All Work and No Play Makes TikTok a Dull Platform: The Influence of TikTok's 'Hustle Culture' on Productivity in the Digital Age

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Redefining the nature of work in contemporary society, hustle culture offers individuals the opportunity for growth and reflection on their work-life balance whilst simultaneously exposing them to toxic productivity habits. With the increased use of social platform, TikTok, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the emergence of hustle culture has challenged its users to blur the boundaries between work and personal life. Working from home has allowed digital technologies to reshape the experiences of work culture and productivity, leading to embodied human-digital encounters (Clark & Lupton, 2021, p. 1224). Working spaces and everyday experiences have changed due to hustle cultures impact on TikTok, redefining the self and the perception of others. Resultingly, the sociomaterial conditions of the pandemic have brought together technologies and bodies that allow for better interpretation of TikTok's role in hustle culture. In 2022, TikTok reached one billion daily active users globally and is now more popular amongst Generation Z than Instagram (Cyca, 2022). Used as a tool to create, share, and discover 15-second videos, the platform has conjured up unfavourable opinions from older demographics due to TikTok's blurred Community Guidelines. With issues around young people's exposure to hateful ideologies, violence, self-harm and eating disorders on the app, there are growing concerns whether TikTok aims to help, hinder, or change social behaviours.

TikTok's hustle culture transforms how workspaces are interpreted by challenging the expectations of the 9-to-5 work week and the physical spaces of labour. An increasing amount of users are utilising the video-focused app to share their daily routine, post about their workplaces or home offices and use their professionalism and industry knowledge to brand themselves to specific markets. Through this, the nature of work changes how productivity spaces are understood, creating tension amongst viewers and creators. With over 77% of employees experiencing work-related burnout in 2022, a user's exposure to 'workaholic lifestyle' content online, shifts productivity from problem-oriented work patterns to emotionally oriented patterns which affects job performance and causes chronic burnout (Han, Xu, Ge & Qin, 2020). The ever-mounting pressure

on individuals working from home to stay organised and keep on top of their tasks will only add to this growing figure in 2023. The embodied experience of the home has, therefore, transformed from a place of rest to a dynamic work and living environment (Zournazi 2014). Popular TikTok creator, Mario Moreno Sears (@followmario) (Figure 1), shares his knowledge and industry experiences to teach his audience about marketing. Sears' ability to use the platform as a successful networking tool by filming all his videos within his private space, suggests the home is an affective atmosphere. The home as an affective atmosphere is "perceived and sensed through the body" with digital technologies, like the mobile phone, being able to configure feelings of health and wellbeing or distress and disappointment (Clark & Lupton, 2021, pp. 1226-1227). With creators, like Sears, producing content that feeds hustle culture, it can be argued that "the relationship between people, things and environments becomes disrupted", negatively impacting people's ability to "improvise their way through the world" (Clark & Lupton, 2021, p. 1227). There is a constant desire to learn and absorb productivity habits outside of typical working hours. Thus, work is no longer a physical place in contemporary society but a mindset in which TikTok hustle culture takes advantage of.

FIGURE 1. Sears' TikTok account.

On the other hand, through dynamic encounters with space and place, affective atmospheres ensure that "emotions cannot be separated from bodily sensations" resulting in TikTok offering users a shifting collective affective state further challenging the notions of work as a physical space (Southerton, 2021, pp. 3251-3252). With the platform centered around play and virality, self-care and wellness subcultures offer a unique perspective on working spaces being collaborative rather than competitive. With TikTok affordances encouraging users to participate in and replicate numerous trends through audio cues and the 'duetting' feature, daily vlogs and routine videos create pressures for individuals to adhere to a strict schedule to be perceived as productive. Yet, there are users who have resisted the social norms of hustle culture through satire and creativity, adopting their own realistic and achievable definition of productivity and the spaces they choose to operate in. Motivating their audience to challenge their current lifestyle and adopt a healthier work-life balance, 'vanlifetok' (Figure 2) is a community of individuals on the platform who live and work while traveling in their vans or RVs. With TikTok's ability to facilitate the spread and scale of social and cultural content, imitation and replication have provided original content with the leverage it needs to impact users and their behaviours online and offline (Zulli & Zulli, 2020, p. 5). It has been observed that users participate in these communities, by sharing their stories, interests and values in which translate to offline settings thus challenging traditional workspaces and practices (Zulli & Zulli, 2020, p. 15). Affective atmospheres and platform affordances contribute to how workspaces are perceived and experienced online, impacting how media participants engage in productivity habits offline. Although hustle culture challenges relationships with space and place, the future of work is entering an exciting phase, stretching the boundaries of labour in the digital age.
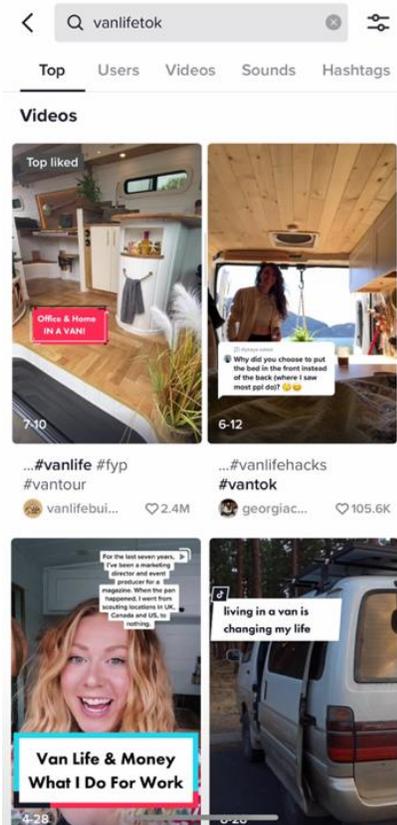
FIGURE 2. 'Vanlifetok' content examples.

Hustle culture on TikTok has a strong influence over how its users spend their time, including their daily routine, activities, practices, and behaviours. With the meaning of work evolving, social interactions and norms are reconfiguring to meet the demands of hustle culture practices on TikTok. The platform is consistently churning out new kinds of material and practices for users to respond to. As a result, some users are working towards creating communities through sharing genuine advice on 'slowing down' whilst others are still unintentionally contributing to hustle culture. Regardless, all users are creating different discourses on how individuals should be spending their day. As Wajcman (2014, p. 33) states, the acceleration of digital technologies and the internet influences the materiality and sociality of activities and identities, allowing technology and society to exist in a process of daily "doings." Acceleration society is reflected on TikTok by blurring the boundaries between production and consumption to distort people's understandings of social norms, experiences, and time. With every social interaction being mediated by technology and the pressures to engage with content in "real-time" increase, the tangible human and social time dimensions of everyday life become compressed and obscured thus accelerating the pace of life and social change (Wajcman, 2014, p.18). Side hustle, #girlboss and 'My 5-9 before my 9-5' content (Figure 3) thrive on the idea of 'getting things

done' without considering the negative impacts. A strong emphasis is on prioritising multiple income streams and encouraging pressure cooker situations to become the most successful version of yourself possible (Premnath, 2020). TikTok affords the 'do more' mentality, producing a discourse of urgency and feeding users with a distorted sense of worth. Hustle culture, in this regard, has become so toxic, the reprioritisation of work over health and physical displays of exhaustion are seen as a status symbol.
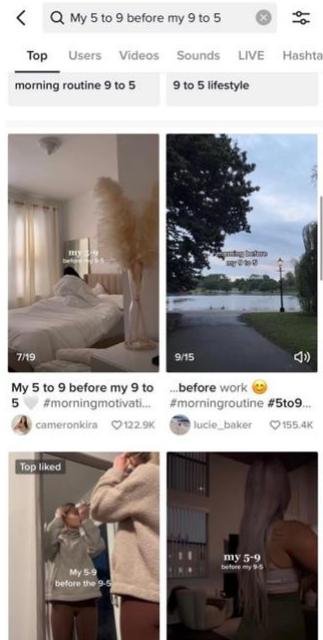

FIGURE 3. 'My 5-9 before my 9-5' trend.

Nevertheless, just like there are time pressures to perform to a high standard every day, there are a number of individuals making content that embraces and celebrates 'lazy days'. Wajcman (2014, p. 19) argues 'the disappearance of time' and venturing away from an ordered sequence of events towards 'instantaneous time'. Therefore, in conjunction with the increased pace of life, network society plays a key role in the flow of information and communication across technology as well as influencing patterns of content consumption and routine. Numerous creators are emphasising the importance of self-care and work life balance through unbridled confidence and an irreverent sense of humour. The goal being not to penalise hustle culture but work with it to inspire lifestyle changes and develop healthier productivity habits. Jonathan Graziano (@jongraz) (Figure 4), coined the terms 'Bones' and 'No Bones Day', after posting daily videos of his pug, Noodle. Depending on the daily actions of Noodle, Graziano's audience will be encouraged to have a productive 'Bones' day or a restful 'No Bones' day. Although Graziano and Noodle still govern how users should be spending their day, they present a strong emphasis on 'being kind to yourself' even when it is a 'Bones Day'.

Resultingly, in a high-speed society, being told how to spend time uncomplicates everyday experiences and helps individuals to seamlessly decide their daily activities (Wajcman, 2014, p. 13). Through this, more creators are implementing creative strategies that transform hustle culture into an opportunity to prioritise rest for achieving a healthier productive lifestyle. Since TikTok is a platform based on attention economy, keeping users engaged within the first 15 seconds of a video is integral to how the perception of time and routine is understood. Although an accelerated society and the time pressures from digital technologies are being experienced, more content creators are realising the importance of a slower, more balanced routine and communicating this in unique ways to capture a wide range of publics.

FIGURE 4. Example of a 'No Bones Day' vs. a 'Bones Day'.

Taking into consideration how hustle culture influences time and working spaces via the platform, TikTok also redefines the self and perceptions of others. The expectation to maximise an individual's time and the implications this has on defining failure creates unhealthy expectations. There is an increase in influencers being transparent about their burnout but won't actively change their routine. In these cases, admitting failure is used as a relatability tool to connect with their audience. Williams (1977, p. 129) discusses the 'subjective' and the 'personal' ideological systems where experience and immediate feeling assemble. When individuals connect and interact with content online, the tension between what the user interprets as fact and the practical experiences and values that the user has, leads to issues in social consciousness. TikTok influencers and micro-celebrities produce content that frame them in particular ways so users perceive them as 'down-to-earth', trustworthy, and honest to push a particular agenda, product or lifestyle. According to a study conducted by Celie O' Neil-Hart and

Howard Blumenstein, 40% of young people believe that online creators 'get them' while 70% of this demographic trust influencers opinions over traditional celebrities thus making them more susceptible to the hustle culture narrative (Arnold 2017). TikTok producers normalise burnout by preaching toxic self-care habits in which entertain forms of productivity. As a result, generations of young people are unable to disconnect work from leisure and are suffering from chronic fatigue.

Hustle culture also allows individuals to perceive and be perceived in ways that manipulate truth and reality. An individual's routine is not always a true reflection of their day and is more about proving a point about their identity rather than being productive. Popular TikTok creator, Anna Paul (@anna..paull) (Figure 5) rose to fame after posting daily vlogs about her extravagant lifestyle. 'The Highlight Reel' lifestyle that Paul, and similar content creators, present, distorts the perception of others, often leaving impressionable audiences with the idea that they must be a part of a specific socioeconomic status to be considered productive members of society. The strive for perfectionism and 'productive' leisure on social media separates the everyday from everyday lives, producing 'digital storytelling' practices. Exploring personal and emotive themes, vlogging is designed to amplify the ordinary voice, forming an effective narrative of self. It transforms the everyday experience into shared public culture but prioritises certain social circumstances that classify as a 'good life' rather than showcasing the full diverse range of individual narratives (Burgess, 2006, pp. 207-212). Resultingly, users are exposed to a particular lifestyle, behaviours and practices that are not only favoured by TikTok's algorithm but are unrealistic expectations of daily life.
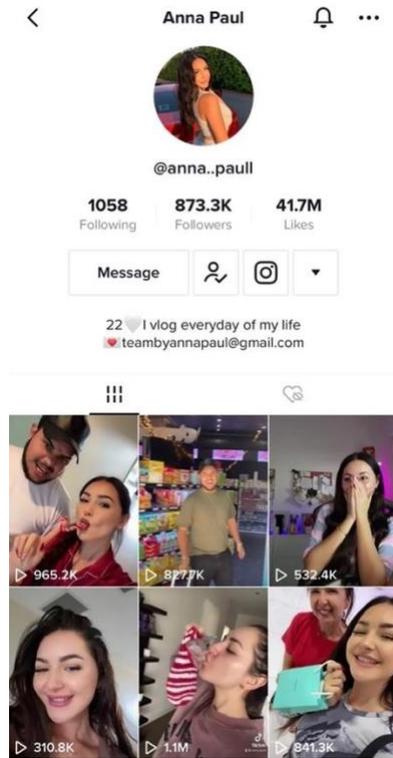
FIGURE 5. Anna Paul's TikTok account.

Although influencers on the platform continue to participate in trends and post their polished, curated content to maintain social status, other creators are pushing for better representation and are becoming more inclusive and accepting of users who might otherwise feel alienated by other creators. Paige Layle (@paigelayle) (Figure 6) is a micro-influencer whose content is focused on their experiences with autism. Layle shares her hyper fixation on specific tasks and subject areas, obsession with organising her space and dissociative tendencies. With more creative agency, Layle uses her account to showcase neurodivergent lifestyles in a raw and captivating narrative. 'Vernacular creativity' and the innovative processes of producing that creators, like Layle, are using, are returning authentic self-expression and play to new media (Burgess, 2006, pp. 206-207). Therefore, not only educating users about the various lifestyles of others but restoring more realistic versions of the self, others and the everyday. Hustle culture's impact on self-perception and the representation of others on the platform, suggests that more work needs to be done by TikTok to assist users in discovering a variety of creators that fall under different categories of age, gender, disability and socioeconomic class.
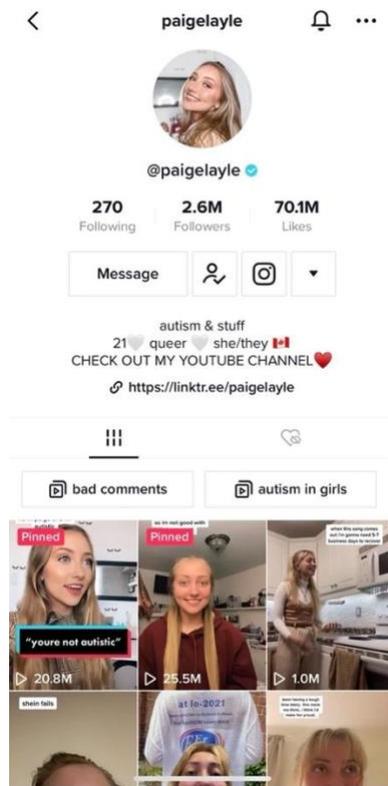
FIGURE 6. Paige Layle's TikTok account.

With the future of digital technologies being speculated by researchers for decades, understanding TikTok's role raises questions about how hustle culture will continue to impact the users of the platform. As Sontag (2005, p. 140) states, "digital technologies thrive in the era of free economic consumption of images" therefore, it can be predicted that hustle culture will breed new types of advertising tactics that explore acceleration and affective atmospheres, challenging perceptions of self and others. Social media will become entirely driven by economic gain and profit that users navigating these spaces will fail to connect with diverse communities and have difficulty forming new social relationships. Yet, hustle culture on TikTok transports tangible spaces of labour into the digital and blurs the traditional understanding of the working week. Perceptions on routine, bodies and relationships have been challenged as this, still unfamiliar platform, is being navigated. TikTok and its affordances have a huge impact on an individual's understanding of self and how they perceive truth and reality. The 'For You' page, duetting features and over 150,000 audio tracks users can implement in their content, revolutionise how people are communicating in contemporary society. Although hustle culture has unique leverage on the platform and comes with its own set of issues for content creators and users alike, it allows individuals to extend their creativity and to produce dynamic

content that has the potential to inspire and motivate others. Hustle culture is still an opportunity filled with untapped potential when practiced safely and ethically. Through education and proper training resources (Figure 7), both users and content creators can utilise TikTok purposefully and contribute meaningful content without bringing harm to individuals or groups.

FIGURE 7. Social media guidelines for safe hustle culture practices.

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