TIKTOK UNDISGUISED

An in-depth psychological-representative study by Lönneker & Imdahl rheingold salon on behalf of the IKW - Industrieverband Körperpflege- und Waschmittel e. V.

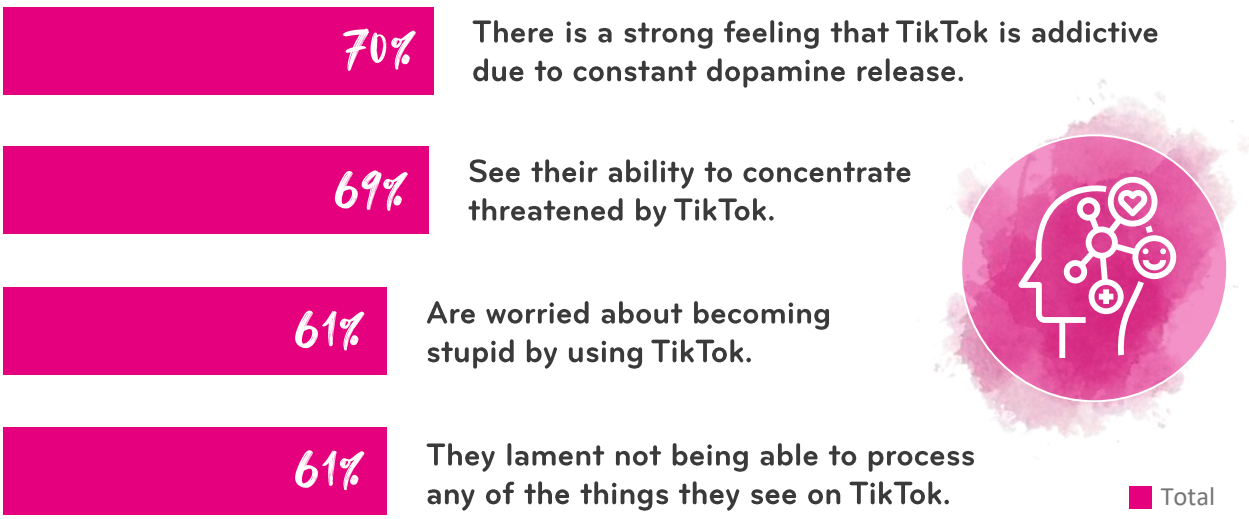
When talking about young people today, you have to talk about TikTok. Every generation has its own special medium that characterises it. The medium of 14 to 20-year-olds is most likely to be TikTok. For the older Gen Z generation, Instagram and TikTok play an equal role. It is moving to see to what extend and in what way TikTok influences young people's mindsets. This much can be revealed in advance: TikTok is shaping young people more than we currently realise.

Our in-depth psychological representative study shows which topics are relevant on TikTok and how much young people rely on TikTok in their everyday lives. At the same time, they feel that this "false" security is not good for them. This is because they consult the platform for guidance and to help them organise their everyday lives. In reality, however, the platform also contributes to the young people being trapped in a kind of hanging game. They lose themselves on the platform in endless scrolling and daydreaming, hoping to find happiness, their dream job or their dream life – without having to invest too much. TikTok thus reinforces the basic problem of youth: the perceived loss of control.

1 'IT MAKES YOU STUPID AND ADDICTIVE' TEENAGERS SAY

The young people themselves initially have a critical view of the platform. There are less political and moral reasons behind this. Rather, they believe to become addicted by constant "dopamine bursts". Young people also suspect that constantly viewing TikTok does make them stupid and switches off their brains. Whereas 6 years ago, young people completely denied the issue of addiction – despite very long screen times – on Instagram, it is now an important topic for almost all of them. Such impression of dependency reinforces the basic feeling of youth, the loss of control.

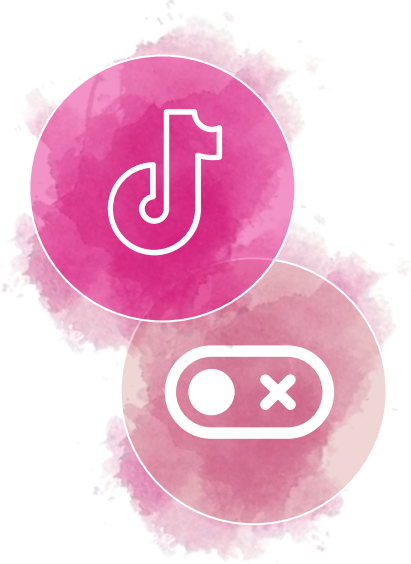
TikTok influences the mindset of young people



Base: All respondents with a TikTok account (n =789)
Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements about TikTok? - Answer scale from 1 ("Do not agree at all") to 6 ("Completely agree"), top 3 values

However, these insights do not mean that young people no longer use TikTok. Nor do they imply that TikTok has less influence on young people's mental state.

2 TIKTOK – A CONSTANT ON-OFF RELATIONSHIP

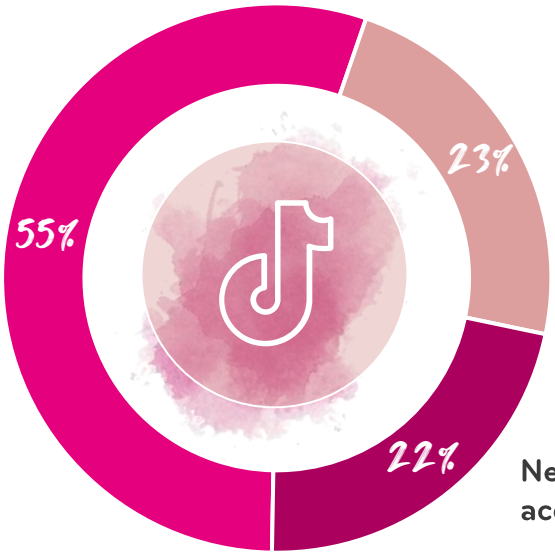


Many "delete" TikTok again and again to escape that dependency and the worry of losing even more control. But they also return to the platform again and again - for fear of missing out on something. They try to escape, but at the same time want to be aware of what is "trending" and relevant. They are caught in a dilemma that reinforces the feeling of not having a grip on life and of losing control.

And so the app is either not used at all because it has just been deleted, or in continuous mode for up to 10 hours a day. Once the app is downloaded and open again, time flies by. Young people often only realise how long they have been online hours later.

TikTok – an on-off relationship with a high intensity of use

Had a TikTok account at the time of the survey.



Figuratively speaking, they have an on-off relationship with TikTok, i.e. they delete and reactivate their account in turns.

Never had a TikTok account.

Base: All respondents (n =1012)
Question: Do you have a TikTok account? - Simple selection

78%

of all TikTok users spend 1-3 hours on the channel every day.

22%

of all TikTok users watch the channel for more than three hours, up to ten hours a day.

Base: All respondents with a TikTok account (n =789)
Question: Of your total daily online time on smartphone/tablet, how much time do you spend on TikTok only? Please also include very short checks. - Simple selection

3 THIS IS HOW TIKTOK IS USED: BETWEEN SEARCHING AND ADDICTION

In general, young people use TikTok in two different mental states: in an active-reality state, in which TikTok almost replaces Google, and in a passive-pre-conscious daydream state, which is described more as an addictive state. While the former serves the purpose of security, the latter is characterised more by a loss of control. Nevertheless, young people cannot escape the daydream-like states as they are afraid of missing out on something important. Both states of mind have very different functions, but influence the mindset of young people equally strongly.

Reality check: the actively aware state of mind

Young people consider TikTok to be more credible compared to Instagram or YouTube. This is mainly due to the search function, which is already being referred to as "Google". The search function is also described as outstanding compared to other platforms such as Instagram. When searching for a product, term or restaurant, not only hashtags or accounts are displayed. Instead, many specific videos on the search topic are offered and users use that to build an opinion on. Young people "check" product recommendations from Instagram on TikTok, for example, by "google".

"For example, if I'm in Paris now and I'm looking for restaurants, I enter 'Paris Restaurant' on TikTok and then I see videos of it directly, what does it look like? What was there to eat?"

Instead of having to read reviews, they receive short videos from people with just a few followers. This makes them seem more genuine and real than an influencer recommendation. The search function also works well as an alternative trip advisor or restaurant recommendation. News is also often only viewed via TikTok and is considered more real. With these functions, TikTok definitely provides support and security for young people .

TikTok as an active conscious reality check

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The extrinsically determined daydream: the passive preconscious state

In this state, TikTok use resembles a daydream, although most of the time this daydream is externally determined. Users want to relax with TikTok videos like a daydream, "beam away" or get a little high. However, they can hardly remember what they have seen and, unlike in a real daydream, rarely feel refreshed. This is mainly due to the fact that they are not following their own themes, but those of the algorithm – in other words, they are watching externally determined "dreams". They often feel bad afterwards because they have neither processed their own daily experiences nor can they process the wealth of new video impressions. ***"If you only wanted to watch for half an hour and then spent 2 or 3 hours on it, you feel really bad - somehow you can't process everything and you haven't dealt with your own things, but with other people's thoughts ."***

Extrinsically determined daydream

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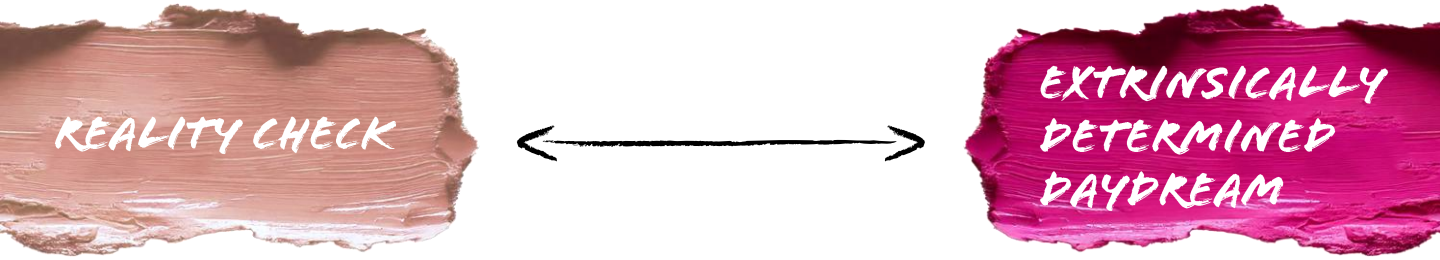
In this sense, the young people on the platform repeatedly lose control. However, they cannot escape because they realise that all the other young people are dreaming exactly the same daydreams (see below: Memes as a shared dream).

Young people hope – more or less consciously – that these two basic dispositions will enable them to fulfil certain functions. In the more active search constitution, potentials and opportunities are to be utilised and shortcuts and structures for everyday life are to be found. In the passive daydreaming state, people want to connect with a community or discover trends. The study revealed a total of six central functions that are relevant for young people.

Active condition

Passive condition



Sense of potential and opportunity

Look for shortcuts

Set trends

Getting stuck in dream worlds

Collective dreaming and docking at bubbles

Discover trends

Utilise potential and opportunities

Watching TikTok always gives young people the feeling that they can utilise their own potential and opportunities. Under no circumstances do they want to fall short of their potential. Young men in particular describe the trend towards the "alpha mindset". Here they reinvent themselves physically and mentally. For young men, "being alpha" is a new way of taking control of their lives and actively working on their mindset. ***"Being an alpha means realising your full potential. I don't do anything that takes me off my path. I'm constantly training my mind and body."***

The platform also offers many options in terms of career, inspiration and motivation. At the same time, there is always the option of going viral any time with a video of oneself – which is sure to put a sparkle in people's eyes. Unlike on Instagram, on TikTok just using "re-publications" (sharing other people's videos) can generate a relatively high level of attention. Young people also see it as an opportunity to assess the character of people, friends or celebrities through the type of videos they re-publish. A factor that gives them confidence.

Chances and potentials on TikTok

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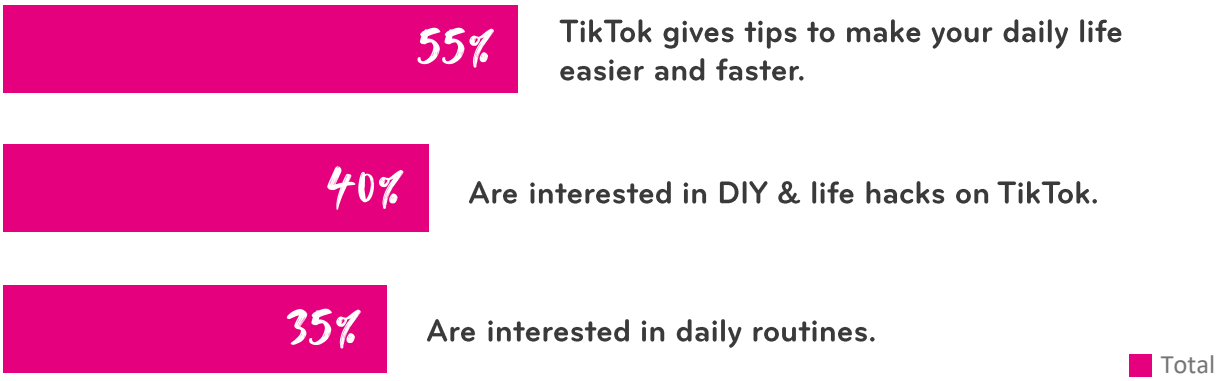
Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements about TikTok? - Answer scale from 1 ("Do not agree at all") to 6 ("Completely agree"), top 3 values

Look for shortcuts

Recommendations on topics such as mindset and fitness as well as cooking and DIY tips are also actively sought. Daily routines and predefined processes shall lead to quick solutions for everyday life. It is also always about shortcuts to limit the effort. Such routines are therefore also shortcuts to happiness, money or success. Motivational or mindset videos are intended to help becoming healthy, beautiful and successful quickly and without effort. DIY and life hacks on topics such as the kitchen, house and car are popular, especially to optimise "reality". Even in this increasingly active state, prolonged engagement and concentration are very rare. After all, you want to know everything in seven seconds and reach your goal quickly. Routine videos and life hacks fit this function very well.

TikTok as an abbreviation and everyday helper



Base: All respondents with a TikTok account (n =789)
Question: What topics are you interested in on TikTok? Please tick all the options below that apply to you. - Multiple selection

Getting stuck in dream worlds

The **gripping algorithm** of TikTok is creating a lot of **problems** for most respondents. The users themselves are worried about getting stuck on TikTok – daily and repeatedly, but also in their lives. On the one hand, the "For You Page" plays out general memes and viral content that virtually everyone sees. At the same time, however, it also captivates users with individual dream worlds and interesting topics such as travelling, cars, fitness or cosmetics, which are compiled individually for each user.

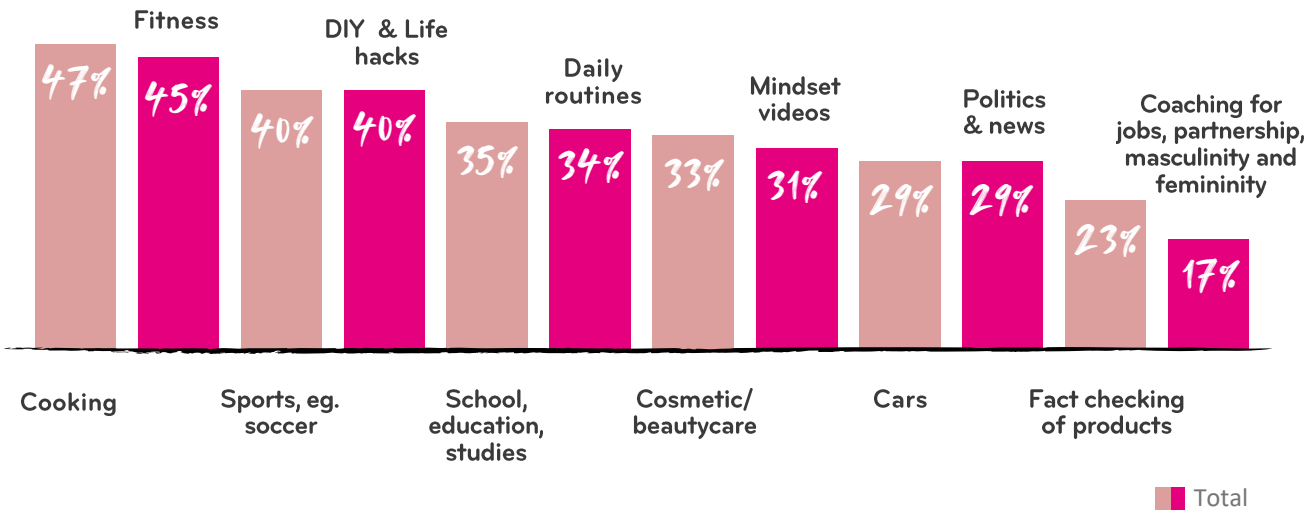
Many people spend hours watching other people's dreams and dream worlds under the guise of "For you". ***"I feel like I'm beaming away" or "The videos convey so many options and possibilities – in the end you don't do any of it, you don't know anything about it, it remains completely vague."***

Collective dreaming and docking at bubbles

Using TikTok also means docking at certain bubbles and communities. Within your own bubble, such as car porn, football, mindset or alpha, you don't want to miss out on anything. Re-publications serve to show which bubble you belong to and which values you represent.

Users generally feel that they are missing out on something if they do not watch TikTok for a longer period of time. They fear that they then might no longer understand the externally determined dream content in the form of "memes". Memes are central to dreaming together with other young people. They are almost a language of their own that other generations hardly understand in its full meaning. Symbolically, (trend) "Memes" that are played out to almost everyone, they manifest dream content. Everyone knows the current memes. However, the meaning of the memes only becomes apparent if you watch regularly and catch everything - in other words, if you dream along with the community. As young people are in a dream state when they use TikTok, they are hardly in a position to give unsupported answers as to what they have actually seen or which memes are "trending". They can only answer specific questions about which topics they watch particularly often.

Communities & bubbles that interest on TikTok



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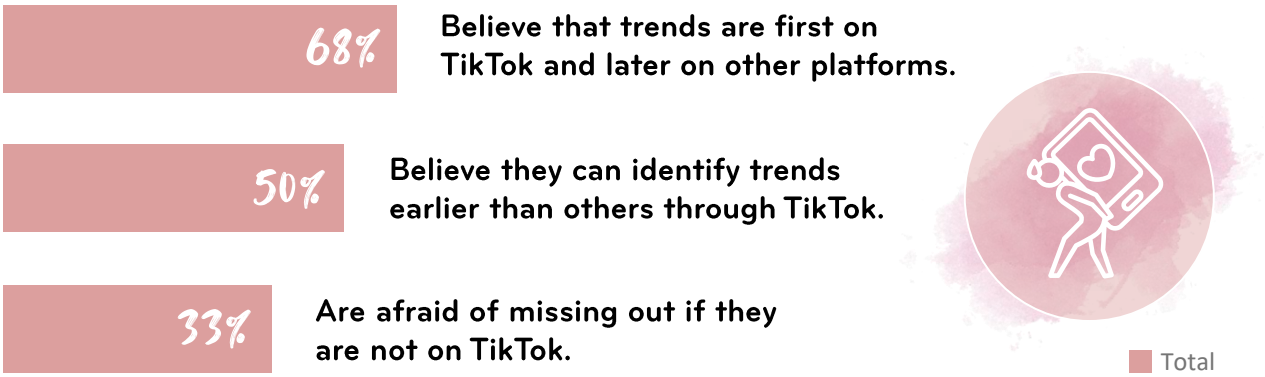
Question: What topics are you interested in on TikTok? Please tick all the options below that apply to you. - Multiple selection

Set trends and discover trends

Trends play an important role on TikTok. Some young people also hope to actively set trends. Passively discovering trends is very important to almost all of them, however. This alone makes them feel like trendsetters compared to Instagram or YouTube users. It's always important to at least keep up with the trends. That certainly creates pressure and you have to watch TikTok regularly. You make a name for yourself by not lagging behind or having known the trend three weeks earlier – much earlier than other platforms even play them out. The order of trends is clearly hierarchised by young people: ***"First it's on TikTok, then on Instagram and finally on YouTube shorts."***

TikTok influences the mindset of young people



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4 RELEVANT FORMATS: BETWEEN REALITY TESTING AND EXTRINSICALLY DETERMINED DAYDREAMS

Formats that are particularly relevant on TikTok often fulfil different functions at the same time.

Memes

are important community daydreams. They appear in a wide variety of contexts. Knowing them means being part of the community. You know what is trending and are one of the early trend discoverers. Memes are often also an important part of "externally controlled daydreams" that are only remembered with support. Example: A small hamster with oversized glassy eyes appears in various videos. The meaning is "intuitively" understood by young people.

Mindset- & Coaching-TikToks

suggest that you can do better. They show that you have much more potential and opportunities in life and that you can achieve your goals with much less effort. Working through and persevering in the various areas of life is not necessary, as there are shortcuts that make life easier. For example, with the right mindset. TikTok is full of videos designed to illustrate that you no longer have to work eight hours. These videos suggest the real attainability of dream worlds – and thus only appear to be real.

Aura-TikToks

are frequently found in relation to the Youth Word of the Year 2024, showing what adds to aura and what decreases aura, each in the form of points. The young people establish a kind of internal moral and rating system on the platform. From an adult's perspective, certain actions are initially awarded plus or minus points in a way that is difficult to understand: Crossing the street when a red light is showing can be just as rewarding as helping others. The behaviour must be "cool" from the young person's point of view. Embarrassing behaviour, on the other hand, can lead to a score of zero. At first glance, aura videos are a kind of reality check. But some of the assessments are also counter-intuitive - more like daydream rules.

Red-Flag-TikToks

are like warnings. For example, they show potential partners what the "no-gos" are. They are also intended to help people orient themselves in everyday life and find their own standards. Similar to the mindset videos, they establish an unrealistic framework: "If he doesn't constantly bring flowers, red flag, if she talks to other men, red flag...." Where the standards come from remains as unclear as what gives orientation in real life.

Routine-TikToks

often start in the morning and often have something to do with waking up - they pick up on the daydreaming - and seem to want to bring us back to reality. They prepare you for the day or show the entire day in orderly routines. This removes pressure when watching TikTok. You have the feeling that you are no longer in a dream world, but are instead organising your everyday life. However, actually you stay in your daydreams for longer. Especially because the routines often show a completely unrealistic lifestyle.

Fact check

Unsupported, many young people do not remember having dealt with cosmetics on TikTok. However, when discussing specific product uses, it turns out that almost all product recommendations or initial product contacts took place via TikTok. In the cosmetics sector, a real fact check is very often carried out on TikTok as a reality check. Many young people believe and trust this platform and the recommendations of real users more than the influencers on Instagram. Recommendations of influencers are increasingly viewed critically.

Fact check on cosmetic and beauty care products

Base: All respondents with a TikTok account (n =789)
Question: What topics are you interested in on TikTok in the field of cosmetics? Please tick all the options below that apply to you. - Multiple selection

Beauty routines provide support in everyday life

The routines on TikTok are particularly relevant for young people in the cosmetics sector. Many young people not only find inspiration in the step-by-step instructions, but also specific support. As they are generally more likely to feel a loss of control, the routines have become particularly important in recent years. It is striking how many products are also used by very young people. A real product duplication took place in recent years.

Concrete instructions for how to maintain it in everyday life

Base: All respondents with a TikTok account (n =789)
Question: What topics are you interested in on TikTok in the field of cosmetics? Please tick all the options below that apply to you. - Multiple selection

Dupes: Abbreviations for happiness & success

In the cosmetic sector dupes are often advertised on TikTok. Cheap products, for example in the area of fragrances or decorative cosmetics, that smell or look exactly like the expensive original. However, these are not fakes or deliberately imitated products. Rather, real people, e.g. in drugstores, find products that are similar and create a TikTok for them. Often these products sell out within hours. So instead of waiting or earning the money for the premium products, dupes provide a shortcut to happiness and success.

6 CONCLUSION

With TikTok, the young people beam themselves into a shared but externally determined daydream. They realise that they are losing control, becoming addicted and switch off their thinking. Nevertheless, they hardly dare to miss the boat, because that would also mean losing some control. They risk to lose their understanding of what trended or the meaning of the memes.

The search function, which is experienced as very good, and the realistic review options also offer young people rational reasons to be on TikTok time and again and they create a sense of security in addition to the feeling of dependency. The young people find it a real relief that the results of their searches are made available as videos. Whether it's a restaurant, travel or routine recommendation – reading is no longer necessary. Videos from small accounts are shown in the same way as those from larger ones. This contributes to a reality check and increases credibility. Paradoxically, young people currently trust this platform the most - and at the same time know how addictive it is. This is why they repeatedly withdraw from it and maintain an active on-off relationship by deleting TikTok and then loading it again.

TikTok is extremely relevant for cosmetics suppliers. Not only do beauty routines play an increasingly important role in young people's everyday lives and give them a sense of stability. The vast majority of products are also first noticed via TikTok and tried out because of TikTok.

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