

## Choreographies of Contagion: Mapping Virality and Performative Identity on TikTok

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### ABSTRACT

The rise of TikTok has inaugurated a new paradigm of digital culture centered on embodied participation. This study investigates viral dance challenges, proposing a novel framework—"choreographies of contagion"—to analyze them as structured, distributed performances that mediate identity. The framework moves beyond treating trends as mere content, instead examining the interplay between movement, affect, and algorithmic architecture. This study employed a six-month digital ethnographic approach, supplemented by a multi-modal analysis of a globally significant dance challenge (#WaveRider). A purposive sample of 500 videos and 20,000 associated comments were analyzed using a combination of kinesic analysis, to deconstruct the core movements, and reflexive thematic analysis, to map the patterns of creative deviation and affective response. The findings revealed a complex system of cultural production. A stable "kinesic blueprint" ensured replicability, acting as the trend's genetic code. This blueprint was then subjected to widespread "performative mutations," where users asserted agency and inscribed personal, cultural, and affective meaning onto the dance. These performances unfolded on an "algorithmic stage" that both disciplined and seduced users, shaping their actions. This process cultivated an "engineered communitas," a potent but transient sense of community forged through shared embodied practice and affective resonance. In conclusion, viral TikTok challenges are not spontaneous occurrences but sophisticated choreographic systems that harness the pleasure of mimesis and the desire for connection. The body on TikTok is a primary site for negotiating the tensions between individual agency and the logics of platform capitalism. This study concludes that virality is a deeply embodied, affective, and technologically mediated process, offering the "choreographies of contagion" framework as a critical tool for future scholarship.

### 1. Introduction

The advent of social media platforms has fundamentally reconfigured the landscapes of cultural production, social interaction, and identity formation.<sup>1</sup> Among the latest and most influential of these platforms, TikTok has emerged as a dominant force, particularly among younger demographics, shaping global trends in music, fashion, language, and politics.<sup>2</sup> Its short-form, video-based format, powered

by a notoriously effective and opaque recommendation algorithm, has created a unique ecosystem for the rapid-fire creation and dissemination of cultural content. What distinguishes TikTok from its predecessors is its profound emphasis on embodied participation; it is a platform built on sound, movement, and the user's physical presence.<sup>3</sup> This embodied nature finds its most potent expression in the phenomenon of viral dance challenges—

participatory trends where users replicate and reinterpret a specific set of movements set to a popular audio clip. These challenges, while often dismissed as frivolous digital ephemera, represent a rich site for cultural inquiry. They are not merely acts of mimicry but are complex communicative acts through which individuals perform and negotiate their identities for a vast, networked audience. The act of participating in a trend is a declaration of cultural literacy and relevance, an attempt to insert oneself into a global conversation.<sup>4</sup> The body, in this context, becomes a canvas for self-expression, a medium through which users articulate their sense of humor, physical prowess, social affiliations, and cultural heritage. The seemingly simple act of a 15-second dance is, therefore, laden with layers of social and personal meaning, reflecting a dynamic interplay between individual agency and collective cultural currents.<sup>5</sup>

The academic inquiry into TikTok is a burgeoning field. Initial scholarship has focused on several key areas: the platform's technological architecture and its "black box" algorithm; its influence on the music industry and popular culture; its role in political activism and social mobilization; and its impact on youth culture and digital community formation.<sup>6</sup> Scholars have examined how TikTok's features, such as the "For You" page, Duets, and Stitches, foster a unique "platform vernacular" that encourages imitation, remixing, and collaborative creation. Research has also explored the psychological dimensions of TikTok use, including issues of self-esteem, body image, and the pressures of performing authenticity in a digitally mediated environment. While this existing literature provides a crucial foundation, it often treats viral trends as content to be analyzed rather than as structured performative systems in themselves.<sup>7</sup> The internal mechanics of how a set of movements becomes a "challenge," how it mutates as it spreads, and how this process relates to the construction of the self remains a comparatively underexplored territory.<sup>8</sup> To address this gap, this study synthesizes four distinct but complementary theoretical pillars. First, from performance studies, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis provides a foundational language of stages, actors, and

audiences. Second, Judith Butler's theory of performativity allows us to understand identity not as an innate essence but as an effect constituted through the repeated, stylized citation of norms. Participating in a viral challenge is a quintessential Butlerian act—a stylized repetition through which users perform and solidify a version of their digital self.<sup>9</sup> Third, from media studies, the concept of the meme, adapted for digital culture, helps explain the mechanics of replication, mutation, and evolution. A TikTok dance is a highly effective "kineme," a meme enacted through bodily movement.<sup>10</sup> However, these three pillars are insufficient to capture the experiential dimension of the phenomenon. Therefore, this study introduces a fourth pillar: affect theory. The "contagion" of a trend is not merely informational but deeply affective. It is a contagion of feeling—the pleasure of rhythmic synchrony, the desire for connection, the anxiety of visibility. Why does watching a dance create a compelling urge in the body to participate? Theories of affect, particularly the work of scholars like Sara Ahmed and Brian Massumi, provide a language for understanding this pre-cognitive, embodied pull. Affect theory allows us to move beyond an analysis of what performances mean to explore how they feel, both for the performer and the viewer.

This study seeks to bridge these theoretical domains by proposing a new conceptual framework: choreographies of contagion. We use these terms with deliberate self-awareness. "Choreography" is employed not to suggest a single, authoritative choreographer, but to highlight the emergent, structured nature of these trends. They are collectively assembled choreographies, with rules, vocabularies, and aesthetic logics that participants learn and negotiate. The term pushes back against the notion of these trends as purely chaotic or spontaneous. "Contagion," similarly, is used not in a pathological sense that frames the user as a passive host, but in a sociological and affective sense. It describes the rapid diffusion of a behavioral and affective state through a network, driven by the compelling pull of desire and the pleasure of participation, not just the passive logic of infection. This framework allows for an integrated analysis that considers the specific movements of the

dance, the performer's individual interpretation, the affective charge of the performance, the social context, and the technological affordances of the platform. The primary aim of this study is to dissect the socio-cultural mechanics of virality on TikTok by examining a viral dance challenge as a "choreography of contagion." This research seeks to map how these embodied practices facilitate the performance and negotiation of identity within an algorithmically mediated environment. It investigates how a standardized set of movements becomes a vehicle for personal expression and how the collective performance of this choreography fosters a sense of transient community among a globally dispersed user base. The novelty of this research is threefold. First, it introduces the "choreographies of contagion" framework as a new, interdisciplinary analytical tool. Second, it enriches the study of digital performance by integrating affect theory, providing a more holistic account that considers both the meaning and the feeling of participation. Third, it moves beyond asking what content goes viral to explore how virality is choreographed, performed, and experienced through the lived body, offering a more critical and nuanced account of identity work and platform power in the digital age.

## 2. Methods

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm to gain a deep and nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and cultural meanings embedded within a TikTok viral dance challenge. The research design was centered on a digital ethnographic approach, which involves the immersive and sustained observation of an online community and its cultural practices. To focus the inquiry, a single, globally significant dance challenge was selected as the case study. The chosen challenge, which for the purposes of this study will be pseudonymously referred to as the "#WaveRider Challenge," met the following conditions: (1) Global Reach: The associated hashtag garnered over 10 billion views, indicating participation across diverse geographical and cultural contexts. (2) Sustained Virality: The challenge remained culturally relevant and actively participated in for a period

exceeding three months, allowing for the observation of its evolution. (3) High Mutability: The core choreography was simple enough for widespread replication but also invited a high degree of user modification and reinterpretation. (4) Rich Data Set: The challenge generated a massive volume of user-generated videos and a vibrant discourse within the comment sections, providing ample data for analysis. The challenge was based on a 15-second audio clip from an electronic music track, characterized by a distinct beat drop that cued the main choreographic sequence.

Data collection was conducted over a six-month period, from January to June 2024. A final dataset of 500 videos was curated using a maximum variation sampling strategy to include videos from creators with varying follower counts, diverse demographic backgrounds, and different performance contexts. The collection included the video itself, its caption, and its engagement metrics. Textual data from the comment sections of a subsample of 100 highly engaged videos were also collected, amounting to approximately 20,000 individual comments. The data analysis was an iterative, multi-stage process. Stage 1: Kinesic and Semiotic Analysis. This initial stage focused on deconstructing the "kinesic blueprint" of the #WaveRider Challenge. The core choreography was broken down into its fundamental units of movement (kinemes). Stage 2: Thematic Analysis of Performative Variations. The full sample of 500 videos was then analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The objective was to identify and analyze the patterns of "performative mutation"—the ways in which users deviated from the kinesic blueprint to express individuality. Stage 3: Narrative and Discourse Analysis of Textual Data. The collected comments and video captions were analyzed to understand the social dimension of the challenge. This stage provided critical insight into the formation of "digital communitas" and the role of the audience in validating performances. All data analyzed was publicly available. To protect user privacy, all usernames were replaced with alphanumeric codes, and any personally identifiable information was redacted. As a researcher and an active (though non-participatory in this trend) user of

the platform, my own familiarity with TikTok's vernaculars and rhythms inevitably shaped my observations. This insider/outsider positionality was a constant site of reflection, allowing for an understanding of tacit cultural norms while also maintaining analytical distance. This study recognizes that the act of interpretation is an exercise of power; therefore, the analysis focuses on the observable effects of performances and their reception, rather than making definitive claims about creator intent. The epistemological limit of a non-participant ethnography is that it analyzes the performance, not the performer's internal state.

### 3. Results and Discussion

At the core of the #WaveRider Challenge was a highly structured yet accessible "kinesic blueprint." This blueprint acted as the stable, replicable "genetic code" of the trend, providing a shared language of movement that scaffolded thousands of unique performances. Its success was predicated on a combination of simplicity, rhythmic satisfaction, and adaptability. A deeper semiotic analysis reveals the blueprint's cultural resonance: the opening "wave" gestures are fluid and legible, connoting "going with the flow," while the climactic pointing gesture at the beat drop is a moment of punctuated agency, a gesture that says, "Look at me." This combination of fluid conformity and punctuated individuality is a microcosm of the social logic of the platform itself. Figure 1 provides a systematic deconstruction of the #WaveRider challenge's core choreography, referred to in this study as the "kinesic blueprint." This visual schematic anatomizes the viral dance into its five critical components, elucidating not only the specific movements but also their intrinsic function in facilitating mass participation and cultural contagion. Each element of the blueprint is meticulously designed—or has evolutionarily adapted—to maximize its memetic potential within TikTok's unique socio-technical ecosystem. The initial component, the Opening Wave, comprises the first two 8-counts of the choreography. It is characterized by fluid, undulating

arm movements that are both visually legible and kinesthetically simple. This element serves as the primary hook, its low complexity ensuring a minimal barrier to entry and thus fostering high-fidelity replication across a diverse user base. Semiotically, the gesture itself evokes a sense of ease and "going with the flow," aligning perfectly with the platform's casual, participatory ethos. Following this is the Beat Drop Point, the undeniable affective climax of the performance. Timed precisely to the audio track's bass drop, this sharp, declarative pointing gesture acts as a moment of punctuated agency. It is a powerful, attention-grabbing motion that provides immense rhythmic satisfaction to both performer and viewer. This carefully engineered moment of audio-visual synergy functions as the choreography's most memorable and emotionally rewarding feature, making the entire sequence "sticky" in the collective consciousness of the platform. The sequence resolves with the Closing Step, a low-energy, side-to-side rocking motion. This serves as a "performance coda," allowing the performer to gracefully exit the main choreography while often making direct, personable eye contact with the camera. This moment is crucial for building a sense of intimacy and connection with the audience. Undergirding the entire performance is the principle of Audio-Visual Synergy. The tight synchronization of every movement to the musical structure is not incidental; it is fundamental to the blueprint's success. This coupling enhances the choreography's cognitive "stickiness," making it easier to learn, remember, and replicate accurately. Finally, the blueprint is defined by its Spatial Containment. The entire 15-second sequence is designed to be performed within a small, 1-2 meter square area. This environmental adaptability is a key strategic feature, as it dramatically expands the potential sites of performance from dance studios to bedrooms, offices, and kitchens, thereby maximizing opportunities for spontaneous participation and content creation. Together, these five elements constitute a masterful piece of emergent cultural engineering, a "kineme" perfectly optimized for viral transmission.

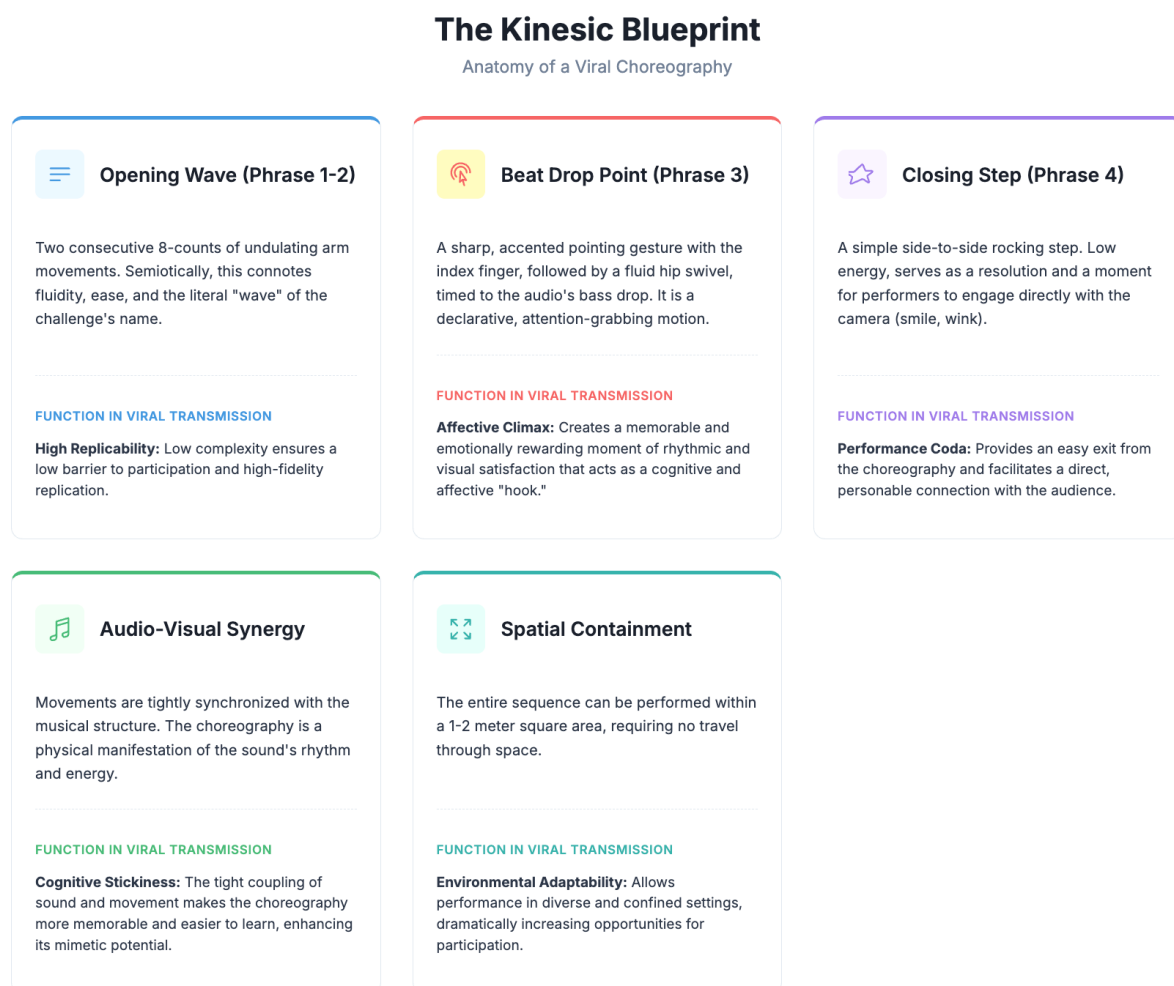


Figure 1. The kinesic blueprint.

While the kinesic blueprint provided the structure, the cultural richness of the challenge emerged from the myriad ways users engaged in "performative mutations." These were intentional deviations from the core choreography through which creators asserted their individuality and inscribed personal meaning onto the collective performance. These mutations transformed a generic trend into a personalized statement. Figure 2 presents a typology of the "performative mutations" that constitute the core of creative expression within the #WaveRider challenge. If the kinesic blueprint represents the stable "genotype" of the viral trend, these mutations are the diverse "phenotypes" through which users articulate their individuality and co-author the trend's cultural meaning. This schematic categorizes the myriad ways

participants deviate from the core choreography, transforming an act of replication into an act of self-expression. The four primary categories identified—Aesthetic/Skill, Comedic/Subversive, Cultural/Contextual, and Narrative/Emotional—are not mutually exclusive but represent the dominant strategies of performative agency observed in the data. The Aesthetic/Skill mutation is a performance of bodily mastery. Here, participants embellish the basic blueprint with advanced techniques, signaling expertise within a specific physical discipline. Whether through the precise pirouettes of a ballet dancer or the complex footwork of a hip-hop practitioner, this mutation transforms the challenge into a virtual stage for showcasing talent. It asserts an identity rooted in skill, discipline, and artistic creativity. In stark

contrast, the Comedic/Subversive mutation is a performance of wit. By intentionally violating the choreographic norms—through absurdity, irony, or slapstick—users demonstrate a higher level of cultural literacy. They prove they understand the rules of the trend so well that they can break them for humorous effect. This category includes everything from performing in outlandish costumes to using everyday objects as props, asserting an identity that is self-aware, playful, and often critical of mainstream trends. The Cultural/Contextual mutation is an act of "glocalization," grounding a global phenomenon in a specific, local identity.<sup>11</sup> By incorporating traditional attire, performing in front of recognizable landmarks, or infusing the dance with regional aesthetic

flourishes, participants perform a dialogue between the global and the local. This mutation asserts a proud connection to cultural heritage, community, and place, pushing back against the homogenizing tendencies of globalized media.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the Narrative/Emotional mutation leverages the platform's affordances, such as on-screen text, to embed the dance within a personal story. The choreography ceases to be just a dance and becomes a symbolic gesture of triumph, relief, defiance, or joy.<sup>13</sup> This is perhaps the most direct form of self-expression, where the trend becomes a vehicle for personal testimony and the public performance of emotion, connecting the abstract choreography to the concrete, lived experiences of the participant.

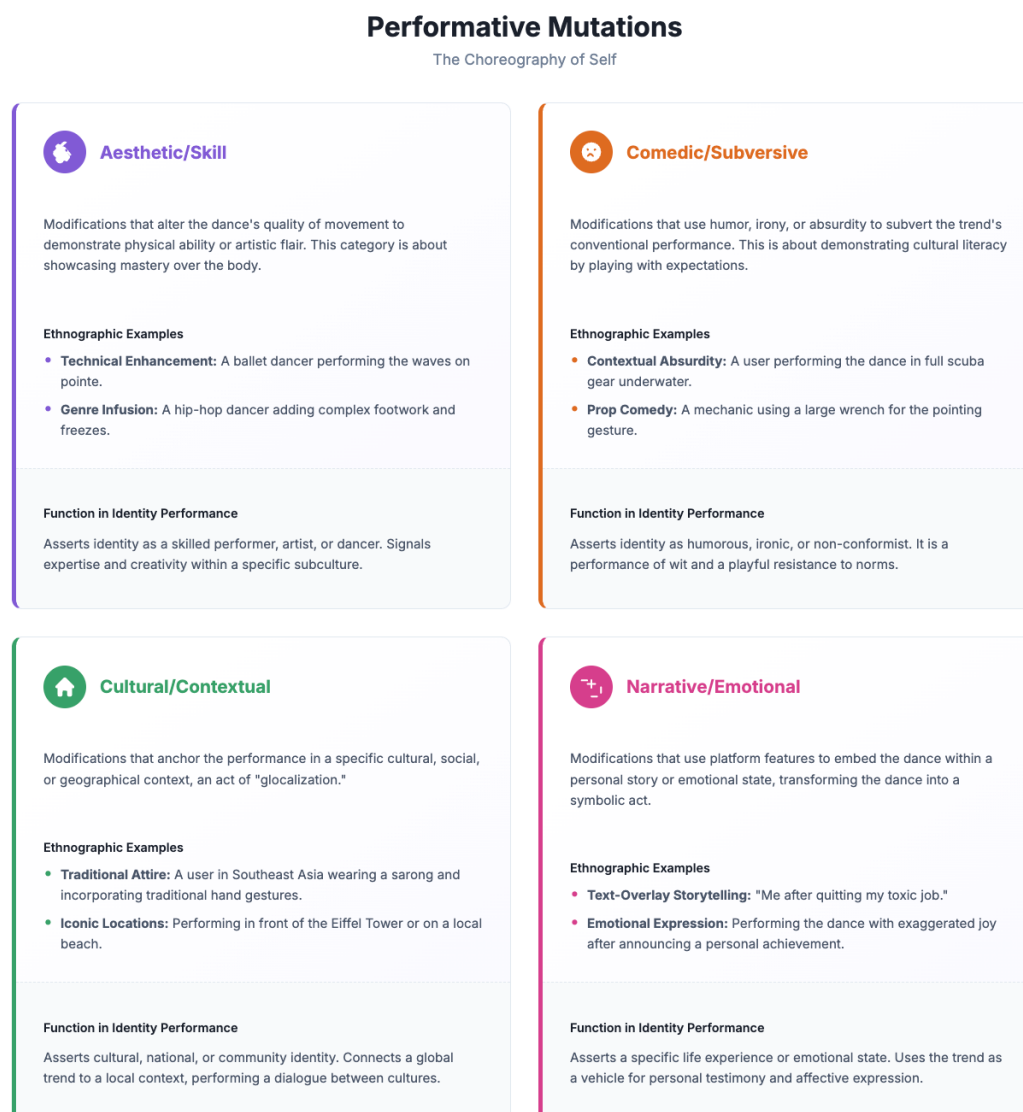


Figure 2. Performative mutations.

The performances within the #WaveRider Challenge were enacted upon what can be termed the "algorithmic stage." Performers' choices were calibrated to appeal to the TikTok algorithm. However, to describe this dynamic merely as a "panopticon" is insufficient. A panopticon disciplines through fear. The TikTok algorithm disciplines through the desire for visibility; it is a seductive panopticon. It does not just watch; it entices, creating an affective economy where the pleasure of being seen and validated is the ultimate reward.<sup>13</sup> This creates a powerful feedback loop akin to a digital "looking-glass self," where a user's sense of self is shaped by the algorithm's perceived judgment. Figure 3 provides a conceptual model of the complex and recursive relationship between the TikTok performer and the platform's architecture, termed "The Algorithmic Stage." This schematic reframes the traditional power dynamic of surveillance, moving from Foucault's disciplinary panopticon, which coerces subjects through the fear of being seen, to a "Seductive Panopticon," which disciplines subjects through the cultivated desire for visibility. At the center of this model is The Performer, whose embodied subjectivity is not an independent entity but is actively shaped and constituted by a constellation of powerful, interlocking forces. This figure visualizes the environment in which the performance of self takes place, illustrating how subjectivity becomes externally oriented and deeply enmeshed with the platform's logics. The model is composed of four primary components that orbit and act upon the performer.<sup>13</sup> The first is The "For You" Page (FYP), the algorithmically curated feed that serves as the primary stage for performance. The FYP is not a neutral space but an unseen, powerful curator that creates a powerful incentive for performers to conform to "algorithm-friendly" aesthetics—such as high energy, direct eye contact, and adherence to trending formats—in order to achieve the ultimate prize of visibility. This visibility is quantified and made legible through Engagement Metrics. The publicly visible counts of likes, comments, and shares function as a

real-time system of social and algorithmic validation.<sup>14</sup> These metrics are not merely data points; they are potent symbols that affirm or reject the performance of self, creating a powerful feedback loop that directly shapes the performer's future creative choices and sense of self-worth. This system of validation and reward gives rise to the Affective Economy, the core engine of the seductive panopticon. The platform's architecture is designed to identify and amplify content that generates strong emotional responses, rewarding creators with the pleasurable rush of recognition.<sup>15</sup> This process disciplines users not through overt coercion but through the seductive pull of positive affect—the "good feeling" of being liked, seen, and approved of. The performer's creative labor, therefore, shifts from pure self-expression to the strategic production of measurable affect. Finally, these forces coalesce to produce The Looking-Glass Self, a concept adapted for the digital age. The performer's subjectivity and sense of self are formed not from an internal essence, but from their perception of how they are being judged by the dual audience of the algorithm and their networked peers.<sup>16</sup> The self becomes a project to be continuously monitored, refined, and optimized for external approval. The central placement of The Performer in the schematic, therefore, does not signify autonomy, but rather their position as the focal point upon which these powerful technological, social, and affective forces converge to choreograph the performance of digital identity.

The collective participation in the #WaveRider Challenge fostered a powerful, albeit transient, sense of community. This "digital communitas" was most palpable in the comment sections and the Duet feature. The contagion is one of affect. The Duet feature provides the most vivid enactment of this. In one widely circulated Duet chain, an initial creator performed the dance, a second user duetted it, then a third and fourth, creating a 2x2 grid of four strangers from different continents, all dancing in perfect synchrony.<sup>17</sup> This is engineered communitas.

# The Algorithmic Stage

The Seductive Panopticon

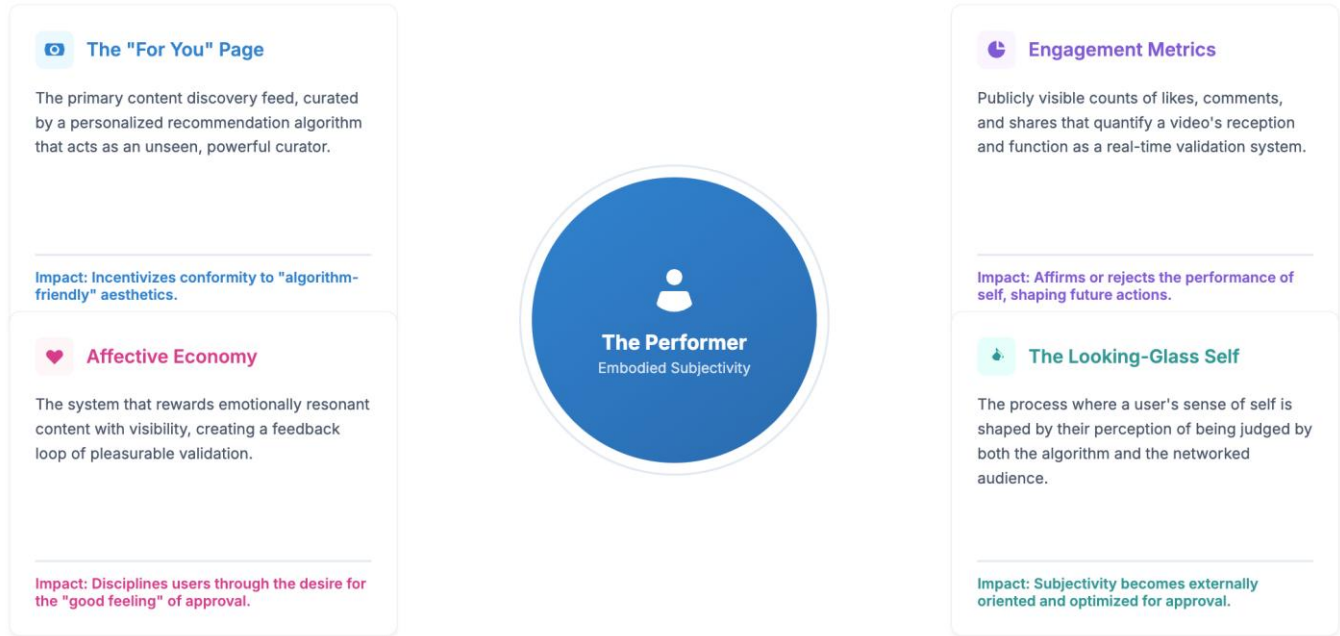


Figure 3. The algorithmic stage.

The feeling of connection is genuine, but the architecture that enables it is a product of the platform. Figure 4 provides a schematic model of "Engineered Communitas," illustrating the process by which individual user actions are transformed into a collective social and affective experience through the mediating force of platform architecture. This model deconstructs the phenomenon of digital community formation on TikTok, revealing it not as a purely organic or spontaneous occurrence, but as a structured outcome engineered by the platform's design. The schematic is organized into three hierarchical levels, demonstrating a clear flow from bottom-up user input to a top-down, emergent sense of belonging.<sup>18</sup> This process is subtitled "The Affect of Contagion" to emphasize that the primary force binding this community is not shared ideology or geography, but a shared feeling-state that is circulated and amplified by the platform. At the base of the model are the Individual User Actions, representing the raw material of the system. These atomized inputs—the individual decisions of User A, B, C, and D to participate in the trend—are the foundational layer.

While each action is discrete, they collectively form a critical mass of participation that fuels the entire process. This level highlights the granular, user-driven nature of content creation that serves as the essential input for the platform's community-building machinery. The middle and most critical layer is the Platform Architecture, identified as "The Engineering" that processes and structures the individual inputs. This level details the specific technological features and social affordances that channel user actions into coherent, interactive patterns. Invitational Tagging functions as a recruitment mechanism, leveraging existing social graphs to spread the affective desire to participate.<sup>19</sup> Affirmative Discourse, primarily occurring in comment sections, creates a positive feedback loop of social validation and bonding, reinforcing the value of participation. Collaborative Performance, made possible through features like Duets, allows for virtual synchronization, creating a powerful visual and kinesthetic experience of collective action that transcends physical distance. Finally, the Shared Vernacular—the development of trend-specific in-jokes, references, and language—establishes



cultural in-group boundaries and strengthens the sense of a cohesive, albeit temporary, social group. These architectural components are not neutral tools; they are designed to encourage specific forms of interaction that are conducive to community formation and, by extension, sustained platform engagement. The culmination of this process, at the top of the schematic, is the emergent phenomenon of Engineered Communitas. Drawing from Victor Turner's anthropological concept, this term is adapted to describe the potent but transient sense of community and shared feeling that is forged through

these technologically mediated and algorithmically amplified interactions. It is a "communitas" in that it generates a genuine feeling of solidarity and collective effervescence. However, it is "engineered" because the conditions for its emergence are deliberately designed and optimized by the platform. The model posits that the feeling of belonging experienced by users is both an authentic social phenomenon and a product of a system designed to harness the human desire for connection for its own economic and engagement-driven ends. The contagion is one of affect, and the platform is its most efficient vector.<sup>20</sup>

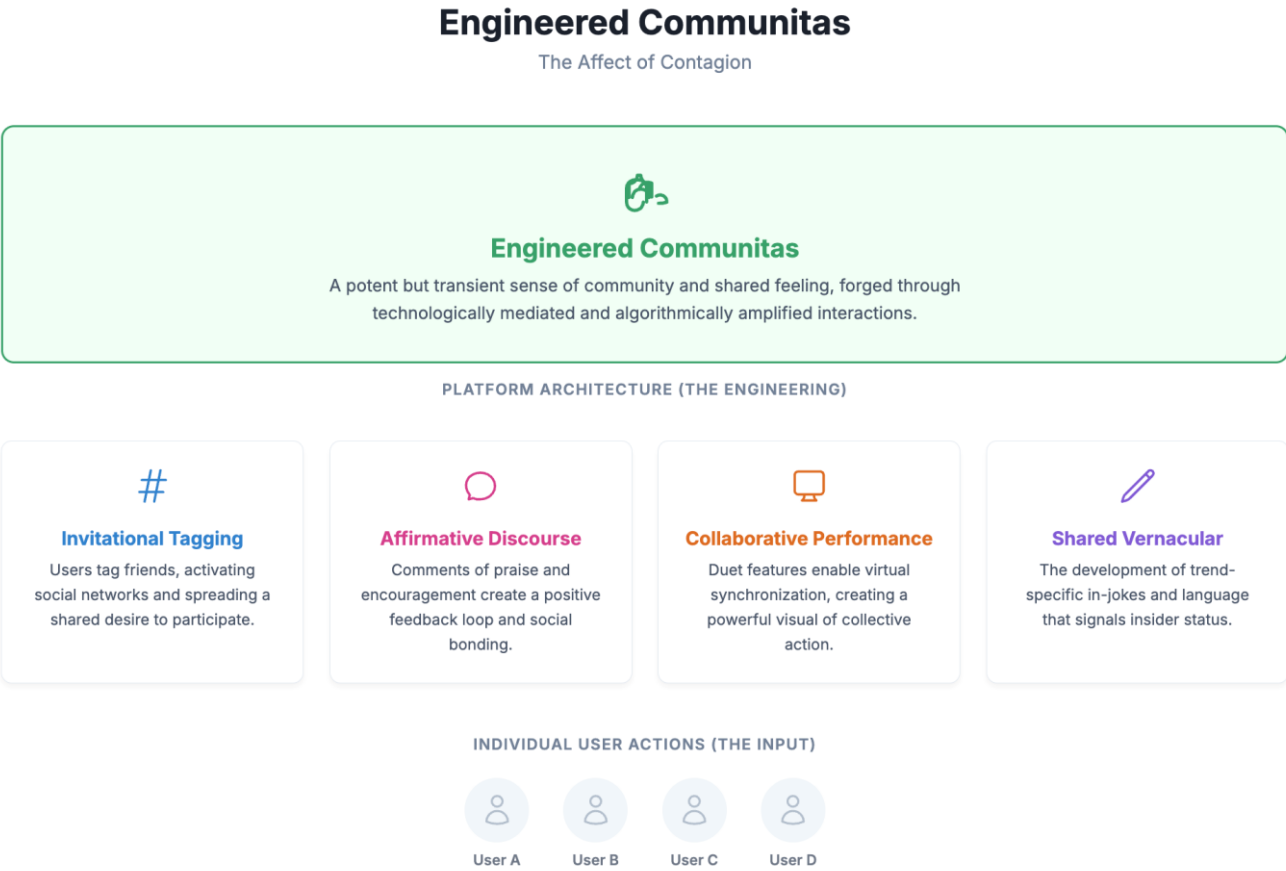


Figure 4. Engineered communitas.

The findings of this study provide a multi-layered account of the #WaveRider Challenge, illustrating how a viral TikTok trend functions as a complex cultural system. This discussion interprets these findings in relation to broader theories of performance, identity, and digital culture, focusing on the tensions between embodied agency, affective experience, and

algorithmic power. Figure 5 presents a conceptual model that synthesizes the core theoretical frameworks of this study with its primary empirical findings, illustrating the direct and reciprocal relationship between theory and data. The schematic is organized into three distinct vertical columns, each representing a major analytical pillar of the research:

The Dialectic of Performativity, The Seductive Panopticon, and The Affective Economy. Each column follows a clear deductive logic, flowing from an overarching "Theoretical Lens" at the top to a corresponding "Empirical Finding" at the bottom, visually connected by a directional arrow that signifies how the theory illuminates the finding. This structure serves as a visual conclusion to the manuscript's central argument, demonstrating how a multi-pronged theoretical approach is necessary to fully comprehend the complex cultural dynamics of virality on TikTok. The first column, "Dialectic of Performativity," is grounded in a contemporary reading of Butlerian performance theory. The "Theoretical Lens" posits that identity on the platform is not a static entity but is constituted through a dynamic tension—a dialectic—between two opposing forces: the pressure to conform by citing established norms (replicating the dance) and the agentic drive for creative deviation (modifying the dance). This lens provides the intellectual framework for understanding the study's key empirical finding: "Performative Mutations." The schematic illustrates that the observed mutations—whether cultural, comedic, or skill-based—are not random acts but are the tangible evidence of this dialectic in action. They represent moments where users assert their agency and inscribe their unique subjectivities onto a collective cultural text, thereby performing their identity in the space between conformity and individuality. The second column, "The Seductive Panopticon," reframes traditional theories of power and surveillance for the algorithmic age. The "Theoretical Lens" moves beyond the Foucauldian panopticon, which disciplines through the fear of being watched, to a model of seduction. It argues that algorithmic power operates not primarily through coercion, but through the cultivation of a *desire* for visibility and the pleasurable validation that comes with it. This theoretical lens is shown to directly inform the empirical finding of "The Algorithmic Stage." The analysis of user behavior—the careful calibration of performances to appeal to the "For You" page, the direct appeals in captions not to "flop"—is empirical proof of this seductive power. The schematic

demonstrates that performers are not merely prisoners under surveillance; they are willing participants in a system that disciplines them through the seductive promise of approval, leading them to orient their subjectivity towards external, metric-based validation. The third column, "The Affective Economy," introduces the crucial role of feeling and emotion, drawing from affect theory. The "Theoretical Lens" argues that virality is fundamentally an affective phenomenon, driven by the circulation of feelings like joy, pleasure, and the desire for social connection. It posits that platforms like TikTok function as "affective economies," systems designed to identify, amplify, and ultimately monetize emotionally resonant content. This provides a compelling explanation for the study's finding of "Engineered Communitas." The schematic visually connects the theory of an affective economy to the observed reality of a community forged through shared feeling. The genuine sense of solidarity and collective effervescence experienced by users is shown to be both an authentic social outcome and a product engineered by a platform architecture that harnesses the human need for connection to generate engagement. The "contagion" is thus revealed to be a contagion of affect, deliberately channeled and amplified by the platform's economic and technological imperatives. Collectively, Figure 5 argues that no single theory can adequately explain the phenomenon of TikTok virality. Rather, it is at the intersection of these three theoretical domains—performance, power, and affect—that a comprehensive understanding emerges. The figure serves as a powerful heuristic, illustrating how the abstract concepts of performativity, algorithmic power, and affective economies are made manifest in the concrete, observable practices of users on the platform.

The results compel a reframing of Butler's theory of performativity for the digital age. The #WaveRider Challenge is a "citational practice" par excellence. Performing the kinesic blueprint is an act of citing the trend, a declaration of belonging. However, the widespread phenomenon of "performative mutations" highlights the profound agency within this structure.

# Theoretical & Empirical Synthesis

Connecting Core Theories to Study Findings

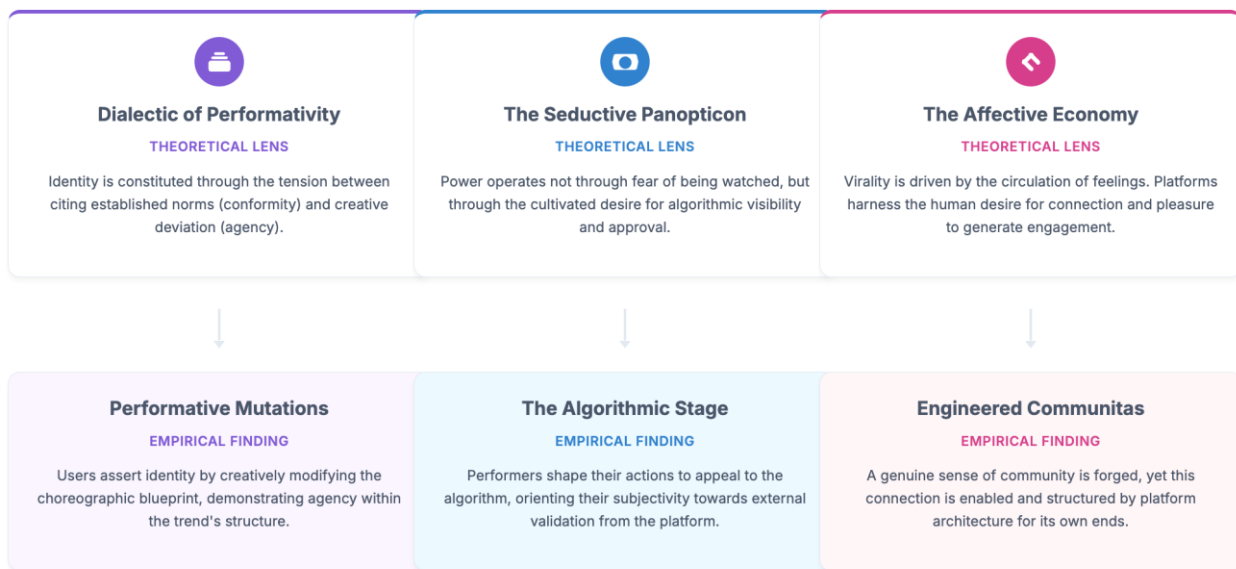


Figure 5. Theoretical & empirical synthesis.

Users are not simply reproducing the norm; they are actively negotiating it, using the shared choreographic language to articulate their unique positionality. This creates a dialectic of performativity. On one side is the centripetal force of the algorithm, the "seductive panopticon" that incentivizes conformity to a legible, algorithmically friendly norm. On the other side is the centrifugal force of individual creativity—the desire to stand out, to be unique, to mutate the performance into a personal statement. Identity on TikTok is forged in the crucible of this tension. The self is constituted in the gap between perfect replication and meaningful deviation. Furthermore, the algorithm itself learns from these mutations. If a particular mutation gains significant traction, it can become a new norm to be cited, creating a dynamic evolutionary loop. Performativity on TikTok is therefore not a simple repetition of norms, but a constant, algorithmically mediated negotiation between conformity and innovation.

The concept of "contagion" must be understood not merely through the disembodied logic of memetics but through the lens of an affective economy. The "pathophysiology" of this cultural virus is driven by the

circulation of feelings. The #WaveRider challenge did not just spread a set of movements; it spread a feeling—complex of joy, playfulness, and belonging. The pleasure of participation, which fuels the contagion, is threefold. First, there is the kinesthetic pleasure of the dance itself—the simple, somatic satisfaction of rhythmic movement synchronized with music. This is the pre-cognitive, bodily joy of the dance, the feeling of the beat in one's muscles. It is a non-discursive pleasure that requires no justification beyond its own felt experience. Second, there is the creative pleasure of mutation—the joy of cleverness, humor, or aesthetic expression. This is the pleasure of authorship, of taking a common cultural object and making it one's own. It is the satisfaction of a well-told joke, a beautifully executed movement, or a poignant cultural reference. This pleasure is tied to the assertion of agency and the successful communication of one's unique perspective. Third, and most powerfully, there is the social pleasure of connection—the feeling of being part of a massive, imagined community, made visible in the Duet chains and affirmative comment sections. This is the pleasure of belonging, of being "in on the joke," of sharing an experience with millions of

others. It is the pleasure that animates the "engineered communitas," providing a powerful antidote to the alienation of modern life. The TikTok platform is designed to optimize this affective economy. The algorithm is an "affect detection machine," identifying content that generates strong emotional responses (likes are a proxy for pleasure, comments for engagement, shares for resonance) and amplifying it. The "contagion" is thus not accidental; it is a core part of the platform's business model. It is the spread of behavioral patterns that generate desirable affective states, which in turn produce the user engagement that is the platform's primary commodity. The pathophysiology of the trend is inseparable from the economic imperatives of the platform.

The "algorithmic stage" is not a neutral space. While it offers unprecedented opportunities for creative expression and community formation, it is also a site of political and economic power. The algorithm, trained on existing data, is not immune to societal biases. While this study did not focus on this aspect, it is a crucial implication that the "seductive panopticon" may not gaze upon all bodies equally. The aesthetics it rewards may align with dominant norms of beauty, race, and ability, potentially marginalizing or rendering less visible those who do not conform. The "choreography of contagion" can thus also be a choreography of exclusion. Furthermore, the "engineered communitas" raises critical questions. The affective bonds forged in these trends, while genuinely felt, are often ephemeral and decontextualized. They generate the feeling of solidarity without necessarily fostering the substantive, long-term commitments of organic communities. This can create a form of "affective displacement," where the desire for social change or connection is satisfied by participating in a hashtag trend rather than engaging in offline collective action. The platform provides the catharsis of community while simultaneously atomizing its users and harnessing their creative labor for commercial gain. The joyous dance of digital communitas is performed on the factory floor of platform capitalism. The discussion of these phenomena must therefore remain critical, acknowledging both the genuine human

pleasure and connection being forged and the corporate architecture that scaffolds, channels, and ultimately monetizes that connection.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study set out to map the complex cultural dynamics of viral dance challenges on TikTok through the conceptual lens of "choreographies of contagion." The revised analysis, enriched by ethnographic detail and affect theory, has demonstrated that this phenomenon is a sophisticated system of cultural production, identity performance, and affective engineering. The research revealed that a stable "kinesic blueprint" enables viral spread, while "performative mutations" allow individuals to inscribe their unique, embodied subjectivities onto the collective choreography. These performances unfold on a "seductive panopticon" that disciplines through desire, while the collective participation fosters a potent but "engineered communitas." The primary contribution of this research is the refinement of the "choreographies of contagion" framework. By integrating affect theory and grounding the analysis in thick description, this framework provides a more robust and critical tool for understanding the intersection of embodiment, technology, and feeling in contemporary digital culture. Virality on TikTok is a deeply choreographed and affective process. The platform has successfully harnessed the fundamental human pleasures of dance, mimesis, and ritual, scaling them through a powerful algorithmic architecture. The result is a dynamic cultural arena where identities are not merely stated but are danced into being. Understanding these choreographies is essential for comprehending the profound ways in which digital platforms are reshaping not only what it means to be a person in a networked world, but also how we feel, connect, and labor.

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