

GROUNDED THEORY CONFERENCE

Grounded Theory Futures: Reconciling Perspectives

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Abstract:

Practicing Humanity through TikTok: A Grounded Theory
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Social media platforms are frequently associated with hostility, judgement and harmful interactions. This study examines how one TikTok content creator works to create the antithesis: a safer online space.

The study forms part of my work as an independent research consultant evaluating a particular TikTok channel, the protocol for which received a Favourable Ethics Opinion from the University of Portsmouth. I align most closely with radical constructivism (von Glasersfeld, 1991): I regard data as constructed through interactions, observations and accounts of experience, and theory as a disciplined conceptual construction judged by its coherence, usefulness and viability.

Although focused on one channel and its creator, the study is not based on one participant or interview. The primary dataset comprised scripts and field notes for 32 videos published between 2023 and 2026 and at least 3,500 associated comments: approximately 2,000 posted by around 1,800 viewers and 1,500 by the creator. Approximately 11,000 words of emails, an interview transcript and blog posts concerning the creator's work were also analysed. Theoretical sampling added approximately 2,500 comments and field notes on five videos from five comparative channels.

The primary data were de-identified and uploaded to Quirkos; comparative data were analysed separately on the study computer. Open and theoretical sampling, constant comparison, memoing and conceptual integration proceeded iteratively (Glaser, 1976, 1998). That is open sampling (Scott, 2025a, p. 52, Scott, 2025b) and open coding proceeded until the core category of 'practicing humanity' was generated; followed by selective coding and theoretical sampling within the TikTok channel and in comparative channels until sufficient concepts were generated and saturated to achieve theoretical completeness. Memo-sorting enabled recognition of the key theoretical codes, which organised the substantive codes and shaped the write up. I did not post to the channel and was not a participant in the TikTok interactions analysed, although the interview and emails arose through researcher-creator interaction. The creator and I selected videos, after which all available comments were retrieved. My principal impact lies in these research interactions and selections and in conceptualising the data using my theoretical sensitivity developed from my experience as a grounded theory researcher and western woman.

The theory of practicing humanity explains how the content creator addresses the main concern: what is it to be human in this social media space? Practicing humanity means working towards becoming the best person one can be by developing principles for action and extending care to others within situations encountered. It comprises two interrelated processes: the basic social psychological process of developing and applying perspectives, through which the content creator translates experience into

principles for conduct and refines them in practice; and the basic social process of shaping space, generating connections and protecting space.

Each video posted to the channel creates a situation, bounded by TikTok's design, in which the creator and viewers interact. By sharing experiences, modelling vulnerability and inviting reflection, the content creator enables viewers to practice, reflect upon or experience humanity. Viewers may share deeply, encourage or contribute personal philosophies. The content creator tends these connections through acknowledgement, empathy, affirmation, well-wishing and sometimes guidance towards constructive perspectives or actions. Collectively, these interactions generate an aura of warmth.

This space remains fragile. Harmful or mocking contributions require respectful boundary-setting, while TikTok's functionality constrains responses to indications of risk. Presented as a case history (Strauss & Glaser, 1987), the theory demonstrates how carefully tended one-to-one interactions can create moments in which people offer, explore and experience humanity.

References

Glaser, B. G. (1998). *Doing grounded theory: Issues and discussions*. Sociology Press.

González-Bailón, S. & Lelkes, Y. (2023) Do social media undermine social cohesion? A critical review. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 17, 155–180. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12091>

Scott, H. (2005a). *Using Grounded Theory: How to Develop Theory for Managed Change*. Grounded Solutions Ltd. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7398-8860>

Scott, H. (2005b). Sampling in Grounded Theory . *Grounded Theory Review*, 25(1), 102–107. Retrieved from <https://groundedtheoryreview.org/index.php/gtr/article/view/492>

Presentation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6rdP-2t15g>

Presentation transcript:

Hello, my name is Helen Scott. I was trained in grounded theory by Barney Glaser. I mentor novice grounded theorists through my website grounded theory online and I published my book using grounded theory how to develop theory for managed change from what I learned about how to support novice grounded theorists from my mentoring practice.

For the purpose of this presentation, I align most closely with radical constructivism. I regard data as constructed through interactions, observations and accounts of experience and theory as a disciplined conceptual construction judged by its coherence, usefulness and viability.

I also conduct applied grounded theory research and consultancy for global, national and local organizations.

In the early days of my consultancy work, I discussed my plans to use GT in evaluation work with Dr. Glaser. He asked me three times if I was sure and I said yes three times and told him about the useful work I had already done. His advice was simple. Memo about what you're doing. Grounded theory was developed for academia but try it. So I did.

My client for this project is Lee who is a mid-tier influencer on Tik Tok with a little over 100,000 followers. Social media platforms are frequently associated with hostility, judgment, and harmful interactions, and Lee has specifically sought to create a safer online space.

After a few years, Lee noticed that viewers were consistently responding with emotional intelligence, and he wanted to understand more about what was happening within the channel. He commissioned this evaluation.

At the start of the project, I was uncertain as to what I would be able to generate from the type of data available to me, but Lee was happy for me to simply do my best.

We submitted the research protocol to the University of Portsmouth, from whom we received a favorable ethics opinion.

So, we have one content creator, over 100,000 followers, and thousands of posts. This makes for an unusual research design for grounded theory. And I was wondering what such a grounded theory would look like and would it be useful.

As it turned out, analysis showed that the content creator had very strong patterns of behavior and so did the viewers and commenters and the two intersected within the channel.

In total, the data comprised the scripts and field notes of 32 of the channels videos, plus over 3,500 associated comments. also 11,000 words of emails, email exchanges, blog posts, and interview transcripts.

I also took field notes of watching five videos from five comparative channels and their associated 2500 comments.

I did not post to the channel and was not a participant in the Tik Tok interactions analyzed, although the interview and emails arose through researcher creator interaction.

The creator and I selected videos after which all available comments were retrieved.

My principal impact lies in these research interactions and selections and in conceptualizing the data using my theoretical sensitivity developed from my experience as a grounded theory researcher and western woman.

A network analysis of the first 10 videos illustrated that there are very few exchanges between viewers. The vast majority of exchanges are between the content creator Lee and one other person and these exchanges are limited. Lee is obviously central to what is going on.

He is a principled individual who lives according to his evolving values among which are equanimity, wholeness, togetherness and harmony. His personal philosophies are carefully considered and worked through. He reflects on life experiences often as they are happening, refines his philosophies accordingly, and derives principles for action from them. He uses these principles to guide his behavior.

His patterns of practicing humanity are what drives him to generate a safer online space through his Tik Tok channel.

For this project, Lee's main's concern can be understood as what is it to be human within social media and Tik Tok in particular.

This is processed by practicing humanity comprising a basic social psychological process cultivating perspectives and a basic social process of shaping social spaces where cultivating perspectives and shaping social processes can be understood as developing and applying perspectives, creating the situation, generating connections and protecting spaces.

Let's look at the basic social process of shaping social spaces and creating the situation. Next, first of all, Lee posts a video which initiates a situation bounded by the platform design and in which actions and interactions take place.

Videos tend to fall into three main types in which Lee may implicitly or explicitly invite viewers to practice their humanity in the world or in the comments, reflect on their own humanity and practices, or invite viewers to experience humanity within the channel.

It is the focus on the viewer expressed as an invitation to interact with both the video content and with Lee that differentiates this channel from those that focusing focus on broadcasting their content.

In the comments section, viewers respond to Lee's invitations and Lee meticulously responds to every comment. It is very rare that he misses one.

These are the strongest patterns of behavior that Lee and commenters engage in.

Lee's behaviors within a situation include acknowledging, affirming, appreciating, empathizing, inviting, mirroring, and more.

Comment behaviors within a situation include reflecting, responding, carrying forward, nurturing, supporting, sharing deeply, and more.

These behaviors also happen, but much less frequently. Protecting, protecting by shaping, closing down, and rebuking are often in response to challenges, criticisms, and mocking behaviors.

Interestingly, interestingly, viewers often support Lee in the face of these types of challenging behaviors.

So different situations tend to generate different behaviors.

Now to illustrate the theory, I apply the theory to the channel. I provide the reader or a reader or audience with a video script, a selection of the video's comments, and a theoretical commentary of what is happening within a situation.

This video script has been changed from the original but retains its meaning.

Here I just want to say that even though the data are in the public domain and the risk of harm to participants of being identified is deemed low because participants share deeply, we prefer not to expose viewer comments when sharing our research.

So this video script is if this video has found its way to you, perhaps there is something you have been carrying on your own. I cannot solve your problem, but I can listen. If you choose to leave a message here, I will read it. I will care about what you say, and I will care about you as a person.

I may not have answers, but I can offer my attention for a moment.

Sometimes we tell ourselves that nobody notices our struggles or that our thoughts are not important enough to share. But reaching out can change things. Even if it is only a small step, it means someone else can walk alongside you for a while.

This is a public space. So, please share only what you are comfortable sharing. But if there is something on your mind, you are welcome here.

And this is a selection of the comments.

C19 writes, "I'm scared that the future I've spent years working towards may never happen. Sometimes I worry that all my effort will come to nothing."

And Lee responds, "Thank you for sharing that fear. What is it that you're hoping to create?"

C19 replies, "I want to be a chef and I have and have my own restaurant, but it's tough."

And Lee responds, "I wish you well with it."

C20 writes, "For years, I felt as though I'm never quite good enough, no matter how hard I try. Other people tell me I'm doing well, but I struggle to believe them."

And Lee responds, "Those inner voices can be very harsh. Thank you for sharing them here. You are more than your most critical thoughts."

And C21 writes, "I don't really know what I want to say yet. I just wanted you to know that hearing someone offer to listen made me emotional."

And Lee responds, "You don't have to have the words right now. This space will be here, still here when you do."

This is the theoretical commentary for the example video script and its associated comments.

So this is a situation arising from an invitation to experience humanity. In this emerging design, practicing humanity is evident throughout the script and in each response that Lee posts.

Through the video, Lee speaks to pain and invites viewers who are suffering to enter this safer online space and be held for a moment. Lee is careful to scope what he is committing to and what viewers can expect.

Commenters respond by sharing deeply.

Lee responds to C19 by appreciating their post, acknowledging their issues, and inviting C19 to continue the exchange.

C20 shares deeply to which Lee responds with empathy and appreciation and seeks to root C20 towards a positive idea.

Lee responds to C21 by acknowledging the commenters perspective and expresses his commitment of being present in the channel.

Digs appear to be used intentionally by hundreds of viewers to signal support for C-21.

The aura generated here is one of quiet suffering which is met with humanity and warmth. It is an intensely human space.

The impact for Lee of practicing humanity to generate a safer online space has been profound in chronicling his values across the temporal span of his channel. He has a record of his growth as a human being.

His experiences have enabled him to apply his values, test himself against them, and test his values against his experiences.

He has been able to refine his values and refine the way he practices humanity in life and in Tik Tok.

His interactions with commenters has allowed him to refine who he knows himself to be today.

The overwhelming experiences of his tens of thousands of viewers is likely to be one of sensing the humanity of the channel.

Those who comment will have experienced a touch of humanity tailored for them in their moment.

This is not a common use of grounded theory and I was uncertain what form it should take.

Inspired by Stra Strauss and Glazer's 1977 book Anguish, I used a case history approach to solve my problem of how to present my analysis.

And I used this code to organize the theory of the Tik Tok situations.

The elements of this theoretical code are context, conditions, actions, interactions, strategies, and tactics, and consequences.

What grounded theory researchers have in common is an assumption that we are studying patterns of behavior.

I used constructivist data and Strauss's coding paradigm with the analytic procedures of classic rounded theory.

At first glance, this might appear to be method slurring, but it isn't.

Classic grounded theory procedures can be used by researchers applying any philosophical or theoretical perspectives.

If you're interested in finding out more about this, please have a look at the presentation in the conference methods thread, reconciling grounded theory perspectives, part two. Part one is also very interesting for this project.

As for every GT project, I began constant comparison with open coding.

First, I uploaded the video scripts and their associated comments to Quirkos.

I find the drag and drop function aids productivity hugely, and I like the visual nature of the interface.

This is the interface after the anal analysis of five videos.

I wrote memos principally in Apple Pages, and when out and about, I also like to record memos on my smartphone.

I copy the phone's automatically generated transcripts into my memo bank.

When analyzing, the classic GT researcher remains in the open coding stage until they are fairly confident in a core category.

I found the core category quite late at around 30 videos.

This is the quirkos interface around then.

Interestingly, interestingly, the core category of practicing humanity didn't appear on a quirkos as a code at all. Instead, it emerged as I was writing memos.

The text in red is when the light starts to dawn.

And I memo Lee is promising commitment. He acts commitment. And in this video, he promises it and scopes it, sets boundaries for it. He can't fix problems, but he can listen. He is always listening. Often he hears. A couple of times he doesn't quite hear the person. Repeating the words to demonstrate that he is heard.

Video speaks to pain, promises, scopes. The promise, keeps the promise, noticing, hearing, reassuring, rooting. Rooting an idea for a different way rather than accepting the burden they place on themselves in terms of expectations or judgments. Rooting part of offering hope. Mirroring. Not quite right, but reflects but reflecting their strengths and qualities back to them.

being human. Lee is being human. Life is less hard when shared. He is offering belonging to the human race.

And I get very excited and write instructions to myself and explore and play with ideas.

Look at quirks and separate practicing humanity out from generating space. Look at the big codes in relation to practicing humanity. Generate the space. Invite connection. Monitor behavior. Share the message of practicing humanity.

What happens in humanity? What is that? The state of lacking compassion, empathy or basic human kindness. Which means that to be human we must be good humans because humans are also inhuman.

I need to qualify what is happening here. Is it to be it is to be a good man, a good person, a good human.

Confident in my core category, I delimited my analysis to selective coding and memoing.

I selectively coded data that I already had and I held an intentional research conversation with Lee.

I didn't tell him what I thought the core category might be, but as we talked, I guided the conversation to what I wanted to theoretically sample around.

I also theoretically sampled two further videos from the channel and five comparative videos.

I copied and pasted all our email exchanges into one document and I selectively coded all of this data.

I made sure that my concepts were saturated and that I had sufficient concepts to explain what was what was happening. I had theoretical completeness.

At this point, I sought my memos to conceptually integrate the theory by finding the theoretical code or codes which work best with these concepts.

And this is my memo sort at 32 videos.

Sorting memos is an extension of constant comparison. only now we are comparing ideas rather than incidents and concepts.

The coding paradigm has had been a candidate theoretical code for a while.

I had to preconceive it during the ethics submission in order to explain how GT might be used for a formative evaluation.

This slowed me down a little from recognizing that the theoretical codes of basic social psychological process and basic social process were relevant for organizing the concepts pertaining to Lee.

But I got there in the end.

After this conference, I will engage with the literature sampling it where it develops the theory before negotiating the position of this theory within the existing literature.

So that's where we are now and that's where this presentation ends.

Thank you for listening.