Tampere University of Applied Sciences

TikTok and Misinformation:

Which Factors Contribute to Spreading Misinformation?

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BACHELOR'S THESIS
December 2022

Degree Programme in Media and Arts
Interactive Media

ABSTRACT

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Interactive Media

KIVIJÄRVI BUSTO, REBECA:
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Bachelor's thesis 47 pages, of which appendices 3 pages
December 2022

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This thesis sought to establish a link between the popularity of TikTok and the factors that make certain misinformation be spread more than other misinformation. The thesis also explored what makes TikTok a popular platform thus allowing a larger audience to expose to misinformation. To do this, the thesis was based on multiple sources such as scientific journals and articles. The information was presented in conjunction with a small-scale experiment that consisted of the creation of 3 TikTok videos and their uploading to the internet.

The theoretical part centered on what brought about the popularity of TikTok including factors within the application itself, as well as how what was happening in the world during TikTok's growth could have affected TikTok's popularity. The theoretical part also identified the underlying factors of what makes information spread in general, by looking at the transmission of memes and narrative theory.

The goal of the experiment consisted of seeing if anyone could make a video based on the factors that make information spread, and receive a significant quantity of views, despite the information being presented potentially being false. All videos created for this thesis received over 200 views, but what was surprising and subverted expectations was that the control video received the most views. This was unexpected as it was made by breaking the rules that make misinformation spread as opposed to the other videos which followed the rules that make misinformation spread.

However, it could not be stated that humour, short content, and a story-like structure failed at making misinformation spread as there were multiple limitations to this experiment. One of them was that the humour used was subjective, another, that the topic might have not been interesting enough to TikTok's users. Further research would be needed to establish or discredit these factors that allegedly cause misinformation to spread.

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1 INTRODUCTION

TikTok is one of the most popular video apps today, ranking as the most down-loaded in 2020, according to BBC News (2021) and 2021, according to Koetsier J. (2021), a writer for Forbes (BBC News 2021; Koetsier 2021). With 1 billion users, TikTok is ranked as the social media platform with the 6th highest number of active users (figure 1) (Kemp 2022).
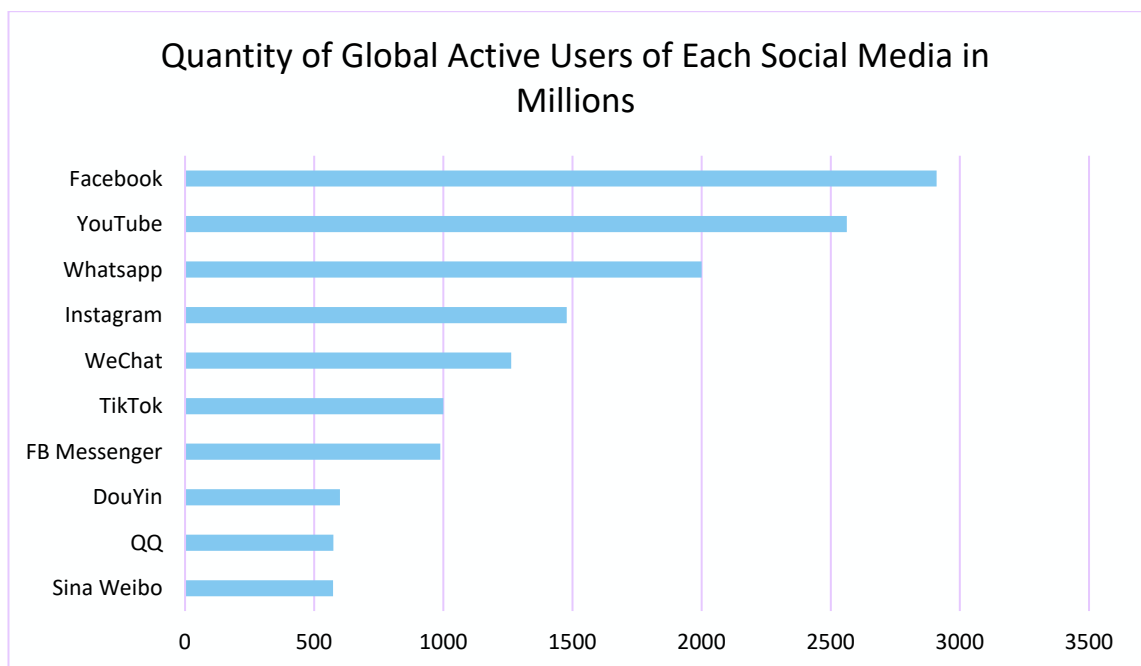

FIGURE 1. Quantity of Global Active Users of Each Social Media in Millions (Kemp 2022).

The goal of this thesis is to understand how TikTok became so popular, thus having a considerable quantity of users to potentially spread misinformation to. Furthermore, the thesis will also be exploring the reasons why specific misinfor-mation spreads including an analysis from the perspective of narrative theory and memetics. I chose this topic out of interest in social media as a user myself and having completed a social media centric course at my university of applied sci-ences. I believe that it is useful to understand the impact that these platforms can have on their users without them necessarily realising it. Moreover, the thesis will contain a section examining how the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced the popularity of TikTok. TikTok being the app with most downloads in 2020 (BBC

News 2021) directly correlates with an increased amount of time that American teenagers spent alone, as even in 2019 four and a half hours a day were spent alone, but in 2020, that number increased to six hours a day for people aged fifteen to nineteen (BBC News 2021; Ben & Ella 2021).

The thesis consists of a written analysis and a practical part that will reinforce the former. The practical aspect of the thesis includes writing scripts based on findings about what factors make misinformation spread. These scripts will then be filmed and edited, with the participation of an actress who will follow them. Finally, they will be uploaded onto TikTok to see how many views, comments, shared, favourites and likes the short videos amass. In my study, the results had the control video gaining most views. This was not expected as it was a control video and made by not following the rules that make misinformation spread as opposed to the other two videos that I made, that did follow the factors that made misinformation spread.

2   THE RISE OF TIKTOK

2.1   What is TikTok and How it was created

TikTok is a social media app that allows users to upload short video content that may be up to 10 minutes in length, expanded from the previous limit of 3 minutes that was already superior to the original 15 seconds. It was developed by the company ByteDance and currently reaches over a billion people worldwide, having had no issue in establishing itself in some of the most important markets with the exception of China (TikTok n.d.; Blair 2020, Malik 2022.) In China, DouYin, also by ByteDance, replaces TikTok due to bans imposed by the government (Blair 2020).

To understand how TikTok became the phenomenon that it has become today, to the point where multiple other platforms such as YouTube and Instagram have released their own short video format in the form of YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels, we must examine the rise of its predecessors. Vine and Musical.ly can be credited for carving out the niche that TikTok now inhabits.

2.1.1   Vine

Vine first appeared in 2012, in the midst of a general trend of increasing video content length on the internet; in 2010, YouTube, the most popular video platform at the time, made the decision to remove their 10-minute limit on videos that could be uploaded. Furthermore, this change signified the possibility to show more advertisements on the content as a direct result of a longer runtime (Kincaid 2010; Blair 2020.)

Despite it being seemingly illogical to go against the grain in terms of the length of videos, Vine allowed only for videos with a maximum of 6 seconds duration to be uploaded. Another social media platform had already done something similar regarding shortening their content, this was Twitter but had only explored this in

text with their character limit per Tweet. Regardless, Vine became a success given that during 2014, at its height, 200 million users were on it (Blair 2020.)

The short video format and the fact that Vines looped, allowed for simple sharing, making them consequently become more popular. This led to many phrases from Vine becoming part of popular culture and the creation of Vine stars such as Thomas Sanders that had a following of over 8 million or Shawn Mendes who nowadays is a famous musician. However, Twitter bought Vine in 2012 and in 2016 terminated it (Blair 2020.) This was because and there were leadership changes that affected morale and Vine's stars had been migrating to completing platforms such as Instagram, meaning that it became too expensive to run Vine for its returns (Isaac 2016).

Vine's influence on TikTok is undeniable, especially considering that many of the creators that used to be on Vine ended up migrating to TikTok (Thomas Sanders can be found under the username thomassanders with 9.1 million followers) and therefore brought along their humour with them (TikTok n.d.). Moreover, there is an even more direct impact as there are TikToks that directly reference differences or similarities between TikToks and Vines or just are Vine compilations for the sake of nostalgia (picture 1).

PICTURE 1. Screenshot of a Vine compilation uploaded to TikTok (Kivijärvi Busto 2022).

2.1.2 Musical.ly and DouYin

Musical.ly can be understood as a more primitive version of Tik Tok. It appeared in September of 2016 by the hand of Zhang Yiming, founder of ByteDance (Montag, Yang, Elhai 2021). When Alex Zhou and Louis Yang saw some kids recording themselves using some music in the background, they decided to create an app that offered such a possibility. Thus, Musical.ly allowed for filming, editing and the sharing of music videos where users would lip-sync, with a duration of a maximum of 15 seconds. Musical.ly had 60 million active users, most of which oscillated between 11 and 16 years of age (Pérez-Escoda & Contreras Pulido 2018.) It was not until 2017 that Musical.ly adopted the name of TikTok, becoming the application that we know to this date. It maintains a young userbase as 81.68% of its users in China are younger than 35 and, in the US, 32.5% are up to 19 years old. Furthermore, anyone over 13 can install the app, nonetheless, in terms of messaging other users privately, it becomes possible for those 16 and older. Filters for content also exist, allowing a more appropriate experience where controversial topics are hidden, for children and young teenagers (Montag et al. 2021.)

DouYin is not so much a predecessor app for TikTok as much as it can be labelled as a sister app. Functionally, they can be considered almost identical, although on a content level there are a number of differences. This is because while TikTok is the version of the app that reaches global markets, DouYin operates in China, this means that differences in culture, for instance, between the US and China will be reflected in the videos that are uploaded to TikTok and DouYin respectively (Montag et al. 2021; Sun, Zhang, Zhang & Luo 2020.) 150 million out of the 800 000 million active users of TikTok worldwide are in China (Perinetti 2020).

2.2 External Factors for Popularity

In this section I will explore some potential reasons for TikTok's popularity. By external Factors I will be referencing things that are not inherent to the TikTok app, for example, world events. TikTok became the most downloaded app in

2020 (BBC News 2021). This aligns perfectly with a couple of relevant situations occurring in the world.

The first are lockdowns in the U.S. happening because of the pandemic and students being sent home (Eden, Johnson, Reinecke & Grady 2020). The second, are the United States presidential elections of 2020 where the nominees for the Democratic and Republican party were Joe Biden and Donald Trump, respectively (Gama 2020).

2.2.1 Pandemic

During 2020 Americans dealt with the removal of in person classes, and millions of students that lived on campus, had to leave without having any reassurance of when, or if, they would be returning. This happened in spring due to anxieties about COVID-19 spread. At the same time, there was an increase in the time that people spent watching videos during the day, meaning that because of the pandemic there was a change in the way that we consume media (Eden et al. 2020.) More concretely, U.S. adults increased their time online from 12:24 hours a day to 16:06 hours a day during the pandemic (Wolf 2020).

Seemingly, users gravitated towards media related to COVID-19 or which they had a certain familiarity with or made them feel reassured. This uptick in viewing of video content could be attributed to it to being used as a form of coping with the start of the isolation period of the pandemic and the anxiety and stress that came with it (Eden et al. 2020.)

An example of TikTok content that was born of the pandemic are short pandemic songs that were posted to vent about the dire situation in addition to looking for community through the public expression of experiences an anxieties. When social distancing kept physical interaction to a minimum, users found a way to communicate their worries through social media such as TikTok. For instance, *Jolene*, by Dolly Parton was used by vicki-dinos, a creator, as a base to create a new song called *Quarantine,* where she has lyrics complaining about being in her

house for way too long and how she is tired of attempting to spell the word 'quarantine' (Stratton 2021.)

Some of these songs that could be classified as parodies not only served as a way to externalise worries about the pandemic, but also used other successful songs as an instrumental base upon which the creators would write lyrics, informing the viewers about precautions they could take to make sure that they did not get COVID-19 (Stratton 2021).

A survey was used in the UK to determine that young people that had mental health requirements were more affected by the absence of social interactions during the COVID-19 lockdown, therefore, media consumption is an important coping mechanism, especially given that it is one of the few that can be enjoyed from the isolation of one's home (Eden et al. 2020). The increase in use of technology brought about by the pandemic might even continue after the emergency is long gone (Garfin 2020).

Given that the COVID-19 crisis caused people to turn to media and created both a demand for pandemic related content and a supply of said content in the form of people venting or sharing information, it may have given TikTok a push in popularity that would not have been as stark had there not been any sort of global emergency. Furthermore, an increase in content online means that it is much harder to control the quality of the content and spend time verifying its credibility, causing more of it to reach users unfiltered.

2.2.2 2020 U.S.A Political situation

As mentioned previously, the election of 2020 included Donald Trump running for president, the candidate from the Republican party, meanwhile, Joe Biden was leading the Democrats. Trump has been a controversial figure amassing both support from people who believed that he was closer to them than other politicians, as well as disapproval from those who saw him as a regression in the country's social matters (McCamon 2016). The popularity of this election on Tik-Tok is shown in the following table (table 1) as recorded by Shaughnessy (2022),

who discloses the quantity of views that different hashtags relating to the political situation obtained (Shaughnessy 2022).

TABLE 1. Amount of views received by different hashtags on TikTok (Shaughnessy 2022)

Name of Hashtag	Amount of Views on TikTok
#Biden	15,400,000,000
#Trump	21,300,000,000
#2020election	739,000,000
#probiden	35,400
#protrump	14,200,000
#uselection	114,500,000
#uspolitics	131,400,000

These numbers (table 1) demonstrate that there was a considerable amount of activity relevant to the U.S. election of 2020 on TikTok. Moreover, in the Summer of 2020, TikTok allowed more people to know of *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) and therefore, gave the opportunity to initiate discussions regarding the movement (Shaughnessy 2022.)

On June 2020, K-Pop fans took credit for signing up for one of Donald Trump's campaign rallies. It was possible to get free tickets through the use of a mobile phone, thus, on the 11th of June, people whose shared trait was a love for Korean pop, uploaded videos to TikTok to encourage others to sign up for the rally and then not go. The fire marshal for the event accounted for 6,200 people attending, meanwhile, the venue ended up being quite vacant. While it is up for debate if this result was caused by the suggestions uploaded onto TikTok, it is true that some of the clips were viewed by millions. Spokespeople of TikTok were not willing to comment on the matter (Lorenz, Browning & Frenkel 2020.)

All of the aforementioned events were commented upon on TikTok, the election and the trend that arose from an attempt to sabotage a Trump rally being especially viewed topics on the app. Had these situations not occurred, there would have been much less content on TikTok and with matters that are so important to people such as these, it is possible that they contributed to an increase in popularity of the app itself.

2.3   Intrinsic factors

This section explores the intrinsic factors that may have been a reason for the TikTok app to grow so popular. By intrinsic factors, I will be referring to characteristics of the app itself that allow its functioning. It is not new that companies that own social media seek to make their products as engaging as possible so that consumers will use them for the highest amount of time that they can (Montag et al. 2021).

Some of these intrinsic factors are part of the content itself such as the length of the videos or the humour that a creator might want to imbue them with, others refer to the more unseen aspects, for instance, the use of dark patterns to keep the users glued to the screen or the fact that TikTok allows for copyrighted music to be used.

2.3.1   Short video format and humour

Short video can be defined as video content that spans up to 5 minutes in length. In 2017, the industry for this kind of content in China increased to 5.73 billion Yuan and reached 221 billion Yuan, around 30 billion Euros, in the year 2020 (Xu, Yan & Zhang 2019; Thomala 2022). Short video content is becoming more popular on mobile phones, a trend also observed on Youtube where, since 2010, a majority of videos on the platform have not surpassed 10 minutes in duration. On Instagram, 'Stories' are utilized by over 500 million users every day. This preference for shorter content has been hypothesised by Wang (2020) to stem from the busyness of our current lifestyle, in fact, those who use different social media

platforms have explained that their preference for these types of videos comes from practicality. Another reason that short videos have captured many people's attention is that despite their brevity, there can be messages of substance communicated in 15 seconds, even managing to influence users to buy certain products (Wang 2020.)

TikTok is primarily filled with videos that are humorous to some extent, the production value is often not very high. It attempts to capture its intended consumer base, young people, through clips that contain music, be it a vocal or dance performance, in addition to the virality of comical videos. Meanwhile, Douyin's content is more geared towards showing relatively more mundane topics relating to things such as everyday life, albeit, still maintaining an aspect of humour. Psychologically, funny content has power to influence people's decisions and help in memorising concepts. Therefore, humorous TikToks can serve as a manner of spreading amusing content that has the potential to convince viewers to do certain things such as use different tech (Wang 2020.) Furthermore, various factors such as point of view filming and humour, affect the user's feeling of leisure and captivation, both of which are relevant to how long the user remains on the social media platform, in this case, TikTok (Montag et al. 2021).

2.3.2 Use of copyrighted music

There is a prominent music centred userbase on TikTok which produces content (Xu et al. 2019). The creators of TikTok understand that for an app of that kind to thrive, it must offer its users a steady flow of opportunity to use their creativity to make videos. An example of this is that the app offers countless soundtracks that range from anywhere between electronic music, to Rock, to sounds that other creators have made available through their videos. The leading aspect of TikTok in terms of significance, is the area of the screen that will allow the user to access all the music and sounds. This will give them the opportunity to view the library in its entirety, sorted by criteria such as duration in addition to being able to save tracks that they like and select one for a current video. The chosen track immediately starts at the same time as the recording of the TikTok (Yang 2020.)

Being able to use music with copyright allows TikTok users to convey their own message with the aid of the original piece despite it not being the same as the one that the author had in mind when making it. TikTok users are now able to take a piece of music already created and make another version with their own meaning. This means that uploaders have more power than, for example, on other social media such as Youtube, as the site is known for allowing companies to accuse youtubers of infringing copyright despite it being untrue (Stratton 2021.)

The usage of copyrighted tracks also makes it so that people without any musical talent can become well known figures in online spaces, in fact, this content is favoured on the internet to the extent that often creators who can afford to make a higher quality video will purposefully try to make it seem more amateur so that it will fit with the other less curated uploads (Stratton 2021).

An example of copyrighted music being used to great effect on TikTok is a coronavirus song parody by Claire and Mel Vatz (picture 2)(Stratton 2021).

PICTURE 2. Screenshot of corona virus parody song video by Claire and Mel Vatz, 'We're All Home Bound' (Kivijärvi Busto 2022).

They used Simon and Garfunkel's *Homeward Bound* as a base, amassing over 750,000 views. Originally, the song was released in 1966 so the parody managed to attract commenters that were familiar with the unedited piece, sharing how happy it made them to hear it again adapted to modern times. This comment section allowed the generation of people who enjoyed the song to find community. In addition to potentially facilitating interpersonal relationships on the internet due to common musical ground, the modification of lyrics of an already existing

song means that since the instrumental is already well known, the new words will be easier to recall (Stratton 2021.) It is possible that the easier recall and sense of community allow for a greater virality of content.

2.3.3   Dark Patterns

Dark patterns account for manners of designing an interface that cause those who use it to pour more time into it than they had originally planned. It has been noted that the use of dark patterns can be harmful as they take advantage of the way that human's brains work so that they will behave in a certain way subconsciously. This also results in people being unhappy when using social media (Janmohamed 2021.)

People who use TikTok have certain behaviours reinforced by mechanisms such as 'Likes', paired with the landing page, aptly called the 'For You' page which offers a never-ending stream of TikToks that are tailored to you based on your past usage of the app. This causes users to spend a more extended amount of time watching than was planned which can be catalogued as addictive behaviour (Montag et al. 2021.)

The dark patterns used on the app can amplify the power of para-social relationships formed with TikTok celebrities, as endless scrolling will subject the user to more of their content. Furthermore, when the influencers recommend different products, even if the video is brief, the user will be more likely to purchase whatever is being shown to them (Wang 2020.)

2.3.4   Algorithm

In certain social media the users are the ones that choose what content is viewed and what content is not following the guidelines, nonetheless, some social media sites operate on an algorithm to the point where it becomes part of the interaction process with the service, acquiring power over the way we utilise these platforms (Simpson, Hamman & Semaan 2022). For TikTok, its algorithm is perhaps the

most significant way that it keeps users watching. It offers curated content by means of the *For You Page* (FYP), which is the first thing those that download the app will see upon entry. TikTok one-ups its competitors by showing even the newest arrivals an infinite number of videos that are popular with other users on the platform. In other apps such as Twitter, one must follow other accounts to receive any content whatsoever, so it can be an unengaging start, furthermore, where other social media prioritised likes, comments and the sort to promote content, TikTok's algorithm promotes videos based on the quantity of time they have been watched for (Hern 2022b; Paul 2022.)

No two users will have the same FYP, each person is shown videos based on what the algorithm believes they want to watch. It does this by assessing those users' interactions with the content. Moreover, it seems that the algorithms accuracy can be quite high since some avid TikTok users comment on its unnerving preciseness. This effect only gets magnified the more one uses TikTok and likes, watches and shares videos in the app. This mechanism has been successful despite offering less control over what one can see on the FYP compared to its predecessors e.g., Vine (Hern 2022b; Simpson et al. 2022.)

The way the algorithm works allows anyone to become well-known on the app, as each video is tested by sending it out to several people, if these people have a positive engagement with it, it will be sent to the next round of people and so on (Hern 2022b). The algorithm also does not specifically favour those with a big platform over others. This results in users' FYPs containing videos from both TikTok celebrities and people who are comparatively far less popular and gives the users indirect power over who can become famous. In addition, this means that content can spread astonishingly fast (Zhang & Liu 2021.)

Often, TikTok will not only consider the sound used, hashtags and title of the videos one watches, and categories liked, continuing to show you the exact same type of content, but rather, it will push its own assumptions about the user, testing their boundaries by showing them adjacent topics. This can manifest in showing the user videos about supercars if they have a record of enjoying formula one content, meaning that the algorithm can also direct users into new fields of interest, increasing their loyalty to the app (Zhang & Liu 2021; Hern 2022b.)

There are, however, criticisms of the FYP, for instance, TikTok seems desperate for information about the user. This includes personal things such as contacts, location, and monitoring content that is shared. If the app's access to this knowledge is rejected, the FYP quickly becomes much less compelling, as the quantity of data that the algorithm can use to curate the content is limited to a much more general idea of the user's location and information about the type of device they are using (Hern 2022b)

TikTok has commented that videos users like, if they comment on videos, people that they follow and even the type of videos they themselves upload, count towards the type of content they are shown. Even settings that a user has chosen for their account such as language, the country they are in, and whether they are on a phone or a laptop is relevant (Hern 2022b.) What has been more controversial are documents that contained secret criteria (table 2) that moderators were looking out for when choosing what videos would not be shown on people's FYP (Biddle, Ribeiro & Dias 2020).

TABLE 2. Ugly Content Policy (Biddle et al. 2020)

New Rules	Reason
Abnormal body shape, chubby, have obvious beer belly, obese, or too thin (not limited to: dwarf, acromegaly)	Unlike diversified videos of which the content itself is the mainly focus, in the non-diversified content, the character himself/herself is basically the only focus of the video, therefore, if the character's appearance or the shooting environment is not good, the video will be much less attractive, not worthing to be recommended to new users.
Ugly facial looks (not limited to: disformatted face, fangs, lack of front teeth, senior people with too many wrinkles, obvious facial scars) or facial deformities (not limited to: eye disorders, crooked mouth disease and other disabilities)	
The shooting environment is shabby and dilapidated, such as, not limited to: slums, rural fields (rural beautiful natural scenery could be exempted), dilapidated housing, construction sites, etc. (for internal housing background which has no obvious slummy character, only those cases as specified should be labelled: crack on the wall, old and disreputable decorations, extremely dirty and messy)	This kind of environment is not that suitable for new users for being less fancy and appealing.
Slide show video with any kinds of picture	Not the ideal video form of our plataform.

It is ironic for TikTok to attempt to paint an idea of it being a free place to express oneself while simultaneously hiding content that fits the above (table 2) criteria.

Furthermore, the guidelines (table 2) have not been shared with the public, meaning that there will be users whose videos get removed without receiving a proper explanation as to why it happened. It is not only unfair to make TikTok users liable for breaking rules that they never knew existed, but also to make those rules entirely subjective as it is extremely up for interpretation what one considers unattractive or whether any number of wrinkles is excessive (Biddle et al. 2020.)

To test the algorithm, small-scale experiment was conducted in which three participants created an account on TikTok and self-reported how their experience had been. They were all to operate under the same rules which included that they do not give TikTok false information when creating their accounts, and that they enter the FYP every day that the same hour. They would then record information about the opening 10 videos that they were shown and replicate this process for a week. By the end of it, one of the participants, a college student, commented that she had attempted to control the algorithm by not liking videos that she was shown despite finding them funny, because she just did not want to see more of that kind of content at the time. The same participant also noted that she had been shown content including young children which she assumed was a result of providing her gender to TikTok, which would probably gear those kinds of videos to women primarily (Paul, Bhuiyan & Simmonds 2022.) Even with its faults, it seems that TikTok's algorithm and its ability to curate the content to its users creates more traffic to the app in a shorter amount of time (Wang 2020).

3   MISINFORMATION

3.1   What is Misinformation

Misinformation and disinformation are both types of misleading information with slightly varying definitions. The earliest record of the use of the word "misinformation" was in the 16th century. It refers to the spreading or crafting of incorrect information characterised by the fact that it is not done purposefully. In the case of disinformation, the definition is much the same as with misinformation, but in this case, there is a clear intent to diffuse incorrect information with the purpose of impacting those who are exposed to it. Disinformation can be used by governments, for instance (Petratos 2021.) There are varying degrees of disinformation, as aforementioned, it can be used by governments to change the political tide, however, it can sometimes manifest as satire, a more innocuous example such as the cases of sites like The Onion or The Borowitz (Dupuis & Williams 2019; Petratos 2021).

The differences between misinformation and disinformation are relevant when having conversations about how they can be combatted. In the case of misinformation, informing users on how to spot it and implementing factchecking into the platform where it is being shared, could suffice to reduce its spread. Nonetheless, when tackling disinformation, in which case users that share it are doing so in spite of being conscious that the information is not correct, letting the users know that what they are spreading is false would have no effect. A survey that sought to study how efficient fact-checking could be, concluded that people were only concerned about truthfulness when it supported their group, however, when the misleading information being fact-checked constituted an affront to their group, people would more commonly react in a hostile manner (Dupuis & Williams 2019.)

Disinformation has been a problem to the point where social media users should be wary of the content that they view since it is difficult to guarantee that it has not been shown to them as part of a campaign to influence their beliefs (Dupuis & Williams 2019). An example of this is the U.S elections that took place in 2016,

where disinformation was prominent to the point of hindering democracy and influencing plans relating to the economy and health services (Dupuis & Williams 2019; Petratos 2021). Disinformation threatens to target future elections too. Furthermore, when the report which discussed Russian meddling in the election was released, there was an effort of 5,000 bots on Twitter that were used to spread #Russiagate with the intention of reducing the credibility of the investigation. In addition, following the Notre Dame burning in 2019, there was also misinformation being shared about it on social media (Dupuis & Williams 2019.)

When trying to spread disinformation, either through bots or people who are acting on behalf of the government, using people who happen to find the misleading information and share it to the point of it becoming viral, is common. These campaigns are hard to combat as they might not even be in the format of an article or a story, but rather can be diffused in the form of pictures and plain text. Those who end up spreading this information have been studied, for example, in 2015 18 participants were asked about what causes them to share news. The responses were wanting to brief someone about the information sent and entertainment. Moreover, some participants found the diffusion of news a way to keep close to a group that they identified with, others wanted to influence opinions or have a discussion. To summarize, part of the people in the study sought to stand out, meanwhile those who were left had goals more akin with fitting in (Dupuis & Williams 2019.)

Another experiment orchestrated by Jonah Berger concluded that psychological stimulation caused data to spread more. Information that elicited sadness was not transmitted as much as information that elicited anxiousness, meanwhile humorous and amusing content did better than information that left the viewer merely content. In a 2013 investigation by Guadagno et al, this notion was reinforced as it found that those who were affected more intensely by a video had a higher chance of spreading it (Dupuis & Williams 2019.)

People on Twitter that have more radical political views are significantly more likely to diffuse content compared to their more centrist counterparts. Radical content is also more commonly transmitted to others, meaning that people are also more likely to come across extreme tweets compared to less reactionary

content. It is possible that the reason why extreme ideas are shared more is due to it eliciting more intense responses in people. For example, there was a survey during the 2016 U.S. elections that concluded that people that spent more time online reading news, reported more negative feelings about the opposition and those with more negative feelings also spread data about the campaign more often (Dupuis & Williams 2019.)

For the purposes of this thesis, I will be using the term misinformation as an umbrella both including misinformation and disinformation since the goal is not to find ways to combat it or if it was shared purposefully or not, but rather to discover what makes some misinformation more compelling to share than other.

3.2   Memes

According to Dawkins (1976) a Meme is "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (Dawkins 1976, 192). Memes that thrive are replicated meanwhile, the ones that do not, die off. Despite research into memes having encompassed fields like language and urban legends, it has barely included studies into the Internet, arguably the most prominent platform for their proliferation (Shifman & Thelwall 2009.)

The Internet has allowed for memes to be shared without any deterioration in the data they hold, furthermore, the number of times that a meme can replicated is endless. Due to the possibility of archiving that online formats provide, memes can also become much more long lived and even be transmitted globally on account of the international nature of the Internet (Shifman & Thelwall 2009.) As a result of memes online being created at an overwhelming pace, it is more complicated to vet which memes are useful and which ones are not. Moreover, simplicity and virality are more relevant than complexity or utility when considering the value of a meme (Marshall 1998.)

Memes contain concepts pertaining to culture, according to Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) these can be concepts such as "communism or catch

phrases" they also mention modern meme examples being "the Egyptian pro-tests, Vancouver riot kiss, pepper spray cop, Leave Britney Alone joke (picture 3) and Wife/Husband 1.0 joke" (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong 2015.)

PICTURE 3. Leave Britney Alone meme (Rainey 2015).

To understand how a meme goes viral, we must look at the process behind it which is constituted of two different stages. The first encompasses the consump-tion of the idea, which requires the meme to be appealing, meaning how interest-ing it is. This increases the desire of the person who experiences the meme to engage with the idea. The second, involves the receiver evaluating if the meme is worth sharing, meaning, to what extent does the person who experiences it, thinks that the idea will resonate with other people in the same way (Taecha-rungroj & Nueangjamnong 2015.)

Being funny is one of the ways that a meme can become viral and therefore suc-cessful. This was studied by using the meme *pepper spray cop* (picture 4), which was found to become more notorious as it was used in humorous scenes. Many well-known memes to date include a component of humour, for instance, different iterations of 'rage faces' (picture 5). The most common styles of humour social media and traditional media memes share, according to Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015), are "sarcasm and silliness" (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong 2015).
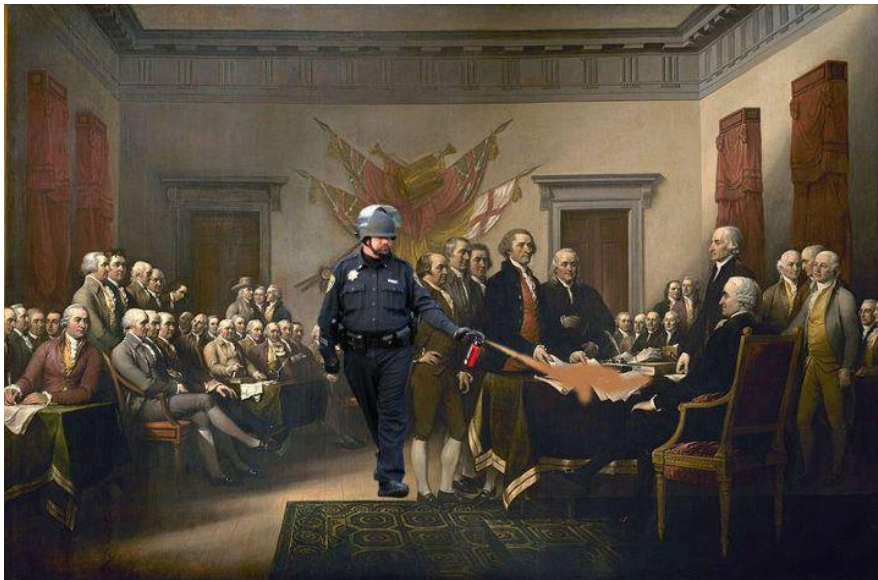
PICTURE 4. Pepper spray cop (Know Your Meme n.d.).

PICTURE 5. Rage faces (Know Your Meme n.d.).

Social media is a perfect platform for memes to spread since they are funny images. They have already been used to attempt to affect what people think, namely, Hillary Clinton's campaign was the target of the *Draft our Daughters* (picture 6) meme as part of a misinformation effort. Memes are powerful at transmitting misinformation because anyone can make them, furthermore, they are consumed fast and with ease and can be shared with the same swiftness (Dupuis & Williams 2019.)

PICTURE 6. Draft our Daughters (Know Your Meme n.d.).

A study conducted on memes where Ryan gosling appeared along with a feminist message, found that people who viewed the memes were more likely to agree with certain feminist ideas. On an individual level, it is not that relevant whether memes can change the minds of those who view them, as if the memes go viral, it is possible that the message they transmit gets discussed on national media, thus, steering the discussion on a nation-wide level. This is exactly what happened when speculations about Hillary Clinton's health arose on social media in the course of her political campaign in 2016. Traditional media commented on the story, and this caused the conversation to continue on social media, becoming a sort of vicious cycle (Dupuis & Williams 2019.)

3.3   What Makes a Good Story?

All the things that people have created, from our clothes to religious systems, are building blocks in a larger narrative. The motivation behind the creation of these things is what imbues them with significance, as they are the fruit of the human desire to problem solve, communicate and transmit expertise or skills to others. Communicating through stories has connected people to their culture, revealed new concepts and information to individuals, and even influenced the manner in which they act. According to Vicino (2014) the definition of a story "is an account of events that use imagery to describe cause and effect". These stories are

shared with the goal of educating people, entertaining them, or eliciting sympathy (Vicino 2014.)

Since stories allow us to recall information better than text devoid of any kind of narrative, we have been using stories to convey important information for survival since the beginning of humanity. Thus, it is important to consider what makes a story compelling. For a story to transcend cultures, we must employ themes that provoke compassionate empathy in the listener or reader (Vicino 2014.) This can be done using tension or a relatable threat, furthermore, there must be a specific weight on how characters interact with each other and their connection (Anholt 2010). A compelling narrative structure initiates by giving the listener details on the setting of the story and characters. Subsequently, it increases suspense while reducing action at the high point to evoke a sensation of importance. Finally, it resolves the narrative obstacle that the characters must overcome (McCabe & Peterson 1984.) Moreover, the use of detailed descriptions can heighten empathy and provoke a sensory experience, for instance, giving the person who is experiencing the story information about tastes or sounds that are part of it (McCabe & Peterson 1984; Vicino 2014). According to McCabe and Peterson (1984) people are also interested in stories that convey complex problems that are worked out in a similarly refined way (McCabe & Peterson 1984).

One important element in a story are Archetypes. These are predetermined ideas that we have learnt, a sort of shorthand that allows us to decipher meaning efficiently. Examples of archetypes are the image that Nike uses to promote a lot of their products, this is the image of a hero, relating to victory, in addition, the brand Harley Davidson uses the archetype of the outlaw to relate its products to toughness. It is easier to understand a story through archetypes since it allows us to relate it to other narratives that we might have experienced with similar archetypes (Vicino 2014.)

According to Vicino (2014) the most important elements of a story are the setting, realistic characters and some sort of struggle. The harder the struggle is, and the more complicated it is for the characters to get past, the higher the engagement

of the spectators will be. Vicino (2014) also notes that there are different arche-types for struggles in stories, but the bulk of narratives tend to adhere to one of these:

- Human against human
- human against nature
- human against self
- human against society
- human against technology
- human against the supernatural
- human against Gods and religion (Vicino 2014.)

In a story, believability is paramount, this does not mean that everything has to be exactly as in our world or be tailored exactly to the experience of the audience. For example, in the case of a setting, one might have never been in space, how-ever, there are comparisons to be drawn to Earth in the way things function and how characters interact in it. In addition, characters often tackle grandiose quests that are not the most relatable to regular humans, despite this, there are feelings in overcoming a challenge that can be very generalisable to anyone. This allows us to elicit empathy from an audience without having to tell their experience ex-actly (Vicino 2014.)

Themes are relevant in a story in terms of how the protagonist approaches their struggle and the potential resolutions that can come out of it. Every narrative has themes in it; however, Vicino (2014) says that the most common ones that arise are

- overcoming a monster e.g., in *Beowulf*
- rebirth and renewal
- a quest or mission
- rags to riches
- tragedy
- comedy (typical in advertising) (Vicino 2014.)

Themes often can be considered internal as they pertain to the protagonist's thoughts or actions. Examples of this are *Finding Nemo* and *the Pianist* in which

the themes are perseverance and isolation respectively. Different chapters in the story with their own narratives become cohesive with one another through this use of themes (Vicino 2014.)

When planning the resolution of the story, one must understand that catharsis has to be a part of the ending. It does not have to be a positive conclusion, however, there must be some change or answer in accordance with the build up to that point. To keep people immersed in the narrative it is good to drop hints that might prompt the audience to speculate about what might happen and thus feel a greater sense of reward once the story ends (Vicino 2014.)

The previous paragraphs have covered the important factors within the story itself, nonetheless, when telling a story, there are also things to consider that can make the experience more enjoyable to the audience. Vicino (2014) affirms that it is important to do the following:

- **Create Interest:** To remind the audience that the story about to be told can be relevant to them. If possible, a storyteller should find what the narrative and the peoples' lives potentially have in common. Hiding some facts that are later revealed can also increase engagement.
- **Amuse:** The way the narrator speaks, the speed, timbre and excitement in one's voice can be modulated to attract attention.
- **Instruct:** This means that knowledge is presented in a way that it is easy to comprehend. The narrator should explain this in conjunction with a way that people can use the information in their lives and in relation to the story (Vicino 2014.)

4   WHY MISINFORMATION SPREADS ON TIKTOK

Since social media facilitates a rapid mass transmission of memes and also has loose enough rules that it barely limits the kind of information that can be spread on the platforms, it is impossible to affirm that everything a user sees will be legitimate information. The misinformation that is spread even when adhering to these guidelines falls mostly on regular people that share it with others without realising its falseness (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong 2015; Dupuis & Williams 2019.)

Through the creation of echo chambers people on social media become especially vulnerable to manipulation as not only do they allow them to ignore any external points of view but also, it has been proven that people feel negatively about trustworthy sources that support opposing views. Furthermore, when one is repeatedly exposed to a certain piece of information, it starts seeming more factual regardless of whether it truly is, or not (Dupuis & Williams 2019.) TikTok has the function of *duets* which allows users to respond to someone's video with one of their own playing alongside the original one. This means that users will be exposed to the same video repeatedly, especially if it becomes popular. According to Paul (2022) TikTok is now regarded as a platform where culture is born, where it can be accessed and where it becomes reiterated, so we must give it attention when it comes to discussing misinformation (Paul 2022).

The users on TikTok tend to be part of a younger demographic, in fact, 67% of those on TikTok that are 18 to 30 years of age, go on the platform every day (figure 2). Compared to other social media platforms, out of which Youtube is the most popular with 95% of teens on it, TikTok takes the second place. Snapchat and Instagram come in third with 60% of teens using them, and Facebook is last with only 32% (figure 3) (Paul 2022.) According to Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy & Okdie (2013) 59% of individuals say that they "very frequently" or "frequently" share online content with people that they know (Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy & Okdie 2013).
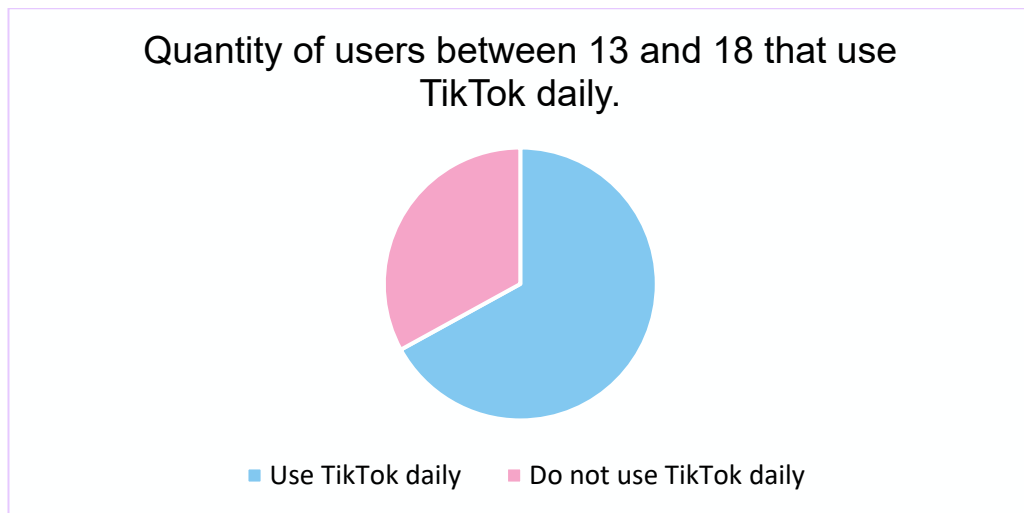
Quantity of users between 13 and 18 that use
TikTok daily.

■ Use TikTok daily   ■ Do not use TikTok daily

FIGURE 2. Quantity of users between 13 and 18 that use TikTok daily (Busto 2022).

Quantity of young people that use the social media platform

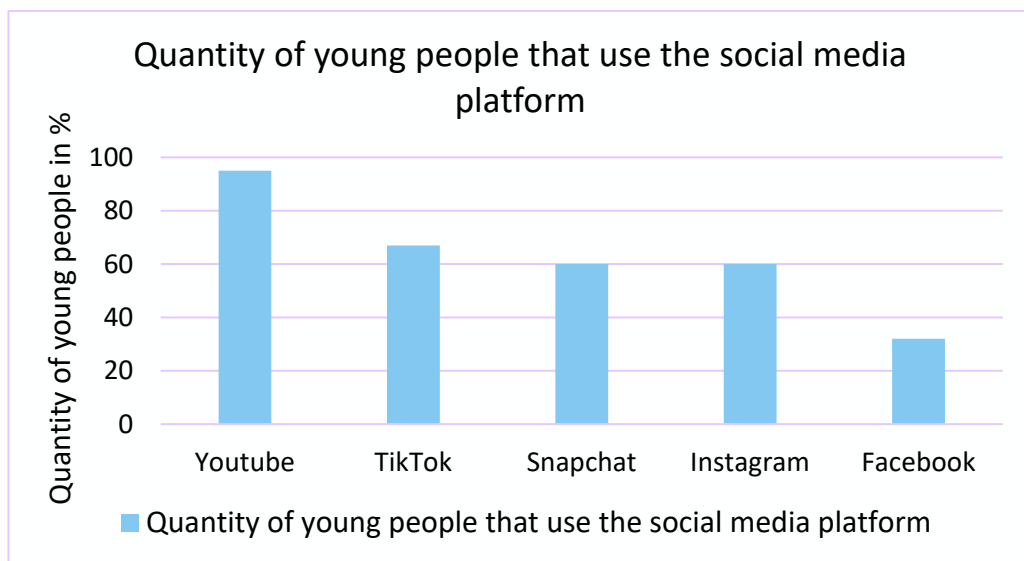■ Quantity of young people that use the social media platform

FIGURE 3. Quantity of young people that use the social media platform (Busto 2022).

TikTok being a very popular app, paired with a large young userbase and the fact that people are very likely to share things they find online, makes the platform ideal as a tool to spread misinformation. Guadagno et al. (2013) explain that funny videos are more likely to not only be watched but also may have a higher likelihood of being shared (Guadagno et al. 2013). When searching #funny on

TikTok, on can find that the category has 2429.9B views as of November 2022 (TikTok n.d.). TikTok had a sharp rise in its quantity of users and kept them coming by paying for advertisements on Facebook and Instagram. This is not necessarily positive as it means that the algorithm might feed users videos that can cause harm and make them popular before moderators can check their contents (Hern 2022b; Paul 2022.)

Something else that could be affecting the spread of misinformation on TikTok is the feeling of being anonymous. Users tend to share different things when they believe that no one knows their identity, namely negative content. According to Dupuis and Williams (2019) "controversial content" is slightly more than three times "more likely to be shared anonymously than non-anonymously" (Dupuis & Williams 2019.) Experts are already cautioning people about the misinformation circulating on TikTok, specifically it was a concern during the Ukranian war. Furthermore, following elections in Kenya, a study found that 130 videos on the platform contained misinformation and were viewed over 4 million times (Paul 2022.)

Expanding on the Ukranian war, according to Hern (2022a) after a new account was created and exclusively watched the FYP, it took 40 or less minutes for TikTok to serve the user content about the war that contained incorrect information. The app did not treat the videos with correct information any differently than those with misinformation. Hern (2022a) states that one of said misleading assertions was that there were "U.S. bioweapon laboratories in Ukraine" and that Putin was not actually present, but rather edited into a video of a press conference that he attended in the beginning of March. TikTok is also useful for those who try to spread misinformation because its search function makes no distinction between the videos that are correct and those that are not either, in fact, in the top 20 videos after searching the terms Ukraine, War, Russia, Kyiv and Donbas, there was content that included misinformation. Other platforms may also face issues with misinformation, however, even when only limited to content regarding Ukraine, much more of it is posted on TikTok than on platforms that have double its number of users (Hern 2022a.)

TikTok has said that it attempts to provide accurate information, at least about the 2016 U.S election. The platform has even recruited the help of factchecking

businesses to contribute to their content rules in regard to elections. In the second half of 2020, TikTok removed 350,000 TikToks containing misleading information on the election (Paul 2022.) If they are actively removing other videos containing misinformation yet so many with misleading information on the Ukranian war have escaped their moderation, it is concerning how much misinformation might be being spread on less popular topics that is not being caught.

To conclude, what makes misinformation spread on TikTok is the young demographic that mostly uses the app, being the second most popular app amongst teens, in addition to TikTok's users having a high frequency of sharing content with others (Guadagno et al. 2013; Paul 2022). Furthermore, the level of anonymity that TikTok may afford can affect the type of content being shared as more anonymity means more controversial content being spread (Dupuis & Williams 2019). The possibility of creating echo chambers on TikTok shields users from differing viewpoints and functions such as duets allow a user to be exposed to the same information repeatedly which makes it seem more factual (Paul 2022). In terms of the content, a lot of it is humorous which is shared more often and TikTok does not distinguish between factual and incorrect information on their FYP or in the videos that appear in their search function which means that a lot of misinformation can easily circulate (Dupuis & Williams 2019; Hern 2022a).

Factors That Make Misinformation Spread on TikTok

- A young user demographic
- Users that share content often
- The level of anonymity that the platform provides
- Creation of echo chambers
- Repeated exposure to videos
- Humorous content
- Lack of distinction between videos with true and false information on the For You Page and the search function

PICTURE 7. Factors That Make Misinformation Spread on TikTok (Busto 2022).

5 TIKTOK PROJECT ON MISINFORMATION

5.1 Methodology and Planning

For the project I created three different TikTok videos, two of which contained misinformation and one control video which contained a true story to be able to compare if the actual content being true or false made any difference. It would also be interesting to see if TikTok caught on with the fact that the information in two of the videos was not accurate and if they would get censored in any way. For the topic of the videos, I chose Finnish mythology as it is not too controversial, meaning that if people do believe the misinformation, the most harm that can be caused is a disagreement, making it more ethical than spreading political misinformation, for instance.

According to Vicino (2014) stories are easier to remember and digest, therefore, for my videos I also chose a story-like format with characters (Vicino 2014). Since Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong (2015) indicated that people might be more inclined to share humorous content, I attempted to give the misinformation stories a funny twist, meanwhile the control video would not be as humorous (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong 2015). Furthermore, according to Biddle et al. (2020) the TikTok algorithm would moderate for videos with a person that had cracked teeth or too many wrinkles and backgrounds with cracks in them or that looked rural, I tried to choose a setting and a person as distant as possible from said description (Biddle et al. 2020). The final things I considered were commented on by Wang (2020) who identified that TikTok videos often did not have a high production value in addition to being short so I tried to imitate this in my videos so that they would not stand out too much the common user (Wang 2020).

5.2 Execution and Results

Following the aforementioned factors, I made three scripts, one for each video, they can be found in appendix 1. Two of them contained characters from the Kalevala with stories that were inaccurate to the Kalevala, meanwhile the third

script was a true story from the Kalevala with accurate characters. I then filmed the video with the actress, who prefers not to be credited. She used a more expressive voice for the recording of the first two scripts as according to Vicino (2014) that can make a good storyteller (Vicino 2014). For the third video I instructed her to be less expressive to have a comparison to the first two videos. Once they were recorded, the first two videos were edited in such a way that time where there was no talking was reduced meanwhile the third video had longer pauses in the narration. I used images as the backdrop for the actress to illustrate the stories and added subtitles to the videos for accessibility.

I created a new TikTok account where I uploaded the videos all at once. I added a simple biography and a profile picture to it and abstained from watching any TikToks to avoid affecting the results. I added a thumbnail to the videos that had the title of the script used written on it. This was to give whoever came across them an idea of what the video was about before clicking on it. The TikTok account containing the videos (picture 8) can be found linked in appendix 2. Video 1 was 41 seconds long, video 2 was 42 seconds long and video 3 was a minute and 10 seconds long.
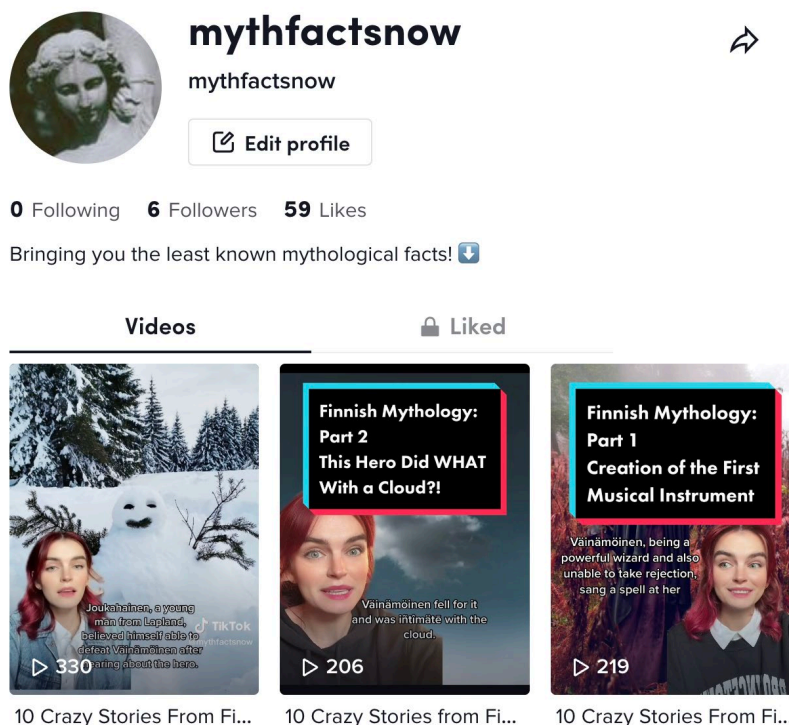
PICTURE 8. Screenshot of TikTok account used for project (Busto 2022).

I recorded the number of likes, favourites, shares, views and comments the videos got for a week. I also noted how many followers the account gained in the same time period.

By the end of the week the first video had 220 views, 17 likes, 5 favourites, 0 comments and 5 shares. The second, had 208 views, 17 likes, 7 favourites, 0 comments, and 4 shares. The third video which is the control video had 333 views, 27 likes, 6 favourites, 0 comments and 6 shares. These numbers can be seen in the graphs below (figure 4 and figure 5). The account had 6 followers at the end of the week.
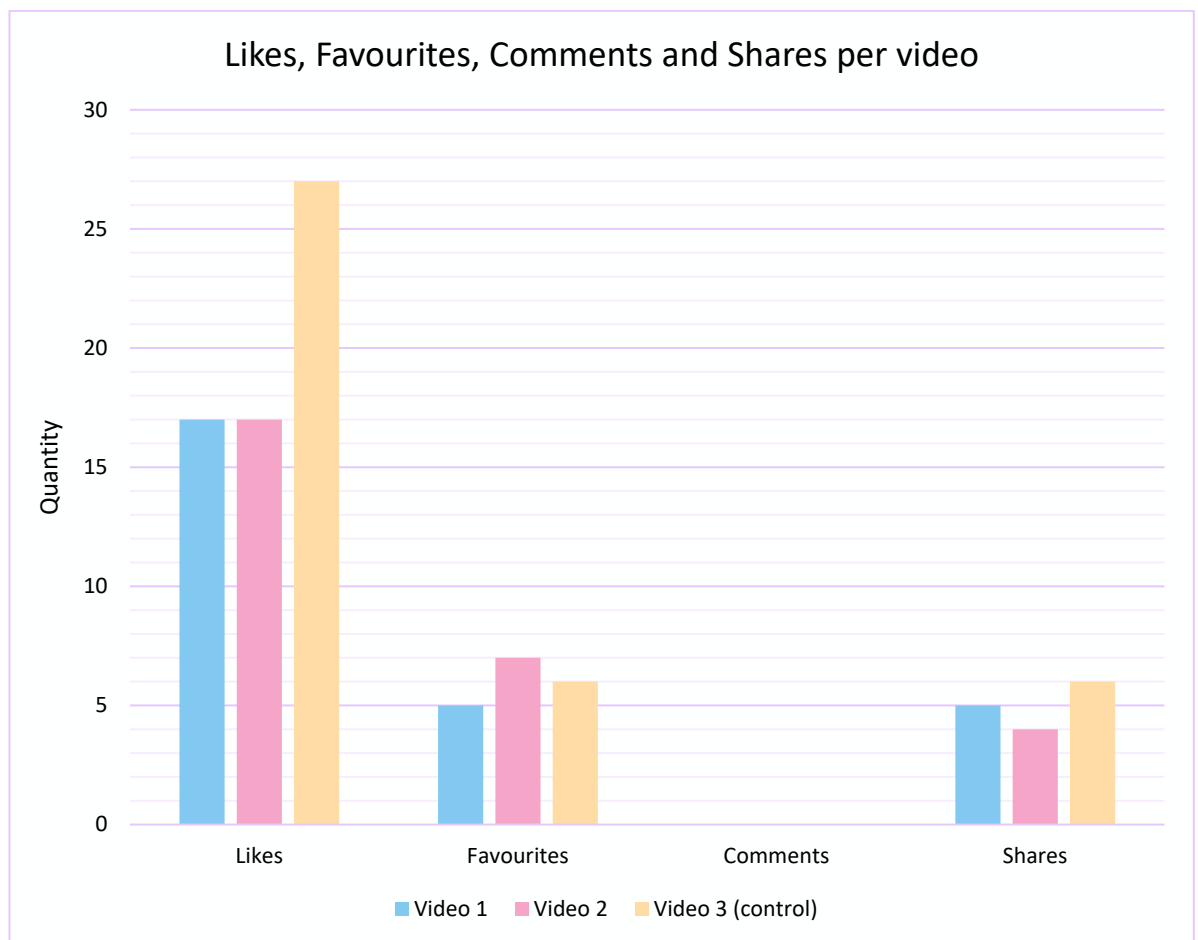

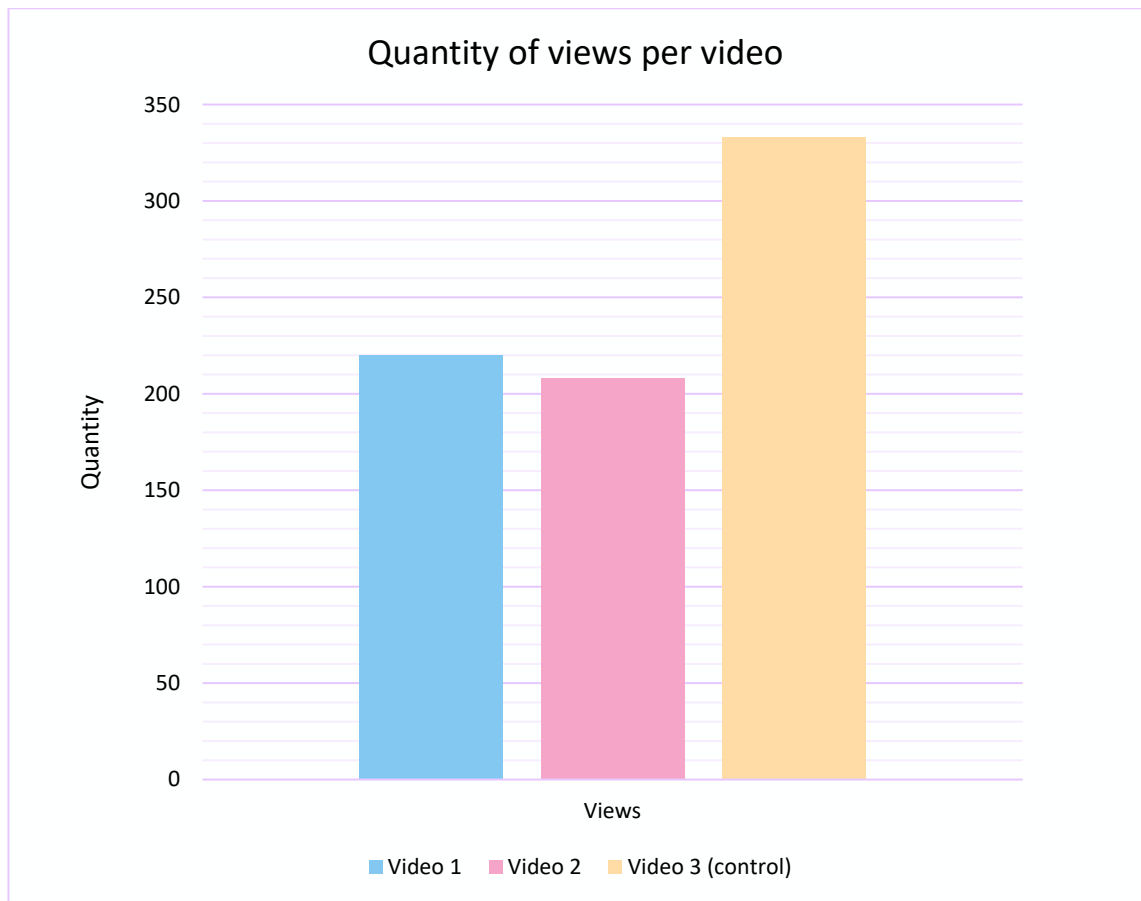FIGURE 4. Likes, Favourites, Comments and Shares per video (Busto 2022).

FIGURE 5. Quantity of views per video (Busto 2022).

The third video had the most views, likes, and shares. Video 2 had the most favourites. Video 1 and 2 were tied in terms of likes and all three videos ended up with no comments at all (figure 4 and figure 5).

6 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The objective of the thesis was to find out how what factors made misinformation spread on TikTok. This was explored in the theoretical part of the thesis, however, when put into practice through the project, the results were quite unexpected. I would have imagined that the third video, which was the control video, would have received the least interactions due to a longer duration, less humorous story, more monotone narration and less editing. According to my project, it would seem like the factors tested that make misinformation spread are inaccurate.

Nonetheless, I do not think this is an appropriate interpretation of the results as there were multiple limitations to the experiment and confounding factors that I was not able to control. These ranged from things such as credibility of the account due to it being new and having few videos, to the fact that we do not know if the views, likes, shares and favourites translate to the people watching my Tik-Toks believing them. Therefore, despite the third video being the most watched we do not know if it is the most believed. Even knowing that it is the most watched video, we do not know if the people truly watched it fully as TikTok might count a view even if the video has not been finished completely. Furthermore, I want to note that uploading all three videos almost at the same time and then none for the rest of the week might have influenced how promoted the videos were, or how users perceived their credibility. The fact that the time the videos were up for was only a week might have not been enough time for them to be watched more, also, since the TikTok algorithm operates on criteria that we do not fully know it is impossible to make perfectly tailored videos. The fact that humour is subjective might have also interfered as I tried to make the first two videos humorous but those watching might have thought that the third was funnier. There is no way to know for sure.

In terms of the ethical concerns, I had to choose a topic where my false stories would fit in while not causing conflict in the world. Therefore, political topics which can get many views and provoke strong emotions were discarded. So, Finnish mythology might have not been a popular enough topic to investigate the spread of misinformation properly.

In the end, if we are to identify more reasons why misinformation becomes widespread, I would suggest having an experiment be live for more time so that the account would seem more organic rather than a planned experiment. I would also create a control video for both misinformation and correct information videos so one can distinguish if it is the quality of information or the other factors that are making the videos popular, and, if possible, I would find a topic that elicits stronger emotions without crossing the border of ethics. An alternative experiment to continue to investigate the topic of misinformation would be to upload the same content on a completely new account to different social media and see how it does depending on the platform.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Project Kalevala Scripts

<u>10 crazy stories from Finnish mythology part 1, the creation of the first musical instrument:</u>

The hero Väinämöinen was obsessed with finding a wife so when he came across the beautiful maiden Aino, he was relentless with his advances. Day after day, he would try to seduce her, following her to the point of hindering her life. Finally, Aino had enough and told Väinämöinen that she did not want anything to do with him. Väinämöinen, being a powerful wizard and unable to take rejection, sang a spell at her and turned her into a Kantele, a string instrument similar to a zither and, the first instrument ever.

<u>10 crazy stories from Finnish mythology part 2, this hero did what with a cloud?!:</u>

The hero of Kalevala, Väinämöinen, continued to be obsessed about finding a wife after turning his first option into a musical instrument. This time, he met Marjatta, a woman renowned for her purity. He wanted to marry her but the God of Thunder, Ukko, who also was in love with her did not like this. Ukko then shaped a cloud into the form of Marjatta to trick Väinämöinen with. Väinämöinen fell for it and was intimate with the cloud. The cloud gave birth to a baby boy soon after.

<u>10 crazy stories from Finnish mythology part 3, the duel (Control story):</u>

Joukahainen, a young man from Lapland, believed himself able to defeat Väinämöinen after hearing about the hero. After sharing his idea to challenge him with his parents, he was met with disapproval. However, he was determined and rode a sled to find Vänäimöinen, not knowing that he'd crash into him, causing both their sleds to break, after three days of travelling.

The duel started and Joukahainen tried to beat Väinämöinen with his knowledge, but it did not work as Väinämöinen knew more. Joukahainen tried to lie about his accomplishments which only caused the hero Väinämöinen to become irritated. Next, they dueled with weapons. As Joukahainen insulted Väinämöinen, he got angry and sang a spell that buried Joukahainen up to his shoulders in the ground and made his stuff disappear. To appease Väinämöinen, Joukahainen tried offering him material goods, but he only let Joukahainen go when he offered him the hand of his sister in marriage.

Appendix 2. Link to TikTok account containing project videos

https://www.tiktok.com/@mythfactsnow?lang=en