Practicing Humanity through TikTok: A Grounded Theory

Abstract: 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.

von Glasersfeld, E. (1991). Knowing without metaphysics: Aspects of the radical constructivist position. In F. Steier (Ed.), Research and reflexivity (pp. 12–29). Sage.

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