

# Creators on TikTok: Personal Branding, Business Models, and Theory

Lecture Script / Manual Draft

May 8, 2026

## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1	Why TikTok Matters in the Creator Economy . . . . .	2
1.2	Research Aim and Teaching Objectives . . . . .	3
1.3	Key Terms: Creator, Influencer, Personal Brand, Community . . . . .	3
1.4	How to Read This Manual . . . . .	4
<b>2</b>	<b>Personal Branding on TikTok</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1	What Personal Branding Means in Platform Culture . . . . .	4
2.2	Identity, Niche, and Value Proposition . . . . .	4
2.3	Authenticity, Consistency, and Trust . . . . .	5
2.4	Visual Style, Voice, and Storytelling Formats . . . . .	5
2.5	Community Building and Audience Relationships . . . . .	5
2.6	Metrics of Brand Strength: Reach, Retention, Engagement, Conversion . . . . .	6
<b>3</b>	<b>Influencer Business on TikTok</b>	<b>6</b>
3.1	From Hobby to Micro-Business . . . . .	6
3.2	The Creator Business Model . . . . .	7
3.3	Revenue Streams: Brand Deals, Affiliate Links, TikTok Shop, Live Selling . . . . .	7
3.4	Platform Monetization: Creator Rewards and Native Tools . . . . .	7
3.5	Costs, Labor, and Invisible Work Behind Content Production . . . . .	8
3.6	Risk, Regulation, and Disclosure in Sponsored Content . . . . .	8
<b>4</b>	<b>Theoretical Frameworks</b>	<b>9</b>
4.1	Self-Presentation Theory and Impression Management . . . . .	9
4.2	Personal Branding Theory . . . . .	9

4.3	Authenticity as Performed Credibility . . . . .	9
4.4	Parasocial Interaction and Emotional Proximity . . . . .	10
4.5	Attention Economy and Algorithmic Visibility . . . . .	10
4.6	Influencer Marketing, Trust, and Source Credibility . . . . .	10
<b>5</b>	<b>TikTok Cases Explained Through Theory</b>	<b>11</b>
5.1	Case Type I: Educational and Expert Creators . . . . .	11
5.2	Case Type II: Lifestyle and Daily-Life Storytelling . . . . .	11
5.3	Case Type III: Beauty, Fashion, and Aesthetic Authority . . . . .	12
5.4	Case Type IV: Comedy, Commentary, and Relatable Personas . . . . .	12
5.5	Case Type V: Live Commerce and Selling Through Personality . . . . .	12
5.6	What the Cases Reveal About Success, Trust, and Influence . . . . .	13
<b>6</b>	<b>A Practical Analytical Model for Students</b>	<b>13</b>
6.1	How to Analyze a Creator Account Step by Step . . . . .	13
6.2	How to Distinguish Brand Identity from Viral Tactics . . . . .	13
6.3	Checklist for Evaluating Creator Credibility . . . . .	13
6.4	Common Strategic Mistakes Made by New Creators . . . . .	14
6.5	Ethical Questions: Manipulation, Misinformation, and Audience Vulnerability . . . . .	14
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>14</b>
7.1	Main Findings . . . . .	14
7.2	Implications for Media, Marketing, and Cultural Studies . . . . .	15
7.3	Directions for Classroom Discussion . . . . .	15
<b>8</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>15</b>

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Why TikTok Matters in the Creator Economy

TikTok has become a central site in the contemporary creator economy because it combines cultural production, algorithmic distribution, and commercial infrastructure within one platform environment. Short-form video makes entry relatively easy, while the *For You* feed can circulate content far beyond an existing follower base. As a result, TikTok changes the classic sequence of media visibility. On older social platforms, creators often needed an already established audience before they could reach large publics. On TikTok, by contrast, discoverability can emerge first, and stable community formation may follow later. This shifts the logic of personal branding from static profile construction toward continuous performance in motion.

At the same time, TikTok is not merely a space of entertainment. It is also a marketplace for

attention, influence, and consumer conversion. TikTok’s own support materials now frame creator activity in explicitly entrepreneurial terms through programs such as the Creator Rewards Program, TikTok One, branded-content tools, and TikTok Shop integration [15, 13, 14, 17]. This institutional architecture shows that creators are no longer peripheral users who occasionally monetize visibility. They are increasingly treated as quasi-professional actors whose content can generate advertising value, retail transactions, and platform growth.

For students, TikTok is therefore useful as a case study for understanding broader transformations in digital culture. It illustrates how identity becomes strategic, how intimacy becomes monetizable, and how creativity is shaped by platform rules. Studying creators on TikTok also helps connect media theory with observable practices: niche positioning, audience interaction, disclosure norms, and algorithm-sensitive content design.

## 1.2 Research Aim and Teaching Objectives

This lecture script has two aims. First, it explains how creators build personal brands and businesses on TikTok. Second, it interprets those practices through selected theoretical frameworks from media, communication, and cultural studies. The text is written as a compact academic manual: it introduces concepts, defines a vocabulary for analysis, and then applies theory to recognizable creator types and platform practices.

The teaching objectives are fivefold. Students should be able to: (1) define personal branding in the context of social media platforms; (2) identify the main revenue and labor structures of influencer work on TikTok; (3) explain how theories of self-presentation, authenticity, parasocial interaction, and attention economy relate to creator practices; (4) analyze concrete TikTok cases in a conceptually rigorous way; and (5) evaluate ethical and regulatory problems associated with creator monetization.

## 1.3 Key Terms: Creator, Influencer, Personal Brand, Community

The term *creator* usually refers to a person who regularly produces digital content and seeks visibility, engagement, or income through that activity. The term *influencer* is narrower: it highlights the ability to affect attitudes, tastes, or purchasing behavior. In practice, many TikTok users are both creators and influencers, but the distinction remains analytically useful. A creator may focus on expression or education without systematic commercial partnerships, whereas an influencer is generally embedded more directly in promotional and market relations.

A *personal brand* can be defined as a strategically communicated identity that makes a person legible, memorable, and valuable to audiences and potential partners. Khamis, Ang, and Welling argue that self-branding on social media links identity performance to visibility, entrepreneurialism, and micro-celebrity practices [9]. A personal brand is not just a logo-like image of the self. It is a patterned promise: viewers come to expect a certain voice, tone, expertise, mood, format, or worldview.

Finally, *community* refers to the social formation around a creator. Community is visible in repeated comments, shared inside jokes, collaborative interpretation, and a sense of mutual recognition. On TikTok, community is shaped not only by follower counts but also by recurring exposure in the recommendation system, replies to comments, LIVE interaction, and the remix culture of stitches, duets, references, and trends.

## 1.4 How to Read This Manual

Section 1 discusses personal branding on TikTok. Section 2 explains creator business models and revenue structures. Section 3 introduces the main theoretical frameworks. Section 4 applies those theories to TikTok cases. Section 5 offers a practical model for student analysis. The conclusion summarizes the main findings and points toward broader implications for media and marketing studies.

# 2 Personal Branding on TikTok

## 2.1 What Personal Branding Means in Platform Culture

On TikTok, personal branding does not primarily function through polished self-description. It functions through repeated audiovisual cues distributed across many short videos. The creator's face, tone of voice, pacing, editing rhythm, catchphrases, topic selection, and emotional posture together produce a recognizable identity. This identity is platform-native: it is built through circulation, not only through self-definition.

In that sense, personal branding on TikTok is inseparable from micro-celebrity culture. Khamis, Ang, and Welling describe self-branding as a process in which ordinary individuals adopt promotional logics once associated with professional celebrity culture [9]. TikTok intensifies this condition because the platform rewards instantly legible personas. A creator benefits when a viewer can understand, within seconds, what kind of account this is and why its content deserves attention.

Thus, personal branding on TikTok is best understood as a synthesis of distinction and repetition. The creator must be distinctive enough to stand out and repetitive enough to become memorable. Branding is therefore less about abstract uniqueness than about maintaining a coherent set of recognizable differences.

## 2.2 Identity, Niche, and Value Proposition

Successful TikTok branding usually depends on the articulation of a niche. A niche may be topical, such as skincare, finance, language learning, gaming, or academic advice. It may also be stylistic, such as deadpan comedy, confessional storytelling, or highly aestheticized daily routines. In both cases, the creator offers a value proposition to the audience: useful information, emotional relief, aspiration, companionship, humor, or identity affirmation.

The niche matters because the platform is saturated with content. Under these conditions, broad self-description is weak. Viewers rarely reward accounts that claim to do “a bit of everything” unless the creator's personality itself becomes the organizing category. Even then, the personality is usually stabilized through recurring formats. For example, a creator may alternate between “day in my life” videos, product commentary, and audience question responses, but these different clips still express a consistent self-concept.

A strong value proposition also improves commercial legibility. Brands and agencies are more likely to collaborate with creators whose audience and content style are easy to classify. TikTok One formalizes this by turning collaboration into a platform-supported matching environment between creators, advertisers, and brands [13]. In other words, niche identity is not only a cultural decision; it is an economic signal.

## 2.3 Authenticity, Consistency, and Trust

Authenticity remains one of the most important and most misunderstood concepts in creator culture. It should not be treated as the simple opposite of performance. Abidin argues that influencer authenticity is historically variable and tied to evolving expectations of ordinariness, intimacy, and self-branding technique [1]. On TikTok, authenticity usually means that a creator appears believable, situated, and emotionally accessible rather than perfectly polished.

This explains why minor imperfections often function as credibility markers. Background noise, quick cuts, visible hesitation, direct speech to camera, or spontaneous responses to comments can all signal that the content is “real.” Yet these signals are themselves often strategic. Authenticity on TikTok is best described as a performed credibility. It is not necessarily false; rather, it is produced through conventions that audiences have learned to read as sincere.

Consistency is the condition that stabilizes authenticity over time. A creator who shifts voice, values, and visual presentation too abruptly may lose interpretive coherence. Audiences tolerate experimentation, but they still search for continuity. Trust emerges when viewers feel they know what kind of person is speaking, what standards govern recommendations, and whether promotional messages fit the established identity. Recent work on TikTok influencer credibility shows that trust and perceived credibility are closely linked to loyalty and purchase intention [2]. Therefore, authenticity is culturally important and commercially consequential.

## 2.4 Visual Style, Voice, and Storytelling Formats

TikTok branding is strongly shaped by form. Unlike platforms where long captions or static images dominate, TikTok requires the creator to organize meaning through timing, voice, gesture, text overlays, music, and montage. The resulting style becomes a core brand asset.

Visual style may include camera distance, color palette, setting, clothing, typography, or editing intensity. Voice includes tone, vocabulary, humor, expertise markers, and emotional cadence. Storytelling formats include tutorials, listicles, mini-vlogs, reaction videos, “get ready with me” clips, myths-versus-facts explanations, comment replies, and before/after reveals. Each format positions the creator differently. A tutorial suggests competence; a confessional monologue suggests intimacy; a reaction video suggests cultural relevance and speed.

What matters analytically is not which format is objectively best, but whether the format supports the claimed identity. An educational creator whose videos are overly chaotic may weaken their authority. A lifestyle creator whose videos are too corporate may undermine relatability. Brand strength depends on alignment between message, format, and audience expectation.

## 2.5 Community Building and Audience Relationships

TikTok creators do not simply broadcast messages. They cultivate recurring relations. These relations are partly social and partly infrastructural. Socially, creators ask questions, respond to comments, quote audience concerns, and narrate shared experiences. Infrastructurally, the platform makes these interactions visible and repeatable through comment-reply videos, LIVE streams, reposts, and recommendation loops.

Community formation often begins with small recognitions: the creator remembers a recurring commenter, acknowledges community language, or invites the audience to participate in a series.

Over time, viewers may feel not only that they like the creator but also that they belong to a specific interpretive group around them. This is one reason why niche creators can be commercially attractive even when they are not mass celebrities. Strong community identification can produce engagement quality that exceeds what follower counts alone would predict.

Parasocial attachment plays an important role here. Horton and Wohl's classic concept of parasocial interaction described how mediated communication can create an illusion of intimacy at a distance [8]. On TikTok, that intimacy is reinforced by direct address, frequent posting, first-person narration, and visible responses to audience prompts. Community therefore involves both actual interaction and imagined closeness.

## 2.6 Metrics of Brand Strength: Reach, Retention, Engagement, Conversion

For analytical purposes, students should distinguish between four broad metrics of brand strength. *Reach* refers to how many people encounter the content. *Retention* refers to how long they stay with it, whether measured through watch time, completion, or repeat viewing. *Engagement* includes actions such as comments, shares, saves, and meaningful participation. *Conversion* refers to outcomes beyond attention, for example newsletter sign-ups, product sales, affiliate clicks, or event registrations.

A common mistake is to treat reach as the sole indicator of success. On TikTok, visibility without interpretive consistency can be unstable. A viral clip may produce temporary attention without strengthening the creator's long-term brand. By contrast, moderate but repeated engagement can build loyalty, parasocial depth, and higher commercial trust. TikTok's own monetization tools also show that the platform values specific forms of sustained performance, original content, and qualified views rather than raw visibility alone [15, 16].

## 3 Influencer Business on TikTok

### 3.1 From Hobby to Micro-Business

Many TikTok careers begin informally. A user experiments with trends, posts from everyday life, or shares knowledge in a niche area. Over time, however, repeated production generates routines, obligations, and expectations. What appears at first to be a hobby can become a micro-business with revenue streams, contracts, content planning, analytics work, and audience management.

This transition is significant because it changes the meaning of creativity. Content is no longer only expressive; it becomes infrastructural labor. The creator must coordinate ideas, filming, editing, posting schedules, comments, partnerships, disclosure requirements, and sometimes inventory or customer service. Even solo creators often perform tasks comparable to those of a small media firm.

The business turn should not be interpreted as a betrayal of authenticity. Rather, it reveals that authenticity itself is often labor-intensive. A creator may need substantial backstage work to produce a front-stage impression of spontaneity. This tension between ordinary appearance and strategic planning is central to the sociology of digital creator work.

## 3.2 The Creator Business Model

A useful way to understand the influencer business model is to separate its core assets from its revenue mechanisms. The core assets are attention, trust, audience data, cultural relevance, and a recognizable persona. These assets can then be monetized through several pathways: direct platform payments, brand sponsorships, affiliate commissions, product sales, subscriptions, speaking or consulting work, and off-platform traffic generation.

In this model, content is both product and marketing. A video entertains or informs the audience, but it also advertises the creator’s own future videos, personal credibility, and commercial usefulness. The creator therefore operates in a recursive economy: each post can create value immediately and also strengthen the conditions for later monetization.

TikTok supports this logic structurally. Through TikTok One, creators and brands can collaborate within an integrated platform environment designed for partnerships and campaign tools [13]. Through content-disclosure and brand-partner tagging features, the platform also makes sponsored relationships more operationally manageable [14]. The business model is thus not external to TikTok; it is increasingly embedded within the platform.

## 3.3 Revenue Streams: Brand Deals, Affiliate Links, TikTok Shop, Live Selling

Brand deals remain one of the most visible revenue streams. In this model, creators are paid to feature, review, demonstrate, or integrate a product or service into content. The most effective campaigns usually fit the creator’s established niche and voice. When the promotional message feels misaligned, trust can decline.

Affiliate revenue is somewhat different. The creator is not necessarily paid a flat fee to post; instead, compensation depends on tracked conversions such as clicks or purchases. This can encourage a more performance-driven content style, especially around product demonstrations, recommendations, and “best things I bought” formats.

TikTok Shop extends this commerce logic by making discovery and purchase more tightly connected. TikTok’s newsroom presents TikTok Shop as a discovery-led retail environment and reports rapid U.S. growth since its September 2023 launch, with creators, sellers, and affiliates participating together in this ecosystem [17]. As a result, creator labor increasingly includes retail mediation: recommending, contextualizing, and narrating products in ways that feel native to platform culture.

Live selling intensifies the commercialization of personality. During LIVE sessions, creators can answer objections in real time, generate urgency, display social proof, and simulate interpersonal shopping assistance. In this format, charisma, responsiveness, and trust become immediate sales instruments. The commercial transaction is embedded in a relationship performance.

## 3.4 Platform Monetization: Creator Rewards and Native Tools

TikTok’s Creator Rewards Program is an important example of platform-native monetization. According to TikTok support documentation, the program rewards eligible creators for high-quality original content and calculates rewards based on qualified views and rewards per 1,000 qualified views [15, 16]. TikTok also states that the newer program replaced the Creator Fund in some markets and offers updated dashboards and eligibility review processes [12].

Two broader points follow from this. First, platform payments are selective. They do not reward

all creativity equally; they reward content that matches program rules, originality criteria, and performance thresholds. Second, platform monetization can shape creator strategy. If long-enough original videos are rewarded under a given system, creators may adapt format, pacing, and output to fit those incentives.

Yet native monetization rarely eliminates dependence on other revenue streams. For most creators, platform rewards function as only one part of a diversified portfolio. Sponsorships, affiliate work, and off-platform deals often remain essential. The creator economy is therefore hybrid: creators earn from platforms, through platforms, and beyond platforms at the same time.

### **3.5 Costs, Labor, and Invisible Work Behind Content Production**

One of the most important academic corrections to public discourse is the recognition that creator work includes extensive invisible labor. Viewers often see the finished video but not the surrounding tasks: market research, trend monitoring, script drafting, filming retries, editing, captioning, analytics review, brand negotiation, invoicing, moderation, and emotional self-management.

This labor is not only technical but also affective. Creators must appear enthusiastic, composed, and responsive even when platform volatility generates uncertainty. They may need to transform private life into public narrative while still maintaining boundaries. They must also manage the risk of audience fatigue: too little posting can reduce visibility, while too much posting can dilute brand coherence.

Algorithmic literacy becomes part of this labor. Klug’s study of deleting and privatizing TikTok videos shows that users often act on assumptions about how the platform evaluates content, and these assumptions shape impression-management decisions [10]. Creators therefore work not only for audiences or brands but also for an imagined algorithmic observer.

### **3.6 Risk, Regulation, and Disclosure in Sponsored Content**

Commercial creator work is subject to trust risks, legal obligations, and reputational constraints. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission states that social media endorsements must clearly disclose material connections between the endorser and the brand, and that disclosures should be hard to miss, understandable, and placed with the endorsement itself [5, 6]. These principles matter because the apparent ordinariness of creator communication can otherwise obscure promotional influence.

TikTok’s own policy framework aligns with this direction. Its support materials require creators who promote a brand, product, or service to turn on the platform’s content disclosure setting, distinguishing, for example, between promotional content for one’s own business and paid partnership content on behalf of third parties [14]. This is significant pedagogically: disclosure is not a minor formal detail but part of how trust is institutionalized.

Risk also includes platform dependency. A creator business built primarily on one platform can be vulnerable to policy changes, monetization revisions, or shifts in recommendation patterns. For that reason, experienced creators often diversify across revenue streams, mailing lists, storefronts, agencies, or other social platforms. What looks like creative independence is often strategically managed dependence.

## 4 Theoretical Frameworks

### 4.1 Self-Presentation Theory and Impression Management

Goffman's dramaturgical model remains highly useful for understanding creator culture. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, he argued that social actors manage impressions before audiences and move between front-stage and back-stage regions [7]. TikTok creators provide an especially vivid digital extension of this idea. They perform roles, control cues, and design settings in order to produce a desired interpretation of the self.

However, TikTok complicates classic dramaturgy because the performance is iterative and datafied. Front-stage success is continuously evaluated through metrics, comments, and algorithmic distribution. Back-stage planning is also constrained by imagined audience response and platform norms. The creator is not simply acting before a human audience; they are acting within a socio-technical system that measures, ranks, and redistributes performance.

This is why impression management on TikTok includes deletion, privatizing, reframing, and trend adaptation. Klug's analysis shows that users engage in algorithm-related impression management, revealing that self-presentation on TikTok is shaped by how users think visibility systems operate [10]. The platform thereby extends dramaturgy into a context where self-presentation is inseparable from platform literacy.

### 4.2 Personal Branding Theory

Personal branding theory explains how identity becomes organized as a strategic communicative asset. In social media environments, this process is closely linked to entrepreneurial culture and the normalization of self-marketing. Khamis, Ang, and Welling argue that self-branding and micro-celebrity have become central to social media influence because they combine promotional labor with audience intimacy [9].

For TikTok creators, personal branding theory highlights three important dynamics. First, the self is packaged as a recognizable proposition. Second, branding is sustained through repeated interaction rather than one-time self-description. Third, the value of the personal brand depends on both cultural meaning and market utility. A creator's perceived authenticity, style, and niche do not exist outside commerce; they often become the very conditions that make commerce possible.

The theory also has a critical edge. Personal branding can intensify neoliberal pressures to treat every personal trait, life experience, and social relation as potentially monetizable. Students should therefore understand branding not only as a technique for success but also as a broader cultural demand placed on individuals in platform society.

### 4.3 Authenticity as Performed Credibility

Authenticity theory is essential because TikTok creators rarely succeed by appearing purely corporate or overly scripted. Yet authenticity should be conceptualized carefully. Abidin's work demonstrates that authenticity in influencer cultures is neither natural nor stable; it is assembled through changing norms of intimacy, ordinariness, community-building, and self-branding [1]. In this sense, authenticity is not the absence of mediation but a particular style of mediation.

Research on parasocial persuasion also supports the importance of self-disclosure. Nah shows

that self-disclosure can increase perceived authenticity and liking, which in turn improves message acceptance in parasocial contexts [11]. On TikTok, this helps explain why casual confessions, admissions of failure, and emotionally candid storytelling can strengthen influence even when they are embedded within highly strategic accounts.

Authenticity is therefore best approached as performed credibility. The creator signals that the recommendation, opinion, or narrative emerges from a real situated self rather than a faceless promotional machine. Whether the signal is accepted depends on fit: fit between creator and product, between persona and format, and between prior audience expectations and current content.

#### 4.4 Parasocial Interaction and Emotional Proximity

Parasocial interaction theory explains why audiences may feel close to creators they have never met. Horton and Wohl described a form of mediated intimacy in which performers simulate conversational availability and familiarity [8]. TikTok intensifies this through direct address, serialized updates, and frequent visibility in algorithmically curated feeds.

Emotional proximity has several consequences. It can increase loyalty, deepen engagement, and make recommendations more persuasive. It can also heighten vulnerability. Viewers may interpret commercially motivated speech as advice from a trusted quasi-friend. This is one reason why disclosure norms matter ethically and legally.

Recent TikTok research reinforces this connection. Studies of influencer authenticity and parasocial relations show that authenticity and perceived similarity can shape purchase intention through parasocial mediation [3]. Even when cultural context differs, the pattern is analytically useful: closeness is not just a by-product of media consumption but a mechanism of influence.

#### 4.5 Attention Economy and Algorithmic Visibility

The attention economy perspective begins from the idea that attention is scarce and therefore valuable. In digital platforms, this scarcity is managed through recommendation systems, interface design, and metrics that reward capture and retention. TikTok is a particularly strong example because the *For You* feed continuously recalibrates what receives exposure.

Recent empirical work indicates that TikTok strongly amplifies content aligned with expressed user interests and that this amplification can emerge quickly, often within the first 200 videos in audit settings [4]. The implications for creators are substantial. They must learn how to secure attention rapidly, how to encourage completion and interaction, and how to remain legible to a recommendation system that infers audience relevance from behavior.

Attention economy theory also clarifies why branding on TikTok privileges hooks, pacing, emotion, and repeatable formats. These are not superficial tricks; they are techniques for surviving within an environment where discoverability is continuously filtered through algorithmic visibility. Yet the pursuit of attention can narrow discourse, reward sensationalism, and pressure creators toward extremes of simplification or affect.

#### 4.6 Influencer Marketing, Trust, and Source Credibility

Influencer marketing theory asks why some recommendations seem persuasive while others are ignored. A central answer is source credibility. Viewers are more likely to respond positively when

the creator appears trustworthy, knowledgeable, and socially relatable. On TikTok, these qualities are often bundled together: the creator may seem expert enough to inform and ordinary enough to feel close.

Recent research in the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* finds that influencer credibility on TikTok is significantly related to loyalty, purchase intention, and recommendation behavior [2]. This aligns with the platform-specific observation that commercial success depends less on follower count alone than on the perceived quality of the creator-audience relationship.

For teaching purposes, the key point is that persuasion on TikTok is relational. Products are rarely sold through detached factual claims alone. They are sold through trust-laden identity performances, demonstrations, narratives of use, and the accumulated credibility of a creator’s brand.

## 5 TikTok Cases Explained Through Theory

### 5.1 Case Type I: Educational and Expert Creators

Educational creators include language teachers, scientists, historians, lawyers, finance explainers, and productivity advisers. Their branding often combines clarity, authority, and accessibility. The central promise is that complex information will be made understandable without becoming boring.

Through the lens of self-presentation theory, these creators perform expertise while remaining conversational. They often stand in front of simple backgrounds, use captions or whiteboard-style visuals, and speak directly to camera. The performance must balance competence with approachability. If the tone becomes too formal, the content may feel out of place on TikTok. If it becomes too casual, expertise may seem weakened.

Parasocial theory helps explain why these creators can be influential despite short formats. Repeated explanatory clips create familiarity, and familiarity can make learning feel personalized. Personal branding theory adds that the expert creator’s niche is highly monetizable because it is easy for both audiences and brands to categorize. This is why educational creators are often recruited for sponsored explanations, digital products, or course funnels.

### 5.2 Case Type II: Lifestyle and Daily-Life Storytelling

Lifestyle creators typically organize content around routines, transitions, domestic scenes, relationships, and the aesthetics of everyday life. Their value proposition is not necessarily expert knowledge but emotional companionship, aspiration, and relatability.

These accounts show particularly clearly how authenticity operates as performed credibility. Imperfection, self-disclosure, and emotional candor often function as trust signals. A “day in my life” video may appear casual, but it is also a carefully curated representation of ordinary life. Abidin’s framework is useful here because it shows that ordinariness itself can be stylized and professionalized [1].

Commercially, lifestyle content is highly adaptable. The creator can integrate clothing, cosmetics, home products, food items, or digital services into a narrative already centered on daily practice. The risk, however, is over-commercialization. When daily life becomes too obviously engineered for product placement, the audience may begin to read intimacy as sales infrastructure rather than

genuine sharing.

### **5.3 Case Type III: Beauty, Fashion, and Aesthetic Authority**

Beauty and fashion creators are among the clearest examples of how platform aesthetics, trust, and commerce interact. Their authority is often built through demonstration: applying products, comparing items, reviewing trends, or translating industry language into everyday judgments.

These creators occupy a hybrid position between expertise and aspiration. They may not have formal credentials, yet they often accumulate practical credibility through repetition, visible experimentation, and audience feedback. Source credibility theory helps explain their influence: viewers grant authority when the creator appears both knowledgeable and sincere [2].

At the same time, this category reveals the importance of disclosure ethics. Product recommendations in beauty and fashion can feel highly personal because they are attached to the creator’s own body and routine. This increases persuasive power but also raises the stakes of transparency. FTC guidance and TikTok’s own disclosure tools are particularly relevant here because the boundary between recommendation and advertisement can become difficult for audiences to identify without explicit signals [5, 14].

### **5.4 Case Type IV: Comedy, Commentary, and Relatable Personas**

Comedy and commentary creators frequently build brands around voice rather than topic. Their niche may be sarcasm, observational humor, social critique, or reaction to current cultural moments. What keeps the audience returning is not just information but the creator’s interpretive style.

From a Goffmanian perspective, these creators manage a strong performative persona. Timing, facial expression, verbal rhythm, and tonal consistency are critical. Their front stage is often minimal in material terms but highly distinctive in expressive terms. Because the content is personality-led, brand coherence depends on the recognizability of the performer’s stance.

These creators are also especially exposed to the pressures of attention economy. Commentary must feel timely, hooks must be immediate, and the creator often needs to respond quickly to trends while remaining legible as the same person. The business opportunity lies in strong audience attachment and high shareability; the risk lies in burnout and the rapid obsolescence of trend-dependent content.

### **5.5 Case Type V: Live Commerce and Selling Through Personality**

Live commerce represents one of the most commercially explicit forms of creator activity on TikTok. Here, the creator’s personality is not merely supportive of commerce; it becomes the main vehicle of commerce. The creator demonstrates products, answers questions, performs urgency, and keeps viewers present long enough to convert curiosity into purchase.

This case type reveals the convergence of parasocial interaction and retail. The seller appears responsive and available, which can simulate the reassurance of in-person shopping assistance. Trust is generated not only through product information but through the social experience of being guided by a familiar persona.

TikTok Shop’s rapid growth underscores the strategic importance of this format to the platform’s wider economy [17]. The theoretical lesson is that creator influence cannot be reduced to symbolic

visibility. On TikTok, visibility is increasingly tied to transaction systems in which attention, intimacy, and commerce operate together.

## **5.6 What the Cases Reveal About Success, Trust, and Influence**

Across these case types, several patterns recur. First, successful creators usually translate identity into format. They do not merely claim an identity; they repeatedly stage it in recognizable ways. Second, trust depends on alignment. Product integrations and monetization strategies work best when they fit the creator's established niche, tone, and audience expectations. Third, influence is cumulative. It develops through repeated exposure, interpretive consistency, and relationship maintenance rather than through isolated viral moments alone.

The cases also show that TikTok creators are not simply entertainers or advertisers. They are hybrid actors who combine cultural performance, entrepreneurial labor, and algorithmic adaptation. Their work can therefore be studied simultaneously as media production, branding practice, and platform-dependent labor.

# **6 A Practical Analytical Model for Students**

## **6.1 How to Analyze a Creator Account Step by Step**

A useful classroom approach is to begin with five questions. Who is the implied audience? What is the creator's core value proposition? Which recurring formats stabilize the brand? How is trust produced? Where does monetization enter the account?

Students can then examine a sample of recent posts and code them according to topic, format, tone, visual style, audience address, and commercial markers. The goal is not merely to describe surface content but to identify the organizing logic of the account. A strong analysis should explain why the account feels coherent, why viewers might return, and how platform affordances shape that coherence.

## **6.2 How to Distinguish Brand Identity from Viral Tactics**

A second analytical task is to separate lasting identity from temporary tactic. Viral tactics include using a trending sound, adopting a popular editing convention, or inserting a dramatic opening line. Brand identity involves deeper continuity: the creator's point of view, niche, tone, and recurring symbolic cues.

This distinction matters because some accounts generate occasional spikes of reach without building durable audience recognition. Others grow more slowly but create stronger brand memory. Students should therefore ask whether a post contributes only to visibility or also to the long-term architecture of the personal brand.

## **6.3 Checklist for Evaluating Creator Credibility**

A practical credibility checklist may include the following indicators:

- Is the creator's area of claimed expertise clear?

- Are recommendations or claims consistent with the creator’s established niche?
- Are sponsored relationships clearly disclosed?
- Does the creator provide evidence, demonstration, or context when making strong claims?
- Do audience interactions suggest trust, correction, skepticism, or loyalty?

This checklist reminds students that credibility is not a mystical quality. It is built from observable communicative practices.

## 6.4 Common Strategic Mistakes Made by New Creators

New creators often make several recurring mistakes. They choose niches that are too broad, imitate trends without translating them into a stable identity, or treat follower count as the only meaningful metric. Another common mistake is to monetize too abruptly without establishing audience expectations or trust.

A further error is inconsistency in expressive cues. If the creator alternates unpredictably between conflicting tones, values, and formats, the audience may struggle to form a stable interpretation of the account. Finally, many creators underestimate the importance of disclosure and policy awareness, which can harm both trust and compliance.

## 6.5 Ethical Questions: Manipulation, Misinformation, and Audience Vulnerability

The academic study of TikTok creators must also remain critical. Authenticity can become manipulative when strategically intimate communication obscures commercial intent. Parasocial closeness can become exploitative when audiences interpret sales discourse as friendship. Educational content can spread misinformation when creators perform expertise they do not possess.

These concerns are intensified by platformized attention. Systems that reward emotional intensity, simplification, and constant output may encourage creators to privilege persuasion over accuracy or disclosure. FTC guidance and TikTok policy tools provide procedural safeguards, but ethical evaluation requires more than compliance [5, 6, 14]. Students should ask not only whether a creator follows formal rules but also whether the account respects audience vulnerability.

# 7 Conclusion

## 7.1 Main Findings

TikTok creators operate at the intersection of identity, attention, and commerce. Personal branding on the platform depends on recognizable niches, repeated formats, performed authenticity, and ongoing audience interaction. Creator businesses are built through diversified revenue streams, including brand deals, affiliate models, TikTok Shop, and platform-native monetization. These practices are best understood not as isolated tricks but as parts of a coherent creator economy.

Theoretically, TikTok can be read through Goffman’s self-presentation model, personal branding theory, authenticity research, parasocial interaction theory, attention economy, and source credi-

bility approaches. Together, these perspectives show that creator success is neither purely artistic nor purely commercial. It is relational, performative, and infrastructural.

## 7.2 Implications for Media, Marketing, and Cultural Studies

For media studies, TikTok demonstrates how platform architecture shapes cultural production. For marketing studies, it shows that persuasion increasingly depends on personality-mediated trust rather than only on traditional advertising formats. For cultural studies, it reveals how contemporary subjectivity is organized around visibility, entrepreneurial selfhood, and the monetization of intimacy.

The platform should therefore be understood as a key site for analyzing digital labor and everyday cultural power. Creators are not trivial figures on the margins of media systems; they are major actors in the organization of contemporary attention and consumption.

## 7.3 Directions for Classroom Discussion

In class, students may discuss the following questions: When does authenticity become performance in a problematic sense? Can disclosure fully solve the ethical issues of influencer marketing? Does TikTok democratize visibility, or does it simply redistribute precarity? How should we evaluate creators who mix education, intimacy, and commerce within the same account?

Such questions move the analysis beyond descriptive platform literacy and toward a critical understanding of digital culture.

# 8 References

## References

- [1] Abidin, C. (2023). The Matrix of Authenticity in Influencer Cultures. *Cultural Science*, 15(1), 14–29. <https://doi.org/10.2478/csj-2023-0002>
- [2] Alcantara, J. M. A., Rodríguez-López, M. E., Kalinic, Z., & Higuera-Castillo, E. (2024). From likes to loyalty: Exploring the impact of influencer credibility on purchase intentions in TikTok. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 78, 103709. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2024.103709>
- [3] Aurellia, C., & Dewi, L. (2025). Influencer authenticity and homophily on TikTok: Shaping purchase intention via parasocial relations. *International Journal of Economics, Business and Accounting Research*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.29040/ijebar.v9i2.17227>
- [4] Baumann, F., Arora, N., Rahwan, I., & Czaplicka, A. (2026). Dynamics of algorithmic content amplification on TikTok. *EPJ Data Science*, 15, 18. <https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-026-00629-2>
- [5] Federal Trade Commission. (2019). *Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers*. Retrieved May 8, 2026, from <https://www.ftc.gov/influencers>
- [6] Federal Trade Commission. (2023). *FTC's Endorsement Guides: What People Are Asking*. Retrieved May 8, 2026, from <https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/resources/ftcs-endorsement-guides>
- [7] Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

- [8] Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>
- [9] Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, micro-celebrity and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2), 191–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292>
- [10] Klug, D. (2023). Deleting videos on TikTok as algorithm related impression management. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2022i0.13036>
- [11] Nah, H. S. (2022). The appeal of “real” in parasocial interaction: The effect of self-disclosure on message acceptance via perceived authenticity and liking. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 134, 107330. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107330>
- [12] TikTok Support. (2026). *TikTok Creator Fund update*. Retrieved May 8, 2026, from <https://support.tiktok.com/en/business-and-creator/tiktok-creator-fund-us/who-is-eligible-us%26lang%3Dlv>
- [13] TikTok Support. (2026). *TikTok One*. Retrieved May 8, 2026, from <https://support.tiktok.com/en/business-and-creator/tiktok-one/tiktok-one>
- [14] TikTok Support. (2026). *Promoting a brand, product, or service*. Retrieved May 8, 2026, from <https://support.tiktok.com/en/business-and-creator/creator-and-business-accounts/promoting-a-brand-product-or-service/>
- [15] TikTok Support. (2026). *Creator Rewards Program*. Retrieved May 8, 2026, from <https://support.tiktok.com/en/business-and-creator/creator-rewards-program/creator-rewards-program>
- [16] TikTok Support. (2026). *How rewards work*. Retrieved May 8, 2026, from <https://support.tiktok.com/en/business-and-creator/creator-rewards-program/how-rewards-work>
- [17] TikTok Newsroom. (2025, June 13). *TikTok Shop is where shoppers come to discover*. Retrieved May 8, 2026, from <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-US/tiktok-shop-is-where-shoppers-come-to-discover>