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From a Carpet Hanger to TikTok – on the Trail of New Childhood Spaces. Focus Research Report

Z trzepaka na TikToka – czyli na tropach nowych przestrzeni dzieciństwa. Doniesienie z badań fokusowych

KEYWORDS

children, childhood, the Internet, TikTok, network backyards, new childhood spaces

ABSTRACT

The article presents a report from the research conducted to reveal the specific aspects of children's experiences related to functioning in the TikTok web application. The specific features and growing popularity of TikTok among children is as surprising for many adults as the phenomenon of carpet hangers (the symbol of pre-digital childhood in Poland) for the modern generation of children. The research was prepared within a qualitative strategy. Children aged 8–10 took part in focus group interviews. The thematic analysis showed that children have turned TikTok into a new informal e-playground. They participate in the TikTok community and create it. Children's activity in this place fulfills the need to be with others, to create something together, but also the need for quick interaction, fun and entertainment. Children try to develop their interests and draw some inspirations to create their own "trends". They do not live in a vacuum, but, as in offline life, they absorb what they watch and participate in. Functioning in the application is also a kind of resistance, as it is against the will of representatives of the adult world. However, discovering forbidden places or even undertaking risky social practices seems to be one of the distinctive features of childhood, regardless of the times in which it is fulfilled.

SŁOWA KLUCZE

dzieci, dzieciństwo,
Internet, TikTok,
sieciowe podwórka,
nowe przestrzenie
dzieciństwa

ABSTRAKT

W artykule przedstawiono doniesienie z badań, których celem było
poznanie specyfiki doświadczeń dzieci związanych z funkcjonowa-
niem w aplikacji internetowej TikTok. Jej osobliwa specyfika i rosną-
ca popularność wśród dzieci jest dla wielu przedstawicieli pokolenia
dorosłych równie zaskakująca, jak fenomen trzepaków (symbolizują-
cych w Polsce dzieciństwo przedcyfrowe) dla pokolenia współczesnych
dzieci. Badania przygotowano w strategii jakościowej. Przeprowadzo-
no zogniskowane wywiady grupowe z udziałem dzieci w wieku 8–10
lat. Analiza tematyczna pozwoliła ukazać, że dzieci uczyniły z TikToka
nowe niesformalizowane e-podwórko dziecięce. Dzieci partycypują
w tiktokowej wspólnocie i tworzą ją. Aktywność w tym miejscu rea-
lizuje ich potrzebę bycia razem z innymi, tworzenia czegoś wspólnie,
ale też potrzebę szybkiej interakcji, zabawy i rozrywki. Dzieci rozwi-
jają tu swoje pasje, czerpią inspiracje do kreowania własnych „tren-
dów”. Nie żyją w próżni, ale podobnie jak w życiu offline chłoną to,
co obserwują i w czym uczestniczą. Funkcjonowanie w aplikacji jest
także stawianiem oporu dorosłym, ponieważ bycie w tym miejscu od-
bywa się – jak wynika z badań – wbrew woli przedstawicieli dorosłe-
go świata. Odkrywanie miejsc zakazanych czy nawet podejmowanie
ryzykownych praktyk społecznych wydaje się jednak stanowić jedną
z dystynktywnych cech dzieciństwa bez względu na czasy, w których
się ono realizuje.

Introduction

Childhood is a category characterised by ambiguity and contextualisation, which
arouses the interest of representatives of various scientific disciplines. It is constituted
by social processes and embedded in culturally valued spaces. Thus, learning about
childhood involves exploration of these spaces which make up the "multidimension-
al landscape" of this period (Zwiernik, 2015, p. 13). The spaces of childhood will
change, just as children themselves and the worlds in which they live are changing.
It is worth referring, for example, to the transformations that have taken place in
the area of the most characteristic space of childhood, i. e. the backyard. Children's
backyards in the traditional sense take the form of public spaces that are separated and
prepared by adults for children's play (e. g. playgrounds). They can also take the form
of "informal" areas, i. e. areas that, by virtue of their location and architecture, have
become places for children to meet spontaneously. Examples of such places include
"courtyard-wells", i. e. small areas surrounded by the walls of tenement houses in the
centre of which carpet-hangers are located (Zwiernik, 2009, p. 412). In Poland, the
aforementioned carpet-hangers have become a symbol of "old" childhood, and it is

with them that peer meetings in the pre-digital era are often identified. This is because they provided the perfect spaces to undertake cultural practices and produce artefacts of various kinds in a community of play and experience, free from adult supervision (Corsaro, 2015, p. 148).

Specific features of traditional children's backyards continues to be the subject of scholarly description, even though the form of these places has been transformed over the years, and some of them are now mere relics of the past (cf. Zwiernik, 2020; Janik, 2021; Siwicki, 2021). Many of these places have become deserted and there are no traces of child activity in them. Children today seem to have moved to internet back-yards and it is there that they are now creating a new culture (Dziekońska, 2020). The e-backyards of contemporary children are seen here, by analogy with backyards with carpet-hangers, as network places for children to meet, interact and play. They are different places because the space in which they are created is different, but they are just as necessary for creating children's worlds and meeting needs as those that existed in the pre-digital era. One of the internet spaces which children like to visit is TikTok. Therefore, in this article I have focused on exploring the specific features of children's experiences of operating in the new space of childhood that is the mobile web application called TikTok. Its peculiar characteristics and growing popularity among children is as surprising to many representatives of the adult generation as the phenomenon of the carpet-hanger is to the generation of modern children.

Research methods and tools

The research was conducted in a qualitative strategy, and its theoretical framework was formed by the perspective of *childhood studies*, an interdisciplinary theory that allows for a holistic understanding of the child and childhood (cf. Lenzer, 2002; Qvortrup et al., 2009; Szymborska, 2016). Guided by the assumption that children are the best source of knowledge about their own childhood (Corsaro, 2015), in my research I adopted the position of a researcher who explores new and fascinating spaces of childhood, not judging, but rather listening to the voices of children: active subjects of social life and co-participants in online life. My research aim was to explore the specific features of children's experiences related to their functioning in the TikTok application. I focused on two research questions: What activities do children take up in the TikTok app? What characteristics of an 'internet backyard' are manifested by the TikTok app?

Children aged between 8 and 10 took part in the study. The selection of the research sample was non-random, purposive and took place through the school head-masters who showed openness and interest in the research topic. The headmasters of

three public primary schools (one rural and two urban ones) in the Mazovian and Warmian-Masurian voivodeships gave their consent for the study to be carried out in their institutions. The children's legal guardians and the children themselves were also asked for their consent to participate in the study. As a result, nineteen children (seven boys and twelve girls) took part in the study.

The research took place between November 2022 and January 2023. The method of data collection was focus group interviews which I conducted using an interview plan. The research tool consisted of open-ended specific questions, although the questions asked were also derived from the children's previous responses. The focus group interviews helped to initiate a relaxed conversational style with the children, which encouraged them to actively express their thoughts (Kvale, 2011, p. 126). The group discussion triggered the kind of children's narratives that would probably not be uttered during individual interviews. It was also important for the participants to interact with each other while giving their answers, complementing and confronting each other's statements (Kubinowski, 2011, pp. 212-213). The interviews took place in four groups of children (three groups of four and one group of seven) in the areas of the schools the children attended. Each lasted approximately 45 minutes. Following the principle of contextualisation (cf. Ciechowska, 2017, p. 120), the research was organised in such a way that the children in each group were pupils in the same classes and the locations of our interviews were familiar to the children (school classrooms).

The collected research material was subjected to *thematic analysis*. This method corresponds well with focus research, as it makes it possible to show the respondents' way of thinking as a certain whole in a socio-cultural context, without having to focus on individual experiences. According to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, in thematic analysis the researcher is immersed in the process of analysing the data and not only develops the themes, but also himself, searching for different meanings given by the respondents to the processes taking place in the reality around them (Braun and Clarke, 2022). During the thematic analysis, I followed the six-step analytical framework suggested by the researchers. After reviewing the collection of data (1), I carried out its coding (2) to perform the initial theme generation (3). Subsequently, I performed a review of the themes (4), and, in the next step (after refining them), I defined and named the themes (5). I closed the analytical framework by preparing a final report (6) (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Excerpts from it can be found later in this article.

Children and their new TikTok backyard. Research report

During inductive coding, six dominant themes emerged during repeated immersion in the research material. The themes represented certain sets of data. The themes

captured important issues related to the research aim as well as the research problems themselves. I present the themes and their descriptions below. In the quoted statements, the names of the respondents have been replaced by symbols, and in the body of the statements I have replaced the referenced names with others.

Just being

All of the children I spoke to were familiar with the TikTok app; they knew what it was and what activities could be undertaken in it. Many indicated that they use it regularly, watching videos or live reports that are interesting to them, for example with animals, dancing, gymnastics, experiments, gardening or agricultural topics, and even videos designed to evoke fear. During the interviews with the children, it became clear that it is quite natural for them to function in the app. Children appear in it and browse through new content: *Most often when I go on TikTok, I just scroll through the videos and, for example, like Krysia, if a song catches my ear, I add it to my favourites* (Child 16). Sometimes they follow their published creations by reading comments and watching other users' reactions. Children enter the app without any particular appointment. Just as children used to get together in traditional backyards after school, now children, after doing their homework, turn on TikTok and spend their free time here. It is their way of resting, relaxing and overcoming boredom.

Pleasure of using

Children enjoy being on the TikTok app. They reacted very lively and enthusiastically to my questions about their activities there. They had a lot to say about the app, even getting into each other's words to participate in the discussion. The TikTok app is among their most frequently visited apps because it is simple, with short and entertaining content that responds to their childhood passions and interests. Children emphasise that they even feel *luxurious, because nobody bothers me here* (Ch 3). Enjoyment also comes from participating in a shared space in which everyone can create their own content, e. g. in the form of videos from everyday life: *I really like it when you can use such overlays, record and save them in private files. Then I watch such moments for myself, e.g. when I was at Martha's house, and I think to myself: 'But that's cool! I have to do it again, only already in the version I am in now* (Ch 14). Interestingly, the children emphasise consciously creating content against the rules of the app because they are not yet 13 years old. I interpret this as a kind of liberation from the constraints of adults, but also as a desire to catch up with elders, to be like adults. This type of behaviour is inevitably a part of childhood and can be an example of coping with the constraints of the 'adult' world.

Active participation

Some of the children who claimed to have an account on the app shared their experiences of creating artefacts, usually in the form of videos. They recounted that they like to be inspired by what others publish in order to prepare their own creations: *On TikTok I have my account and a few followers. There are also videos with some dance trends there, they share their passions there too, etc. I also create my own dance trends... – And how do you do this? Will you tell us? (*researcher) – *Well, you just set up your phone, a few seconds to get ready and, with inspiration from others, you dance* (Ch 7). An interesting example of experiences was the transfer of activities from TikTok to the offline world. This involved, for example, cooking: *Sometimes I get recipes displayed on TikTok and I just used 6 recipes from TikTok for New Year's Eve and everyone liked the food. And when I said I made it from TikTok recipes, everyone said it was so good although from such a hopeless app* (Ch 16). However, the children admitted that making videos involved the possibility of having their account blocked by administrators, so they avoided showing their faces in the videos or saved the videos in the app's private archives and only shared them with friends.

Community of play

The theme of community and the desire to be together were strongly reflected in the children's statements. The social dimension of TikTok seems to fulfil this need of children, which is inherent in their natural development. Children like the app because they meet other (different) people in the app whose productions they find inspiring. In their utterances, they sometimes mentioned that they share an account on the app with a friend and record content together: *With a friend, this year we recorded mowing corn. We added a song to make it fun; to make it nicer to watch. Well, and two thousand likes came in under one TikTok movie* (Ch 4). Interestingly, the children saw the app from the perspective of fun and entertainment, hence they expressed their displeasure when adults joined the TikTok community: *I have seen a lot of videos like this, in which even older people record these TikToks. In my opinion, this is wrong. Older people should be sitting on the sofa drinking hot tea, not dancing [...]. I know a lot of such people and their mothers record such inappropriate TikToks, and these children even cry that their mothers record such videos* (Ch 2).

Popularity and fame

Children emphasised that for active TikTok users being recognisable is very important. This impressed the children and they often emphasised that, due to the large number of followers *You can be a popular TikToker, and then you can get money and*

be famous (Ch 3). *During the interview, they were able to name many well-known creators publishing their content in the internet: Julia* Żugaj, *Czajnik, MrBeast, Wersow, Monika Kociołek, Genzie, TeamX, Ekipa, Natsu World, Charli D'Amelio, Lexy Chaplin* (Ch 18). These individuals and groups are mainly young people whose online activity is watched by several million people each day. The children admitted that they like watching their videos and know a lot about their lives, but they were also critical of their online activities: *I don't follow their example, because they can do really stupid things* (Ch15). As examples of inappropriate behaviour practised by TikTokers, they pointed out, for example, recording videos to hate others or taking on dangerous challenges (*internet challenges*).

School of life

On TikTok, just like in the traditional backyard, inappropriate social practices occur. In the past, it was insults, verbal taunts or even physical violence. Today, it has taken the form of online hate. The children shared their thoughts on unpleasant comments online, although they usually indicated that they had not experienced them directly. They usually cited examples they had heard or observed. What caught my attention was that the children did not feel a fear of being hated because, they said, they do not provoke or nag others with negative comments: *I sometimes read the comments to see what's out there. Well, and I see some kind of... drama, so to speak, in that kind of language. And I prefer not to get involved in it, so that I don't get in trouble for it later* (Ch15). The children were unequivocal in their opinion that offending others in the internet is wrong and should not take place, especially in the case of children: *I saw a girl who was seven or eight years old, and she recorded her dance and wrote that it was a video to be hated. I don't want to hate that girl, but she shouldn't make a video like that because it psychologically affects that girl* (Ch8). A good way to do avoid this, according to the children, is to block people who get involved in online hate.

Results of the analysis and conclusion

The TikTok app has been downloaded to mobile devices more than 2 billion times in less than four years. Today, it is likely to be used by almost one in four people on Earth (Schellewald, 2021, p. 1437). Among them are children who have made TikTok their new e-backyard. It is an informal backyard because it was not deliberately created for children, just like "backyard-wells" in the past. A sense of agency and subjectivity can be felt in the children's utterances about their activity in the app, as they participate in and create the TikTok community. Being active in the app fulfils their need

to be together with others, to create something together, but also their need for quick interaction, fun and entertainment. The children develop their hobbies here and are inspired to create their own "trends". They don't live in a vacuum, but, just like in offline life, they absorb what they experience and participate in. They follow fashions, copy the behaviour they observe and are inspired by "idols". To function in the app is also to resist adults, as children's being there is often criticised by parents who, according to the respondents, often do not approve of their children's use of TikTok. Exploring forbidden places or even engaging in risky social practices, however, seems to be one of the distinctive features of childhood, regardless of the times in which it is fulfilled.

The reflections on children's experiences gathered on TikTok's e-backyard provide a voice in the discussion on the image of contemporary childhood, and the analysis presented here is one possible interpretation of the phenomenon concerning children's functioning in this internet place. Indeed, when exploring the spaces of childhood, researchers bring into the analysis their own beliefs about who the child is, what childhood is, and they create theories and conceptualisations from the perspective of the discipline they practice (Siwicki, 2021, p. 14). Their beliefs often grow out of their own personal experience of childhood, recorded in their memory in the form of memories of this period. They are often based on comparing the image of one's own childhood with images of the childhood of contemporary children, as a result of which we may encounter a lot of theses concerning contemporary childhood which is not as rich in experiences as it used to be, or childhood which is threatened by technology (Postman, 2011; Rixon et al., 2019; Spitzer, 2021). Breaking free of these constraints provides an opportunity to rise above the level of evaluating the media-child relationships, and to reach into the fascinating areas of children's hybrid everyday life. This requires researchers of contemporary childhood to be vigilant and to constantly update their knowledge of how children function, including online. It seems important to be open-minded, following children and looking at their activities without didactic moralising and depriving children's online functioning of a broader perspective. Analyses and conclusions from the exploration of children's spaces bring us closer to a deeper understanding of children and can also prove valuable when designing spaces for children, for example in the field of education. Creating an educational offer for the times ahead or educating teachers without up-to-date knowledge of children and their everyday life may run the risk of creating education that is illusory and detached from the reality.

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