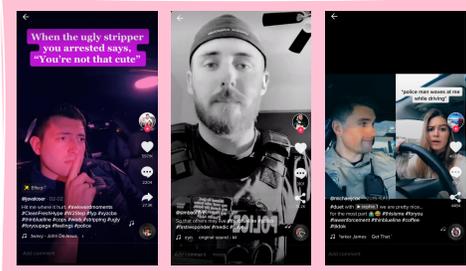


Crossing the #thinblueline: Implications for Authority and the Police on TikTok

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What is TikTok?



TikTok is a social media platform that algorithmically curates an infinitely-scrolling feed of short-form videos. These videos range in length from fifteen to sixty seconds. Users on the platform can use their own audio or choose from elsewhere. Users also have the option to “duet” TikToks from other creators by recording and publishing a new video

next to the original user's content. The app defaults to the 'For You' page, but users can scroll within hashtags. TikTok rose to prominence in North America after the acquisition of the pre-existing app Musically and its users in November 2017.¹ As of February 2020, TikTok has been downloaded over 1.5 billion times and maintains 800 million users.² Also as of February 2020, 41 percent of TikTok users are between the ages of 16 and 24.³

Why are the police using TikTok?



Authoritative institutions on civilian platforms reflect what Foucault characterizes as the “capillary” structure of power, which “inserts itself into [the] everyday lives” of civilians.⁴ Police-created TikTok content represents one element of expanding surveillance across identifiable boundaries⁵ such as the perceived privacy of social media.

Police-created content also suggests an intentional and “idealized” presentation of self which influences the behaviour and perception of the audience over time.⁶ This influence is underscored by social media's characterization as a look at the authentic “backstage” of content creators.⁷ Social media renegotiates the boundaries of privacy, which are already contested between marginalized civilians and privileged institutions like the police.⁸

Social media is a site of image management for policing. This work is performed to appear more “authentic and credible”.⁹ Appearance is of high importance to modern police institutions, as social media has conversely made policing a highly visible career.¹⁰ TikTok's popularity with young people provides an ideal environment for fostering attitudes towards the police.

Research Question

In what ways does the presence of police officers on TikTok contribute to the complexity of relationships of authority in the contemporary digital age?

Methodological Approach

The sample texts were analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as outlined by Huckin et al.¹¹ The sample consisted of the first* 25 posts in the popular hashtag #thinblueline.

1. “What the narratives are ‘about’¹² and how the characters are positioned in relation to one another.
2. How the content creator has controlled this narrative versus how respondents like the audience provide influential feedback.
3. Analysis of where the content creator positions themselves within overarching ideological narratives about relationships of authority.

Narrative Theme 1: Sympathy for the Struggle

- Many TikToks discuss the “dark side” of policing. Topics include mental health, post-traumatic stress disorder, and death.
- Frequent use of POVs (point of view) – a genre of TikTok content that constructs a fictional scenario and relationship between the creator and the viewer – to create a sympathetic connection.
- The **framing narratives** most frequently used position police officers as two distinct characters: 1) the selfless hero and 2) the traumatized hero. Both suggest a desire to “image manage” and cultivate sympathy and respect for the role.
- Comments on TikToks employing this narrative theme were overwhelmingly positive. Supportive comments frequently came from other police officers and first responders.
- Counterpoint to criticism and civilian surveillance of police officers.

Narrative Theme 3: Funny and “Relatable”

- Humorous content, both “vlog-style” and scripted, appears most frequently in the sample. Humour gives the impression that the police officer is approachable and “real”¹⁴ which encourages sharing with a wider audience as well as a positive relationship between the police creator and the audience.
- Funny police narratives naturally **foreground** the perceived “humorous” experiences of policing and **background** the (likely negative, non-funny) experience of the other parties involved.
- **Genre** additionally impacts these TikToks, as they most commonly employ stereotypes to quickly communicate a joke.
- This narrative theme also very commonly **frames** criminals and prisoners in a negative light by Othering them using negative stereotypes such as “nosy” or “ugly”, implying that the desired audience is “good”, law-abiding civilians.

Sample Demographics

44% skits or otherwise scripted videos

Indicates a conscious presentation of identity and ideology

44% confessional or “vlog-style” videos

Appears like a spontaneous glimpse into the “real” life of the content creator
Creates an “air of familiarity” between creator and viewer¹³

8% used the Duet feature

Direct communication with the audience

Narrative Theme 2: Community Outreach

- Some TikToks in the sample involved a direct response or outreach to the community by a police officer. In this case, police officers are consciously using the platform – a civilian space – to assert their position as an authority figure.
- These TikToks commonly **frame** police officers as authentic and knowledgeable. Their direct approach to engaging with the community gives the impression that they are being “real” despite asserting their authority.
- Community outreach TikToks most frequently made use of **discursive differences** to highlight their authority in making a call to action.
- This narrative theme also includes the two police-created Duets present in the sample. Duets display a desire to address anti-police sentiment but also an awareness of civilian activity and discussion of policing on the platform. This awareness once again suggests a desire to “image manage” perceptions of police.

So what?



Social media appears to be a neutral platform for individuals to express their thoughts and opinions. When authoritative bodies like the police begin to engage with the public through such a platform, their motivations and goals must be unpacked. Understanding *why* the police are maintaining a visible social media presence is key to understanding *how* we should interpret their messages. Social media platforms

continue to demonstrate their usefulness as a site of public surveillance, and the naturalization of policing into these spaces where the potential for function creep is high must be interrogated.

TikTok as a platform also has a unique userbase. Many of TikTok's most active users are young. Therefore, the ubiquitous presence of police – as well as the knowledge that the police or other authoritative bodies can always be watching their activities – contributes to a culture which accepts surveillance as the status quo.

Larkin, P. (2019, September 26). Inside the rise of TikTok, the Chinese video-sharing app that's currently the No. 1 iPhone app in the US. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/tiktok-app-online-video-sharing-2019-9>

*Subal, M. (2020, February 21). TikTok revenue and usage statistics (2020). *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/544444/tiktok-revenue-usage-statistics/>

¹TikTok by the Numbers: Stats, Demographics & Fun Facts (2020, February 12). *Chronicore*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicore.com/tiktok-statistics/>

²Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977* (Ed. C. Gordon). New York, NY: Pantheon Books (p. 39)

³Haggarty, K. D., & Eason, R. V. (2000). The surveillance assemblage. *British Journal of Sociology*, 51(6), 605-32.

⁴Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

⁵Stooper, B. (2010). The presentation of self in the age of social media: Disturbing performances and exhibitions online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30(5), 379.

⁶Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2010). Understanding privacy at the margins. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 1159.

⁷Ballwin, K. (2018). #hashtagting: “order” versus the construction of police presentational strategies on social media. *Policing and Society*, 28(3), 357.

⁸Heesell, B. C. (2019). Content, visibility, and control: police work and the contested objectivity of bystander videos. *New Media & Society*, 21(1), 61.

⁹Foucault, M. (1979). *Discourse analysis*. In T. Miller (Ed.), *Functional approaches to written text* (pp. 78-92). Washington, DC: US Department of State.

¹⁰Haggarty, K. D., & Eason, R. V. (2000). *How you talking to me? How identity is constructed in police-voiced Facebook sites*. *Narrative Inquiry*, 28(2), 10.

¹¹Huckin, M. (2018). Constructing narrative and media identity of “thin blue line” celebrities: A narrative relational analysis. *International Studies in Communication & Culture*, 8(2), 225-237.

¹²Subal, M. (2019). *Understanding “real” online: the construction of police presentational strategies on social media*. *Policing and Society*, 28(3), 355.

*Videos outside of the scope of the research project (strictly police-created content) were omitted from the sample selection.