



SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
MANAGEMENT

What's Mine is Yours

A discourse analysis of the stakeholder relationships
involved in brand co-creation on social media platforms

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We wholeheartedly hope you will enjoy reading the product of our free labor.

Lund, May 31st, 2022

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Abstract

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Purpose	The purpose of this study is to research how consumers adopt discourses to make sense of their experiences with brand co-creation on social media platforms. We wish to bring forward how the interactions of the stakeholders involved in the co-creation process affects the consumers, through the theoretical lens of governmentality and exploitation.
Literature Review	The literature review outlines the conversation that relates to social media platforms, brand authenticity and co-creation. Moreover, the literature review delineates the critical studies that concern co-creation.
Method	The research design consists of a discourse analysis through the empirical context of the social media platform TikTok. The empirical material was gathered through semi-structured qualitative interviews with content creators on TikTok. Further, the material was analyzed in accordance with the literature and by using categorical reduction to identify discourses.
Theoretical Contributions	The findings show that, from the perspective of the consumers, brand co-creation occurs passively and is directly facilitated by the social media platform. From this, we contribute to the critical literature stream of co-creation by identifying the relationships and power dynamics in play between the stakeholders.
Keywords	co-creation, governmentality, exploitation, digital labor, user-generated content, social media platforms

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1 Introduction

The first chapter of this thesis begins by introducing the study's research domain. Then, a background to the most relevant concepts to the research domain follows. We continue to problematize previous literature to identify a research gap from which we believe we can contribute to the critical marketing literature stream. The chapter concludes with a presentation of our aimed contribution and the formulated research question.

“More than 1 billion people around the world now come to TikTok every month to be entertained as they learn, laugh, or discover something new. We're honored to be a home for our immensely diverse community of families, small businesses, and creators who transform into our favorite stars. TikTok has become a beloved part of life for people around the world because of the creativity and authenticity of our creators.” (TikTok, 2021)

In September of 2021, TikTok reached one billion monthly active users. It only took TikTok 5.1 years to reach the same audience size that Instagram achieved in 7.7 years, YouTube in 8.1 years and Facebook in 8.7 years (Fischer, 2021). In light of the rapid growth and popularity of TikTok (Herrman, 2019), it has become increasingly common for brands to use the platform. 70% of the top 500 brands are active on TikTok (O'Brien, 2021, p. 116). One possible reason for brands' interest in TikTok is that TikTok states that they have co-creation at their heart (TikTok for Business Europe, 2022b).

The case of @itsreefa's viral video “I like it, Picasso” exemplifies the typical co-creation process on TikTok. Just four months after @itsreefa's video was published, the sound from the video had been used in an impressive 216 thousand remakes on TikTok (2022), including those created by official brand accounts such as the NBA, Dunkin Donuts and Microsoft. These brands are praised by TikTok's end-users for their remakes of the viral video. End-users are defined as passive consumers of TikTok. TikTok refers to active consumers, like @itsreefa, as creators. However, we conceptualize the term *creator-consumer* since we believe that they are simultaneous creators for TikTok and consumers of TikTok. Nonetheless, @itsreefa did not actively choose to co-create

with these brands. Rather, their content was posted for a variety of reasons completely independent of these brands. The brands then decided to appropriate the readily available user-generated content (UGC), after the UGC had already become popular on the platform. The case of @itreefa's sound is not unique and exemplifies the typical relationships between the creator-consumer, brands and end-users on TikTok. Yet, there remains some ambiguity concerning what the expectations are of the co-creation interactions on TikTok.

1.1 Background

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define Web 2.0 as the version of the Internet where “content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion” (p. 61). In the discourse of Web 2.0, Zwick and Bradshaw (2016) identify a “mutually rewarding relationship between producers and consumers” and “a culture of sharing” (p. 95). Hence, the introduction of Web 2.0 has implicated a so-called power shift where consumers are more empowered (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). With the rise of Web 2.0, a novel way to co-produce arose, essentially creating a new form of labor (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). This labor is, according to Terranova (2000) free labor, which in itself is voluntary and unpaid and the individuals engaging in free labor enjoy the activity. Additionally, Ritzer (2009, cited in Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) designates Web 2.0 as the user-generated version of the Internet.

By default, a result of Web 2.0 is the increase in UGC. UGC refers to the work of users and the content created and published for non-professional reasons (Christodoulides, Jevons & Bonhomme, 2012). UGC has proven to be a significant contributor to “the production of culture worldwide” (Banks & Deuze, 2009, p. 420). Banks and Deuze (2009) also cite UGC as one way to decentralize the media industry, signifying a transformation in how culture is produced, distributed and accessed. The transformation is often described as liberating and democratizing. An increasingly important concept, relating to the transformation of cultural production, is the one of participatory culture, studied by Burgess and Green (2018) through the social media platform YouTube. Participatory culture refers to the “cultural production and social interactions of fan communities” (Jenkins, 1992, cited in Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, p. 2). From participatory culture, Burgess and Green (2018) differentiate between one-off viral videos, where the video itself

is shared and viewed, and videos where different content creators make their version of the same initial idea. With this second type of video, it is sometimes unclear to the ordinary social media user who the original author of the idea is (Burgess & Green, 2018). Therefore, with participatory culture, the typical protections associated with copyright are at risk of becoming difficult to retain.

Copyright is both a tool for control and a protection mechanism that affords creators monetary compensation for their creative labor (Berry, 2008). According to Burgess and Green (2018), content creators need copyright to ensure that their content and ideas are not stolen or misappropriated. On the other hand, Barbrook (2003) suggests that cultural producers on the Internet are disinterested in copyright and will share information knowing that they will not be financially compensated since they are satisfied with the exchange. The cultural producers are satisfied because they believe they will be provided with a high return on investment from the rest of the network (Barbrook, 2003). The cultural producers assign their informational contributions with an exchange value and therefore the concept of copyright is deemed gratuitous. Still, independently of the debate about the value of copyright on social media, brands have involved consumers in their value creation processes by appropriating their UGC.

Traditionally, brands have subscribed to the rather contradictory belief that the ‘customer is king’ (Kotler, 1972), while keeping the customer out of the decisions around the products and services that they would offer (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a). This approach can be categorized as Grönroos’ (2012, p. 1522) first value creation process, “the firm acts alone”. Then, the goal of any interaction between customer and firm was to extract value from the interaction (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b). Today, however, the dominant marketing logic has shifted from firm-centric to more customer-centric, granting the customer a more active role in value creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). The new market’s value creation process is referred to as co-creation, which is defined as “the firm and the customer act together in a merged, coordinated, dialogical, and interactive process that creates value for the customer, and for the firm as well” (Grönroos, 2012, pp. 1522-1523). In this manner, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a) believe that firms’ value creation can be enhanced through the practice of co-creation.

Firms employing co-creation understand that value creation occurs continuously and repeatedly during the exchange process and not solely at the end of the value chain (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b). Moghadamzadeh, Ebrahimi, Radfard, Salamzadeh and Khajeheian (2020) write that it is well-established within the marketing discipline that involving the consumer in co-creation will render profits and a competitive advantage for the brand. Brands creating value with the help of consumers can generate products that exceed what the parties can achieve independently (Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). Moreover, co-creation is a suitable tool for brands to manage and control the heterogeneous tastes and consumption patterns of today's consumers (Gabriel & Lang, 1995; Holt, 2002). With this definition of co-creation, Ind and Coates (2013) discuss the potential of co-creation as a democratic process since it allows consumers to participate in value creation. Therefore, the customer-centric marketing logic is perceived as beneficial to consumers because co-creation is believed to create value for both parties.

According to Bonsu and Darmody (2008) co-creation is the most pervasive on the Internet in comparison to other settings. Ind and Coates (2013, p. 89) claim that marketers interested in co-creation should focus on "how to make groups productive" on behalf of the brand. Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody (2008) highlight that "the smartest marketers today bow to the empowered, entrepreneurial, and free consumer" to remain competitive in the market (p. 184). Therefore, organizations must govern the consumer to shape and exploit the creativity and know-how of customers toward value-generating activities (Cova, Dalli & Darmody, 2011). Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody (2008) draw on Foucauldian thought and present co-creation as a marketing strategy that uses a neoliberal form of governmentality. In addition, marketing scholars have argued that social media platforms have accelerated these brand co-creation dynamics (Cova & Pace, 2006; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner, 2010). Ergo, these authors present a critical stance toward the customer-centric marketing logic of co-creation.

1.2 Problematization

Although extensive research has been carried out on the topic of co-creation, the literature on co-creation has taken the brand management perspective, as well as focused on the strategies brands can employ to maximize brand value through the process of co-creation (e.g. Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; O'Hern & Rindfleisch, 2010, Merz, Zarantonello &

Grappi, 2018; Moghadamzadeh et al., 2020). Considering recent developments in social media literature, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the existence of co-creation activities on social media. Fournier and Avery (2011) introduce the concept of open-source branding, where social media affords consumers a say in the brand's image. According to Rosenthal and Brito (2017b), how consumers react to certain owned media is "uncontrollable but manageable" (p. 931). Rokka and Canniford (2016) disagree with Rosenthal and Brito's (2017b) argument that consumers' reactions are manageable. Instead, they describe how consumers can build doppelgänger brand images through their heterotopian selfies on social media. As consumers can increasingly contribute to a diversity of brand meanings that do not align with the brand vision, corporations are at a larger risk to suffer from a misalignment between brand image and brand vision (Rokka & Canniford, 2016). This stream of literature assumes that the consumer is free to decide to participate in co-creation and has a say in the construction of the brand image.

Furthermore, Lucareli, Cassinger and Östberg (2022) highlight the critical research stream on co-creation and identify three different perspectives. The first perspective is co-creation as exploitation of labor (Arvidsson, 2008; Banks & Deuze, 2009; Cova, Dalli & Zwick, 2011; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Arvidsson (2005) recognizes consumption as a form of unpaid and immaterial labor, in which the surplus value is exploited by brands. The second is co-creation through the lens of governmentality (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008; Cova & Dalli, 2009), in which co-creation is a "means by which consumers can govern themselves" (Lucareli, Cassinger & Östberg, 2022, p. 67). The third critical perspective is researched by, among many, Zwick and Bradshaw (2016), and supposes that consumers are aware of co-creation and its exploitative processes but still accept it (Lucareli, Cassinger & Östberg, 2022). These perspectives show that the relationship between consumers and brands appears to be more asymmetrical than ever, as brands are becoming more powerful and enabled in their ability to selectively capitalize on consumers' creative labor on social media to build their brand image.

Lucareli, Cassinger and Östberg (2022) write that even though much has been researched regarding the critical aspects of co-creation, "a more networked, embodied, and lived account of the process of brand co-creation and its critical implications and consequences for stakeholders is needed" (p. 68). In other words, it is of great relevance to understanding the impact of the power

asymmetries and the stakeholder relationships on co-creation. By the same token, previous research has perceived brands as the main governing and exploitative party, and the social media platform as solely the medium where co-creation can occur. Such expositions are unsatisfactory because social media platforms are powerful agents with commercial interests (Gillespie, 2018; Carah & Brodmerkel, 2019). As researchers have not considered all the stakeholders involved, we would like to investigate the impact of the stakeholders' relationships in the co-creation process.

1.3 Aimed Contribution

The research aims to explore the relationships between the stakeholders involved in the co-creation process on social media. To understand the relationships between the stakeholders, we will identify socially constructed discourses that the creator-consumers use to make sense of their experiences in the co-creation process. We apply a critical marketing lens, using the theories of governmentality and exploitation, to analyze the creator-consumers' discourses surrounding the asymmetries between the stakeholders.

To achieve this aim, we will use the empirical context of the social media platform TikTok, in which we have recognized four key stakeholders. These are the creator-consumers, the brands, the platform and the end-users. The empirical setting of TikTok provides a new perspective on how certain affordances benefit the co-creation process. This thesis will contribute by attempting to unravel some of the mysteries surrounding why creator-consumers willingly contribute UGC to a social media platform that then enables brands to effortlessly adopt the UGC in their owned media.

1.4 Research Question

How do consumers adopt discourses to make sense of their experiences in the co-creation process?

2 Theoretical Lens

The chapter describes the theoretical lens that we will use to analyze the empirical findings generated for this study. We present Foucault's theory of governmentality and Marx's theory of exploitation of labor.

2.1 Governmentality

Foucault presents the shift from direct governance, in the shape of top-down structures and disciplinary power, to indirect governance that is conducted through "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1991a, cited in Giesler & Veresiu, 2014, p. 841). Governmentality is defined as the conduct of conduct and as an "activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons" (Gordon, 1991, p. 2). Through governmentality, consumers are controlled not through physical force but by a state that creates and shapes the consumer's aspirations to self-govern in a way that is profitable and desirable (Chomsky, 2017). The controlling party creates an illusion of freedom among their consumers by molding their desires, habits, aspirations and beliefs (Foucault, 1991a). Foucault philosophized regarding "who can govern; what governing is; what or who is governed" (Gordon, 1991, p. 3). Techniques of power are, according to Foucault, created to "observe, monitor, shape and control the behavior of individuals situated within a range of social and economic institutions" (Gordon, 1991, p. 3). By extending Foucault's theory of governmentality, Giesler and Veresiu (2014) elaborate on the process of governance as the shaping of a responsible consumer. When the state and corporations enact governmentality, the social-moral responsibilities are shifted to the individual consumer. The result is a responsabilized consumer who is self-reliant, rather than dependent on disciplinary power, proving highly beneficial for the state and corporations (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

2.2 Exploitation of Labor

Marx distinguishes between exchange and use value (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008). Exchange value refers to a commodity's worth relative to another commodity. Typically, the commodity's value is relative to money. Use value, on the other hand, is the extent to which a commodity can

satisfy a consumer's want. Exchange value is realized at the point of trade or sale, making it of great interest to the producer, whereas use value is realized through usage or consumption, benefitting mainly the consumer. Producers are the organizers of the value creation process, affording them the right to absorb the surplus value. However, Marx argues that it is the laborers who should absorb the surplus value (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008), since the wage of the workers should be directly proportional to the labor that they invest (Fuchs, 2014). Assuming that the act of consumption is a productive process (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), and that the roles of producer and consumer are increasingly intersecting, we can perceive consumption as an act of labor. Humphreys and Grayson (2008) exemplify that it is only when a consumer "produce[s] something that they do not use" that they become a laborer (p. 974). The product of the consumer's labor is then sold by the producer for surplus value. The Marxist critique is that the producer absorbing the surplus value is an act of exploiting the laborers (Fuchs, 2014).

Brands can determine how consumers will and may act concerning the brand to generate opportunities for immaterial labor (Arvidsson, 2005). Immaterial labor is Lazzarato's (1996) concept that includes "the practices that produce either the immaterial content of commodities, or the social context of production itself" (p. 133). Through language, interactions, socialization, shared knowledge and competencies, individuals can build social relations and community, which is a form of immaterial labor (Virno, 2004). Arvidsson (2005, p. 249) writes that "the autonomous productivity of consumers is used as a source of innovation" for brands. Therefore, brands can take advantage of consumer knowledge in their value creation process. Additionally, Lazzarato (1997, cited in Arvidsson, 2005) explains how the process of immaterial labor produces an ethical surplus. Ethical surplus is defined as "a social relation, a shared meaning, an emotional involvement that was not there before - around a brand" and provides the brand with economic value (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 237). The ethical surplus and consumer's immaterial labor prove highly beneficial to brands, but at the consumer's disservice, prompting exploitation.

3 Literature Review

The third chapter of this study provides a traditional literature review concerning the thesis research question. First, we explore the social media and platform literature stream and relate this to UGC and affordances. Second, we inspect the theories of brand authenticity. Last, we thoroughly engage with the literature stream on co-creation, where we believe motivation plays a significant role. The chapter concludes with critical perspectives on co-creation in connection to the chosen theoretical lens.

3.1 Social Media Platforms

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of [UGC]” (p. 61). Further, Fuchs (2021) describes how cognition, communication and cooperation, the three forms of sociality, co-exist on social media. Cognition refers to when individuals post UGC, whereas communication occurs through comments and other forms of engagement. Cooperation, most notably, enables “multiple authorship” (Fuchs, 2021, p. 41). Some technology facilitates cognition, communication and cooperation on the same social media platform. This is referred to as integrated sociality (Fuchs, 2021).

According to Bucher and Helmond (2018), social media platforms are intermediaries that host many different users, such as end-users, advertisers and developers, who all have different incentives and interests. Many platforms are perceived as free; however, their business model is often related to “commodifying audience labor, creating opportunities for gathering data, adding people to a contact list to be sold to marketers, or bringing together an audience to sell to advertisers” (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, p. 76). In return, platforms allow brands to market and sell their goods and services. Platforms also create a space for users to publicly “express their opinions, shape their identity, build their social relationships, and organize for collective action” (Elkin-Koren, de Gregorio & Perel, 2022, p. 997), and co-create (Moghadamzadeh et al., 2020). Users are contracted as consumers of the platform’s services, as well as suppliers of content, naming them co-creators who contribute to culture on the platform, which then shapes user

expectations (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). If the expectations are positive and appropriate, more users will join (Elkin-Koren, de Gregorio & Perel, 2022). Therefore, the network effects make the social media platform more valuable. As more users join the platform, the value of being a user increases both for the user but also for cultural content producers and advertisers (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The most successful platforms can serve and “attempt to profit” from the stakeholders’ interactions on the platform (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 9). Social media platforms are seemingly constantly weighing the different vested interests of their stakeholders.

Although, platforms have vested interests too. In their inception, platforms were designed to simultaneously invite and frame social media participation toward a specific end (Gillespie, 2018). Similarly, Carah and Brodmerkel (2019) perceive platforms as “participatory, algorithmic, and logistical tools for monitoring, pre-empting, and organising consumer culture” (p. 6). It is through the Terms of Service that platforms afford themselves the ability to freely govern users and content (Elkin-Koren, de Gregorio & Perel, 2022). Platforms have for a long time framed themselves as neutral actors; however, this literature suggests that platforms have a lot of tools for control.

3.1.1 User-Generated Content

The OECD lists three criteria for categorizing UGC (2007, cited in Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The first is that the content must be posted publicly on either a website or a social media platform. Second, the content must demonstrate creativity. Third, the UGC must be created away from the creator’s primary occupation and without a commercial context in mind (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Elkin-Koren, de Gregorio and Perel (2022, p. 996) add that UGC “stimulates engagement and exchange”, which drives more users to the platform.

The platforms and their communities where users can upload content are maintained through interaction and consist of a majority of so-called digital natives (Burmamann & Arnhold, 2008 cited in Christodoulides, Jevons & Bonhomme, 2012). Because of the infrastructure set up by social media platforms, today’s users are becoming particularly skilled at judging and determining what content will perform well and according to the algorithm (Carah & Brodmerkel, 2019), making digital natives more common among users. The digital natives must strategically reflect on what, who and when the algorithm will recognize and recommend content to others (Carah &

Brodmerkel, 2019). Following, the concept of algorithmic content curation refers to what content the platform makes visible to end-users. Depending on the platform, there is a specific process for how algorithmic content curation is constructed, which creates incentives for users to strategically align their content to suit the algorithm (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Furthermore, the content distributed through the algorithm is also personalized and dependent on factors such as “time, location, user profile, and behavior” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4289). Because of the algorithm set up by the platform, the UGC community learns to attract attention they want and deflect attention they do not want.

Holt (2016) claims that through social media’s increasing presence, ‘crowdcultures’ have formed that can improve the quality of UGC. ‘Crowdcultures’ are defined as “[digital crowds that] serve as very effective and prolific innovators of culture” (Holt, 2016, n.p.). The first category of ‘crowdcultures’ is ‘subcultures’. These ‘subcultures’ are represented by members that gather around a certain topic and intensively interact with the group to generate new ideas and products. The second category of ‘crowdcultures’ is ‘art worlds’. These consist of different types of artists who convene to cooperate, co-create, learn from each other as well as engage in collaborative competition. Through these processes, creative breakthroughs are achieved. As a result, individuals within these ‘art worlds’ can utilize the power of the group and conduct ‘rapid cultural prototyping’. ‘Rapid cultural prototyping’ refers to how individuals can generate “instant data on the market’s reception of ideas, have them critiqued, and then rework them so that the most resonant content quickly surfaces” (Holt, 2016, n.p.). The aftermath of this process is a highly culturally relevant piece of UGC that speaks to the target audience and that is produced at the lowest cost.

3.1.2 Affordances

Gibson’s theory of affordances can explain why users interpret and use the same social media platform in different ways (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Consumers respond to social media based on their perception of the affordances, rather than to any fixed set of technological offerings (Majchrzak & Markus, 2013; Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Schrock (2015) emphasizes that in a digital context, “an ‘affordance’ is broader than the buttons, screens, and operating systems of mobile devices” (p. 1233). An affordance perspective highlights that the material features of social

media do not vary across social environments. Instead, what varies is the perception from members of these environments concerning what opportunities for action these features afford (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). These opportunities are ‘action potentials’ constituted by the relationships between the features of social media and the people who perceive and use them (Majchrzak & Markus, 2013). Affordances do not create the user’s ambitions on social media. Instead, they enable the user’s actions to fulfill their ambitions (Schrock, 2015). Further, a signifier refers to a visual representation that explains how the user is meant to use an affordance (Thornton, 2019; Falahatpisheh & Khajeheian, 2020). Affordances and signifiers are an inherent part of social media and play an important role in stakeholders’ interactions on platforms.

3.2 Brand Authenticity

According to Holt (2002), the modern branding paradigm and modern consumer culture reached their decline when consumers realized that brands should not be able to control their tastes and preferences, and therefore began demanding sovereignty in their choices. With this shift came the rise of the postmodern branding paradigm and the postmodern consumer culture, where it became especially important for consumers to achieve personal sovereignty through the brands they chose to engage with. The postmodern branding paradigm is partially defined by the reflexive consumer. The reflexive consumer is a consumer who is especially critical of marketing as an institution, and who is more aware of their consumption behavior (Holt, 2002).

Holt (2002) claims that the postmodern consumer is particularly fond of authenticity, which has led to a more complex nature of marketing strategies. To prove authenticity, “[brands] must be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value” (p. 83). One marketing strategy to create a brand image of authenticity is to seek out cultural contexts that are still untapped by corporate commercial intentions, such as ‘crowdcultures’. By targeting these contexts, brands can “leapfrog traditional media and forge relationships directly with customers” as well as stand out from other brands in the social media landscape (Holt, 2016, n.p.). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) demonstrate that brands can, through social media, engage with their consumers at a lower cost and more efficiently than through traditional media. Brands are also better off blending in with users instead of curating professional content in their owned media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

One way for brands to penetrate the ‘crowdcultures’ is to co-create with UGC on social media since this signals authenticity. However, as the postmodern brands are competing on the premise of authenticity with UGC, the strategy becomes more aggressive, and consumers will begin to question the brand’s motives (Holt, 2002).

3.3 Co-Creation

Much of the scholarship about co-creation originates in the service-dominant logic (S-D logic), coined by Vargo and Lusch (2004). The market has shifted to focus on intangible assets like information and skills instead of goods. Consequently, there is a focus on the process enabling the exchange rather than on the good that is exchanged. This shift has also led to greater interest in the consumer as the consumer is no longer perceived as a target but rather a co-producer. S-D logic acknowledges that the consumer is always co-producing since the consumer learns to use the good and adapts the good to fit their specific needs (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Therefore, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000, p. 80) write that firms and consumers equally partake in “education, shaping expectations, and co-creating market acceptance for products and services”.

Brands’ motivation to engage in co-creation is similar to the motivation to implement open innovation. A principle of open innovation is that firms understand that “not all of the smart people work for us so we must tap into the knowledge and expertise of bright individuals outside of our company” (Chesbrough, 2003, p. 38). Lead users are helpful in innovation because they lead or have knowledge of market trends ahead of other users (von Hippel, 2005). According to Merz, Zarantonello and Grappi (2018, p. 88) “successful brand value co-creation depends on the firm’s ability to identify and leverage customer-owned resources and customer motivations”. Customer ability refers to consumer-owned resources such as knowledge, persuasion or skills, creativity and network, whereas customer motivation includes the aspects of passion, commitment and trust, all concerning the brand (Merz, Zarantonello & Grappi, 2018). If brands can successfully co-create with consumers, they can increase brand identification and brand loyalty (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), which proves the important role that co-creation may play in branding strategies.

A typical form of co-creation is front-end innovation, where firms prompt customers to generate new product ideas on behalf of the firm. O’Hern and Rindfleisch (2010) differentiate between

contributing and selecting, where contributing refers to customers submitting ideas for products, and selecting is when firms offer options for new products and customers select an option. A secondary form of co-creation is when consumers submit ideas for an ad or even create the ad. This type of co-creation is referred to as a consumer-generated ad (CGA) (Thompson & Malaviya, 2013).

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004b) define the building blocks of co-creation through the DART model. The building blocks are dialogue, access, risk and transparency (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b). Dialogue references engagement and interaction between the consumers and firm, as equal actors, through a medium or in a forum. Both actors must be willing and able to co-create. There are also “rules of engagement” that are clear at all times that dictate how the dialogue will and can occur (p. 23). The result is that consumers can more easily communicate their opinions on a firm’s value creation process. Second, access associates with the consumer’s aim of having advantageous experiences rather than owning a specific good, which also aligns with S-D logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Firms will face new business opportunities if they use S-D logic (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b). Third, risk pertains to the shift from firms wholly carrying the risks, to the consumer as the co-creator “shoulder[ing] responsibility” too (p. 27). The consumer is demanding to know more about the risks and benefits of a good, which also places them in an apt position to take on more risk. Last, transparency regards how firms now must communicate transparently about their business, in other words, the diminishing of information asymmetry between firms and consumers. The result of greater transparency is an increased trust between firms and consumers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b). The DART model illustrates an equal relationship between the consumers and the firm.

3.3.1 The Consumer’s Motivation to Co-create

Since consumers can create value “through their ability and through their willingness” (Merz, Zarantonello & Grappi, 2018, p. 88), it is intriguing to learn what motivates consumers to co-create. According to Roberts, Hughes and Kertbo (2014) consumers are motivated by economic incentives when directly collaborating with a brand. Muñiz and Schau (2007) exemplify how consumers are happy to contribute a CGA because they are interested in the temporary celebrity status they receive when a brand selects their CGA. Furthermore, Roberts, Hughes and Kertbo

(2014) found that, in the case of independent co-creative contributions, consumers are motivated by egocentric purposes such as an improved product as well as self-improvement. Self-improvement refers specifically to personal goals regarding skills and competencies that they believe co-creating with a brand can improve (Roberts, Hughes & Kertbo, 2014). The consumer will voluntarily co-create if they perceive it as a challenge, they believe they can solve (Martini, Massa & Testa, 2014). Consumers can also be motivated to co-create in communities (Roberts, Hughes & Kertbo, 2014). These motivations are connected to social exchange theory, where consumers believe that they will be rewarded in the interaction (Füller, 2010; Roberts, Hughes & Kertbo, 2014). Moreover, Roberts, Hughes and Kertbo (2014) found that consumers are motivated by participation as well since participation in co-creation can put them in contact with peers and build relationships and consequently communities. Additionally, there is also an altruistic value in joint co-creation since, through co-creation, consumers can achieve a “sense of self-fulfillment or sense of well-being” (p. 162).

Shah (2006) studied open-source software developers' motivations and found that there are two types of developers as one is need-driven and the other is a hobbyist. The need comes from using open-source software in their professions because then they can format it to suit their specific needs. For the developers to be motivated to make their code public, there must be some interest in “reciprocity, future improvements, source code commits, and career concerns” (Shah, 2006, p. 1005). Reciprocity connects to a social contract or obligation in the community to contribute. Future improvements reference the developers' code that they are eligible to receive feedback on or even initiate discussions that they believe they, or others, can learn from. Source code commits are associated with the previously mentioned aim of having a specific function that suits their specific needs. Career concerns are related to skill development and reputation. Shah's (2006) term of the hobbyist, on the other hand, is motivated by fun, enjoyment or feedback. Hobbyists are heavily influenced by the context of the community, like whether there is a lot of control exercised over the members or if the members are exhibiting behavior that does not align with theirs (Shah, 2006). Thus, if firms can provide some form of exchange, consumers will, according to the authors above, voluntarily participate in co-creation.

Similar to Shah's (2006) two categories, Bonsu and Darmody (2008) introduce two types of users of the user-generated platform Second Life. These are 'corporates' and 'creatives'. 'Corporates' are the individuals and corporations that enter the platform with the intention to "convert available resources into financial gain" (Bonsu & Darmody, p. 362). 'Creatives' are users whose incentives to join the platform are not to earn money but to improve their knowledge and social efficacy and are motivated by healthy competition. These 'creatives' do not perceive their consumption or labor as productive, which is why platforms can, according to Bonsu and Darmody (2008), dodge the negative consequences of a consumer feeling exploited.

3.3.2 Co-creation as Governmentality

The emergence of customer management is a form of governmentality (Arvidsson, 2005; Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). The goal of governmentality is for consumers to self-govern in profitable and desirable ways (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008; Giesler & Versiu, 2014). Co-creation is a political form of power that shapes consumers as both "free and controllable" and "creative and docile" (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008, p. 1). Control is not implemented through domination, but rather through an illusion of freedom (Cova & Dalli, 2009). The result of this imaginary freedom is productive laborers that can engage in what they believe is a mutually beneficial innovation and production process (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). Therefore, by shaping the consumer in predetermined ways, brands can capitalize from co-creation. Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody (2008, p. 167) claim that as consumers become sources of "creative and innovative talent", governmentality through co-creation becomes a very useful tactic of the new marketing strategy. Brands have thus successfully united consumer production with consumer consumption (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008), consequently making consumers even more valuable to brands.

Enabling governmentality on social media platforms is a way for platforms to be able to run themselves (Moody, 2006). Social media platforms provide brands with tools to retrieve value created by consumers (Ebrahimi, Kot & Fekete-Farkas, 2020). Platforms have for a long time framed themselves as neutral actors (Chander & Krishnamurthy, 2018). Yet, Nieborg and Poell (2018) find that social media platforms can both enable and steer the users' interactions. Chander and Krishnamurthy (2018) conclude that platforms should "drop the pretense of neutrality and

acknowledge their active role in managing content” (p. 416). Bonsu and Darmody (2008) witness how consumers perceive the platform as limitless, while simultaneously the productive laborers’ creativity and desires are limited per the wishes of the platform owner (Boellstorff, 2008). Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody (2008) develop the idea of platforms governing their users and illustrate how user-generated platforms are built through co-creation. The platforms can rely on the work of each user, and the illusion of the user’s freedom, to develop and improve the platform. Thus, user-generated platforms are one of the purest forms of consumer government within co-creation (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008).

3.3.3 Co-Creation as Exploitation of Labor

Prahalad and Ramaswamy’s (2000; 2004a; 2004b) concept of co-creation is from a Marxist perspective a form of exploitation, since consumers as producers of value are not fairly compensated for their labor and brands can exploit the generated surplus value (Cova, Dalli & Zwick, 2011; Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). According to Bonsu and Darmody (2008), co-creation can both empower consumers to collaborate with firms in the production, while simultaneously opening up for firms to appropriate and exploit the consumer’s labor. Critics identify two perspectives of the exploitation of consumers through brand co-creation (Arvidsson, 2005; Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). First, consumers are not being fairly compensated for their knowledge and work. Second, consumers are the ones paying a price premium as a result of the value they have created for brands.

Bonsu and Darmody (2008) believe that the capitalist society allows for the consumer’s creative labor and participation to generate both exchange and use value. Humphreys and Grayson (2008), however, exhibit how it is in the distinction of use and exchange value that consumers can be exploited. Co-creation assumes that productive consumers are using their labor to enact steps in the value chain that the brand typically would enact. Specifically, consumers are taking over steps that generate exchange value. Marxist theory argues that the surplus value that arises is most often from the exchange value and that the laborers are most deserving of this value. However, it is most often the firm that can absorb the surplus value. This is the nature of capitalism. (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008). Humphreys and Grayson (2008, p. 978) conclude that the “exclusion of productive consumers from the surplus value that results from their labor” hints at exploitation.

Digital labor, in comparison to physical labor, is often not experienced as labor because its fun and playful characteristics disguise the feeling of labor (Fuchs, 2014). Some will supply labor simply for the “pleasures of communication and exchange” (Terranova, 2000, p. 48). Therefore, Terranova (2000) calls for more nuance in how labor is discussed within the digital economy on the Internet and suggests to not solely use language indicating exploitation. Fuchs (2014) adds that humans need to enter social relations and communicate to survive. That is why in our information society, these social platforms have become crucial for social interactions.

Additionally, according to Fuchs (2014), there are scholars in the digital labor discourse who argue that unpaid digital labor is not productive labor, and thus not a form of exploitation. Along the same lines, Cova, Dalli and Zwick (2011) argue that one should question whether the concept of labor is fitting for this line of co-creation and social production. Using the term may be misleading in the world of Web 2.0’s sympathetic cooperation and prosumption (Terranova, 2009). Moreover, viewing co-creation as exploitation may misrepresent “the mode of collective production, cooperation, and mass collaborations” (Cova, Dalli & Zwick, 2011, p. 234). Even though we are situated in a capitalist society, the voluntary co-creation process should, according to Cova, Dalli and Zwick (2011), not be reduced down to passive consumption or the manipulation or exploitation exercised according to capitalist ideology.

Co-creating consumers on social media produce content, relations and networks as use value through their unpaid digital labor (Fuchs, 2014). On these platforms, users are creating two types of use value with their digital labor. The first type of use value is for themselves and others through social relations and publicity. The second type of use value is for capital, since consumers spending more time on the platform enables the platform to profit from attracting a greater number of advertisers. Therefore, Fuchs (2014) alleges that consumers are exploited because their digital labor results in a surplus value. The platform can absorb the surplus value because the digital laborers do not have control over their data, creating an information asymmetry where platforms can further exploit consumer labor (Fuchs, 2014).

Through the exploitation of consumer's power, knowledge, labor and social connections, value is generated, which the platform may convert to financial resources (Boellstorff, 2008). Bonsu and Darmody (2008) found that the platform owners of Second Life made sure to return some of these financial benefits to the consumers; however, the majority of the financial gains were harvested for the platform owner itself. By creating the illusion of consumers being compensated for their work, the platforms can mobilize the consumer's labor, resulting in consumers being trapped in this production cycle (Bonsu & Darmody, 2008).

4 Method

The method chapter begins by presenting our research approach and philosophy, which form the point of departure of the study. We outline the research design of discourse analysis (DA), justify the chosen empirical context and motivate our methodological choices for sampling, data collection and data analysis. The section is finalized with a critical reflection on the quality of the research study, limitations as well as the ethical considerations.

4.1 Research Approach and Philosophy

To study how consumers adopt discourses to make sense of their experiences in the co-creation process, we selected a qualitative research approach. The data produced in qualitative research is rich and creates an opportunity for explanation and argument, rather than description (Mason, 2009). According to Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe and Valizade (2021), qualitative research is applicable for studies interested in specific individuals' knowledge, experiences and opinions. In this study, we are investigating the complex relationships between four main stakeholders - the brands, the social media platform, the end-users and the creator-consumers. In line with Bucher and Helmond's (2018) reasoning, the creator-consumers, end-users and brands are all considered users of the platform. However, in this study, we are particularly interested in learning about the creator-consumers' experiences with the stakeholders as well as discovering how they use discourses to describe the interactions involved in the co-creation process.

The ontological perspective refers to how researchers view "the nature and essence of things in the social world" (Mason, 2009, p. 14). This study takes the ontological position of nominalism. The nominalist position believes that the world is shaped by the language and names we use (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The nominalist ontology aligns with the aim of identifying discourses that provide insights into the power dynamics and conversations being held between the four stakeholders. It is precisely the language and names that the creator-consumers assign to phenomena and relations that accumulate to shape our understanding of their reality. In addition, the epistemological perspective refers to how researchers theorize around knowledge as well as how they obtain evidence (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The social constructionist view assumes

that reality depends on perspective (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), and focuses on the context and “the cultural settings of the participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). The social constructionist epistemology is appropriate for this study, as we are interested in creator-consumers’ discourses since discourses are “determined by people rather than by objective and external factors” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, p. 78).

The research is conducted using an abductive approach. Abduction, according to Timmermans and Tavory (2012, p. 167), is “a creative inferential process aimed at producing new ... theories based on surprising research evidence”. Abductive research ensures that theory is not imposed on data that does not fit (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In other words, the abductive approach was useful since we wanted to ensure that we had a deep understanding of the relevant literature and theoretical lens, but were not bound to these. This enabled us to be both guided by theory and also generate theory as an outcome of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

4.2 Research Design

The research design delineates how we have chosen to attempt to answer the following research question: *How do consumers adopt discourses to make sense of their experiences in the co-creation process?* The following section details the DA-based method as well as provides a thorough description of this study’s chosen empirical context.

4.2.1 Discourse Analysis

Foucault (1991b) suggests that discourses shape and create meaning in the world. Discourses are understood as “the way versions of the world, of society, events and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse”, especially in the social sciences (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 525). Discourses exist around us and using them also shapes how we understand ourselves (Miller & Rose, 2008). DA aligns with the epistemological position of social constructionism as the focus lies in understanding members of the investigated case’s perceptions of reality. Gill (2000) presents the four themes of DA. First, discourse is the data itself and not a means to finding the reality. Second, discourse is constructed based on the participant’s predispositions. Third, language is action since language is used to achieve things. Gill (2000) exemplifies the active nature of discourse with language that signals action such as “to offer blame, to make excuses, to present

themselves in a positive light” (p. 175). Last, DA asserts that language is used in a manner to convince others of their presentation of their reality (Gill, 2000).

As seen in Thompson and Haytko (1997), many consumer culture theory (CCT) researchers utilize an interpretive case method to conduct DA. The interpretative case method of DA provides a means to understand how micro-level experiences of individuals in the case can represent macro-level cultural processes. Through this method, “specific personal experiences, social practices, or cultural texts are interpreted as sites where cultural traditions of meaning and social value systems are enacted, negotiated, and transformed” (Thompson & Haytko, 1997, p. 20). Inspired by Thompson and Haytko (1997), a DA research design was chosen to ensure that the meanings and beliefs that were made visible in our interview participants’ language were analyzed and applicable to macro-level processes.

4.2.2 Empirical Context

The digital landscape is continuously changing, likewise social media platforms. Due to their relatively new nature, TikTok has not been studied nearly as much as more senior platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Therefore, Robson, Banerjee and Kaur (2022) call for more scholarly attention to TikTok. TikTok is a mobile-first social media platform that was launched in 2018 by the Chinese, privately held company ByteDance (O’Brien, 2021). In 2017, ByteDance acquired the social media platform Musical.ly, which was popular in the United States (McLachlan, 2022). The acquisition of Musical.ly made TikTok popular very quickly. In 2020, ByteDance claimed revenue of 34 billion USD and one year later the number had risen to 58 billion USD (Yang & Yu, 2022). TikTok was also named the fastest-growing brand in 2021 (Brand Directory, 2022). It is also because of TikTok’s rapid growth that we believe the platform is a highly relevant empirical context to study the relationships between creator-consumers, end-users, brands and the platform. Due to TikTok’s relatively novel nature and important role in the study, we deem it vital to thoroughly present the platform and its functions.

TikTok is known for the ‘For You’ page, which is a never-ending stream of videos that TikTok’s recommendation system, powered by machine learning (O’Brien, 2021), deems to align with every user’s specific interests. Thus, every user has a unique ‘For You’ page. More specifically, the

recommendations are based on the user's interactions, video information as well as device and account settings (TikTok, 2020). TikTok's media format is solely video (O'Brien, 2021), and on the platform, creators can, using filters and sounds, produce short videos ranging from five seconds to three minutes (McLachlan, 2022). Often, TikTok videos are created with an existing sound file. These sounds can be "snippets from songs, dialogue pieces from movies or TV shows, or sound elements produced and uploaded by other users" (Haenlein, Anadol, Fansworth, Hugo, Hunichen & Welte, 2020, p. 23). Users are also able to collaborate with other users through the functions of 'duetting' and 'stitching'. By 'duetting' a video, the final UGC will show both users' videos side by side. Users can also add their video after another user's, essentially 'stitching' them together.



Figure 1 - The Placement of Sound Bar

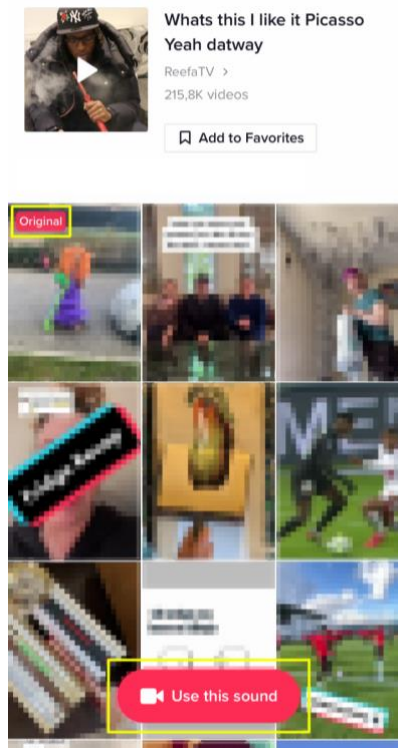


Figure 2 - The Sound's Page

Creator-consumers can decide whether they want to allow other users on the platform to repurpose their sound through the enabling of a setting. In the figures below, we have marked the signifiers that point the user to the affordance that allows them to co-create with each other's sounds. In Figure 1, there is a spinning record with an icon beside the title of the sound. If the user clicks on this record, they are taken to the page in Figure 2. On this page, the user can see the title of the

sound, the creator of the sound, how many videos are made with the sound and if the sound uses a piece of music. TikTok marks the original video and puts it as the first video on the list. To use the sound in their video, the user can simply click on the button with the text 'Use sound' shown in Figure 1 and 'Use this sound' as shown in Figure 2.

TikTok offers creator-consumers the possibility to join the Creator Fund. The Creator Fund is the way TikTok rewards creator-consumers that fulfill the requirements of having at least 10,000 followers and more than 100,000 views in the previous month (Hughes, 2022). TikTok communicates that the Creator Fund is a monetary reward system put in place to offer creators additional earnings for "creatively connecting with an audience that's inspired by their ideas" (Pappas, 2021, n.p.). Moreover, TikTok also launched the Creator Marketplace that provides brands with a direct line of communication with creators, as well as provides the brand with insights into the creator's views, likes, comments and shares (TikTok, 2022a).

4.3 Data Generation

Emerging from a nominalist ontology and a constructionist epistemology to identify discourses, we chose to conduct qualitative interviews with creator-consumers to generate empirical data. In other words, the qualitative interviews functioned as the "production site of knowledge" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 54). Interviews were deemed an appropriate data generation method because we wanted to understand the participants' "emotions, experiences and feelings" (Oates, Griffiths & McLean, 2022, p. 194), through "guided conversations" (Yin, 2009, p. 106). Interviews provide the participants' accounts of their own experiences as well as their judgments of said experiences.

The first step in the interview inquiry process is thematizing. Thematizing is only possible after developing the research purpose and determining the subject that will be investigated (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This meant that we had to gain an initial understanding of, and familiarity with, the empirical context before conducting the interviews. To familiarize ourselves with the language, routines and structures of TikTok's creator community, we spent time on the platform, observing the co-creation process and its related affordances. This provided us with the necessary knowledge of TikTok to obtain the participant's trust (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

With qualitative research, the data is always situated (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Therefore, to prepare for conducting the interviews, we gathered background research on the participants to accurately understand the context the participants were operating within. The background research consisted of observing their TikTok content as well as gathering information on their follower count and the video selected in the sampling stage. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) deemed obtaining this knowledge as necessary preparation to ask follow-up questions. Preceding the interviews, the participants were made aware of the research's focus on TikTok and TikTok content creators. Since the participants were not sent the questions beforehand, they could not prepare their responses and thus, we gathered more impromptu responses, which aligns with the abductive approach.

4.3.1 Data Generation Process

In two weeks, we conducted individual interviews with creator-consumers of TikTok. The interviews were conducted using the video-conferencing software Zoom. Computer-assisted interviews are beneficial because they allow researchers to reach geographically distant interviewees (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The digital nature of the interview was necessary since the participants were otherwise inaccessible because they were based in the United Kingdom and the United States. We also collected synchronous data as there was direct interaction in real-time on Zoom (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Both of us were present in all the interviews but we held different roles. One of us took field notes during the interviews, noting the participants' tonality and pauses. The other served as the main interviewer and asked the predetermined questions with the help of the interview guide (see Appendix 1). When appropriate, we utilized prompts, probes and checks to encourage the participant to elaborate on their primary response to the question. Before officially beginning the interview, we engaged in some small talk with every interviewee to obtain their trust and make them comfortable. We then offered background information about ourselves and our research. This aspect of the interview is referred to as briefing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We also let the participants know that we would record the interview for transcribing purposes. Moreover, we gained their informed consent, which is discussed more closely in *Chapter 4.6.2 Ethical*

Considerations. Before beginning the official questioning, we gave the interviewees the option to ask questions.

We selected semi-structured interviews because the order we asked the participants the questions was not set. Rather, we determined the order based on where the conversation led us and how the participants told their stories. In qualitative interviews, the order and wording of the questions are inconsequential, as the semi-structured style of qualitative interviews is informal (Mason, 2009). This also allowed the participants to introduce new themes that we previously had not thought of, or outlined in the interview guide, which connects to our abductive and thematic approach (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The questions centered around the following themes:

- An introduction of the participant
- The participant's experience with TikTok
- The participant's UGC
- The participant's experience with their UGC being used by other users

We posed introductory questions and used laddering up and down in follow-up, probing, specifying and interpreting questions. At the end of the interview, we debriefed the participants, which included asking if the interviewees had anything more to add or any further questions for us about the research. This ensured that the participants felt content with how they had described their experience (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

4.3.2 Sampling Strategy

The process of sampling refers to identifying, choosing and gaining access to relevant data sources. Through inference, it is possible to make conclusions about a population from a sample (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). A sample is necessary due to resource constraints and the need for focus since qualitative research values depth rather than the "broad sweep of everything" (Mason, 2009, p. 121). Since sampling from a population means that an alternative selection would have been possible, it is necessary to explain the reasoning for this particular sampling method (Mason, 2009).

We employed a non-probability random sampling technique. This sampling design entails that it is not possible to determine the likelihood of any member of a population to be selected for the sample (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Specifically, we used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling refers to using specific criteria to screen potential participants (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The population we sampled from is TikTok creator-consumers. The criteria for the purposive sampling design were that the creator-consumer had experienced their UGC being repurposed by a brand on TikTok. The creator-consumer also had to be the original publisher of the sound. To identify these creator-consumers, we began by identifying brand accounts on TikTok, gathered from lists found in Conviva's (2022) "2021 TikTok Benchmarks & Strategy Guide for Brands". Specifically, the lists were categorized by industry, and brands were ranked according to the number of followers. In total, Conviva analyzed 900 brands. From this list, we systematically went through the top brand accounts to determine whether they were appropriating UGC as their social media strategy. In other words, brands that only used their own sounds were disregarded. To gain access to the creator-consumers, we then proceeded to find their contact information through an "informal process of gaining access" (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p. 162), which was either via email or an Instagram account eligible to direct message.

Out of 68 contacts, we received 30 responses. Out of 30 responses, 27 were interested in participating. We conducted interviews with 12 creator-consumers but later found that one creator-consumer did not accurately fit our sample criteria. Therefore, the final sample size was 11. We settled with this sample size because the interviews began to produce the same responses, which Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) refer to as the law of diminishing returns.

Table 1 - Overview of Creator-consumer's UGC

Creator-consumer's TikTok handle	UGC	Number of videos created under sound	Number of likes on UGC
willeygoat	<i>Wanna see something crazy?</i>	11,4K	1,0M
carol.ine3	<i>I fear I may have girlbossed a bit too close to the sun</i>	32,3K	1,2M
heyzmsc	Cover of "Fall for You" by Secondhand Serenade	52,2K	821,5K

jacobwillyms	<i>Oh god this is such a bad fucking idea</i>	725	70K
jacobsutherland	Remix of “Fireflies” by Owl City	88,6K	1,2M
wanderingandlost	<i>Avidi Kavidi</i>	976,6K	3,9M
dereldoylan	<i>Day 23 in the Chamber and they ain't found me yet</i>	12,8K	1,5M
cheetocrumbz	<i>Emma no</i>	17,3K	2,4M
benjaminlish	<i>Nobody said parasocial relationships had to be positive</i>	85,5K	1431
tiktoshh	<i>Bestie vibes only</i>	50,9K	2,5M
crispinion	<i>When you accident add a random emoji when laughing</i>	175,8K	2,5M

The data in Table 1 was gathered in connection with the conduction of interviews, between April 11th and April 22nd, 2022.

Table 2 - Overview of Creator-consumers' Accounts

Creator-consumer's TikTok Handle	Number of videos on account	Number of followers on account	Number of total likes on account
willeygoat	69	131,6K	6,7M
carol.ine3	318	59,6K	10,4M
heyzmsc	287	489.2K	9,1M
jacobwillyms	84	5,7K	475,3K
jacobsutherland	236	364,2K	25,3M
wanderingandlost	35	82,8K	4M
dereldoylan	212	170K	4,3M
cheetocrumbz	25	42,1K	2,4M
benjaminlish	206	182,7K	11,6M

tiktoshh	2718	1.4M	62,4M
crispinion	774	429,1K	16,3M

The data from Table 2 was collected on April 27th, 2022.

4.4 Data Preparation

The original audio files were safely kept in duplicate copies to secure the original data. From the audio files, written text was generated through a combination of computer-generated and manual transcribing. Together the audio files and written texts comprised the empirical material (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Still, we recognize that the transcripts are only a rendering of the data, which is the audio recordings (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Transcribing provided the opportunity for thorough revisits of the interview material before the data analysis stage.

Groups allow for the creation of initial dichotomous variables that are believed to affect the research (Friese, 2019). Following Shah's (2006) and Bonsu and Darmody's (2008) categorization of co-creators' motivation to use a platform, we created groups of the transcripts based on whether the participant had the ambition of using TikTok for their future professional career or as a hobby. After this, the primary qualitative data was ready for the analysis stage.

Table 3 - Groups of Creator-consumers

Need-driven Creator-consumers	Hobbyist Creator-consumers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● willeygoat ● carol.ine3 ● heyzmsc ● jacobsutherland ● crispinion ● tiktoshh ● benjaminlish 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● cheetocrumbz ● dereldoylan ● wanderingandlost ● jacobwillyms

4.5 Data Analysis

The need for analysis of qualitative data originates in a need to manage three problems (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). After collecting data, the data is often disorganized, which is the problem of chaos. Second, it is also not possible for researchers to include all data, which is the problem of

representation. Third, the researcher must consider what is possible to conclude from the data and whether it is original, which is the problem of authority. Therefore, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) suggest that qualitative researchers undertake three activities: sorting, reducing and arguing.

Sorting supports the researcher's pursuit of order in the qualitative material. By sorting, we attempted to find what the participants spoke about, as well as how they spoke about it. Most commonly, researchers find "recurring contents" and these build themes (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 77). In this stage, the themes were broad and inclusive as we were not yet sure of what would be the most protruding themes. This process can also be referred to as coding (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). A fully formed code is more than "a descriptive label" (Friese, 2019, p. 3). Rather, a code summarizes the meaning of a statement (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Coding is simplified by using a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). For this research, the material was coded using the web version of ATLAS.ti, which authorizes researchers to "code, annotate and compare segments of information" (Creswell, 2007, p. 166).

We began by creating a code list. The code list is fundamental when searching for "relationships and patterns in the data" (Friese, 2019, p. 143). The code system was reworked several times, in the process that Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) refer to as re-coding and re-evaluation, as we engaged with the material and reviewed the codes' value (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). According to Friese (2019), quotes can be sorted into codes at different "levels of abstraction" and order (p. 118). Due to the iterative nature of qualitative data analysis, it is necessary to review the codes since they begin by being named concretely and close to the exact message. As the process continues, the codes become more conceptual (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In the case of repeated occurrences in the data, we coded every occurrence. This allowed us to decipher how important the participants perceived that particular thought to be. We also identified negative cases to strengthen the findings. Negative cases are quotes that contradict a potential explanation, in essence forcing the researcher to rework the explanation to be all-encompassing (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

By coding data segments, the segment is both conceptualized and framed (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). After having coded the data segments, we went on to reduce the codes to a selective and manageable number of discourses that we found supported our aim. It was at this stage of the data analysis process that we could see the creator-consumers using discourses to make sense of their experiences on TikTok. Categorical reduction refers to choosing among categories to identify the ones that provided the most insights into the discourses and disregard those that do not fulfill the research aim. Illustrative reduction, on the other hand, refers to choosing the quotes best suited to represent the category and aspects of the theoretical framework (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), which became the quotes presented in *Chapter 5 Analysis*.

Arguing, in some ways, occurs in the sorting and reducing stages too, but is most crucial for a qualitative researcher in the presentation of the findings. Arguing entails theorizing, which is “a kind of argumentation based on empirical facts putting words on what the analyst has found in the field” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 178). Typically, arguing entails utilizing analogies, which support the concept of transferability. Transferability is an important factor to consider in the quality of qualitative research since it can “broaden the relevance of a theory” (p. 164) or “identify something new in a field” (p. 166). We engaged in the former by viewing the highly researched concept of co-creation through a critical perspective as well as in a new empirical setting. Additionally, we engaged in the latter by identifying stakeholder relationships in co-creation.

4.6 Research Quality

In terms of evaluating the quality of qualitative research, Lincoln & Guba (1985, cited in Korstjens & Moser, 2018) state that the research should ensure trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is evaluated through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The first criterion, credibility, speaks to the truth of the research findings. For this study, the credibility criterion was taken into account, especially when writing the field notes, transcribing the interviews and analyzing the findings. We were thorough in ensuring prolonged engagement both with our interviewees and with the data collected from the interviews. Moreover, we engaged in persistent observation by carefully identifying the discourses. The second criterion, transferability, concerns how applicable the findings are to other settings. To help the readers of this study assess whether our findings are applicable to their situations, we provide a ‘thick description’ of the

context of our study, the participants and the method. A ‘thick description’ provides readers with a so-called database so that they can judge the findings’ transferability for themselves. The two last criteria are dependability and confirmability. The criteria concern whether the analysis is consistent with our chosen research design and whether the research is unbiased. To ensure dependability and confirmability, we have kept detailed records of all the stages of the research. By providing extensive methodological reasonings and justifications, we can provide the reader transparency in our research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

By acknowledging that data is generated through people’s accounts (Creswell, 2007), we recognize that both the interviewer and interviewees are co-authors of the subsequently generated data in the social context of an interview (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Wood & Kroger, 2000). As stated by Timmermans and Tavory (2012, p. 173) “abductive analysis, consequently, rests for a large part on the scope and sophistication of the theoretical background a researcher brings to the research”. Because of the interviewer’s key role in qualitative research, a variable to consider is interviewer reliability (Mason, 2009). A common criticism of interviews is that the process is too dependent on the interviewer (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The instrument, or researcher, must be highly skilled to avoid interview bias (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To set the interview up to ensure interviewer reliability, only open questions were asked and no leading follow-up questions were posed. This guaranteed that the participant answered each question without postulations. Interviewees were also free to reject the premises of an interview question. Additionally, open questions also for “the participants [to] construct the meaning of a situation” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21).

4.6.1 Limitations

One limitation associated with the data generation was the digital nature of the interviews. With computer-assisted interviews, it is more difficult to interpret body language than in an in-person interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Still, we transcribed the interviews afterward, which allowed us to both actively listen and note down non-verbal and bodily cues in the field notes.

One common criticism of textual data is that the process of transcribing is an “interpretative process” from oral to written form (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 177). To combat possible

discrepancies in the translation process, the interviews were audio-recorded, allowing us to focus wholly on the conversation and therefore accurately quote the participants (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Typically, transcripts include solely a verbal recollection of the interview interaction. By way of explanation, non-verbal qualities are ignored (Mason, 2009). In this research, we combatted this possible limitation by complementing the transcript with the field notes. The field notes focused on the participants' tone of voice and non-verbal gestures and consequently ensured a higher degree of loyalty to the interviewee's original responses. Including the tone of voice also provides intriguing nuance (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Thus, where appropriate, the field notes were added to the transcript files. Further, Wood and Kroger (2000) speak to the importance of the transcribing process as it is not possible to determine what details are important at the data preparation stage of the research. Thus, as is appropriate in DA, the transcripts were generated with high fidelity. This means that the transcripts were written verbatim instead of opting for a more traditional written style. Still, we as constructivist researchers recognize that the interpretative process is highly dependent on our backgrounds (Creswell, 2007).

Although it is immensely beneficial for a researcher to collect the quotes under codes, a prevailing criticism of CAQDAS is that the software decontextualizes the quotes from the situated question (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To minimize the effect of the decontextualization, we used ATLAS.ti's memo function to briefly describe the background of the quote, allowing us to interpret the coded quotes properly and in their original context.

Mason (2009) introduces participants' complex sets of experiences as one factor that could limit the quality of the research. Therefore, one limitation of the sampling strategy was that some of the participants had a different number of UGC that had been used by brands on TikTok. Similarly, the participants exhibited different levels of knowledge about TikTok's creator system. Burgess and Green (2018) refer to this as literacy. The literacy of our creator-consumers was largely contingent on how they perceived their long-term aspirations and current engagement with TikTok as a platform. The purposive sampling strategy was based on the sole criteria that the creator-consumer had experienced their UGC being repurposed by a brand account on TikTok. One way to minimize the impact of these limitations could have been to include a criterion that detailed the literacy of the creator-consumer sampled.

4.6.2 Ethical Considerations

Gaining informed consent from the participants was crucial for the continuation of our research.

To gain the participants' informed consent, we gave participants the following information:

- “The purpose of the research
 - Who is undertaking the research and which organization is sponsoring it
 - What will be involved and how long this is likely to take
 - Whether they will receive any expenses, payment or incentive
 - How their data will be stored, used, and how the research findings will be disseminated”
- (Oates, Griffiths & McLean, 2022, p. 62).

To combat the power asymmetry of qualitative research interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), consent forms were sent out to every participant through the website Scive before each interview (see Appendix II). The consent form summarized the participant's rights, which include the right to withdraw from the research, maintain their anonymity if they would like as well as the right to provide informed consent.

5 Analysis

In this chapter, the main empirical findings from the qualitative interviews are grouped and presented as creator-consumer discourses. The findings are categorized into six main creator-consumer discourses. These discourses form the basis for analyzing the relationship, interactions and power dynamics between the creator-consumers, the end-users, the brands and the social media platform.

5.1 We Signed Up for This: The Discourse on the Non-existing Social Contract

The participants unanimously agreed that by the simple act of creating a TikTok account and uploading their videos, they had afforded brands and other users the right to their UGC. Still, the creator-consumers cannot dictate who, when and how their UGC is used. Users can freely co-create with the creator-consumer's UGC and this action is mediated and simplified by TikTok. For example, @crispinion refers to users appropriating their sound on the platform as “part of the game” and @wanderingandlost refers to the act as “free game”. We found that from the beginning, the creator-consumers were aware of the stakeholder relationships at play, and willingly consented to participate in co-creation. In other words, this prominent discourse relates to the creator-consumer's acceptance of their role in the brand co-creation process, facilitated by TikTok.

5.1.1 Brands: The Discourse on the Non-existing Social Contract

If [a brand] wanted to use something that's popular on mainstream television ... you would have to, not only, contact the person who made it, get negotiations done for the pay or just throw a “Here's a flat dollar number for us to use your sound in our advertisement” and possibly have to roll through some lawyer ... That's how TV works. TikTok, on the other hand, is basically that once you've posted anything to TikTok, it is not only open-source, but free game. You don't have to request permission to use it. You don't have to pay a dime to anyone who created that information. And for the people who want to make money off of it, I feel bad for them in this regard. Because you're sitting here, losing out on money

because someone decided “Well, I’m just going to use the ‘TikTok-y’ algorithms as they are set in the Terms of Service.” - @wanderingandlost

@wanderingandlost describes a narrative that many creators share regarding the difference between how intellectual property in traditional media is controlled and compensated versus now on social media and in particular on TikTok. Relating to consent, the norm on TikTok is that creator-consumers must not ask for consent when appropriating each other’s sounds, and thus neither must brands. The participants are demonstrating an awareness of having accepted TikTok’s Terms of Service and therefore feel that they cannot retrospectively expect brands to request their consent.

Never on TikTok has anyone been like “I’m gonna use your sound to advertise this, is that alright?”, you know? It’s just the culture on that app. I think it’s just the way it is. - @cheetocrumbz

The quote above describes how they have relinquished the typical procedure of gaining consent, since the Terms of Service do not dictate this, and nor does a social contract. Their description signifies how TikTok’s unofficial code of conduct has created a unique relationship between creator-consumers and brands. This relationship has shaped a culture of co-creation that is completely dependent on the platform that enables the said culture.

I think McDonald’s did ask my permission. I do remember that they’re the only brand that has asked for my permission and I said sure and I didn’t ask for anything in exchange. So they’re like “Hey it’s yadda yadda from McDonald’s branding and marketing team.” So that was nice, they didn’t have to do that. - @heyzmsc

The norm is so well-established that in the rare case a brand does request the creator-consumer’s consent, the creator-consumer does not expect to receive anything in return. @heyzmsc response is almost automatic as TikTok’s Terms of Service do not afford the creator-consumers the right to consent to co-creation. On the rare occasion that a brand affords them this right, they are surprised and unexpecting any compensation.

5.1.2 TikTok: The Discourse on the Non-existing Social Contract

One of the things that makes me ponder a lot about TikTok is the really loose, just like ‘run-and-go attitude’ that you kind of are encouraged to have about copyrights and about legal use of other people’s work. Because so much of copyright and ownership kind of has to be thrown out the window for the way that the social Internet works on TikTok. - @jacobsutherland

Even though the creator-consumers do not believe that gaining consent is a requirement within the delineations of the platform, many still critically reflect on the unique rules that exist on TikTok. The purpose of copyright is to protect the copyright holder from theft and to ensure they are compensated for all dissemination of their work. Copyright is a fairly established domain on many social media platforms, but this discourse illustrates the loosening of copyright protections specifically on TikTok. It is deeply ingrained in all of TikTok’s users’ approaches that copyright only exists under very specific pretenses.

Once it’s posted on TikTok, it basically becomes TikTok’s property. So my sound ‘avidikadivi’ - it’s not my sound anymore, it’s TikTok’s, which I’m not exactly fond of but I knew that before going into it. - @wanderingandlost

@wanderingandlost characterizes a clear transfer of ownership as soon as the creator-consumer’s UGC is publicly uploaded on the platform. Even though they remain critical of the position they are put in, they know that those are the terms they have accepted. There is also an awareness regarding TikTok’s Terms of Service encouraging the appropriation of another’s UGC, in the name of co-creation.

For example, if I had something like an audio or a video and somebody took and did something I didn’t like with it, there’s no way for me to get that removed. There’s no way for me to be like, “No, I don’t approve of this, I don’t consent to [you] using this”. I can’t do that because that’s not within your rights as a TikTok creator. - @benjaminlish

Creator-consumers are aware of their non-rights and display concern regarding this fact. Typically a piece of copyrighted work cannot be altered or modified without the author's consent. However, on TikTok, UGC is constantly modified through users appropriating sounds, or 'duetting' or 'stitching' content, resulting in the creator-consumer's experienced inability to manage their creative outputs. Therefore, with the transfer of ownership from the creator-consumer to the platform comes the perceived loss of control. The creator-consumers are very aware, yet somewhat dissatisfied with their lack of rights on TikTok. Nonetheless, they still accept these conditions.

5.2 Minimum Wage: The Discourse of the Value of Digital Labor

The following discourse can provide clarity as to why the creator-consumers accept the conditions set by TikTok in the *We Signed Up for This* discourse. In general, the participants described not accumulating sufficient monetary compensation from both the brands appropriating their sounds or from TikTok. However, this discourse highlights how the creator-consumers reason regarding the value of their digital labor, by counterbalancing the deficient financial compensation with alternative forms of compensation.

5.2.1 Brands: The Discourse of the Value of Digital Labor

The participants describe a frustration with respect to brands' lack of monetary compensation when brands repurpose their content. @cheetocrumbz jokingly said, "I didn't get any money from Sour Patch Kids using my sound, I didn't even get any free candy".

It's a little bit of a gray area and a little bit of a slippery slope because there is a lot of taking advantage of, and exploitation with, a lot of brands or marketing departments that have a lot of money and are using moments like that to not have to pay the money because it's kind of the culture of the space. - @jacobsutherland

Many creator-consumers blame the brands' lack of compensation on the culture of TikTok since they believe the culture sets the rules. With the lack of a social contract, brands can exploit the creator-consumer's labor. Because the nature of digital labor is often perceived as fun, the creator-consumers seem to attribute the lack of monetary compensation as a fault of the consumer-

generated culture of the platform, rather than a fault of the inadequate labor valuation system set in place by TikTok.

5.2.2 TikTok: The Discourse of the Value of Digital Labor

[TikTok is] like “Hey we want to give you some money, sign up for [the Creator Fund]” and then you know you get to see your little daily statements. It’ll be like one dollar, you know, like a good day will be like 40 bucks. But that’s on a video that got like five million views, you know? - @heyzmsc

As partially demonstrated by @heyzmsc above, a majority of the interviewed creator-consumers believe that TikTok does not compensate their creators enough through the Creator Fund. @willeygoat believes that the low monetization rate from the Creator Fund is one of the main reasons creator-consumers turn to brand partnerships.

That’s something that I wistfully think about sometimes ... If I were getting, instead of one dollar per 20 thousand or 30 thousand views on TikTok, if I were getting closer to what YouTube’s revenue is, which is one dollar per one thousand views, I would have been able to quit a full-time job a long, long time ago. - @jacobsutherland

@jacobsutherland compares the monetization model on TikTok to that of YouTube. All the creator-consumers have other occupations outside of their social media channels to make a living. Many of the need-driven creator-consumers are extra sensitive to the low financial compensation because they are investing a lot of resources to pursue social media and TikTok full-time.

TikTok has to stand up and take accountability for big companies like that, using the sound and us not being compensated. Because, like I said, two or three dollars out of [the brand’s] bank account is not going to hurt them, but taking our sound and you know you’re going viral, you’re earning sales. How do you sleep at night? I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t. - @tiktohh

@tiktohh is acknowledging that they are experiencing a power imbalance between themselves and brands. They perceive the relationship to be directly facilitated by TikTok. They are commenting on not only the creator-consumers' bargaining power but also the large difference in the financial capital the different stakeholders possess.

In comparison to the need-driven creator-consumers, the hobbyist creator-consumers are less critical of the monetary compensation because the platform affords them a medium to express their ideas and passions. Many of them use TikTok to express their creativity and humor and as a platform to engage with their pastimes. To exemplify the hobbyists, @dereldoylan said, "I've always been in love with recording and making videos and editing, so that was always like a big passion of mine on the side".

5.3 Free Advertising: The Co-Creation Discourse of Compromise

Many of the creator-consumers rationalize the lack of financial compensation from co-creation with the discourse of *Free Advertising*. @heyzmsc believes that if a brand or end-user with a lot of followers uses their UGC, the publicity from the popular user will feedback to their account. TikTok's sound bar allows for the users to easily locate the original author of the sound, which the creator-consumers believe will generate more views, followers and engagement for the original creator-consumer. In other words, this identified discourse is positively inclined to the co-creation process since the discourse of *Free Advertising* functions as a compromise.

I consider it free advertising when people use my ideas or sounds ... When it's a page that big, that to me is another form of free advertising where it's like, yeah, post my content because it's gonna get a ton of eyeballs. - @willeygoat

In line with the discourse identified amongst some interviewees, @willeygoat is optimistic regarding the process of brand co-creation since they believe that all types of appropriation of their UGC will generate attention to their original content and account.

I've had some of the biggest names use my sound that haven't tagged me ... So yes, it would be great. It would be amazing if they had tagged me ... 'Cause I mean realistically

if they had tagged me, I think it would have taken my page to another level like that. -
@crispinion

@crispinion additionally discusses the approach of brands offering additional credit on top of the credit that is automatically generated through the sound bar. The additional credit can take the form of the appropriator tagging them in the caption or the comments. Many of the creator-consumers argue that they see larger increases in their views and followers when popular brands give additional credit to their UGC. This reasoning was proven more common for the need-driven creator-consumers. There is a fundamental belief that the need-driven creator-consumers' hard work will generate the necessary publicity to positively impact their future career prospects in the entertainment industry. @willeygoat describes their hope that TikTok will "open doors" for them into the said industry, and @benjaminlish believes that they can build some name recognition through TikTok. Need-driven creator-consumers perceive receiving credit as free advertising for their personal brand. They perceive this to a greater extent than hobbyists; therefore, a need-driven creator-consumer can justify the lower monetary compensation more.

5.4 The Non-ad is the Best Ad: The Authenticity Discourse of the Seemingly Non-Commercial Intent

The authenticity discourse relates to what the current success factor for brands on social media is, which the creator-consumers believe is to blend in and create content that appears to be a non-ad. Non-ads take the shape of following a social media trend and speaking the language of TikTok's demographic.

I feel like a lot of brands nowadays are using social media like never before. They use social media as if they're an actual [person]. I think it's good because it obviously gives brands personality. I feel like it shows that they wanna be with the people, they wanna stay on-trend, stay on topic. I was shocked to be honest. I was really shocked when they started to use it 'cause I hadn't seen brands using TikTok as if it's an actual person. And like huge brands as well! - @crispinion

Through the quote above, it becomes clear that brands that can disguise themselves and their content as a regular TikTok user and video, are more successful in producing an authentic brand image. @benjaminlish states that brands that make traditional branded content annoy them, while brands such as Duolingo instead can successfully create content that they thoroughly enjoy.

It's just very easy for people now to go like "Oh that's an ad" ... I don't even pay attention to ads most of the time. But if you can disguise an ad as like, "Oh, hey, we're one of you, you know, like we're just like the common user of whatever app" and then it kind of pulls you in at first. - @willeygoat

Similarly, @willeygoat would not pay attention to videos that clearly are branded ads. Companies must attempt to portray themselves as more personal and minimize their commercial intent by following social media trends and disguising themselves. Traditional advertising strategies are not as successful on TikTok since users are more tuned in to recognize ads on their 'For You' pages, and subsequently scroll past them.

But like if I saw an advertisement for Papa John's, if it's straight up an ad like you'd see on TV, that means that they miss the point of the app. But if it's an ad such as like Domino's Australia grabbing a tiny piece of cheese, picking it up and flicking it around and doing a video [referring to their UGC], that's the ad that makes sense for the TikTok user base. - @wanderingandlost

@wanderingandlost's quote shows how the consumers of TikTok are seemingly sensitive to how well brands follow trends. It is not just about identifying the right trends, it is about how well the brand executes the trend. If the content feels poorly executed or not suitable for the brand, the branded content is quickly disregarded by the users.

It seems like there is a weird and desperate ploy among brands to connect with like [Generation Z] and I think the easiest way to do that is to hop on to TikTok trends because I think [Generation Z] uses TikTok more than any other social media ... I can't remember specifically, but there have been [major brands] that have commented, probably to benefit

their brands, like seeming hip and cool with the times which is what I've noticed when brands use my sound. It's embarrassing 'cause it's like, why are you making an 'Emma no' Sour Patch [Kids] video? Like who is that connecting to? They think that that's gonna relate to the people, and that's what's gonna work so ... It's still cheap to me. - @cheetocrumbz

@cheetocrumbz exemplifies the most reflexive consumer operating within this discourse when they describe their experience. The quote proves how fine the line is between a brand succeeding or failing in creating an authentic brand image on social media. What some creator-consumers perceive as a good marketing strategy, that is using UGC and following trends, others may disregard it as a cheap ploy. To summarize, the discourse of *The Non-ad is the Best Ad* provides insights into the important role that authenticity plays for today's brands on social media, according to the creator-consumers.

5.5 Warm and Fuzzy: The Community Discourse of Collaboration and Belonging

The discourse of the creator-consumer and end-user community was prevailing in nearly all the interviews and for multiple reasons. The discourse of community on social media allows us to learn about the social exchange that may occur between users.

I think about when I use other people's sounds and I've gotten views and stuff on my own [videos], and then I picture the roles reversed ... I just overall think it's really cool. - @jacobwillyms

@jacobwillyms speaks to a mutual exchange in the statement above. On TikTok, the norm is to collaborate by using other creator-consumer's sounds or ideas. Many of our participants are honest about the fact that they are being inspired by other creator-consumers, social media trends or songs. For example, @cheetocrumbz' UGC was inspired by a video from the social media platform Vine. Similarly, the idea behind @jacobsutherland's video originally came from another "Fireflies" remix on TikTok. @heyzmsc became well known for their specific genre of singing on TikTok, yet even this was inspired by another user that they had come across on their 'For You' page. Keeping with, @jacobwillyms believes that most viral sounds are never fully original. The

community discourse can afford creator-consumers the ability and willingness to be inspired by each other, and the trade-off is perceived as equal.

Once those people start to reply with laughing faces and “this is funny”, then that feeling that I was providing entertainment also started to kind of make me want to do more. -
@crispinion

@crispinion describes their experience with publishing content on TikTok above, illustrating how creator-consumers can be deeply fulfilled from the interaction and engagement with other users. In this way, many of the creator-consumers who categorize their content as ‘relatable humor’ are driven by the enjoyment of their self-determined community, and state that they find satisfaction in others’ joy.

To finally have people talking about me or seeing me in a good way was just a really big moment, almost like healing my inner child. It’s like “No, they do think you’re funny, they do enjoy hearing your voice and what you have to say does mean something to some people, even if it is just a little sound bit on an app.” - @benjaminlish

On the other hand, we can observe that @benjaminlish experiences that their success on TikTok has had a greater impact on their personal development. TikTok and their users have afforded @benjaminlish a sense of belonging that they have not experienced elsewhere.

If it gets three views, it gets three views because I’m there now for my [followers]. I’m not just there for myself or for my family, I’m there for other people who literally look forward to seeing me. - @tiktohh

@tiktohh speaks highly of their followers and the reciprocal relationship they have, exemplifying the discourse of community between creator-consumers and their followers. In other words, the *Warm and Fuzzy* discourse provides an entry into understanding the relationship dynamics between themselves and end-users.

5.6 TikTok as Big Brother: The Social Media Discourse of Docility

The discourse pertains to the way creator-consumers can resolve TikTok's performance as Big Brother. The Big Brother discourse is commonly applied on social media relating to surveillance, characterizing platforms as overly prying and controlling. We found that the discourse encapsulates a greater number of narratives, including the competitive nature of content creation, the famed algorithm as well as TikTok's moderation of users and content.

5.6.1 The Competitive Nature of Content Creation

I think with content creation, it's like a competition, innit? Really, like everyone wants the best video. Everyone wants the most trending [video], the most viral [video], the most views. - @crispinion

As TikTok is garnering an even larger audience, more creator-consumers are attracted by the opportunity to reach the said audience. The result is that there is increased competition and therefore increased pressure to perform. @crispinion's quote above highlights how creator-consumers begin to change and shape their content to suit what they believe TikTok will boost on the 'For You' page. From having been all about creating content for the safekeeping of memories and personal entertainment, it has now become a process where they experience a great deal of pressure to perform and maintain high quality content. Indirectly, TikTok encourages creator-consumers to shape their content to align with the current popular trends to gain a competitive advantage on the social media platform. Therefore, many creator-consumers spend a significant amount of time scoping out the platform before posting.

I would say for the first few months [of being on TikTok], I was definitely viewing and just kind of studying what other people would do. And just seeing what trends are doing, what made this video popular and just kind of going on from that. - @dereldoylan

@dereldoylan is referring to what trends were occurring as well as speculating as to what made that particular video or trend popular. According to the creator-consumers, the trends are easily observed when they explore their own 'For You' pages. For instance, @jacobsutherland said, "On

TikTok, more than any other platform, I feel more like my work as a creator is directly inspired by my experience as a user". To @crispinion, trends retain a creator-consumer's content's relevance. Through these statements, the creator-consumers are showing their need to study the content on the platform to be able to cater to the current needs of the users, gain inspiration and remain competitive in the creator market.

5.6.2 The Famed Algorithm as an Omnipresent Technique of Power

[Users] are essentially being pointed towards the things that they like, which is exactly what the algorithm is designed to do, but it's almost kind of scary how accurate it can be.
- @wanderingandlost

TikTok's algorithm is often discussed as highly accurate. One side perceives the accuracy as entertaining as the algorithm shows them content that aligns with their interests. However, the quote above actually illustrates the other side that is represented by the more critical and reflexive consumer who understands that TikTok manages to retain users on the platform for an extended amount of time through this highly specific, personalized and omnipresent technique of power.

And so [the algorithm] also rewards certain formats of content ... I know people will post live comedy stuff ... but it'll just be a video of them like on a stage. A lot of times that doesn't do as well as like a front-facing camera video, because that's just like the style people are more used to on TikTok. - @carol.ine3

One example shown above highlights @carol.ine3's discussion about how creator-consumers actively create content that suits the algorithm. Further, creator-consumers also make other adaptations to fit the algorithms on TikTok. For example, they often consider what time is the most suitable to post, as well as what length of video will be most appreciated by the algorithm. The discourse suggests that the algorithm adjusts the 'For You' page according to these types of variables. This speaks to the creator-consumers' narrative that content must be a certain way, or meet certain requirements, to perform well on the algorithm.

TikTok is really good at growing something at the grassroots level, at the lowest level possible. Because you can have like zero followers and one of your videos can do very well if it hits the algorithm right and if it just makes sense, and connects with people. - @carol.ine3

Creator-consumers critically reflect on TikTok's algorithm yet praise the algorithm as more democratic than that of other social media platforms. The famed TikTok algorithm essentially allows a greater number of small creator-consumers the opportunity to 'go viral' and increase their reach.

5.6.3 The Policing of Content and Users

My page magically disappeared last month for about seven to eight days. It said I was banned for multiple Community Guidelines violations. But then when you go to violations, I had none. - @tiktohhh

What @tiktohhh is describing is common, as TikTok has a system in place that regulates the content that is eligible to be posted according to their Community Guidelines. Nearly all the creator-consumers have, at one point or another, experienced their accounts being banned, or their videos being muted or removed, by TikTok's moderation system because they have supposedly breached TikTok's Community Guidelines.

A couple of times when I've appealed it, [TikTok has] been like "Oh, we were wrong" and then they ... put it back on. But then there are a few that I've just had to delete because they just didn't allow it. - @crispinion

Creator-consumers often feel that TikTok does not justify or give reasons for their decisions to moderate their content. @crispinion discloses that when their videos have been flagged for breaches of the Community Guidelines, they have wished that TikTok would declare why the video or account was banned. The creators have the option of appealing TikTok's decisions, but @tiktohhh's experience with appealing has been complicated. They describe sending multiple

emails from multiple addresses until their account was reinstated. On the other hand, the opposite is also true, where @jacobwillyms describes the moderation system as both overly policing as well as subpar as it does not catch all the infringements of the Community Guidelines.

Sometimes people will get banned for reasons that are unexplainable and other times people don't get banned for things that should not be on a 'kid-friendly' app. - @crispinion

@crispinion echoes @jacobwillyms description and discloses when they have stumbled upon inappropriate videos and comments. There is then an internal questioning relating to how these users can act in the way they do without interference from TikTok.

It is asking a lot for us to be like "This app should be able to stay on top of what's getting out and what's not" ... As much as we need the business of TikTok to be on top of it, we do also have to keep in mind that we have to trust people to be able to be honest and not predators as well. - @crispinion

On the other hand, @crispinion emphasizes the inherently social nature of the app and assigns responsibility to the users. This is a common narrative for social media platforms who typically characterize themselves as neutral mediators of communication. However, from these findings, it is clear that the creator-consumers' discourse of *TikTok as Big Brother* reflects the power dynamics operating between creator-consumers, end-users, brands and the social media platform, exhibiting the platform's immense ability to shape, control and moderate the content and users as they deem appropriate.

6 Discussion

In the following chapter, we present a discussion of the previously identified socially constructed discourses. The discussion is held in close relation to the literature presented in *Chapter 3 Literature Review* and guided by the theories presented in *Chapter 2 Theoretical Lens*, thus situating and associating the findings within the context of the critical marketing literature. The chapter is divided into the subheadings of *Passive Co-creation, Brands: What's Mine is Yours* as well as *TikTok: What's Mine is Yours*.

6.1 Passive Co-creation

The creator-consumers' discourses about TikTok are consistent with Fuchs' (2021) postulation about technology enabling integrated sociality on social media platforms. When the creator-consumers publish their UGC, they are using the sociality form of cognition. The UGC becomes popular when users engage with it, precipitating the sociality form of communication. Still, the cooperation sociality form is the form that we are most interested in. Cooperation, or co-creation as we refer to it, occurs to a great extent on TikTok because of the affordances related to using and sharing sounds. The sound bar functions as a signifier, in line with Thornton (2019)'s description, providing the user with an action potential, as described by (Majchrzak & Markus, 2013). The action potential affords users to appropriate another user's sound in their own content. Affordances are innately relational and simply provide users with an opportunity. Therefore, TikTok's sound affordance provides an opportunity for brands to co-create. Affordances do not, however, determine in what ways brands can co-create. This is entirely contingent on the brand's perspective, concurring with Treem and Leonardi's (2013) claim about affordances depending on the perspective.

Through Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004b) DART model, we have been able to identify how the process of co-creation on TikTok differs from what the co-creation literature has previously presented. According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004b), co-creation assumes that there is a continuous dialogue between the consumer and the brand, which ensures that consumers more easily can communicate their opinions of the brand. Rokka and Canniford (2016) as well as

Rosenthal and Brito (2016) similarly illustrate how consumers on social media can create brand meaning through active contribution and active dialogue. The most crucial aspect of the dialogue is therefore that the consumer is willing to contribute (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b). As observed on TikTok, the creator-consumers are exhibiting their willingness by actively choosing to make their content public and thus eligible to be appropriated by others. With this simple act, the creator-consumers open themselves and their content up to the possibility of being appropriated by a brand. On the other hand, contrary to Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004b) requirement of co-creation, the creator-consumers on TikTok are not afforded the ability to dictate what brands they enter into a dialogue with. Instead, they are subject to be used by any brand that selects them. The creator-consumer's willingness only stretches as far as the initial decision to publish their UGC.

Typically, Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004b) supposition of rules of engagement, within the dialogue building block, would dictate how the communication between a brand and creator-consumer would occur. Normally, copyright would provide some rules as to how co-creation should occur regarding both ownership and compensation; however, copyright seems to be extraneous on TikTok. In some way, the creator-consumers perceive a loss of ownership of their UGC from the moment they publish it on TikTok. Therefore, none of the typical rules of copyright on social media are in play. There are no rules of engagement stated in the Terms of Service or the Community Guidelines that require brands to ask for consent before appropriating UGC. Nor is there a social contract in place that dictates what type of dialogue is expected. Without any explicit or implicit rules of engagement in regards to co-creation, the creator-consumers displayed a sense of uncertainty regarding how they believe the process should look. Additionally, the same uncertainty seems to taint brands' approaches to co-creation, as they, according to our creator-consumers, are not consistent in their approaches.

According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004b), dialogue is not possible without granting the consumer access and transparency. Unlike the co-creation that occurs on social media where consumers can access co-creation possibilities through tagging, liking and commenting (Rokka & Canniford, 2016; Rosenthal & Brito, 2017b), we cannot identify the same access to co-creation on TikTok. Creator-consumers cannot themselves choose to interact at a specific time as the interactions are initiated by the brands as in the firm-centric marketing logic, as described by

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a). Moreover, the co-creation experience assumes that brands will communicate transparently about their business to the consumer (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b). For brands using co-creation on TikTok, the findings showed that there is no need for transparency. Rather, brands can capitalize on the information asymmetry in that the creator-consumers do not know the value of their UGC. The cost for the brand to produce social media content with UGC is much lower than producing their own branded social media content. Appropriating UGC is more beneficial for brands, according to Holt (2016) and Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) who claim that targeting 'art worlds' and blending in with users is proven to be the most successful social media strategy. Therefore, it is both cheaper and more beneficial for brands to capitalize on the information asymmetry and subsequent lack of transparency on TikTok.

The risk aspect of DART relates to brands shifting the burden of the risk to the co-creating consumer (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b). Co-creation on TikTok exemplifies this building block of co-creation well, as by using a creator-consumer's UGC, the brand can shift the burden of the brand image to the creator-consumer. The creator-consumer will then carry the risk of a potential blunder if the audiences do not respond positively to the brand's version of the UGC. Furthermore, as more users appropriate the UGC, the risk is further divided between an even larger group of users. Still, the brand can extract the majority of the value since if they utilize the UGC after it has already been circulated by users, they minimize their risk further.

Due to the varying interpretations of the affordance, the non-existent rules of engagement and the information asymmetry, co-creation seems to proceed differently on TikTok. Contrary to expectations, on TikTok, co-creation is possible without the creator-consumer's willingness and ability to actively contribute to the brand image. This is because willingness on TikTok materializes peculiarly. By using the discourse of *We Signed Up for This*, the creator-consumers are consenting to the potential of their UGC being appropriated. However, the findings show that the creator-consumers did not perceive that they had the capabilities to selectively choose what brands they would like to co-create value with. Because of the inconsistency in control, we conceptualize *passive co-creation*, as seen from the perspective of the creator-consumer. The creator-consumers agree to the potential UGC appropriation, but not to specific co-creation activities.

6.2 Brands: What's Mine is Yours

A possible explanation for why brands choose to engage in co-creation with UGC is found in the creator-consumer's discourse of *The Non-ad is the Best Ad*. The brands' decisions can partially be explained by Holt's (2016) theory of 'crowdcultures'. Holt (2016) identified that what generates the greatest effects for brands is to target the unique outputs of 'crowdcultures' such as UGC, to stand out from other generically branded content. 'Crowdcultures' on TikTok are represented by the communities of digitally native creator-consumers who are well-versed in the TikTok language. Co-creating with UGC from the 'crowdcultures' gives brands a direct line of communication with the end-user. The result is that the brand appears to be more authentic, which is crucial because consumers are increasingly reflexive and critical of brands' motives (Holt, 2002). The creator-consumers proved to be more accepting of co-creation with their UGC if it was in line with the original meaning of the UGC. In congruence with Holt's (2016) claims about 'crowdcultures', brands that are literate in 'crowdcultures' seem most authentic. The penetration of 'crowdcultures' allows brands to hide their commercial intentions, hence the creator-consumer's description of branded content as non-ads. This is the successful exploitation of the creator-consumer's labor that affords brands the highly valuable asset of an authentic brand image.

As brands connect their value creation process with creator-consumers, they can piggyback on the creator-consumer's knowledge, creativity and networks (Merz, Zarantonello & Grappi, 2018). Since the creator-consumers are highly knowledgeable about the TikTok community, exhibit a fanbase-like network, and exhibit their creativity in their UGC, brands can gather these positive spillover effects through co-creation. The exchange value-generating stages in the value creation process that brands have given creator-consumers partial responsibility for are the marketing and advertising stages. Through this process of outsourcing, brands can invest fewer resources in generating ideas, as they instead can leverage the creator-consumer's UGC. From the improved brand image, which is generated through the user's approval of the brand's ability to tap into the demographic and culture of TikTok, surplus value is generated. However, the laborers are excluded from benefiting from the surplus value within capitalist ideology, as explained by Humphreys and Grayson (2008).

The end-users play an important role in the co-creation process too, especially for the brands. By consuming the brand's co-created content, for example, by commenting, liking and sharing, end-users are employing immaterial labor. The end-user's immaterial labor then produces an ethical surplus, which can take the shape of an emotional involvement around the brand that was not there before (Lazzarato, 1997, cited in Arvidsson, 2005). The ethical surplus is highly beneficial to the brand as they can absorb the surplus value from both the creator-consumers and the end-users of TikTok.

The discourses of *Minimum Wage* and *The Non-ad is the Best Ad* leave us to identify the two-sided nature of consumer exploitation in regard to creator-consumers, as highlighted by Arvidsson (2005). First, the creator-consumers are exploited because they are not fairly financially compensated for their labor. TikTok's Terms of Service or Creator Marketplace does not enforce any rules of engagement that could dictate the extent to which brands should financially compensate the creator-consumers when co-creating with their UGC. Since it is both easier, cheaper and more beneficial to use the affordances in place and co-create with UGC than to begin a partnership or endorsement of a creator-consumer, brands choose this method of advertising. Second, as a brand's reputation grows, partially as a result of the positive effects of the co-creation process, Arvidsson (2005) and Bonsu and Darmody (2008) argue that the same consumers will then be forced to pay a premium price for the services of the brand, exploiting the labor of the consumers further. According to Holt (2002), brands must convince the consumers of their authenticity to succeed in the postmodern branding paradigm. As the discourse of *The Non-ad is the Best Ad* has shown, the creator-consumers approve of such social media strategies and therefore it is likely that the brands could begin to successfully charge a price premium as their brand grows.

Even though much of the critical literature stream surrounding co-creation discusses how consumers are exploited by brands' co-creative process (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008; Cova, Dalli & Zwick, 2011, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008; Humphreys & Grayson, 2008), the discourses show that only a small share of the creator-consumers acknowledge this. Unexpectedly, some creator-consumers perceived a more equal exchange, possibly due to them experiencing self-improvement by developing skills and competencies through co-creation, as explained by Robert, Hughes and Kerto (2014). This finding aligns with Terranova's (2000) description of how

platforms offer consumers the opportunity to communicate and exchange in return for their digital labor. Thus the creator-consumers must not necessarily feel exploited, rather, they experience the exchange as fair. Some creator-consumers rationalize the brand's appropriation of their UGC with the discourse of *Free Advertising* because they see increases in their views and followers, similar to what Muñiz and Schau (2007) described as temporary celebrity status. In line with Foucault's (1991a) theories on governmentality, brands have successfully governed the consumers to believe that they should desire being co-created with.

Still, the most reflexive creator-consumers were critical of brands' co-creative behaviors. They understood that the brands were profiting from the surplus value created through their digital labor. Therefore, they wished for compensation proportional to their invested labor, as well as acknowledgment, in the form either gaining consent or giving credit, from the brand that their content was a product of the creator-consumer's labor. However, when the brands asked for consent, the creator-consumers were rather surprised since it is not the culture of TikTok, as shown in the *We Signed Up for This* discourse. When a brand asks for consent, they are allotting the creator-consumer some control of their content, similar to the privileges that copyright otherwise would have afforded them (Burgess & Green, 2018). However, since the process of gaining consent cannot impede the brands from using the UGC, consent is only an acknowledgment that gives the creator-consumers an illusion of freedom and choice, as explained by Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody (2008).

The other form of acknowledgment, giving additional credit, is related to the creator-consumers rationalizing the exploitative nature of co-creation. Many of the creator-consumers consider TikTok a great place to market themselves, as established in the *Free Advertising* discourse. Co-creating consumers perceive such publicity as the first type of use value, as reported by Fuchs (2014). The creator-consumers described brands giving additional credit as superfluous because the features on TikTok already generate automatic credit to the creator of the sound or video. Thus, TikTok bestows brands with the unique value proposition of avoiding the traditional lengthy and complex process of gaining rights to creative material. According to the creator-consumers, as long as the brands use the sound affordance, they are pleased with the acknowledgment and

publicity they receive. This relates to governmentality as the brands have shaped what creator-consumers now believe is the correct approach relating to the appropriation of UGC.

Interestingly, even though the reflexive creator-consumers seemed aware of the exploitative situation, no action was taken to change the situation. Consumers were able to justify their decisions to remain on TikTok with the discourse of *We Signed Up for This*. The discourse exhibits how the creator-consumers are affording TikTok the right to perform direct governance, as characterized by Giesler and Veresiu (2014), although some more consciously than others.

6.3 TikTok: What's Mine is Yours

As with all other social media platforms, TikTok was built to efficiently steer and absorb consumers' immaterial labor (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). A possible explanation of the original goal of social media platforms can be found in governmentality since governmentality aims to steer how people conduct themselves (Gordon, 1991). Through the platform's affordances and functions, it is exceptionally easy for consumers to collaborate and use others' UGC. TikTok has also created a space for brands to directly use creator-consumer's labor in their marketing activities, made it revolutionarily simple to do so and enabled the exploitation of consumers, all by governing to create and shape their aspirations (Chomsky, 2017). Therefore, from a Marxist perspective, co-creation, as defined by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000; 2004a; 2004b), highlights the exploitation of consumers since the surplus value generated from the creator-consumer's labor value is not fairly compensated, implying exploitation.

What is clear when looking at the co-creation process on TikTok, is that through the creator-consumer's unpaid digital labor, UGC is generated and it is the UGC that constructs TikTok's value as a platform. Through the creator-consumer's labor, the platform is becoming increasingly enjoyable for all users, following the growing number and quality of users and content. First, TikTok's system functions because they are employing the users to improve their own experiences and personalize their 'For You' pages by consuming the content on the platform. The users are actively teaching the algorithm how to classify and predict what content should show up next on their 'For You' page. As Vargo & Lusch (2004) argue, the S-D logic meant that the role of the firm was to provide the consumer with a desirable experience. Previously, it would have been the

firm's responsibility to provide a personalized experience to the consumer (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). However, TikTok has shifted the burden of this exchange value-generating stage in the value chain to the consumer. In essence, TikTok exploits the consumer's digital labor by burdening them with creating their own desirable user experience. In contrast to the scholarship identified by Fuchs (2014) that does not classify unpaid digital labor as productive, our findings show that consumption is a productive action as it generates a surplus value. With this logic, the surplus value arises from the users personalizing their own 'For You' pages, providing the algorithm with data points, resulting in TikTok's immense popularity and positive reputation, as seen in *The Famed Algorithm* discourse. TikTok absorbs the surplus value that Marxist ideology believes should be dedicated to the digital laborers; thus, for all intents and purposes exploiting their users' labor.

When end-users are engaging with content through actions like commenting, liking and tagging (Rosenthal & Brito, 2016), content is consistently improved with each interaction. This aligns with Lazzarato (1996)'s concept of immaterial labor as the interactions exemplify the construction of the social context surrounding content production on TikTok. The social context of content production on TikTok is directly influenced by interactions as these reflect community building, which the creator-consumers are stimulated by. The discourse of *Warm and Fuzzy* illustrated the great value placed on the sense of community and belonging on TikTok. Thus, immaterial labor arises from the creator-consumer's ability to produce the surplus value. The surplus value is shaped through socialization, interactions and community building, which also highlights TikTok's colossal ability to responsabilize a creator-consumer to shape the community and govern their desires and needs necessary to maintain the community, aligning with the theory presented by Giesler and Veresiu (2014). Nevertheless, TikTok is the party that can capitalize on the surplus value.

The discourse of *The Competitive Nature of Content Creation* illustrates the creator-consumer's common experience of pressure to produce high-quality creative outputs. With TikTok's increasing popularity, the creator-consumers must invest more time and labor to ensure their survival on the platform, similar to what Nieborg and Poell (2018) describe as the result of algorithmic content curation. The creator-consumers perceive the pressure as self-imposed;

however, according to Giesler and Veresiu (2014), this is an effect of governmentality where the creator-consumer feels socially and morally responsible for their own and the platform's success. As a part of this process, TikTok also governs the creator-consumers to align their creativity with what they believe to be suitable against the algorithm, to achieve what TikTok has shaped them to believe is desirable. Therefore, the creator-consumers are unknowingly prompted by TikTok to engage in 'rapid cultural prototyping' to preserve their current competitive advantage on the platform. The result of 'rapid cultural prototyping' is the content of superior cultural accuracy and quality. However, the *Minimum Wage* discourse related to the Creator Fund confirms what Humphreys and Grayson (2008) claim about the nature of capitalism. TikTok is once again absorbing the surplus value from the superior content, and unjustly compensating the creator-consumers who are the true laborers.

As shown through the creator-consumers' discourses, we can observe that the user community on TikTok is investing their digital and immaterial labor in the direction of the co-creation process. Through a more entertaining 'For You' page filled with culturally relevant content and interactions, every user's individual experience is improved as well as the experiences of all the other users. Additionally, TikTok is the party that absorbs the surplus value through their increasing ability to attract users, which according to Nieborg and Poell (2018) is the network effect. By commodifying the users' labor and with a constantly growing user base, TikTok can attract more advertisers, resulting in direct financial gains based on the user's labor. Advertisers are attracted because TikTok can show ads to increasingly more specific demographics as they can collect more data points on the users when the users spend more time on the platform. Consequently, TikTok gains financial benefits as a direct result of the consumer's unpaid labor and surplus value, which according to Arvidsson (2005) is one perspective of consumer exploitation. TikTok is capitalizing on surveillance and consumer participation and these actions concur with Jenkins, Ford and Green's (2013) list of how platforms typically build their business models, suggesting that TikTok's actions are not unique and instead these actions are prevalent in the social media landscape.

Prior studies show that consumers are motivated to co-create by financial incentives (Roberts, Hughes & Kertbo, 2014). In 2021, TikTok launched the Creator Fund to financially compensate

and motivate the creator-consumers (TikTok, 2020). However, the discourse on *Minimum Wage* shows that the creator-consumers believe the Creator Fund does not compensate them fairly. Per the Marxist critique of capitalism, TikTok is reaping the creative labor of the creator-consumers at a fraction of the cost. TikTok's deficient monetization model is a direct reflection of how they value their creator-consumers' digital labor. Moreover, the requirements to join the Creator Fund make monetary compensation a privilege that not all creator-consumers are offered. Also, creator-consumers who become eligible only after their UGC became popular, cannot receive financial compensation retroactively. The hobbyist creator-consumers are particularly affected by this since they are less likely to actively seek fame and virality with their UGC and therefore also less likely to become eligible for the Creator Fund. This then signals to the hobbyists that their immaterial labor is not equally valued in the eyes of TikTok. Only need-driven creator-consumers who perform regularly will be paid for their labor. Seemingly, TikTok is encouraging full-time labor and loyalty and neglecting the occasional TikTok user.

Because of the lack of financial compensation available from the Creator Fund, TikTok's very structure obligates creator-consumers to find alternative income sources. One of these sources, as found in the *Minimum Wage* discourse, is for the creator-consumers to engage or partner with brands. This can be interpreted as TikTok governing the creator-consumers to become responsabilized and find their own solutions. Creator-consumers find alternative solutions through the process of rationalizing, as seen in multiple discourses. Rationalizing epitomizes TikTok's successful exercise of governmentality over their creator-consumers. *The Famed Algorithm* discourse manifests the supposedly democratic nature of TikTok. The creator-consumers were both impressed and grateful to be afforded the potential of being promoted by the algorithm in TikTok users' 'For You' pages, as delineated in the *Free Advertising* discourse. TikTok is also a platform where they can engage in pleasurable pastimes with the *Warm and Fuzzy* community, as TikTok allows them to network and become inspired by others. With these rationalizations, the creator-consumers were willing to forgo financial compensation. However, Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody (2008) associate the creator-consumer's willingness to forgo compensation with the illusion of freedom. TikTok is governing the creator-consumers in such a way that the creator-consumers believe that the *Warm and Fuzzy* and *Free Advertising* rationalizing discourses are mutually beneficial for both parties. The creator-consumers are inherently optimistic as they

discuss TikTok as full of opportunities, when in reality they are limited, as outlined by Boellstorff (2008), within and according to TikTok's predetermined vision.

It cannot be denied that much of the scholarship surrounding Web 2.0 highlights the incorrect labeling of digital labor as exploitation (Terranova, 2000; Fuchs, 2014; Barbrook, 2003). In this way, the social relations that the platform provides for the creator-consumers cannot be replaced with financial means (Fuchs, 2021), and the *Warm and Fuzzy* discourse presents that the creator-consumers find immense pleasure in communication and mutual exchange. On the other hand, this pleasure can also be affiliated with governmentality since TikTok may have succeeded in modifying the creator-consumers' desires and needs. TikTok willingly provides a platform for social exchange, but they will not provide fair financial compensation, inducing their use of governmentality strategies to construct the creator-consumers' attitudes and values.

Although there are many ways that TikTok is implicitly governing the creator-consumers, the discourse of *The Policing of Content and Users* indicated that there are some techniques of control that are explicit too. On TikTok, there is a system in place in the form of a moderation system, that upholds the hierarchical power relationships between the actors. In line with Chander and Krishnaumurthy's (2018) claims about the platform's neutrality, the discourse illustrates how TikTok is openly acknowledging that they are managing the platform's users. Giesler and Veresiu (2014) describe this act as the direct governance of consumers. The creator-consumers use the discourse to describe how TikTok enacts their disciplinary powers to regulate and remove their accounts and content, despite not having breached any Community Guidelines. The information asymmetry as well as lack of transparency and communication from TikTok's side also signals the power dynamics in play between the creator-consumer and the platform.

7 Conclusion

The concluding chapter of this study is divided into four parts. First, we revisit the purpose of the study and summarize the discussion. Then we present the study's theoretical contribution and some practical implications for the stakeholders. Last, we elaborate on the study's limitations and suggest future research that could complement our findings.

This study aimed to examine the co-creation process regarding the relationships between the creator-consumers, brands, social media platforms and end-users, by identifying multiple socially constructed discourses that creator-consumers use to make sense of their experiences. Through the discourses, we see that creator-consumers are essentially telling brands and TikTok *What's Mine is Yours*.

TikTok and brands have been able to provide the creator-consumers some form of exchange, enticing them to willingly and voluntarily contribute their UGC and digital labor that they are well aware can be effortlessly used in brands' co-creative practices. The exchange concerns how TikTok and brands have persuaded creator-consumers that the value of community and expression far surpasses the value of financial compensation and copyright protections. This is the direct outcome of exercising governmentality, and the inherent nature of capitalism. It seems that TikTok was never meant to be a neutral mediator between users because the affordances were consciously designed to foster co-creation. Marketing literature has established that co-creation generates profit for the firms that enact it. TikTok creates the illusion of freedom because the illusion is a tool that can aid them in capitalizing on users' sociality and interactions, as is common in the participatory culture of the Internet and Web 2.0. Nowadays, UGC functions as an abundant source of culture that brands can tap into. By appropriating UGC, the brand accesses the 'crowdculture' and can then convince the end-users of their authenticity. Co-creation is therefore an advantageous tool to increase brand identification and loyalty, as well as to generate a competitive advantage. TikTok is simply the new context where brands are afforded great ease and ability to do this. In essence, TikTok has given brands a *carte blanche* to leverage the creator-consumer's resources; therefore, it seems that the power asymmetry is greater than ever before.

7.1 Theoretical Contribution

The study demonstrates that there is a significant gap in the literature on co-creation relating to the stakeholders' dynamics. Since the affordances and culture of Web 2.0 are allowing new strategies of co-creation to be implemented by brands and platforms, the relationships between the four stakeholders become increasingly relevant as co-creation is evolving. Overall, this study strengthens the critical marketing literature stream relating to co-creation (Arvidsson, 2005; Cova, Dalli & Zwick, 2011; Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Humphreys & Grayson, 2008), by providing a more detailed characterization of the power dynamics in play. Specifically, the depiction of the social media platform as more than a medium as well as the portrayal of the end-user as a validating recipient of the brand's appropriation of UGC, complement what was previously known about the brand and consumer dyad.

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), the introduction of social media greatly shifted the power dynamics. This shift is supposedly bestowing the consumer with more power to contribute to brand meaning (Rosenthal & Brito, 2017b), at times even succeeding at creating a doppelgänger brand image (Rokka & Canniford, 2016). However, our findings show that social media has shifted the power back to the brands. Despite the creator-consumers demonstrating some willingness through their initial decisions to publicly post their UGC on the platform, they are not consenting to specific co-creation activities with specific brands. Therefore, this is the first study, to our knowledge, to examine what we conceptualize as *passive co-creation*. The passive nature is exhibited in the lack of continuous dialogue between the consumer and brand. Brands can freely select from what the consumers have contributed to the social media platform to co-create with, and the consumer cannot control the process. *Passive co-creation* both expands and contradicts what Parahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) and Vargo and Lusch (2004) present as the service-dominant and customer-centric co-creation paradigm, as well as what Holt (2002) states about the sovereignty of consumers in the postmodern paradigm. Taken together, these findings suggest that the social media climate is still rather firm-centric and consumer sovereignty rather minimal. Through the enactment of indirect governance, social media platforms and brands are becoming better at disguising their commercial interests and exploitative intentions.

7.2 Practical Implications

From a managerial perspective, this study has provided a practical implication for the brands using TikTok. The brand managers can, through the process of co-creation, generate value for the brand by appropriating the digital and unpaid labor of creator-consumers. Brands must consider how they define their intellectual property and the extent to which they can claim ownership of branded content that was created with a creator-consumer's sound. As creator-consumers are beginning to consider co-creation as exploitative, they may begin to question the brand's intentions, resulting in potential negative reputational effects. Similar to Holt's (2002) claim about authenticity extinction, the creator-consumers are becoming more aware and reflexive of the brand's true motivations in co-creating. Therefore, brands may consider employing a social media manager who is literate in the reflexive 'crowdcultures', as this would allow them to avoid an exploitative and overly controlling brand image.

This study has raised important questions about the scope of TikTok's involvement in the consumer and brand relationship of the process of co-creation on social media. From the discourses, we have observed that the creator-consumers are blaming TikTok for the exploitative nature of co-creation to a greater extent than they are brands. As the creator-consumers are assigning a lot of responsibility to the platform, blame is directed toward TikTok for the minimal financial compensation from the Creator Fund as well as the unclear communication that follows TikTok's moderation of content and users. If TikTok is overly controlling, they especially risk discouraging hobbyists from contributing UGC to the platform, as Shah (2006) found was the case with hobbyist open-source developers. The seriousness of this critique and risk should not be neglected because the creator-consumers, with their dual role as both content generators and consumers of the platform, represent the motor behind TikTok's rapid success and growth. Thus, another practical implication is that TikTok can no longer hide behind the guise of a neutral mediator and must acknowledge their active role as the manager of the TikTok community.

7.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This research aimed to provide insights into the discourses used by creator-consumers in describing their experiences in the co-creation process. However, given the limited time and scope of the thesis, we encountered some possible limitations. One limitation of this study is that the

sample included mainly United States-based creator-consumers and United States-based brands. As these findings may not be generalizable across all markets and cultures, cross-cultural validity cannot be ensured. Therefore, extending the sample to include creator-consumers and brands from more countries in future research could result in different findings.

Furthermore, a possible limitation relates to how applicable the discourses are in other social media settings. The above analysis does not allow us to conclude whether the phenomenon of the passive co-creator exists on other platforms where different actors and affordances are operating. Therefore, future studies would benefit from establishing if the relationships between the stakeholders result in similar discourses to those found in this study and are thus transferable to co-creation on other social media platforms.

The main limitation of this study is that only the perspective of the creator-consumer was investigated. The choice of including only one perspective leaves several questions to be resolved, in particular how the other users perceive the relationships between the stakeholders. Primarily, we believe the end-users could provide an intriguing perspective. By engaging with and validating the brand's social media accounts and co-creation processes, end-users are employing productive consumption; thus, they also play a key role in co-creation on social media platforms.

The introduction of TikTok's Creator Marketplace certainly warrants investigation. The introduction is hinting at how TikTok is following suit of its social media predecessors like Instagram and Facebook, where brands are consistently taking more space on the platform. Thus, it would be interesting to follow and see how the inevitable commercialization of the platform changes the value of co-creation and the subsequent relationships. It is possible that the Creator Marketplace changes what the study identified as *passive co-creation* since enabling a direct line of communication between creator-consumers and brands in the Creator Marketplace would imply that co-creation on TikTok could increasingly match how Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004b) describe the building blocks of transparency and dialogue.

The final suggestion for future research is the potential effects of TikTok's privacy policy, which has largely been under criticism. According to Tidy and Galer (2020, n.p.), TikTok gathers data

such as users' locations, phone models, phone operating systems as well as "keystroke rhythms when people type" and "which videos are watched and commented on". The United States' national security reviewed TikTok because of the allegation that ByteDance was providing the Chinese government with their users' data (O'Brien, 2021). Therefore, future research could focus on why TikTok's popularity is rising despite their reputation of consumer surveillance.

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Appendix

Appendix I - Interview Guide

Introduction of participant

1. Tell us about yourself.
2. In general, describe your relationship with social media.

Relationship with TikTok

3. Describe your relationship with the social media platform TikTok.
4. In what ways does TikTok differ from other social media?
5. What kind of content do you create on TikTok?
6. What made you start creating content on TikTok?
7. Can you describe your reasons for why you created your sound on TikTok?

The main topic of the interview

8. Can you tell us about how you created your sound?
9. Can you tell us about how it then went viral on TikTok?
10. Can you recall some accounts that have used your sound on TikTok?

Repurposing of sound

11. Tell me about a time when your content was repurposed in a way you did not appreciate.
 - a. Why did you not appreciate that specific account repurposing your content?
12. Tell me about a time when your content was repurposed in a positive way.
 - a. Why did you appreciate that specific account repurposing your content?
13. Do you prefer certain types of accounts using your sound on TikTok?
14. In general, what are your thoughts about other creators using your sound on TikTok?
15. What are your thoughts about brand accounts using your sound on TikTok?
16. Did you know that [brand account] used your sound on TikTok? How do you feel about that?

Appendix II - Consent Form

I have been given information about this research project about the social media platform TikTok by Amanda Bjerkli Olsson and/or Jessica Jinzhi Liu who are conducting this research as a part of a Master's in International Marketing and Brand Management supervised by Sofia Ulver.

By signing, through Scrive, I am indicating my consent to participate in the research as it has been described to me.

- I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.
- I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for thesis and journal publications, and I consent for it to be used in that manner.
- I understand that I can decide whether I want my identifiable information to be anonymized, or not, in the research paper.