion of sometimes very invasive surgeries and body modifications (Bonner et al., 2023). On TikTok and Instagram Reels, this is furthermore emphasised through the use of augmented reality filters, which can alter the appearance of a person in the matter of seconds, also in video material (Bonner et al., 2023). The platform has also been known to promote harmful stereotypes regarding marginalised groups and sexist messages (Divon & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2022; Skinner, 2022).

The social constructivist thinking of this thesis would also implicate that one might consider TikTok in terms of how the users ‘perform’ (a term I borrow from Judith Butler, 1990) and ultimately also define and form their identities, both in rejection of and accordance with these stereotypes (Jaramillo-Dent, Contreras-Pulido & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2022; Karizat et al., 2021).

Central to the notion of consumerism, also regarding being a tourist or a vagabond, is the fact that one is either put in a position of action, or not. While the guidelines and algorithm of TikTok has changed over time, to allow for a greater space of inclusion and action for minorities, they still tend to favour white, cisgender, heterosexual creators (Divon & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2022; Skinner, 2022). Often, the groupings of minorities, which can be considered empowering to those included in them, are often self-enclosed systems; not by choice, but by the deemed relevance of these marginalised voices to be heard by a broader audience (Skinner, 2022).

As I have also outlined, the benefits do appear to be larger for already well-privileged individuals, who are even more likely to succeed on the platforms (Sweeney-Romero, 2022). They will be able to experience more things, particularly those that are pleasurable and enjoyable, and with less of the work that would normally go into creating lifestyle content, thanks to the editing features embedded in the platform.

These benefits, no matter if they are result of technical bias or otherwise, will likely profoundly shape the way the platform is interacted with, in regard to the user’s own perception of the relationship between their own identity and how acceptable it is

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deemed to be in terms of the algorithm. If one's identity is seen as contested by the platform, acts of resistance will inform the use of the platform, and/or risk impacting one's self-esteem negatively (Karizat et al., 2021).

The aesthetic qualities of popular videos, and the need to purchase specific items to live up to the standards of these videos, will likely cause further inequality of exposure, regardless of these otherwise systematic biases, causing a very direct result of socio-economic factors (Sweeney-Romero, 2022). Furthermore, an inability to follow these trends may cause very real disadvantages to users in real life as well or lead to taking up loans and/or paying for goods using "Buy Now, Pay Later" options; options which are often very costly, and can be detrimental to a person's economic health and subsequently, mental health (Mustafa, 2024).

If we focus our attention to young women as an example of a case, we see how 'That Girl' became a big trend on TikTok; a girl which has it all, and also changes up what it means to be "her", once in an oft while. This girl is healthy, thanks to her everchanging and broad variety of often quite expensive and poorly evidenced health supplements, the stable morning routines she executes after waking up in her picturesque bedroom, complete with the aesthetic bedding she arises from. She wears the trendiest of makeup looks, and rarely, if ever, needs to repeat an outfit from her wardrobe. Even her constantly productive time, powered by iced matchas and coffees at trendy cafés, looks effortless (Sweeney-Romero, 2022). Despite all odds, she is not even necessarily white (Martinez, 2022), although she most often is (Sweeney-Romero, 2022).

Taking this perspective further, an interesting trend on TikTok also emerged in 2023, in relation to this issue; that of 'girl math'. This trend was centred around justifying frivolous and "unnecessary" purchases, by means of making some rather questionable calculations. One could, for example, reason the purchase of an expensive iced coffee, by writing it off as "free", because one had bought a piece of clothing on sale, for an amount equal to the price of the coffee. Or the purchase of a particularly expensive set of bedding could be justified by calculating how many uses one would get out of it, thus making the "cost-per-use" close to 0 (Kawata, 2023).

This trend was of course meant as a light-hearted joke but speaks exactly to the issues that I have just discussed in relation to this thesis. It speaks to how an aesthetic sense of identity (perhaps, especially one of being female in this case) takes over matters of

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reasoning, even when it comes to one's livelihood, and can ultimately have a great impact on one's life and well-being. It can justify why you should "treat yourself" to another blouse on Shein, purchase expensive health supplements to be 'That Girl', and why you should purchase the trendy bedding; even if you are not in a position to make this purchase in the first place. After all, you can pay it off later anyway, and it might be worth the investment; especially if it enables you to escape the prospects of liquid nomad-hood, for now.

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## 4. Summary

In this part of my thesis, I have laid bare the rationales and preconceptions – both scientific and personal – behind the paper presented in the first part. I have presented the underlying problem formulation: *“How can the consumerist and rapidly changing culture(s) of social media influence be understood to influence the identity formation of young people?”* along with the research question of *“What are some of the known (theoretical) mechanisms and impacts of this influence?”*. I will now seek to answer these questions directly and briefly, as I have not taken the opportunity to do so yet.

In the paper, I stressed the mechanisms of TikTok and its algorithm especially in terms of its pacing and immersive format, as they can impact the formation of a coherent and correspondent identity very negatively. Furthermore, I stressed how they appear to be a result of, and moreover an exacerbation and further construction of an accelerated and consumerist societal logic and structure. I did so in a way which conceptualised these impacts as the result of mostly socially constructed factors, that may, then, also be re-constructed socially. However, layers of more objective reality and normative assumptions were also conceptualised, although not the main focus of inquiry.

The impacts were in the paper (mostly) conceptualised to be deeply personal and profound to the individual young person’s formation of identity and well-being, although environmental concerns were also touched upon; most of all, it also found these impacts to be ultimately unsustainable. But as I have especially unfolded in this part of the thesis, they also have larger and deeper impacts on group levels, and even on the level of (structural) power. These levels will, as conceptualised in the model put forth in the paper, will also impact the identity formation of young people.

The influence of social media on the identity formation of young people is thus not singular or straightforward; it is to be understood in a broad context of confounding factors. The life-course of one user’s feed is one embedded in pretty much every other factor and complexity of the user’s life, but with a technical and somewhat opaque caveat built into it, that may also profoundly change said life-course.

I will end this thesis by stressing the importance of making the matters of modern social media design and use more transparent, both in terms of mapping out the potential influences and their magnitudes. I do so because they may be one of the most

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powerful structures in our society; one that evidently also holds potential for good, if considerations are made with constructive intentionality in mind.

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