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Playing Through the Motions: A Stylistic Analysis of Brand Identity on TikTok

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Thesis of Anthony Laboriel

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Nova Southeastern University
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

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PLAYING THROUGH THE MOTIONS: A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF BRAND IDENTITY
ON TIKTOK

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Anthony Laboriel

Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

Department of Communication, Media, and the Arts

Nova Southeastern University

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ABSTRACT

The short-form video-sharing application TikTok has blossomed from a standard piece of social media into the multi-use platform known in households around the world. A consideration of how brand identities are created in online spaces has much to offer scholars in communication studies and rhet/comp. This project examines how brand identity and audiences are formed through analyzing successful brands and the content they post. My research applies a stylistic analysis, drawing from theories proposed by Ethan Bresnick, Donald Murray, and Carolyn Mae Kim, to observe five well known pages on TikTok: Chipotle, the National Basketball Association (NBA), Netflix, The Washington Post, and the children's network Nickelodeon. The thesis focuses on how these pages utilize components of play. To illustrate this, I draw upon Bresnick's theory of "intensified play," connecting the intensification of contemporary cinematic techniques to the changing characteristics of play on mobile devices. In essence, I argue that our field lacks the specificity to discuss TikTok when regarding identity building on social media. This thesis expands upon the theory of intensified play and highlights the importance of the application when building one's brand.

Keywords: Social Media, Composition, Rhetoric, Digital Media, TikTok, Intensified Play

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Introduction

This thesis explores how brand identities are formed and communicated via TikTok. A consideration of how brand identities are created in online spaces has much to offer scholars in communication studies and rhetoric and composition. Through looking at the brand identities of popular accounts and the content posted we can find which techniques aid in generating higher audience awareness, uncovering which design choices appeal to said audiences when considering multimodal content. Unlike other social media platforms, TikTok appeals to a younger generation and allows for interactive and collaborative content, using templates, effects and editing tools generally found and used in film. Brand identities—as communicated through TikTok—are related to play. For an illustration of this, I draw upon Bresnick’s theory of intensified play, connecting the intensification of contemporary cinematic techniques to the changing characteristics of play on mobile devices. In this thesis, I will demonstrate the importance of play in building brand identity with an analysis of five major brands’ on TikTok. From these case studies, I suggest that play has a significant impact on building a brand identity through using techniques normally seen in film to be used for content posted on TikTok, pushing for rhetorically appealing content. This thesis offers stylistic techniques to use when posting content on TikTok, stemming from a “Design Choice Matters” frame of thought composing multimodal projects and being aware of your audience generates higher quality content.

Social Media has altered the landscape of composition studies, becoming a commonplace for companies, marketers, celebrities, influencers, and many others attempting to gain a following through building themselves a brand identity through new media. With the growth of the Internet and social media marketing continuing to be a normal facet of life, the act of using various platforms to create has not only opened opportunities for many but has also given social

media a purpose other than casual connections with friends and family. “With more mobile devices connected to the Internet than there are people in the world, the impact of social media is felt in every facet of culture” (Bennett, 2013, as cited in Kim,2016). Companies have stuck with traditional social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and even Youtube for brand growth over the past several years. As stated by Shivam Devgan, the active number of social media users has passed the 3.8 billion mark towards the end of 2019; with Facebook, Instagram and YouTube as some of the “more popular” platforms all reaching above 1 billion monthly active users (MAU). We now reach our current dilemma, how can users and companies utilize social media to stay fresh, stand out and continue to reach communities, truly engaging with the consumers of their brand. “As social media has developed as a platform, and organizations have matured in their approach to social media engagement, the methodology to using social media as a platform also needs to change” (Kim,2016). As a scholar hailing from Gen Z, I propose the use of a newer medium for building a brand, the app TikTok. With 500 million MAU and counting, the use of TikTok for building one’s brand has been relatively dismal. Users have not yet fully grasped the use of the app while the uses for the application grow. Looking at TikTok as an envisionment, away from the applications original purpose we as a field can acquire the specificity to discuss the uses of TikTok when building a brand identity, through an analysis of stylistics. The platform being relatively new in comparison to other forms of social media is being shortchanged as an opportunity that is slowing ticking away as companies are failing to “do TikTok” correctly. Our current question “how does one TikTok?”. A common thought when creating social media campaigns, as companies begin to uncover the usefulness of the application on their marketing practices. Finding out how to utilize TikTok through analyzing the style of successful company pages and studying what attracts an audience to their pages, we may find the

stylistic choices that push a company's success on TikTok while discovering best practices for users to fully grasp the application.

Research Statement

We lack the specificity to discuss composing regarding new media and technology based off the lack new scholarship provided. Composition studies has underutilized TikTok as a means for composing. This thesis investigates the stylistic choices made by major brands to build an identity through the app.

More specifically, this study aims to provide knowledge on the best practices when composing on TikTok, through conducting a stylistic analysis of five of the most popular pages on TikTok. TikTok promotes the sense of user generated content through short videos ranging from a few seconds to a whole minute. These videos and the pages in which they inhabit use strategies of “intensified play”, for interacting and collaborating with audiences and in turn generate a great number of viewers. However, as a field we have not yet fully considered TikTok in our conversations about multimodal composing. This thesis moves to contribute a better understanding of the marketing, branding, stylistic choices, and interaction with audiences on the short video platform, TikTok, using these research questions to focus the research:

- Which stylistic choices promote success when marketing/composing on TikTok? What separates TikTok from other social media?
- How are companies using style to enhance their brand identity? What stylistic features are they using?
- What does it mean to look at TikTok as a “virtual playground,” through the lens of “intensified play”?

Background Information

With many active social media platforms, the means to compose vary from platform to platform. The current and most popular platform is the short video sharing service named TikTok. Founded in 2012, and later making an official debut in 2016, the video sharing social networking service has gained a major amount of traction within the last couple of years. Although the app is new in comparison to other social media platforms, the components of composition that make up the content posted on TikTok are all pieces of our field that have been created using technology. “With more accessible social media and communication technologies, many knowledge related activities, such as learning and sharing, are taking place in online communities, introducing new forms of collaborative platforms” (Dron & Anderson, 2014). Looking at TikTok as an “envisionment” away from its originally intended use (Yancey, Blake, and McElroy, 2017) I plan to use the social media platform as a ground for analysis, uncovering the most effective stylistic choices for making a formidable TikTok page for a company marketing themselves on the app and, with that, putting together a best practice set needed in order to create effective pages. The assemblage of not only the many differing cultures and communities on the app but also observing how the means of composing have changed based on the integration of technology and how one may go about learning and reproducing content seen on TikTok. Social media throughout the last two decades has gained traction not only in marketing and mass media but also within composition studies, “over the past 15 years, digital media platforms have revolutionized marketing offering new ways to reach, inform, engage, sell to, learn about and provide service to customers” (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Expanding further than originally intended the use of social media has provided many professions and as the years strut by, more people are engaged with social media as a source of

information, entertainment and killing time. Appearing in 1997 but gaining traction in 2008 (Sajid, 2016) social media has acclimated to our current world's climate becoming more mainstream than ever. Major companies such as Apple, Netflix and Hulu are using social media platforms to share information and market themselves, creating new opportunities to gain recognition through social media. There are many platforms that have been around longer than TikTok, so why would a company use this fresh platform rather than use an already established app? The app supports many of the qualities that the public tend to use other forms of social media for all-in-one convenient application. Through gaining gratification from themes such as personal identity, diversion, surveillance, and personal relations TikTok generates more users on a daily basis with about 90% of users visiting the app more than twice a day (Iqbal, Hussain, Aslam, 2020). Although the age of TikTok has become prominent within the last few years, there are many reasons as to why I have chosen the platform to analyze the choices a company may make when building its identity. With the app's collaborative nature comparatively to other forms of social media and how culturally widespread the app has become as well as the inclusion of those with differing backgrounds and communities, TikTok has risen through the ranks and fought for a spot at the social media table. When speaking on the inclusiveness of the app many users are greeted with a variety of content spread across different cultures and communities. Although this application supports the collaboration of the many, there are still issues with the suppression of content when created by minority groups, the app has faced faults. Nevertheless, as a community the influence of TikTok on our culture has evolved and, in my opinion, I feel a stronger sense of community on the app when comparing it to other mainstream social media platforms especially in terms of authenticity as TikTok thrives on relatable content. The importance of TikTok includes multimodal functions and editing features that can be used to

promote style all while presenting new techniques and choices for creators to express an idea or create meaning (Ex. Video, audio, typography, formatting of visual elements) (Folk, 2013).

Pushing for a “Design Choice Matters” frame of thought

With videos ranging from a few seconds to a minute (Su, 2018, as cited in Zhou, 2019), the platform emphasizes a content generating and sharing community. As TikTok is one of the newer forms of social media many millennials and those in GenZ (Patrick, 2018) have built the platform and grown the community, with about 41% of users between the ages of 16 and 24 ((Iqbal et al., 2020). Although there are many from younger generations that utilize TikTok, the older generations also collaborate using the application, the ages ranging from as young as 13 to 60. Looking at knowledge sharing among the TikTok servers one may see content specializing in the arts, music or even photography. A study lead by Qiyang Zhou explores these knowledge-related activities occurring on TikTok with a focus on learning, practicing, and sharing drawing skills. Zhou touches on the term Web 2.0, which encompasses technologies and services from the internet, including blogs, social network sites, wikis, and communication tools. They all emphasize the sharing of content among users and online collaboration, which makes Web 2.0 a highly interactive and dynamic application platform for fielding new kinds of applications (Murugesan, 2007). Popular applications like Twitter, Instagram, Wikipedia, WhatsApp, and YouTube are all the derivatives of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 enables users to collaboratively create information and conduct knowledge sharing in the Internet community (Darwish & Lakhtaria, 2011). With this kind of collaboration and the amount of knowledge being shifted daily the ground for users begins to surface. With all the knowledge sharing content on the internet, composition studies could analyze TikTok and the importance of stylistic choices in a real-world application of marketing. I personally have not seen a social media platform with as many genres

and communities like TikTok, for those that may not accept TikTok as a forum for marketing, statistics show that knowledge sharing is one of the most popular categories of content on TikTok (CBNData, 2017). Upon further research the categories of shared knowledge include skills ranging from creating to knowledge on common sciences. An example of such would be when the coronavirus began and there were many channels on TikTok not only raising awareness of the virus but also those that shared information on the virus through the app. Analyzing company TikTok pages to find which stylistic choices work regarding using the app for brand identity will aid in forming best practices for users. We can then begin to understand and redefine “new media” (Manovich, 2002).

Literature Review

Web 2.0 and social media

Technology growth encompassing web services, blogs, social networking sites, wikis, and more has aided in the second stage of the World Wide Web. “Web 2.0 harnesses the Web in a more interactive and collaborative manner, emphasizing peers’ social interaction and collective intelligence, and presents new opportunities for leveraging the Web and engaging its users more effectively” (Murugesan, 2007). Applications like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are derivatives of Web 2.0 allowing users to create and share knowledge with the community.

Social media, an aspect of Web 2.0 assists the communication among users and the technology being used to create, resulting in a stronger correlation between the user and the websites. As the term “new media” opens the floor for newer forms of composing/composition, we must understand the importance of this correlation through looking at the growth of new media and how it has ultimately aided in the evolution of Web 2.0. According to Georgescu and Popescul, “Web 2.0 is the infrastructure, the technological foundation which makes possible the Social Media phenomenon.” With Web 2.0 as a base, new media serving as a bridge, and social media taking the helm, the growth of these media is dependent on the amount of User Generated Content (UGC) created, shared, and circulated through them.

Style, Brand Identity, and Multimodality

The way in which we communicate differing ideas across fields starts with a simple thought and is typically expressed in a form of new media, almost like a story being told. Joe Sabias discusses the term “storytelling” and how through time the need for stories has continued constant, but the way in which we tell these stories is constantly evolving. Leading to the expansive use of multimodal content to relay these “stories.” From top to bottom the way in

which we share our stories, create texts, and display our messages has shifted with the ever-present Internet and the need for information to be discernible across all modalities (Gambarato & Dabagian, 2016). For example, within my own graduate program, projects like interactive literature (Twine), podcasts, videos, and even the occasional song production are becoming commonplace. Likewise, I have seen first-hand composition courses that implement similar projects, giving students the technological skills, they may need in their future.

Composing is not only appearing in newer forms but also must be rhetorically appealing, leading to a correlation between style and multimodality. Style and the choices that compositionists make progress the multimodal frame of thought; these choices give the creator power. Digital rhetoric considers how digital forms such as blogs, wikis, texts, and social media have impacted literacies and composing processes (Ray, 2015). Design choices such as color, size, font, etc. matters; digital media sparks an uprising with how we view language by looking through it and looking at it for meaning (Cowen, 2008). Whether it be general aesthetics, following trends, using hashtags, lighting, and angles, and even how one may interact with their audience, style now plays a larger role than it has in the past. The variations in which these multimodal projects appear differ per person and the choices that come with their work slowly forms individual identities as people are now working through the process of composing.

On top of design choice, individuals, marketers, and companies form identities for themselves. For the purpose of this thesis, I limited my scope to major companies utilizing TikTok. Brand identity is the way a company would like to be seen in the eyes of the consumer; they build themselves with an image that fits how they would like to be perceived (Kim, 2016). Through building a strong sense of identity, companies will gain the trust of their audience and produce content befitting their audience. "In today's networked world of social media, however, it

is committed relationships that are the key” (Kim, 2016). Without these working relationships between brand and patron the work put out and the design choices put in would fall on lost eyes and ears. This feeds into the never-ending cycle of input (design choices), output (multimodal projects), and the constant fill from those who align themselves with a company’s brand identity (recognition and gain). Repeat.

Therefore, we are constantly updating how messages, texts and information are displayed. With the growth of social media and the internet, the desire to hold an audience’s attention is imperative for a business to be stable in our climate. Gundlach and Murphy (1993) suggest that trust is the cornerstone of all long-term relationships between organizations and publics. Without trust, relationships erode and eventually disappear. With this cycle companies have been able to succeed on the social media sphere. With the growth in “authentic” storytelling as a branding strategy and companies looking to maintain their image, we look forward to TikTok.

Process and Assemblage

As we move forward in a multimodal era, we shift from a product centered frame of thought to focusing on the process in which we compose. Rather than expecting a product with results right off the bat we are paying more attention to the how the product is made, focusing on detail, and imbuing it with style. While the field has been focused on writing as a process since Donald Murray’s work in the 1970s, the process theory has grown to encompass the many differing way to compose, including multimodal production. From creating an infographic to filming a trailer on posthumanism to creating a digital archive to display projects in an online gallery, the ways in which we create are changing. With the process theory, we can look at composition with the intent of developing critical thinking and shaping one’s authentic voice and

their own conclusions. Looking at TikTok as an envisionment, away from its originally intended use, composition scholars may look at the application as an assemblage of modalities and stylistic properties, with the users all having access to freely create using the application. Broadening our ideas as to how assemblage is framed, we can use TikTok to analyze what works in new media and how to maneuver through this new landscape. By analyzing successful company pages on TikTok, I aim to find out how brands build trust with an audience all while creating and communicating their identities through style.

Methods

Social media experts and companies are underutilizing the benefits of marketing on TikTok. “When organizations realize that social media is not a publicity tool used to plaster information in front of users, but rather a dynamic communication platform to foster two-way relationships in an unscripted environment, they are positioned to truly ignite their social communities” (Kim, 2016). With this function in mind, the question becomes, which stylistic choices promote success when marketing on TikTok and how can a company or marketer use these choices to either create a brand or promote an existing one? For the purposes of this thesis, I chose to analyze the TikTok pages of well-known companies, including streaming service Netflix, the children’s network Nickelodeon and sport pages such as the National Basketball Association (NBA) (See Chart A). Specifically, I analyzed the general aesthetics (lighting, sound, and content quality), the relevance of the content being posted in relation to the audience, the way these companies are interacting with their audience, and the use of hashtags to interact and connect with other audiences. With these aspects of style guiding the research, we can begin to understand the choices that go into creating a successful page, using them for a wide array of composing opportunities and audiences.

These brands, although different in nature and audience, perform well on TikTok and are well known both on and off TikTok. Using a netnographic approach allowed for an unobtrusive way to conduct the analysis of the pages and how these companies approach content creation and audience interaction through the application (Kozinets, 2015). Netnography utilizes the publicly available information shared through social media, bringing in more of the human element back into a disembodied experience. Using aspects from both a quantitative and qualitative approach,

this process focuses on the listening of conversations taking place on the web while analyzing users behaviors and opinions.

Nickelodeon

On TikTok, Nickelodeon can connect with audiences across a broad range of ages, really connecting with those who have grown up with the network while still gaining new followers from the incoming young demographic. With its bright orange color scheme and high value to a “family friendly” audience connection, Nickelodeon thrives on TikTok with the networks posting rate on the application, meaning the frequent number of posts keeps an audience coming back to this page for continued content. Content wise Nickelodeon posts clips from common television shows, has guest celebrities for interviews and a great mix of content ranging in different styles. In terms of analysis Nickelodeon on TikTok is a well-rounded source regarding aesthetics, content, and the techniques employed when posting.

NBA

Shifting to a different type of fanbase, the National Basketball Association (NBA) serves as a connection to the athletic side of TikTok. Thriving with gravity-defying dunks, strong highlights from well-known athletes, and giving their audience funny content, the NBA official TikTok page stands strong in popularity. Their posts create a specific “hype” for games and the stars inside of them. Sticking with trends like dances, and those same dances being performed by the athletes, forms a stronger connection between the audience and the players. Many athletes and stars are using TikTok to form bonds with their audience and the NBA capitalizes on this by posting content that makes the players relatable.

Chipotle

Unlike the other pages analyzed here, this page has more user generated content, meaning most of the posts are created by TikTok users, leading to an almost “free advertising” approach. Sticking to trends and interacting with their audience, Chipotle is consistent with their posting efforts which is extremely important on this platform. Promoting special deals, highlighting people who “cannot resist Chipotle,” and even releasing popular Chipotle “hacks and recipes,” this popular food brand makes its name known on the application.

The Washington Post

As a newspaper, *The Washington Post* does an excellent job on TikTok, posting engaging content that follows a familiar bearded man in many videos on the page, keeping a uniform format to how these videos are produced, people enjoy consistency and though following this format users are continuing to be greeted by a now “familiar face’. Sticking to stories in the news and putting a comedic twist on the acting, *The Washington Post* creates a reliable location to obtain news stories while being entertained, being an informative source of satirical content that embeds itself in the importance of the news.

Netflix

An aesthetic powerhouse Netflix has the entertainment style that thrives on TikTok. Generating content that pokes fun in moments we view through our binging sit downs and even capitalizing on the more “adult” humor Netflix continues to being entertaining content in varied fashion. Through providing promotional release TikToks, featuring talent on well-known shows, and even sharing behind the scenes content, Netflix is a company that thrives on TikTok generating (13.3 million Followers and 195.5Million likes) content in a similar style to the children’s network Nickelodeon. Relying heavily on new releases and streaming content for all

ages, Netflix differs from Nickelodeon in the fact that there is content for all age groups on the page.

Analysis

TikTok Page:	Chipotle	NBA	Netflix	Nickelodeon	The Washington Post
Handle:	@chipotle	@nba	@netflix	@nickelodeon	@washingtonpost
Followers:	1.5 Million	12.5 Million	13.3 Million	11.3 Million	922 Thousand
Likes:	29.1 Million	290.6 Million	195.5 Million	216.4 Million	37.1 Million
Component of Play (MS):	The Sandbox	The Slide	The Swing	The Seesaw	The Swing
Component of Play (Secondary):	The Slide/Swing	The Sandbox/Seesaw	The Slide/Sandbox	The Swing/Slide	The Sandbox/Seesaw
Component of Play (LS):	The Seesaw	The Swing	The Seesaw	The Sandbox	The Slide

Table 1

In Table 1, I highlighted the 5 pages I observed, making note of their number of followers and likes and the “@” handle. The addition of the Components of Play includes the “Most Successful”, the “Least Successful” and the Secondary options when it comes to which brand

better utilizes the components. These were found through an analysis of the pages and the individual TikToks created, comparing the pages and their uses of the components.

I draw upon Ethan Bresnick's concept of "intensified play" as the framework for this analysis of brand identity creation on TikTok. The term "intensified play" originates from the 2019 study, *Intensified Play: Cinematic Study of TikTok mobile app* written by scholar, Ethan Bresnick: viewing TikTok as a "virtual play structure" or "virtual playground." This is meant to serve as a metaphor that likens digital experiences to physical playground experiences. The virtual playground includes video creation and sharing workflows as forms of play. TikTok's features, including in-camera speed controls, image-tracking composites, collaborative split screens, and shortened video timelines, make it a ground for "play." TikTok creates the feeling of intensified play through common cinematic techniques, including jump cuts to set up important shots and quips and editing tools and filters to add extra flair to a video. To illustrate how these "amplified traditional characteristics of play" work, Bresnick introduces four components of play; "the slide," "the sandbox," "the seesaw," and "the swing." Using these techniques as a framework for analysis, we can better understand what attracts an audience to a particular brand identity on TikTok. These components inform my analysis here, by highlighting key aspects of popular pages and identifying what makes them appealing to an audience. This section develops an understanding of Bresnick's four components of play while using them as a lens guiding the analysis. Towards the end of this section, I propose a fifth component of play, "the monkey bars," evolving Bresnick's original framework.

The Slide

Bresnick compares the rate of playback speed to a playground slide. By increasing or altering video/audio speed to a higher or slower pace to fill the time limit of the TikTok format, brands can appeal to their audience with high energy and quick moving content. The “slide” is heavily used by pages like Nickelodeon and the NBA. Bresnick compares this increase of speed to a “race,” saying TikTok videos are animated and cartoon like, mesmerizing audiences with their range of speeds and clear video content. “Slides have a thrill of increased speed separate from other playground equipment and ordinary activities” (Bresnick, 2019).

The NBA TikTok page uses the “slide” technique to speed up behind-the-scenes videos and gravity defying dunks and even slow videos down to highlight players celebrating a record-breaking game. In a video posted on April 14, 2021, well-known Warriors player Steph Curry is in slow motion being doused with water after a “historic night.” The voiceover explains the reason to celebrate as we see Curry’s teammates dumping water on the player. The use of the slow motion in this video capitalizes on the subject which in this case is the player, using the motion to fully highlight the player and put viewers in the video through giving the audience the feeling of celebration with the team. With any video content, successful lighting habits push how the company would like the audience to feel and visually relays their messages.

“Cinematographers use these lighting approaches to enhance a movie’s plot, characters, theme, style, and overall mood” (Poland, 2015). The amount of lighting, lack thereof, how bright, how soft, and even what color the lights are, are all decisions of creators both in film and even social content.

When analyzing Nickelodeon, a sense of invitation was felt as I entered their TikTok zone, their brand resembling a friendliness and a sense of nostalgia as orange tends to incite

these emotions into many (Meerum Terwoegt and Hoeksma, 1995). The Nickelodeon page typically uses the “slide” technique to speed up arts and crafts that would not normally fit within the minute long time frame. When analyzing their use of lighting in their videos, I noticed a soft bright light in the majority of their videos, mainly to highlight actors/actresses from their network. For example, on Mother’s Day we see a post of someone creating a DIY flower arrangement, explaining the steps and the process it took to fully assemble the floral arrangement. This video is sped up to not only fill the allotted time TikTok has to offer but also speed up the information to share the whole video with the audience. The Slide can affect the length of the video being shared to the audience, from slow motion speeds such as “.3x” (3 tenths normal speed) or “.5x” (half normal speed) to “2x” (double the normal speed) and “3x” (triple the normal speed) speeds. In these examples, the slide technique is used for dynamic content, moving shots, adding a comedic slow-motion clip, or even speeding up the audio to have the audience mesmerized. Another example from July 4, 2020 shows singer Alicia Keys sitting in front of a screen, well-lit so as to see her face, with lighting that is inviting as she discusses topics concerning the ongoing #BlackLivesMatter movement. The content that Nickelodeon posts tends to be very uniform in terms of lighting when it comes to posting content with a live subject, meaning an actor/actress speaking front in center. The key to successfully creating content starts with the eyes, in these cases. As brands shift from traditional means of promotion, they engage and play with the many available tools on the application.

From filters to separate effects TikTok has aided in how brands, companies, and individuals present themselves to a larger community of viewers. Nickelodeon and the NBA perform better with the slide technique compared to the other pages simply because there are more moving parts in the content created by these pages. For example, a basketball dunk is

normally slowed to show the full motion of the play while a DIY how-to is sped up to fit all the tips and tasks needed to create the craft. As the start to our playground journey, the slide connects content with an audience by playing with time, adding emphasis on aspects of the video the brand wants to highlight.

The Sandbox

While at a playground a child may take the time to experiment or explore activities, in an “imaginative” process. This theme is explored in Bresnick’s work by comparing this type of exploration to a sandbox. The technique of the “sandbox” builds on the play environment of “make believe,” and is used here to focus more on the tools TikTok offers content creators to get imaginative. Some might say users are building their own sandcastles. TikTok hosts a wide array of editing functions, sounds, audio modulation tools, filters/AR/IR, and templates all at the ready for creators to produce content. The Sandbox refers not only to the tools TikTok has to offer, but also the act of creation itself, using the tools provided. With the ability to make any idea possible and build content from just a simple idea, TikTok offers something that most social media sites do not: authenticity, as creators explore ideas that come from the user. Tools without a user cannot be used to create sandcastles and sandcastles cannot be built without people. TikTok capitalizes on the user, giving them all the tools needed to build. Chipotle and Netflix use these tools to stand out amongst competitors and deliver dynamic content in a strategic manner to their audiences.

Most of the content posted on the Chipotle account is user generated, meaning the account takes the videos submitted to them and reposts them, tagging the creator of the video, normally in the caption of the post. For example, in a post created by Chipotle from April 15, 2021, we see a person standing in a trash bag explaining how reused gloves are used to remake

their trash bags. But beyond the surface level of the post, we see a multitude of background changes, filters being used in a comedic way to highlight the content, and music being used to create the effect that guides this informational video and makes it both attractive and entertaining through capitalizing on effects. These users are constantly combining different effects, tools like the face morph, face zoom, the inverted filter, and many more, utilizing the sandbox-like freedom to create the content that the Chipotle page posts. This page highlights a multitude of posts featuring the various effects, sounds, and visuals TikTok has to offer. Thriving from the use of the effects and the differences each creator puts into every video, Chipotle maintains its status as one of the more popular companies on the application on the application.

The Swing

The act of jump cutting shot A and shot B sets a story for video content. With a solid set up and a simple punchline the audience can be quickly captivated with the short story telling. Utilizing the jump cut to add comedic, dramatic, and many other effects that accentuate feelings of tension, mental states, and moods are only a few of the features evolved from the simple jump cut. These types of jump cuts are often used within videos posted on TikTok. Bresnick calls this type of sequencing a “swing”. TikTok functions much like a short form YouTube, with quick, story-based videos that leave the audience wanting more. These stories are created using the “swing” technique, attracting an audience using set ups (Shot A) and a punchline (Shot B), that being a witty joke, maybe a pun, or even something outlandish that a user would not expect. *The Washington Post* excels with using the swing on TikTok mainly because this page uses witty humorous quips that are set up through shot timing. While conducting my analysis, I noted that *The Washington Post*'s most popular videos are built on the use of setting up shots that are pushed through following the set up/punchline pattern, relying on the use of dialogue/audio. As

marketing has evolved the use of audio becomes more prominent when creating content, from jingles about your local Stanley Steamer to the outro of your favorite show. In the words of Daniel Newman, “Music is powerful” and many marketers and companies are beginning to find proper audio strategies when creating content. TikTok separates itself from other social media platforms with its wide array of sound options, effects and audio tools which adding to the effectiveness of content created on the app. Although it may take many set ups to finally get to punchline, the story builds and the anticipation swells until the punchline is received. Audio appeals to the user, looking for what “works” when using audio on TikTok; *The Washington Post* creates content that typically focuses on our bearded friend; the audio is always audible and clear. The content found on *The Post*’s page utilizes the swing tactic in many videos. The setups, shots, and punchlines rely on having a clear audio for the audience. Audio choices aid in making or breaking content. Audio marketers are currently pairing a visually appealing image or video with an audio track as a supplemental piece that can draw both the audience’s eyes and more importantly their ears. In a post created on May 7, 2021, a normal bearded fellow is having a conversation with himself...dressed as a cicada. Through the short video we gain a short conversation between the two characters, highlighting each person while they speak by focusing the camera on them. This builds the necessary banter to hit the audience with the final blow at the end of the post. The constant back and forth of the “swing” builds until we reach the height of our ride. The atmosphere built on *The Washington Post*’s page keeps the audience returning with their witty and engaging content, sometimes making light at newsworthy current events while still sharing the knowledge needed to fully understand the topic. The “swing” is probably the most used of Bresnick’s components of play in common media practices because the possibilities are endless and figuring out how to jump cut properly is not a difficult task to learn.

The Seesaw

TikTok is known for its influence in popular culture through creating new trends, dances, and catchphrases that go viral. The act of going viral is when an image, video, or piece of information circulates the Internet reaching many users at a rapid pace. Examples of viral trends range from using the term “SHEEEEEEEESSHH!” while pointing to one’s inner forearm to viral dances and jokes that are well known by users of TikTok and even those outside the application. This popular content circulating through the Internet results in an unplanned back-and-forth motion between audience and creator. Just like a seesaw at a playground, two people send energy back and forth, both gaining the similar feeling of enjoyment as they take their turn on the ride. As users imitate rising trends, collaborating, and ultimately remixing content, these trends gain traction through gaining popularity and multiple users interacting with similar posts. Some pages capitalize on these trends, using them to stay relevant on the app and keeping users engaged with their page and content. “The popularity of the app springs from uncertainty,” claims Bresnick. This unplanned rise of trends, energized through duetting videos, participating in challenges, and remix culture give us the component of play, the “seesaw.” Comparable to a living organism TikTok is constantly “evolving/ adapting” or in this case gaining new trends and challenges on a weekly basis. To stay connected and relevant companies will use these trends to their advantage. Nickelodeon is a prime example of a page that practices the seesaw technique by using viral trends in a strategic manner to gravitate users to their page, using sounds that are trending on the “top sounds” list and utilizing clips from past television shows assist with the connection between using trends and building an audience. With Nick’s common name spread across multiple generations, they use these trends, purposefully attaching themselves to popular memes rapidly moving through the Internet.

The Monkey Bars

In the analyses I conducted, I observed a technique unaccounted for in Bresnick's framework. Aptly following the playground metaphor, I add a fifth component of play: the "monkey bars". The "monkey bars" technique represents the grid pattern "#hashtags," in essence how these hashtags are used to connect with the audience. Like the seesaw, with its focus on unplanned connection to the audience, the monkey bars are the planned connection with the audience. By looking at the use of hashtags in social media as a form of metacommentary, we see that hashtags are used to build an audience around their content, to spread posts and connect with larger audiences (Daer, Hoffman, & Goodman, 2016). Using hashtags to communicate with an audience is a difficult feat, with the ever-expanding conversations taking place with just a simple "#". A commonality that I observed when analyzing these companies on TikTok is the way they use their hashtags. Some are used to generate large audiences while others are meant to redirect the attention of the audience to more information related to the hashtag. On TikTok an audience can form simply off the hashtags a company or marketer chooses and which communities are reflective of the hashtags one may decide to use. The power of the tag raises the rate in which people view the content, with like-minded people searching for videos with similar tags generating the amount of attention posts may receive. An important portion of social media marketing is how relevant content is in relation to the audience; if the audience does not connect with the content being posted or feels underrepresented in the content being posted, the amount of interaction that follows the post and page will suffer. For example, Nickelodeon, more for children's entertainment uses "#funny," "#diy," and even "#icarly" (the name of a popular tv show) to sort where their content is being placed and provide a location for any users trying to find similar content. *The Washington Post*, on the other hand, tends to use hashtags that surround

noteworthy current events such as “#2020election,” “#Coronavirus,” or “#Misinformation.”

Based on the content being created and the brand identity a company would like to portray, the use of hashtags is imperative to creating an audience and ensuring your content makes it to those who interact with it, share it, and return to that location for similar content to what they just saw. The monkey bars connect different pieces of the physical playground to one another; a child uses the monkey bars to reach various locations around the playground just as a user interacts with hashtags using them to connect with content they would like to view.

Bresnick’s components of play highlight the similarities of the features and tactics used on TikTok to film techniques. His four components provide a starting point for analysis of intensified play as a branding strategy. A branding strategy is a plan to achieve long term goals, resulting in higher brand awareness and generating a following/audience. Intensified play does that and can be used as a branding strategy for brands and users to gain a following. Using Bresnick’s components of play strategically users can become the King of the playground, pushing their page to a higher popularity status through utilizing the components. As TikTok is a relatively new platform for marketing, this study serves as a starting point for users attempting to increase their brand identity on the application. This project also introduces a method for analyzing multimodal texts that is situated within play and specifies stylistic elements that facilitate play as a rhetorical strategy. With the understanding that we can use TikTok as a means for composing, looking at the application as a “virtual playground” gives users of the app the components to improve audience outreach and popularity through producing content that is rhetorically appealing.

Conclusion

This thesis drives to highlight the importance of using TikTok as a means for generative brand identity through examining popular pages, using components of play. The analysis shows common film techniques/composing methods being used in real world marketing. Scholars within the composition field tend to create scholarship discussing new media, gaining a deeper understanding of the the resources they are studying, but rarely create using the mediums they study. (Watts, Baird, and Oppedisano, 2010) The application serves as a virtual playground meant for the users to explore the possibilities of the many differing features and tools. TikTok, considered one of the newer social media platforms, has not received much attention from the academic world and we lack the proper knowledge needed to fully appreciate the application's use in composition. This gap in knowledge is filled through first discussing what we can do with TikTok, seeking methods to better brand identity while producing content that rhetorically appeals to the brand's audience; second by analyzing popular brands found on TikTok using Bresnick's framework to offer tactics and highlight how these components are used in the content produced; and finally finding which component works best with the way the company would like to present itself to the outside world. BresnickUsing the components of play as my framework aided in highlighting the film tactics found and used on TikTok, giving simpler terms to these tactics as well as how to implement them by showing examples. This thesis's contribution not only highlights the importance of stylistic choices in the marketing field, but also can be used to find out how these choices create, affect, and interact with an audience. TikTok is a new form of media with little scholarship written on the app. Using TikTok and analyzing it will better our field by opening new possibilities for multimodal projects, remix culture and users all around.

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