

**SO MANY VIEWS:**

The influence of TikTok “blow-ups” on the mental health of Gen Z creators

Bachelor Thesis

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## Abstract

**Background:** TikTok is a newly established social media platform with few boundaries and many new characteristics. Especially, this platform offers the novel and unique experience of having a TikTok *blow-up*, a rare occurrence that is not possible on other social networks with the same simplicity. The connection with thousands of strangers could, including new forms of social interaction could influence the mental health of TikToks largest age group, Gen Z. Furthermore, due to TikTok's modern algorithms, there is no literature on the impact of the new TikTok blow-up phenomena which allows anyone to get a large amount of attention and interaction in a short period.

**Aim:** This study aims to discover the possible effects of viral TikTok videos on the mental health of its Gen Z creators.

**Method:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Gen Z creators who uploaded a viral video on TikTok in which they expressed their feelings and thoughts during and after the TikTok blow-up phenomenon.

**Results:** Going viral on TikTok had positive effects on the mental health of Gen Z creators. For instance, they experienced happiness, social approval and boosted confidence during and after going viral. Also, positive comments boosted mood and mental health. Nevertheless, uploading a TikTok that went viral also had negative impacts on the mental health of Gen Z creators. For example, harmful and inappropriate comments, stress and the feeling of pressure to experience virality again, and also disappointment when failing to achieve virality again influence Gen Z creators' mental health.

**Conclusion:** As most of the participants did not value the opinion of strangers, the impact of positive and negative comments or the feeling of virality was only temporary. Stress and disappointment caused by not achieving virality again was an enduring effect, the same as with boosted confidence. Although some information about the influence of viral TikTok on

the mental health of Gen Z creators was discovered there is still a lot unknown. To ensure carefree TikTok usage for everyone, more research must be conducted in this field.

**Keywords:** TikTok, Gen Z, going viral, mental health, well-being, blow-up, TikTok famous.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	2
Introduction .....	5
Theoretical Framework .....	7
2.1 TikTok and its users .....	7
2.2 Creating TikToks and going viral .....	8
2.3 TikTok’s influence on mental health .....	11
Methods .....	13
3.1 Research Design .....	13
3.2 Procedure .....	13
3.3 Participants .....	14
3.4 Sampling .....	15
3.5 Analysis .....	15
Results .....	16
4.1 Results qualitative data collection .....	16
1. TikTok Usage .....	17
2. TikTok Creator .....	19
3. Viral TikTok .....	20
4. Viral Mental Health .....	23
5. TikTok’s Uniqueness .....	27
Discussion .....	30
5.1 Main Findings .....	30
5.2 Limitations and further research .....	34
Conclusion .....	35
References .....	37
Appendix .....	43
Appendix A: Participant Message .....	43
Appendix B: Participant Information .....	43
Appendix C: Interview Questions .....	44
Appendix D: Cohen’s Kappa .....	45
Appendix E: Codebook .....	46

## Introduction

Social media is a new way to communicate and interact globally. It can be defined as digital technologies that allow users to interact with each other, produce and share content and profiles, and consume information (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Compared to traditional media such as television, literature or radio, social media is outperforming its competition due to its unique contribution to creating communities by channelling the representation of various users (and creators) from all over the world. Furthermore, social media is connecting people of all age groups. Its accessibility stimulates increasing quantities of people to join and participate in this effortless form of communication (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). The concept of social media has grown to become indispensable within the scope of behavioural science as it is part of many people's daily life. Approximately 4.65 billion people are currently active on various types of social media platforms. This increasing number of users is specifically dominated by younger generations in particular, since 90% of Gen Z, a generation characterised by adolescents between the ages of 14 and 24, have confirmed their social media usage to be at least multiple times a week (Statista (A), 2022).

These numbers especially apply to a rather recently developed platform, known as TikTok. Statistics have shown that TikTok is one of the most frequently used platforms among adolescents, as it is used by 63% of American Gen Z weekly (Statista (B), 2022). TikTok can be described as a video platform that enables its users to connect and interact with each other based on their preferences in content. More specifically, TikTok's algorithms construct a user-based feed, a so-called *For You Page* (FYP), based on one's interests only. Compared to platforms where creators are actively chosen to follow, the FYP is a unique feature. Next to that, this novel form of social media is allowing everyone to create content with the potential to go viral, become TikTok-famous, or blow-up on the FYP of others. Virality in social media can be described as uploaded content that is highly viewed, liked, and shared in a short amount of time. Therefore, despite traditional platforms, TikTok allows

users with a small or even no following to experience virality as well (Yao, 2021).

Nonetheless, many effects and impacts of the platform TikTok and its unique algorithms remain still unknown.

For instance, there is literature that demonstrates the app's impact on the mental health of TikTok users. Several studies dealt with TikTok's influence on mental health. Only so-called *users* were targeted by the research, rather than *creators* (Aloui, 2021; Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Cauberghe et al., 2021; Weimann & Masri, 2020). For example, studies by Yao (2021) and Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz (2020) described that TikTok use supports gratifications like attention and social recognition which can be connected to TikTok creators as well. Moreover, there are reports about the effects of hate comments, body shaming and cyberbullying that are connected to the mental health of TikTok users (Aloui, 2021; Jaffar et al, 2019; Weimann & Masri, 2020). However, due to the novelty of TikTok and its algorithms, it is not yet academically discovered if TikTok blow-ups may have an impact on the mental well-being of its creators.

TikTok is a newly established social media platform with few boundaries and many new characteristics. The connection with thousands of strangers could create new forms of social interaction which may have an influence on the mental health of TikToks largest age group, Gen Z. Furthermore, due to TikTok's modern algorithms, there is no literature on the impact of the new TikTok *blow-up phenomena* which allows anyone to get a large amount of attention and interaction in a short time (Yao, 2021). Hence, this study aims to provide an overview of possible effects of the blow-up phenomena, making one of the first steps into the field of mental health of creators on TikTok which finally should answer the following research question: “*How does a viral TikTok influence the mental health of its Gen Z creators?*”.

## Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 TikTok and its users

Since its launch in 2018, TikTok is one of the most used and fast-growing social media platforms in the whole world and therefore several academic studies are focusing on this application (Zeng et al., 2020). TikTok is the 4th most downloaded social media app with over 3 billion downloads and over 1 billion monthly active users (Bursztynsky, 2021; Iqbal, 2022; Jaffar et al., 2019). Especially, younger people are attracted by the app as 41% of TikTok's users are between the age of 16 to 24 (Weimann & Masri, 2020). According to Weimann & Masri (2020), 90% of users in this age range are using the platform daily. Moreover, TikTok users between 16 and 24 spend on average 52 minutes a day on the app (Iqbal, 2022). This stated age group is called Gen Z. People of Generation Z are born between the years 1996 and 2009. This generation is by far the most interested in apps and technologies as they were the first generation to grow up with smartphones (Sladek & Grabinger, 2014). Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok received increased public and scientific attention (Hellemans et al., 2021). Several scientific papers described the platform's features, characteristics, and content.

The app's main feature is that users can watch, create, and share short video clips. These mostly 15-second-long videos appear on the so-called "For You Page" where users spend the majority of their time (Scherr & Wang, 2021). Additionally, social media elements like likes, followers, and comments are included in the app (Ma & Hu, 2021). For instance, the platform allows creating connections with other users by sharing their thoughts and ratings. Therefore, TikTok's users can interact with almost exclusively user-generated and uploaded content (Scherr & Wang, 2021).

TikTok's content can be characterized as a "creative chaos", meaning that within TikTok everything can find its place without any structure or restrictions (Anderson, 2020, p. 8). The platform itself claimed that the app should "bring joy" and "inspire creativity" in users

with algorithmic recommendations and trending hashtags and challenges (Aloui, 2021). Next to that, the study of Bresnick (2019) expressed that TikTok allows younger generations to connect and create without paying attention to the limitations of narratives, styles and online cultures of the past. Hence, clips contain filters, music samples, quick cuts, and other creative and innovative features that offer users many opportunities to express themselves in short videos (Weimann & Masri, 2020).

Compared to other social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, TikTok is offering its users the FYP, which consists of content that TikTok deems likeable to the specific user. This estimation is executed by algorithms only, which is generated based on every action a user performed on the app, including every comment, follow and like that was made by the user (Anderson, 2020). Notably, TikTok is one of the first apps to make use of big data analytics to study the wants and needs of its users (Hou, 2018). A study by Yu (2019) showed that TikTok enhances a “deep interaction with the user” while algorithms form a deep connection with every action (p. 29). Next to the algorithms, other design features like the short video clips adjust to the short-lived attention span of most of the users, making it “fit into the user’s rapid lifestyle which makes TikTok different from other competing apps” (Jaffar et al., 2019, p. 188).

## **2.2 Creating TikToks and going viral**

TikTok allows its users to gain a lot of attention and popularity in a short amount of time. This situation can be described as going viral. Especially, content that is shared with a lot of individuals in less than no time is one of its characteristics (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). Going viral is theoretically possible on various social media platforms but TikTok’s algorithms favour that content is mostly shown to non-followers which makes it a unique feature and way more likely to happen (Hellemans et al., 2021; LeCompte & Klug, 2021). This process has received its own phrase, *going vrial*, and can be defined as individuals or themes that are featured in viral content (Zeng et al., 2020, p. 1). Indicators for a TikTok to go



viral can be the engagement rate, the number of shares between users and the use of certain hashtags or trends (Weimann & Masri, 2020). Several studies report that the possibility of reaching so many different people on TikTok is important to spread messages that would normally never reach these audiences (Weimann & Masri, 2020; LeCompte & Klug, 2021). For instance, the study of LeCompte and Klug (2021) analysed the practices and motivations of social activists on TikTok. Some activists underlined that the unique process of going viral on TikTok is essential for activists to reach as many people as possible, as it helps to “get their message beyond their own circle” (LeCompte & Klug, 2021, p. 5).

Several studies tried to discover the background of the general need to create, upload and share with other users on TikTok. For instance, Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz (2020) explored the gratifications of TikTok’s users. According to the study of Katz et al. (1973), gratifications theory examines why people consume media and what motivates them to do so. Concisely, the theory describes aspects of media that have an impact that satisfies the consumer’s mind. Especially, social media showed new gratifications and motivations to use them, compared to traditional media. This includes the need for approval and recognition, which can be fulfilled with social media (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). In the case of TikTok, several gratifications were already studied as they may cure boredom, offer distraction, or entertainment (Hellemans et al., 2021).

Shao (2009) looked at three distinct behavioural groups of media users to better understand how gratifications affect social media users. In the first category, passive consumption includes users that read, watch, and view online content. Thus, this type of user can be easily satisfied with fun, relaxation, and entertainment as those are possible gratification needs. The second user category is the participatory user. Within this category, users are sharing, ranking, liking, and commenting on content. Hence, social interaction, relationship building, and maintenance are possible types of gratifications. Lastly, Shao (2009) presented the contributory user as the third behavioural category. This user category

includes actions such as creating, posting, and publishing content for other users. Therefore, gratifications for this category may include the intentions of fame-seeking, identity-creation, social recognition and self-expression.

Next to that, publishing on TikTok supports users' "creativity, self-expression and [...] experimenting with their identity" (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020, p. 472). These factors could be explained with theories that establish two different motivations to publish on TikTok. First, there is intrinsic motivation which is used when a person is interested in "doing something for its own sake" (Reiss, 2012, p. 152). This kind of motivation is used when users publish TikTok to create and experiment with their own identities. The other type of motivation is called extrinsic motivation. This is used if there is a reward for certain activities (Reiss, 2012). Connected to social media, there are several rewards for performing activities like publishing, creating, or commenting. In the case of TikTok, rewards can be acknowledged in the form of likes and views on a published video or comments (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020).

Focussing on TikTok's creators, the study of Yao (2021) found out that the design of TikTok's algorithms supports certain gratifications like fame-seeking and recognition as it is "possible for every user to become famous" (p. 297). Other research discovered that seeking attention is another motivation to contribute to and create TikToks (Omar & Dequan, 2020; Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). On the one hand, Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz (2020) mentioned that young adults are craving attention and social recognition. Moreover, becoming famous is now more important than ever as "young people today are immersed in a world of celebrity" (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020, p. 468). The interest in the value of fame and becoming famous increased to 40% among adolescents (Uhls & Greenfield, 2012). Being TikTok famous can be a starting point for influencer careers which is often considered a goal for young TikTok users (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Omar & Dequan, 2020). On the other hand, young people are "intensively preoccupied with their identity development and

perform various identity experiments” on TikTok (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020, p. 468). One of the most mentioned motives to publish on social media is the creation of identity and self-expression (statis et al., 2010). Due to characteristics of the online world, for example being anonymous, impersonal, or transient, adolescents are more likely to express themselves compared to their actions in “the real world”, as they face less judgement, humiliation, or face-to-face encounters online (Odacı & Çelik, 2016). Furthermore, the study of Omar & Dequan (2020) illustrates that archiving can be a motivation for publishing TikToks. Therefore, they can remember special occasions of their lifetime and “trace back their memories in their personal space” (Omar & Dequan, 2020, p. 125).

### **2.3 TikTok’s influence on mental health**

The usage of the social platform TikTok can result in an influence on mental health. As previously mentioned, several gratification needs can be fulfilled when using TikTok. Purposes that include entertainment, connecting to others, or escaping from reality, TikTok can have a positive influence on mental health (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). As Jaffar and colleagues (2019) reported, the received attention and recognition after uploading on TikTok boosted users’ self-confidence and mental health. Next to that, the study by Cauberghe and colleagues (2021) discovered that people in Gen Z are using TikTok to avoid boredom, stress, and loneliness, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Adolescents post on TikTok to interact and connect with friends and family which makes them feel better (Cauberghe et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, there is also a negative influence of using and posting on TikTok on mental health. The study of Weimann and Masri (2020) reported that there are several aspects of hate speech on TikTok. Next to that, there is other unpleasant content on TikTok like “nude images of children, child predators, devious algorithms, lack of privacy, and teens bullying and harassing one another” that increases a negative influence on mental health (Weimann & Masri, 2020, p. 4). Additionally, the research of Aloui (2021) expresses forms of body

shaming and cyberbullying on TikTok leading to “body disaffection, eating disorders and narcissistic personalities” (p. 553). Especially, women can get attacked on TikTok as they often receive inappropriately and objectifying comments (Aloui, 2021; Jaffar et al., 2019). Moreover, the study of Jaffar et al. (2019) collected perceptions of content creators that received occasionally negative comments and feedback on their content. Hence, the authors mentioned that addiction and suicide were reported because of TikTok. The study expressed an example of a young boy that shared his alternative lifestyle which came across For You Pages of people that were not alike or open-minded, often described as the *bad side* of TikTok. Those people insulted him and wrote negative comments which led him to take his own life. According to Jaffar et. al (2019), TikTok can be “a base for users to bully other users which leads to depression” (p. 190). Finally, the research of Braghieri et al. (2021) underlined that social media has had an impact on increased mental illnesses among young adults in the last few years. If the same deduction also applies to TikTok creators remains yet to be researched. Next to that, influences of stress were discovered if users of social media are not uploading frequently after they went viral (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Rach, 2021).

This study is investigating the possible effects of going viral on TikTok on the mental health of Gen Z creators. Especially, considering the previously discussed literature, it is expected that participants will mention the feeling of happiness and satisfaction as the attention of a TikTok blow-up can satisfy the need for social approval and recognition. However, the usage of TikTok can also generate negative influences on mental health. As previous studies mentioned, cyberbullying, stress or hate speech can be possible factors to affect the mental health of creators. Furthermore, insights into the unique features of going viral on TikTok are expected to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon. Although several studies already reported on the mental health influence of TikTok usage, this study aims to emphasise the creator’s perspective. Therefore, a boosted confidence or influence of

negative comments is predicted to be an outcome. However, new findings are additionally awaited.

## **Methods**

### **3.1 Research Design**

In the current study, a qualitative method was applied to provide a detailed overview of how Gen Z TikTok creators experience a blow-up, with a general focus on the impact of virality on mental health. Since there is no research yet that focuses on young TikTok creators whose content went viral and its effect on their mental health, a qualitative method makes sense to gain a broad overview of the research topic. Principally, to capture different emotions that define one's mental health, qualitative research allows vivid discussions to recall certain memories and states of being (Boeije, 2009).

Within this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to assess the influences of TikTok blow-ups on the mental health of Gen Z creators. Semi-structured interviews can be characterized as discussions that leave space for participants to answer more than asked for within the flow of the conversation, as the researcher is able to deepen and expand on certain topics during the conversation (Boeije, 2009). However, there continues to be a general set of questions that makes up the structure of semi-structured interviews. However, this method leaves a place to speak about subjects that extend the horizon of the initial structure which would not be accessed when conducting a completely structured interview (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). In this case, a semi-structured interview was crucial as mental health can impact individuals in different, unique ways.

### **3.2 Procedure**

Each participant was sent an online invitation to the interview in form of a text, including information about the topic, setting, and estimated time of the interview (See Appendix A). After agreeing, another document with more specific information was sent to

the participant which included the structure of the interview as well as a disclaimer about possible risks and consequences (See Appendix B). Participants got informed about the contents of the interview and its specific focus on mental health as it is a sensitive subject that some individuals might want to avoid. Hence, the interviewees were given the chance to outline themes that they preferred not to be mentioned during the interview. Moreover, before each interview, the researcher once again, repeated the purpose, procedure, ethical risks and consequences of the study to make sure that every participant was well informed.

Furthermore, it was pointed out clearly that participants could quit the interview at any time if they felt the need to do so. Lastly, the participants were informed that they were being recorded to analyse their answers. Then, participants were asked to give their oral informed consent right at the start of the recording: Informed consent is a voluntary decision by an independent individual to participate in an experiment or study after being briefed about its characteristics, consequences and risks (Ferreira & Serpa, 2018). After the interview started, each interview was guided by a predefined set of questions that made up the foundation of the discussion (See Appendix C). The majority of these questions were answered, although often in a different order. Every participant had a unique story about their TikTok blow-up and consequently offered a variety of different perspectives.

### **3.3 Participants**

A total of 15 participants were included, ranging from 19 – 24 years of age. Two of the participants were male, while the remaining 13 were female. The noticeable difference between genders can be explained by the overall gender imbalance of TikTok's users and creators since data shows that the vast majority of users are, in fact, female (Statista (C), 2022). Different nationalities were incorporated in this study as well, including German, Dutch, Italian, French, American and Brazilian. In addition, all interviewees had completed their high school degree as their highest educational degree. Yet, all participants were bachelor's students at that time, while some worked part-time.

### **3.4 Sampling**

Participants were gathered by using non-probability sampling methods. In order to participate, the interviewees needed to be part of Gen Z and, at one point, must have gone viral on TikTok at least once. Within this study, the action of “going viral” is determined after receiving a minimum of 100.000 views per one specific post. Since getting in contact with participants meeting the necessary criteria was rather difficult, the researcher focused on getting participants within the scope of his personal environment. This method is defined as convenience sampling (Etikan, 2016). As a result, several students and former students at the University of Twente were contacted. Furthermore, the researcher was able to use snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a method that allows respondents to reach out to other participants that might meet the criteria, especially when they are not easily accessible (Naderifar et al., 2017). For example, some of the interviewees were able to provide other possible participants from their personal environments that were willing to contribute to the study as well.

### **3.5 Analysis**

To transform the gathered data of the semi-structured interviews into useful information, data analysis was completed. As the semi-structured interviews were recorded, the first step was transcribing the audio files. Hence, the anonymity of the participants could be guaranteed as voice, name or other personal information was deleted immediately after the process of transcribing. Later, the transcriptions were analysed in the programme ATLAS.ti. As the next step, the transcriptions were re-read to ensure the researcher was familiar with the data. Afterwards, the process of coding started. Thus, a codebook was created, based on the structure of the questions that were used in every interview which is known as the deductive coding approach (See Appendix E). To ensure an extensive analysis, a hybrid approach was used and, therefore, the coding process was supported by inductive coding which added more detail to the codebook (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Consequently, five different code

groups were created that categorized all the codes. While four of the code groups were derived from the interview questions, one code group and its codes were made and added to the codebook in the process of coding. The final step included reviewing the codes. Irrelevant information was summarized or excluded. Next to that, an intercoder reliability measurement was conducted to assure the independence of the results. Therefore, 10% of the interviews had been coded by another independent researcher to calculate Cohen's Kappa which is calculated when the data is analysed by more than one peer (Burla et al., 2008). The result of the calculation was a Cohen's Kappa of .79, indicating logical and understandable codes for different researchers (See Appendix D).

## Results

### 4.1 Results qualitative data collection

Five main code groups were created as a result of researching the effects of virality on TikTok on one's mental health to optimally showcase the results. The structure that displays the results was mainly derived from the interview and its coding scheme. The code groups are presented as followed: *TikTok Usage*, *TikTok Creator*, *Viral TikTok*, *Viral Mental Health* and *TikTok's Uniqueness*. The first theme, *TikTok Usage*, expanded on the user behaviour of each participant. To provide a more detailed overview, the following sub-codes were created: *TikTok Screentime*, *TikTok Enjoyment and Feeling* and *TikTok Motivation*. The second code group, *TikTok Creator*, investigated the respondent's individual characteristics and their effects on their posting behaviour, originating the following sub-codes: *Content Type*, *Upload Amount and Frequency*, and *Upload Value*. Moreover, the third code group, *Viral TikTok*, expanded on information regarding the participants' viral TikTok itself, therefore generating sub-codes such as *Viral Context*, *Viral Statistics*, *Viral Surprise*, *TikTok Effort* and *Feeling Decreased Views*. In addition, the code group *Viral Mental Health*, created to specifically investigate the effects of virality on the mental well-being of creators consists of the following



sub-themes: *Feeling Virality, Feeling Attention, Feeling Comments* and *Difference Virality*.

Lastly, the code group *TikTok's uniqueness* summarized and connected statements that provided background and indicated influences on the creator's mental health caused by unique TikTok characteristics. The following sub-codes were created: *Anonymous Attention, Instagram Upload* and *Sides Of TikTok*.

In addition, it is notable to mention that few participants reported additional insights regarding TikTok or social media in general. For instance, participants mentioned a gender difference when it comes to performing actions on TikTok. Particularly, men were observed to leave negative comments while women often times comment positively. Also, women were described as far more open and supportive of all types of content on TikTok. Next to that, many participants stated that they have now new insights into the lives of influencers. Fame and attention seemed unattainable and utopic. Their view changed when they perceived virality themselves. As this is not relevant to the outcome of this research, it is not included in the results section. However, this information does leave room for inspiration in regard to further research on this subject.

## **1. TikTok Usage**

### *1.1 TikTok Screentime*

The initial step of the analysis was to distinguish the individual use of the social media platform TikTok by each of the interviewees. To gain more insights into the TikTok habits of the participants, their screen time was asked: Results of the interview showed that most participants use the app frequently, usually half an hour to two hours a day while some, however, used TikTok irregularly. Every participant confirmed that their screen time went up as they went viral. One participant mentioned: *"Yes, for sure. Especially, when getting all the pop-up messages I was way more often on TikTok."* One can assume that virality, in this case, correlates to the release of positive emotions towards TikTok, considering that the usage of the app drastically increases during the process of blowing up.

### *1.2 TikTok Enjoyment and Feeling*

Moreover, to gain insight into the well-being of participants in relation to TikTok, their level of enjoyment in regard to the app was asked. Nearly every participant stated that they enjoy using TikTok. Nevertheless, half of the participants attached a negative connotation to their TikTok usage, describing it as often considered a waste of time. On the contrary, one participant expressed that their only enjoyment was recording and uploading TikTok videos. All in all, the participants reported primarily feeling positive sentiments in connection to the usage of TikTok, mostly mentioning aspects of retrieving entertainment and happiness from the app. These answers helped to assess the respondent's feelings toward TikTok. As the participants connect overall only positive emotions to TikTok, a significantly bad impact on their mental health produced by their viral video seemed unlikely. However, this assumption is based on the experiences of creators that did not, or barely, encountered negative feedback on the app, which is why there are certain restrictions to this proposition.

### *1.3 TikTok Motivation*

Lastly, to assess the participants' user behaviour more deeply, their specific motivation and personal drive to use TikTok were investigated. As it turns out, most of the interviewees describe values such as accessible entertainment, distraction, and social connections to be the perceived purpose of the platform and thus their reasoning behind using TikTok (frequently).

*“Yeah, it's like entertainment and in some way, it makes it social with other friends that I have on TikTok. We can send each other things and then you can find a lot of humour there.”*

Other motives included an increase in sentiments such as inspiration, relaxation, or the ability to gain approval from others as motivations for the use of the app. These motives display a healthy relationship with the social media platform which indicates a positive influence of virality, like happiness or satisfaction, on the creator's mental health.

## 2. TikTok Creator

### 2.1 Content Type

Numerous content types can be found on the social media platform TikTok, providing entertainment to a diverse audience with various demographic characteristics and interests. Respondents that partook in this study displayed preferences as well, particularly in joining so-called TikTok challenges. Other participants described their content under broader, categorising terms such as comedy, fashion, football, or motivational content. This shows and proves the point of previous literature that everyone can get viral with any content.

### 2.2 Upload Frequency and Number

Through recounting the frequency and number of uploads insight into the intentions and aspirations of each creator is provided. A significant number of participants uploaded less than ten videos. However, some also uploaded more than a hundred videos while one interviewee reported having more than a thousand TikTok videos on their profile. Most of the participants stated that their uploading frequency is irregular. Only a few respondents stated they upload weekly or monthly. One participant, in particular, emphasised their daily sharing behaviour on TikTok. Again, these answers emphasized the assumption that everyone can go viral, despite a low frequency of uploads.

### 2.3 Upload Value

Lastly, respondents were asked about their personal values when publishing videos. This question was asked to explain their reasoning and motivations behind uploading and sharing on TikTok. It was commonly mentioned that uploading fulfils the need to inspire, for instance in fashion or motivational contexts, for example by this participant: *“I would say inspiration. (...) I want to help people as they helped me”*. Next to that, a second example is expressed:

*“The biggest personal value, I think, is to get feedback from people telling me that the content actually helps them or motivates them to do certain things like going to the gym or getting more healthy or getting out of their comfort zone to get more confidence. I think this is the main value from it”.*

Furthermore, comedy and relatability were named as important motives for uploading content on TikTok. Therefore, one participant mentioned:

*“I think like, it has always kind of been like, even just in real life, like a goal to make other people laugh and smile. So um, I just, like, when I upload something, I'm like, I hope somebody can relate to this. I hope somebody's like, laughs at this and that's it”.*

Especially social approval was named by nearly all participants as their primary value. One participant mentioned: “TikTok is for me approval from others, strangers. And it is fun, also feels good to get compliments”. These answers provided an indication of TikTok’s impact on their mental health. For example, participants that wanted to inspire and motivate people experienced a greater positive impact when their video blew up since the video would therefore fulfil their value to upload on TikTok and could be considered an accomplishment. The same goes for people that upload to entertain. The acknowledgement of others that share the same humour gave respondents a significant boost in their mental health. Moreover, participants who mentioned that social approval is an important value to them when they upload videos, recall a negative impact if new uploads after their blow-up did not receive the same attention as their initial viral video.

### **3. Viral TikTok**

#### *3.1 Viral Context*

To understand the process of virality better, participants were asked to describe the context of their TikToks, especially the video(s) that went viral. While some focussed on rather personalised content that tries to be motivational and/or relatable for other users, most of the respondents experienced virality through partaking in TikTok challenges. Since these

challenges increase the likeability to go viral, taking into account that they were contributing to a trend that was already deemed popular and approved by larger audiences.

### *3.2 Viral Statistics*

Moreover, statistical information was retrieved from the respondents to take into consideration the extent of virality each individual experienced. However, this had no significant influence on most of the participants. One participant mentioned that the views are not comprehensible anymore from a certain point on as large numbers of views can no longer be rationally understood. The majority of the respondents reached 100.000 – 500.000 views per viral video. Just a few reached 500.000 – 1.000.000 views, while only a small number of participants reached above one million views. Especially, the participants that reached millions of views with their viral video, mentioned a bigger impact on their mental health than participants that reached lower views.

### *3.3 Viral Surprise*

The sub-code *Viral Surprise* refers to the recurring tendency that nearly every participant experienced a sense of surprise by the sudden attention their upload attracted, especially since many participants experienced virality only once or on one minimal occasion and do not necessarily pursue full-time content creation.

*“It was. Yeah, it was super surprising because I think I posted it like before going to bed. Like back then, now I get a little more views, which is still, like, nothing. But back then I would get like 20 views maybe, like just my friends. And like, I woke up and there were like already, like 1000s of views and I was super surprised. Especially in this video. I feel like I've made better videos. This was like made in one minute, with no effort. I was very surprised. I was like, why do people like this video out of all of them?”.*

Some participants referred to their knowledge of social media and TikTok and therefore stated that, based on their experience and observations of trends, they were able to predict the virality of certain uploads:

*“Especially with these videos, I just knew that they would go viral. I sensed this somehow because I have seen other videos that were like this and went viral. This is exactly what the algorithms pushed. And therefore, I expected this”.*

The outcome of this sub-category correlates with the impact of virality on mental health. Participants that did not expect the virality were more positively impacted than interviewees who were able to predict it.

### *3.4 Viral Effort*

Respondents were also asked if their effort and input into creating TikTok content after experiencing virality increased. While some participants emphasised that they did not necessarily care, the majority of the respondents expressed to have put more effort into creating additional TikTok.

*“Because once I saw that people enjoy what I publish and it was possible to get views and also, of course, the attention and to also grow your account with a following. Then I started to put in more work and publish more videos “.*

Some of the participants who put more effort into creating TikTok content experienced stress during the process. While some interviewees explained that they stressed the quality of the video, which resulted in feeling emotions of dissatisfaction and therefore never uploaded content again. Others were able to attract an income through their TikTok content, in which the financial incentive and resulting reliability were the cause of stress.

*“I think I'm a bit of a perfectionist sometimes. So, if I would try to create more TikToks, I would want them to go viral as well. Because otherwise, I don't know, it would feel sort of out of balance or like, as if the others would like to be familiar. And there is I don't know; I don't think I would have been I would enjoy making TikTok's if*

*they weren't on the same level of virality as the one that's currently up. So, it sort of hinders me from making TikToks “.*

While experiencing stress during the process of trying to go viral again has a negative influence on mental health, putting effort into creating TikToks after the blow-up, on the other hand, indicates positive influences like social approval, recognition or enjoyment which was initially caused by going viral and becomes a need for the participants which they strive to experience again.

### *3.5 Feeling Decreased Views*

Participants were also asked about their emotional well-being in connection to experiencing decreasing views on content that was uploaded after experiencing vitality. Consensus in responses was found. In fact, all participants stated that their emotional state was negatively impacted and expressed to have felt sad and disappointed:

*“Especially, after once or twice a video gets viral and you know what this makes you feel and you know what is possible, you kind of lose a little bit feeling of also like of the amount of views and what is actually nice and good for yourself. And once the video has over 100, 200, 300,000 views or even over a million views, videos that have 20, 30, or 40,000 views, which is still a lot but feel not that good anymore, because you feel like you could have gone better and could have gotten more views. And that just makes you feel very, very bad”.*

Nevertheless, as going viral on TikTok can recall positive emotions, failing to achieve it again can lead to disappointment, sadness, and stress.

## **4. Viral Mental Health**

### *4.1 Feeling Virality*

Furthermore, to assess the general state of mental health of the participants during and after experiencing virality, additional questions regarding possible effects caused by the so-called TikTok blow-up were asked. In fact, the emotional state while blowing-up was

reflected upon. Overall, a large majority of the respondents expressed have felt happy when their video received a large amount of attention.

*“When there's a video that gets thousands, or millions of views and lots of comments and likes, you just feel a certain rush and way that just makes you smile and feel good for certain moments. And once you feel this kind of rush, you want to feel it again and again. And this then also has an impact on videos that don't go viral because you feel less good about them”.*

Some respondents even describe it as experiencing “a rush of happy hormones going through their body” when they realised that their video went viral:

*“With the first video, it was like my phone was blowing up. Then you have something like a wow-moment. It is almost like someone rams a dopamine syringe into your arm”.*

In addition, many participants also stated that the effects of the virality permanently decreased over time.

*“I think it lasted as long as the TikTok grew. So, at some point like for a couple of days it kept. I kept receiving likes and like views. And to that point, it was interesting. But as soon as that sort of dropped, I think I was over it as well. So, it just lasted for the days that it got attention, I think, to be honest. And then afterwards, it became normal, not really something special. Whether I did feel proud, somehow, like I liked showing it for example, with people I'm close to and like showing that I went viral“.*

However, despite the weakening effects of virality, a few participants were particularly clear in emphasising the lack of influence the process of going viral on TikTok had on their well-being and identity. For instance, one participant mentioned: “I have had social media for a long time, and I always try to distance myself from that. I mean that I do not want to build my value from likes or clicks.”.

#### *4.2 Feeling Attention*

To investigate more deeply the effects of virality on the mental health of TikTok-



creators, all participants were asked about the impact of the general attention that was received through the process and with that, the increased possibility of getting judged by fellow users. Results, however, showed that the respondents' opinions were rather balanced. Some participants said to not have cared about the increase of attention or the idea of receiving increased judgement:

*“I think so, probably. Everybody's always judging, and everybody has their opinions. But personally, I don't care about that at all. I'm a very confident person. And I very much just believe in like, me, my abilities, and like, my close friends and family and any other like people that I don't know, or whatever, that are not close to me, doesn't really matter. So yeah, that doesn't really affect me”.*

On the contrary, other participants specifically mentioned that they liked the attention as it stimulated sentiments such as social approval and recognition while also fuelling their motivation to produce more content. For example, one participant expressed: *“I think it's just motivating. You know, like, if people liked it once, then they'd like it again”.* Nonetheless, some participants explicitly stated that they disliked the attention. Instances of a negative impact were, for example, that strangers recognized participants in real life, causing them to feel uncomfortable.

*“I'm a very sensitive person, you know, especially to like criticism. (...) I sometimes get a bit nervous that I'll be judged for something that I find funny and other people don't find funny. And I do have to consider, like, political correctness and how people react to things, or else I will be, you know, there's cancel culture. So, I think that is always in the back of my mind before I post something. And I do get scared that people will judge me”.*

#### 4.3 Feeling Comments

Moreover, participants were questioned about the effects of positive and negative comments on their mental health. Each respondent agreed that positive comments made them feel good, happy and more confident.

*“I was really happy about the comments. Because something I was really insecure about was sort of reacted upon by a lot of people very positively. Like, the comments were really nice. (...) It made me feel a lot better about myself. And about something I was insecure about, it made me feel less insecure, especially at that moment”.*

Some respondents put emphasis on the social approval they gained through positive comments on their viral videos. For instance, in some cases, encouragement was given in form of comments, which then led to feelings of approval and confidence.

*“They said that the trick was useful and cool. This was my intention to help people. It was also nice to also see compliments for my dress and lipstick, therefore you feel kind of validated”.*

Next to that, participants were naturally questioned about the impact of negative comments they received on their viral TikTok as well. Fortunately, the majority of the participants did not get any or expressed that those had little to no impact on them.

*“You know, in the end, it doesn't really affect me at all. Because I know it's just a stranger on the internet, I don't really know this person. And that I shouldn't value an opinion, especially a negative opinion from someone I don't know too much”.*

However, a few respondents did express that they expect to feel impacted if they were to receive negative comments on their viral video.

*“Like even a couple of comments, like if there would have been like two really nasty comments, those would have affected me. And I think the negative comments always outweigh the positive comments, so they always stick more. So yeah, I think that was kind of a risk that I took because I know that if it would have gone the other way, it would have made me feel really bad about myself. And like, it would have I would have deleted the video for sure”.*

In fact, there were a few cases where respondents reported comments that made them feel angry. For instance, unprecedented political positions or specific insults towards for example family members in the comment section affected some respondents negatively.

*“I think if I was in the video I would not care so much. But I could not stand it that it was about my little brother. I was really upset and really close to deleting the video. (...) Also, these comments received hundreds of likes and then I felt really bad”.*

Participants were additionally asked about inappropriate comments or messages originating from their viral videos. Where nearly every female participant received inappropriate comments or messages, male creators did not. Naturally, the affected female creators expressed discomfort when receiving tasteless, vulgar comments. Usually, it was ridiculous comments or private messages, one participant mentioned this as an example: *“I got dm’ed by some people that wanted photos for money. That is really, really uncomfortable”.*

#### *4.4 Difference Virality*

Moreover, participants were asked if they perceived themselves differently after experiencing virality on TikTok, and how it affected them personally. Nearly all participants expressed to have felt a boost of confidence after their video went viral.

*“Like I think TikTok, social media in general, was the reason that my self-confidence is where it is now. That it's like developed a lot because as I started, I was a very shy person and just changed, changed while uploading the videos and also getting recognized on the internet. And this helped a lot”.*

## **5. TikTok’s Uniqueness**

### *5.1 Anonymous Attention*

Participants mentioned unique characteristics of TikTok that had stimulated different effects on their mental health. Especially, the fact that TikTok algorithms offered participants new ways to share content impacted their mental health positively. Because the attention was received by strangers, some participants mentioned a high level of comfort with the app. They were able to share TikToks that reveal sensitive and personal content. Publishing videos to strangers that can relate to the content inspires or encourages them to offer help and tips, therefore resulting in positive effects on the creator’s mental health.

*“You're a lot more anonymous, and it allows you to post more. Also, like, sensitive stuff and like personal stuff. Because it's a lot more private. And yeah, that's kind of nice, too. Because you're sharing stuff that people can relate to you without having to tell people that you know”.*

Next to that, anonymity makes them “feel safe” on TikTok and less vulnerable to negative comments. Some participants received negative comments but mentioned that they did not care about them. Most of them pointed out that the creator of the negative comment is unknown and therefore does not have an impact on their mental health. Some interviewees added that this would not be the case if family, friends, or other acquaintances would react negatively to their TikToks.

*“You know, in the end, it doesn't really affect me at all. Because I know it's just a stranger on the internet, I don't really know this person. And that I shouldn't value an opinion, especially a negative opinion from someone I don't know”.*

## *5.2 Instagram Upload*

To investigate TikTok’s unique effect on mental health in more detail, respondents were asked if they would upload their TikTok content on comparable platforms such as Instagram. Nearly all respondents expressed disfavour towards uploading TikTok content on Instagram. Some argued that TikTok clips do not fit their content standard on Instagram, as they are “not perfect enough”, as stated by one of the participants. TikTok was characterized by the participants as an “authentic” and “comfortable” platform, leaving space for various, sometimes even “raw” and “honest” content. On the contrary, Instagram was often described as having a judging audience, as the respondents explained that their Instagram following consists of people that they know personally, like friends, acquaintances, parents, or other relatives, making some participants anxious to post more authentic and private content.

Moreover, a few respondents stated that it is even more fun to create for strangers than for people they know.

*“On TikTok, you are definitely more anonymous. Although I have the same username on Instagram and TikTok, I know the video reaches people that do not know me. With Instagram, you know that especially your followers will see the video. Then I do not have motivation. Then I see less value. TikTok is an entertainment platform while Instagram is more serious”.*

These unique characteristics allow users to share without having anxiety about getting judged by followers they know, leading to reduced impact of negative comments on mental health, for example.

*“I just think that I feel safer on TikTok because I don't really know who follows me on TikTok and whenever people liked my TikTok I'm like, you follow me? I do not really want that everyone that follows me on Instagram, seeing or even commenting on my TikToks”.*

### 5.3 Sides of TikTok

Some interviewees mentioned different sides of TikTok where their content appears. The “good side” implies an audience of like-minded people that support and can relate to the content, the bad side stands for an audience that has a controversial and contrary opinion. These different sides have a big impact on mental health as participants realised a positive impact when being on the good side and a negative impact on the bad side. For instance, a few participants mentioned that they “landed on the good side” and received only positive feedback. Some of them added that they were thankful for “not ending up on the bad side” as negative comments then would impact their mental health a lot. One participant even mentioned that their TikTok upload landed on the bad side, resulting in people misunderstanding, disagreeing, and writing negative comments which, as a result, had a negative influence on the creator’s mental health. When being asked if their TikTok landed on the wrong side, the participant replied: *“Yes, of course. Definitely. Some people landed there*

*that had somehow a really different opinion. I did not accept it and felt uncomfortable. Then, I deleted the video”.*

## **Discussion**

### **5.1 Main Findings**

The goal of this study was to investigate the effects of TikTok virality on the mental health of Gen Z creators, answering the following research question: “*How does a TikTok blow-up influence the mental health of its creators?*”.

As reported previously, the first code group investigated the TikTok usage of the participants specifically. Connecting the results of this topic, context is provided as to why participants experience emotions of happiness when using the social media platform TikTok. Next to that, indications of their perceived impact on mental health could be made. For instance, as participants reported positive emotions and sentiments when using TikTok, positive influences on the mental health of the creator that experienced a TikTok blow-up can be assumed. In fact, a predominant number of creators actually got inspired through the consumption of content first and eventually felt motivated to publish. All participants were well-experienced with the app and the process of going viral, which presumably has a concrete influence on the emotional distance some participants choose to keep to TikTok or social media in general. Therefore, some participants were not significantly impacted by the experience of sudden virality. However, mostly positive emotions can be indicated as every participant confirmed an increase in usage of the app during experiencing virality as it might show that the process of going viral wants to be enjoyed if possible.

The second code group, *TikTok Creator*, provided specific information on the participants' behaviour when it comes to uploading content on TikTok. Participants' content and upload frequency are considered rather versatile. These results demonstrate that going viral on TikTok is not bound to any specific strategy, therefore supporting the literature of

Yao (2021) that describes TikTok's algorithms and how it provides the opportunity for everyone to go viral and/or be considered famous. However, some participants mentioned that they took part in challenges and trends which might have increased their likeability of going viral, as, for instance, Weimann & Masri (2020) described previously. Next to that, participants mentioned their personal values when uploading TikToks. Especially when virality was achieved with content that reflects the values of a respondent, the positive impact on mental health was more concrete and noticeable. This can be traced back to the previous mentioned intrinsic motivation that satisfied the creators as they succeeded and therefore, could boost the good feeling of going viral (Reiss, 2012). For instance, participants that wanted to inspire and motivate their audience felt happier and fulfilled when they reached their goal with their viral video. On the other side, participants that did not reach their value connected feelings of disappointment and sadness to the process of uploading. Moreover, an additional assumption can be made that those interviewees with a high upload amount and frequency perceive high pressure to go viral again due to an increased aspiration of reliving virality.

The next code group, *Viral TikTok*, highlights the content of the videos that went viral. Remarkably, the impact of going viral correlated with the perception of the viral video. The perceived impact, like excitement and happiness, increased when participants did not expect the virality of the video. However, participants did refer to negative emotions, such as stress, when trying to achieve virality again. Other research confirmed this impact on mental health before, as the study of Arriagada & Ibáñez (2020) described this for Instagram creators and Rach (2021) for TikTok creators that are financially dependent on getting viral. Next to that, respondents particularly emphasised the feeling of disappointment when unable to accomplish virality again. These respondents were able to identify and confirm a negative impact on their mental health caused by TikTok blow-ups.

The code group *Viral Mental Health* directly investigated the process of going viral in

relation to mental well-being. First, the effects and emotions participants experienced while their TikTok went through the process of going viral were investigated, which showed a short-term effect on most participants' mental health. In particular, participants confirmed a positive impact on their mental state while their video was going viral. Therefore, studies such as Jaffar et al. (2019) which reported that the received attention and recognition from a TikTok blow-up positively boosts users' mental health, are supported. Furthermore, participants reported having experienced a boost in confidence, which is previously stated in literature as well (Jaffar et al., 2019). Nevertheless, some participants attached importance to their distance from social media which can possibly be connected to the level of education of the participants as they have an enlightened and healthy attitude towards social media. Moreover, participants describe the impact that comments have on mental health. For instance, positive comments and compliments had a short but positive influence on mental health. Nevertheless, negative comments were rarely found, making it difficult to draw a direct comparison between the two contrasting types of comments experienced by the same creator. However, if negative comments appeared, they did have a negative impact on participants' mental health in some of the cases. Remarkably, some participants emphasized their purposeful distance from social media and to opinions of strangers online, which dampens the potentially negative effects on mental health. Therefore, cyberbullying or hate speech that was discovered by other research, could not be confirmed (Aloui, 2021; Weimann & Masri, 2020). One can assume, that this specific action can presumably also be connected to their high educational degree since they were thought to strategically reflect. Additionally, this was noticed as some participants did not care about the attention that they received through the process of going viral. Nonetheless, participants expressed enjoyment as well as discomfort towards the judgement of strangers. Lastly, participants reported inappropriate comments as well, which had a significant negative impact on their mental state. During this study, only female participants reported receiving inappropriate messages from users that



likely discovered them through their viral content which was featured in previous studies as well (Aloui, 2021; Jaffar et al., 2019).

The last code group dealt with the unique characteristics of TikTok that indirectly influenced the creator's mental health or provided background to the emotions some participants felt. For instance, the fact that attention was received from strangers instead of individuals who are part of one's social group made participants feel safe and less vulnerable to negative comments. Their impact would be considered less meaningful. The safety within anonymity in social media was expressed by the study of Odacı & Çelik (2016) as well. Next to that, the perceived anonymity allowed freedom for participants to expand their boundaries and remove themselves from their comfort zones since respondents did not experience as much judgement compared to the offline world or even reality in general. Nearly all participants were afraid to post comparable content on other popular social media platforms, like, for example, Instagram, where family, friends and acquaintances would potentially see the content and possibly express judgemental opinions or disapproval towards it. Participants emphasized that the opinions of their close ones have far more meaning to them personally. The impact of their reaction to their TikTok content is considered to have significantly more value. Lastly, participants often mentioned the good and bad sides of TikTok, which refers to the degree of relatability one's audience experiences based on the viral content that is uploaded. The good side of TikTok equals high relatability. As one participant described the lack of control when uploading videos and therefore being unable to manage who gets to see their content, others expressed their fondness as the algorithm brought their upload to the so-called good side of TikTok which consists of like-minded users. This observation underlines the significance of TikTok's algorithms and how it has the power to impact the mental well-being of TikTok creators. In particular, the bad side of TikTok probably has an impactful negative influence on the creator's mental health.

## 5.2 Limitations and further research

Although this study is one of the first research projects about virality among Gen Z on TikTok and can be classified as rather novel due to its emphasis on the mental health of young creators, some limitations must be outlined to determine the reliability of the outcome.

First of all, a lack of literature in relation to TikTok as a platform, its elements and the concept of virality made it difficult to categorize, classify or relate the results of the study with comparable research. For instance, as the study of Montag et al., (2021) expressed, many studies that deal with motivations behind TikTok, use the gratifications theory to back up their research as well. However, this theory is too broad and old for new social media platform, such as TikTok (Montag et al., 2021). Moreover, the used sampling methods caused that the sample was not reflective of society in general or even Gen Z within society, as 80% of the participants are female and all participants achieved matching levels of education. It may be considered valuable if results might differ with participants that have lower educational statuses. Especially, the healthy attitude and distance to social media might deviate from those individuals with other educational levels. Moreover, the qualitative outcome of the research may be considered partially one-sided due to its heavy emphasis on the positive effects of virality on mental health. The sample failed to represent content creators that experienced severe negative consequences. Although most of the participants expressed resilience and distance towards negative backlash on TikTok, however, although it may be a common characteristic for Gen Z as this generation grew up accustomed to technology and social media. Therefore, this may not accurately reflect the generation in its entirety. Furthermore, one can investigate the academic relevance of other age groups, such as Millennials or younger generations, and their interpretation of the effects of virality on TikTok in future research, in order to ensure a carefree TikTok usage for all age groups. The same applies to the representation of nationalities as well, due to the fact that, although the research included participants from North America, Brazil, Italy, France, and The Netherlands, by far the most

participants were German. Also, respondents that were not German, study in The Netherlands. Hence the suggestion that upcoming studies must obtain insights from other nationalities as there might be cultural differences in perceiving attention and judgement from strangers.

Although it is not proven to have a direct influence on one's mental health, a lot of respondents have expressed that they would not upload their TikTok content on Instagram. Nearly every interviewee stated significant differences between the two social media platforms, which creates further possibilities to elaborate upon in additional research. Also, the fact that participants agreed to share their content with potentially thousands of anonymous people on TikTok while being ashamed to show the same video on Instagram at the same time may be worth further investigation.

Finally, practical implications for further research designs can be made. First of all, to get the most detailed description of participants' feelings, a journal study could add more detail as it helps individuals to reflect and spend more time and thoughts on their answers (Annink, 2017). Unfortunately, the journal study should be conducted during or shortly after the process of going viral to be a possible improvement for semi-structured interviews as participants should have a fresh memory of the incident to provide detailed insights. For instance, some participants could not recall certain memories in this study as the process of going viral was too long ago. Next to that, journal studies might help with the assumption that participants might give dishonest answers when speaking about the negative impact on their mental health. Especially mental health is a sensitive topic and not easy to be confronted. Therefore, anonymized data collection, also in form of journal studies, might be more suitable to exclude possible dishonest answers (Hydock, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

This study investigated the mental health of Gen Z creators during and after the experience of going viral on TikTok. The effects on the mental health of Gen Z creators

caused by a viral TikTok video can be categorized into short-term and long-term effects. The short-term effects were that participants felt happiness due to the high amount of attention and notifications that were received. Furthermore, the effect of comments, positively as well as negatively connotated, was temporary as the participants did not attach importance to the opinion of strangers and if they did, the impact was expressed to be manageable and temporary. However, the long-term effects of TikTok blow-ups on the mental health of Gen Z creators are mostly connected with the gained following by the viral video. Some participants felt a need to experience the virality again, leading to disappointment and a bad influence on mental health. Also, inappropriate messages had a long-term impact as the creators of these messages discovered them during the viral video but stayed as a follower and therefore had a prolonged effect on the creator's mental health. Yet, more positively, another long-term effect was boosted confidence and approval due to positive feedback from others. Nevertheless, the social media platform TikTok is still academically undiscovered. Future research could be conducted to provide a more representative sample of society as different age groups, cultures or education levels could be included. Next to that, another research design, like journal studies, could be used to get more detailed and honest answers. Moreover, this study offered many opportunities to further investigate the suggestions that were mentioned during the data collection, for instance, the anxiety of uploading the same content on Instagram that was seen by thousands of TikTok users. Although participants' mental health was not heavily negatively affected, the bad side of TikTok might still be dangerous for other creators. Therefore, all these suggestions and implications should be considered and reflected upon academically to ensure a safe online environment for everyone.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Participant Message

Dear ...,

I am a communication science student at University of Twente, and I need your help to finish my bachelor thesis! I study the effects of going viral on TikTok on mental health and therefore, I would like to interview you online. Do you have time in the next two weeks to answer some of my questions? It only takes about 30 to 45 min. I will provide you with more information soon, but you would really help me to graduate. Thank you!

### Appendix B: Participant Information

#### Thank you for your help!

This document provides you with all the relevant information concerning our interview. Nevertheless, I will still explain everything before the interview.

#### This is the plan:

As previously mentioned, I study possible effects of TikTok blow-ups on mental health. First, I will ask you about your general information like age, gender or your TikTok usage. Then I would like to know more about your viral TikTok. Therefore, it would be nice if you take a look at your TikTok once again to tell me more about views, likes or comments. But mainly I would like to talk about your mental health and feelings towards the blow-up. So, if that is already a while ago, it would be great if you think back and try to remember your thoughts and feelings at the moment of getting viral. But most important: I will conduct a semi-structured interview which means that not every question has to be answered. My main priority is that you feel comfortable.

#### Important to know:

You can stop the interview at any time. You are not obliged to participate or to answer every question. Mental health can be a sensible topic which is not always easy to talk about. Please tell me if something is uncomfortable. Also, you can inform me beforehand if there are topics that we should not talk about.

#### This happens to your data:

To analyse the information that you provided I have to record the audio file of our interview. To guarantee full anonymity I will directly transcribe the file and delete it afterwards. The data will be stored on the servers of the University of Twente which is in multiple ways secured and encoded. In the end only some quotations can be found in my thesis that cannot be traced back to you.

#### Still questions?

If you have any questions, please be free to contact me. Below you can find my details. I am looking forward to our interview.

Alexander Michael Agater Email: a.m.agater@student.uwente.nl
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## **Appendix C: Interview Questions**

### **General information/Demographics:**

- What is your gender?
- What is your age?
- Where are you from?
- What is your educational degree?
- What is your profession?

### **About TikTok usage:**

- Are you using TikTok?
- How long are you using TikTok per day?
- Did the usage increase during the process of going viral?
- Do you enjoy using TikTok?
- What feeling do you get when using TikTok?
- What motivates you to use TikTok?

### **Focussing on creating TikTok's:**

- What type of content do you create?
- How many videos did you upload so far?
- In what frequency do you upload TikTok videos?
- What personal value do you get when publishing videos?
- Would you publish your content on other platforms? For example, Instagram?

### **Focussing on TikTok going viral:**

- What was your video about? What was the setting and context?
- Do you know how much views, likes and comments this video received?
- Was the blow up a surprise or did you expect it?

### **Effect on mental health:**

- What feeling did you get when you saw that the video went viral?
- What feeling did you get when knowing that strangers are looking/judging at your video?
- Did you receive compliments or other positive comments? How did it make you feel?
- Did you receive any hate speech? How did it make you feel?
- Did you receive comments or messages that seemed inappropriate? How did it make you feel?
- After your TikTok blew up, did you put more effort into creating TikTok's?
- If you created more TikToks, did the views decrease? If yes, how did that make you feel?
- Have you ever thought how it would be to get viral again?
- Do you think you stressed yourself to get viral again?
- Did you recognize any difference in yourself, comparing before and after getting viral?

**Appendix D: Cohen's Kappa**

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*Cohen's Kappa*

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<b>Code</b>	<b>Cohen's Kappa</b>
TikTok Usage	0.814
TikTok Creator	0.798
Viral TikTok	0.869
Viral Mental Health	0.751
TikTok's Uniqueness	0.719

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## Appendix E: Codebook

### Codebook

<i>Code</i>	<i>Sub-Codes</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Kappa</i>
1. TikTok Usage	1.1 TikTok Screentime	Refers to daily screentime average of TikTok app.	Oh, I would say 30 minutes to one hour a day.	0.814
	1.2 TikTok Enjoyment and Feeling	Refers to emotions that are experienced while using TikTok.	Yeah, I love it. It's so fun.	
	1.3 TikTok Motivation	Refers to motivation to open TikTok	I mostly use it for entertainment and when I have to distract myself.	
2. TikTok Creator	2.1 Content Type	Refers to type of content that the participant creates on TikTok.	It's basically about motivational fitness content.	0.798
	2.2 Upload Frequency and Number	Refers to the frequency and number of uploads on TikTok.	I uploaded two videos.	
	2.3 Upload Value	Refers to perceived value when uploading videos.	I would say that that I want to inspire people.	
3. Viral TikTok	3.1 Viral Context	Refers to the context and setting of viral TikTok.	So, I'm insecure about my nose. And the challenge really played into that. So, I felt like I could participate.	0.869

	3.2 Viral Statistics	Refers to views, likes and comments of the viral video.	Right now, it has 31.7 million views, 2.8 million likes and around 8.000 comments.	
	3.3 Viral Surprise	Refers if the viral video was surprising.	At the beginning, it was definitely a surprise, because I just started to TikTok account to get a little bit out of my comfort zone and do something new, and not with the purpose to go viral.	
	3.4 Viral Effort	Refers to increased effort into creating TikToks.	I posted a lot more videos, but my effort never changed.	
	3.5 Feeling Decreased Views	Refers to feelings that were perceived when views decreased.	Because you feel like you could have gone better and could have gotten more views. And that just makes you feel very, very bad.	
4. Viral Mental Health	4.1 Feeling Virality	Refers to feeling during the process of going viral.	I was so happy when I saw it had that much likes.	0.751
	4.2 Feeling Attention	Refers to the perception of strangers' attention.	No, I actually never thought about it. I don't really care.	
	4.3 Feeling Comments	Refers to feelings that were influenced by comments on viral TikTok.	They made me feel like I was doing the right thing. Especially, if I can inspire people.	
	4.4 Difference Virality	Refers to perceived difference in mental health comparing before and after virality.	It's definitely made me more confident.	

5. TikTok's Uniqueness	5.1 Anonymous Attention	Used when participants spoke about attention of strangers.	You're a lot more anonymous, and it allows you to post more.	0.719
	5.2 Instagram Upload	Used when participants spoke about a possible Instagram Upload.	On Instagram I know who follows me that's why I wouldn't upload it there.	
	5.3 Sides Of TikTok	Used when participants referred to both sides of the TikTok algorithm.	Some people landed there that had somehow a really different opinion. I did not accept it and felt uncomfortable. Then, I deleted the video".	

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**END**