

The Discourse of Parenting on TikTok

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SVEUČILIŠTE U RIJECI
FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET

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The Discourse of Parenting on TikTok

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and
Literature and Pedagogy at the University of Rijeka

Rijeka, rujan 2024

SVEUČILIŠTE U RIJECI
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ODSJEK ENGLESKOG JEZIKA I KNJIŽEVNOSTI

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The Discourse of Parenting on TikTok

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The Discourse of Parenting on TikTok
Bachelor's Thesis

Rijeka, September 2024

IZJAVA O AUTORSTVU ZAVRŠNOG RADA

Izjavljujem da je moj završni rad **The Discourse of Parenting on TikTok** izvorni rezultat mojeg rada te da su svi korišteni izvori, kako objavljeni, tako i neobjavljeni, primjereno citirali ili parafrazirani te navedeni u popisu literature na kraju rada.

U Rijeci, 29. kolovoza 2024.

(datum i godina)



(vlastoručni potpis studentice)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND.....	3
3. DATA DESCRIPTION AND METHODOLOGY.....	5
4. ANALYSIS.....	7
4.1. Video No. 1: @hannahflint_ on #parenting	7
4.2. Video No. 2: @thedad.father on #parenting	8
4.3. Video No. 3: @drjoe_md on #parenting	9
4.4. Video No. 4: @willow.allen on #parenting.....	11
4.5. Video No. 5: @thiaga2678 on #parenting.....	12
4.6. Video No. 6: @mom.ma.gi on #parenting	13
4.7. Video No. 7: @kerwinrae on #parenting	14
4.8. Video No. 8: @bencoleedwards on #parenting.....	16
4.9. Video No. 9: @mumc2 on #parenting	18
4.10. Video No. 10: @jonathanjoly on #parenting	19
5. DISCUSSION.....	20
6. CONCLUSION.....	24
7. REFERENCES.....	25
7.1. Sources:.....	26

ABSTRACT

Digital media has entwined itself into our daily lives, especially as a means for communication. With its emergence, discourse analysts have gained a new realm for research and exploration. TikTok has become one of the most popular applications and social media platforms accumulating over a billion users globally. Discourse on TikTok is being constructed at a fast pace as the platform's affordances allow for the communication to flow in various forms between the users. The discourse of parenting is one of many that is present on the platform. Employing the research approach of digital discourse analysis, this thesis set out to uncover the discourse elements and underlying implications of the discourse of parenting on TikTok. To explore the parenting discourse, 10 videos labelled with #parenting have been selected as a sample for this discourse analysis. The study found that self-reflection, accountability, and acceptance are key skills a modern parent should possess, and it uncovered that the main speakers who add to the discourse are presenting as experts and parents. It was also found that many creators use written linguistic devices as titles and subtitles to make their content more accessible and attract attention. Verbal elements communicated through speech tend to be attention-grabbing and implying community. An auditory element that is a frequent occurrence is soothing background music which helps evoke an emotional response in the viewer. These elements are not only building blocks of the discourse of parenting on TikTok but also tools for manipulation of users.

Keywords: digital discourse analysis, discourse analysis, TikTok, parenting, digital communication

1. INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, the aim is to explore the parenting discourse on TikTok through a digital discourse analysis (henceforth DDA) lens. By focusing on 10 TikTok videos labelled by the #parenting hashtag, I seek to shed light on the discursive practices and implications that shape and are shaped by these digital representations of parenting.

Much of daily life today is affected by technology, especially the ever-growing number of new types of media. This poses a new path in discourse analysis for researchers to explore the newest features of digital communication and its practices (Izotova et al., 2021).

Short-form videos have gained popularity through the social media platform called Vine in 2013. Soon after, a competing platform, Musical.ly, emerged with the premise of viewing and creating videos ranging from 15 seconds to a minute. Years later, Musical.ly became what we today know as TikTok (Britannica, 2024). TikTok, which is a technology company based in China that offers a video-sharing social network platform, has been rapidly gaining popularity with over a billion active users globally as of 2023 (Team, 2024).

TikTok comprises a variety of content that caters to a wide range demographic. From comedic sketches to cooking demonstrations, dance challenges to educational quizzes, TikTok offers a platform for anyone to share their hobbies, passions, jobs, interests, etc., with a particular audience. TikTok's affordances (i.e., its perceived possibilities and constraints) allow its creators to record videos or assemble picture slideshows and add background music or any kind of audio. These audios, referred to as "sounds" by users, are often music, recordings from the videos, voiceovers from other creators or audios taken from other media. One can also include text in their content either in the caption of the post or on the video/picture itself. When published, the content can be "liked" (pressing a heart symbol to indicate the user likes it, much like Instagram), commented on, saved within the app and shared with on or off the platform. In this sphere of diverse content, many niche communities emerge around particular content, and videos relating to parenting have become a centre interest of one such niche community.

The object of analysis presented in this thesis are TikTok videos relating to parenting. One prominent genre of parenting content on TikTok is based on parenting advice and tips and tricks. Creators share practical insights and methods in an attempt at improving or alleviating different aspects of parenthood from household organization to supporting the child's emotions.

Authors of these videos rely on TikTok's affordances and implement visual and auditory elements to videos to convey information in an interesting and digestible format, combining brief and clear explanations with creative visuals and engaging audios. The most likely target audience of this kind of creators are parents seeking advice and support to help them navigate parenthood.

As well as offering advice, creators who focus on parenting content often share anecdotes and realisations from their own journey of parenthood. Through storytelling and they give a glimpse of their experiences of parenthood. They share their feelings, expectations, insecurities, dilemmas, fears, accomplishments, and thoughts that come with raising one or more children. Opening up and being vulnerable about such a universal experience strengthens the connection between them, their viewers, and other users creating a community (Lee, 2021).

However, not all creators in question are individuals, since some organisations and experts on child upbringing also provide videos on the topic of parenting, usually sharing information and resources based on credible research. Psychologists, paediatricians, and parenting coaches address frequent questions and speak on misconceptions about discipline, health, and child development. As these experts have the required credentials, they take on the important role of debunking myths and overall educating their audience, specifically parents, while urging them to make informed decisions regarding their child's well-being (Gardner, 2020).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical framework for this thesis is digital discourse analysis (DDA) which examines how discourse and communication manifest in the digital world. Digital discourse is not comprised of text only, but also images, videos, emojis, GIFs, hashtags, etc. DDA studies multimodal content across online platforms like social media, blogs, forums and websites. Its key theoretical perspectives are multimodal discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, and interactional sociolinguistics. Themes that are often discussed when conducting research through the lens of DDA are networks and communities, power and ideology, identity and performance, and multimodality (Vasquez, 2022).

The aim of this thesis is to explore and analyse selected representative videos about parenting in the digital realm. Employing DDA, this thesis intends to shed light on strategies that users of TikTok use to construct the discourse on the topic of parenting. Furthermore, it seeks to discover which ideologies and practices are formed within this discourse.

TikTok's format, with its short videos and algorithmic curation, offers a rich landscape for analysis. The content created by users covers a wide range of topics, including parenting, allowing exploration of various discursive practices and representations. By diving into the content of TikTok videos, we can uncover various discourses surrounding parenthood and understand how broader social, cultural, and technological factors influence them.

Affordances of TikTok allow creators significant freedom to construct their own narratives and representations shared on the platform. Following Van Dijk's understanding of the interconnectedness of society and discourse (2009), it can be said that through their choice of topics, language, and visual presentation, TikTok creators shape the discourse around parenting, often reinforcing prevailing ideologies and norms. Furthermore, the platform's algorithms also play a role, amplifying certain voices and perspectives while marginalizing others, thus perpetuating power imbalances (Gillespie, 2014).

It has to be noted that the discourse on TikTok is able to flow both ways, as the platform allows for interactions. Users actively engage with content through liking, commenting, sharing in private chats with friends or posting reacting videos to the content,

stitching¹ videos or reposting them. Their participation shapes the meaning of the videos under the hashtag “#parenting” on TikTok, contributing to ongoing discourse construction. Hashtags are most often descriptive terms and are used to group posts because of the overwhelming content on social media. Acting as a filter when using the search bar, all the posts containing, for example, #parenting come up in one place (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

It is not only language that constructs discourse, but many other elements that bring the whole picture together. TikTok’s affordances allow users to shape discourse through multimodal media. Many might think multimodality is a product of the development of technologies and Internet, all communication is inherently multimodal. For example, face-to-face communication involves both verbal elements like language and facial expressions or gestures (Cameron & Panović, 2018). Multimodality is also seen in posters and commercials. Linguistic elements play along with the visual aspects on a poster to convey a message that is to be decoded by the viewer. Commercials are more similar in form to TikTok videos as they encapsulate both linguistic, visual, and auditory elements. Different elements work together to form a whole picture of the information being communicated.

In essence, DDA provides a valuable approach for studying parenting discourse on TikTok. By examining power dynamics, ideologies, and discursive practices reproduced in videos about parenting circulating on this platform, we gain insights into how parenthood is constructed, discussed, and contested within the digital realm.

¹ Stitch is a tool used when creating content that allows one to combine another video on TikTok with the one already being created (*Stitch / TikTok Help Center*, n.d.)

3. DATA DESCRIPTION AND METHODOLOGY

With the goal to observe and comprehend how verbal, visual, and auditory elements interplay to construct the discourse of parenting on TikTok, this study applied a digital discourse analysis approach. DDA is particularly appropriate for this research as it enables a comprehensive analysis of various communication modes withing digital discourse that revolves around the topic of parenting.

The data for this analysis was collected by using the search bar to filter videos with the #parenting hashtag on March 12, 2024. The first 10 videos of the search result have been chosen. It is important to note that these videos are a result of the platform's algorithm which filters content even while using the search bar and are not necessarily the most viewed, liked, commented on or shared videos containing the #parenting hashtag (*How TikTok Recommends Content / TikTok Help Center*, n.d.). However, they still can be considered to be representative of the content about parenting on the platform. The sample includes videos of parents, medical experts, individuals of different cultures, influencers focusing on mental health, and talk show and lecture excerpts. The length of videos varies from 30 to 90 seconds.

The analysis process involved several stages. Firstly, the overview and description of each video was written down to accurately portray a base of the material being analysed. Secondly, the verbal elements were examined and coded for thematic content. Keywords, phrases, and sentence structures that construct the discourse were noted. Since some of the verbal elements were visually supported, e.g. in the forms of subtitles, their qualities were also analysed. Thirdly, visual elements were observed with a semiotic lens considering scenography, behaviour, colour schemes, video editing, and visual symbolism in how they confirm or challenge the verbal messages. Finally, auditory elements that include background music and voiceovers were analysed to understand their role in supporting the visual and verbal content. The summarized analysis of each video is represented below in Chapter 4. Online links leading to each video are listed in the Sources section at the end of the paper.

The interplay among these modes was analysed to recognize how they contribute to the system of ideologies that make the discourse of parenting. The multimodal approach withing DDA provides a nuanced understanding of various elements working together to form certain discourses within a community online which inevitably replicates itself in real life. For instance, a creator might use footage of a situation in their home, while the audible portion plays a

conversation where the creator comforts and apologizes to their child. Including linguistic elements that promote love and acceptance grounds the message of the video in transparency and connection of a parent-child relationship. This sort of content promotes an open and forgiving relationship which becomes a (desired) reality in families.

Findings from this analysis are expected to give an insight into the methods of implementation of certain elements in constructing discourse of parenting on TikTok. Moreover, how they shape ideologies surrounding the same topic. This thesis aspires to enrich the field of discourse analysis by examining the ways the visual, verbal, and auditory elements contribute to the construction of the discourse of parenting within contemporary online media.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. Video No. 1: @hannahflint_ on #parenting

The video that first showed up when searching #parenting was one by Hannah Flint (@hannahflint_) showing a video montage of a child in daily situations with white text written in a simple, legible font.

The first linguistic device, acting as a title, states “This is our “hard” child...” It changes throughout the video as do the frames – they correlate. As seen in figure 1, when words “Our “doesn’t listen” child” are presented in the video, the frames show the child refusing to face the camera and is seemingly upset. The first three linguistic devices are negative terms to describing the child’s behaviour, but the following six are adjectives describing good qualities, e.g. “resilient child” while showing the child in a hospital bed smiling and playing with a toy (shown in figure 2). By showing both the negatives and the positives, the creator portrays both sides of their child that construct their everyday routine. There is an absence of an audible speaker which put these linguistic devices in the role of captions. Although there is no audible voice, there is a song playing in the background called “Home” by Edith Whiskers. This song is emotional and soft moving the viewer.

An important aspect of this video is an affordance of this platform which allows videos to be created by combining multiple videos one after another. These videos do not need to be taken while filming or in the order they are shown but can be edited from the photo and video material in one’s device.

The video as a whole seems to be intended as advice and encouragement for other parents which is supported by the caption of the post: “Trying to see the world through her eyes is a struggle somedays, and often makes me feel like I’m parenting all wrong. But reminding myself of all the GOOD that she is always helps ❤️ (...)”. The creator writes the caption in first person because she is speaking from her point of view telling the audience her own experiences, with ‘her’ referring to her daughter who appears in the video. Connecting this verbal element with the video, she gives the audience the full picture – she is vulnerable with her audience in showing her flaws in her role of the parent.

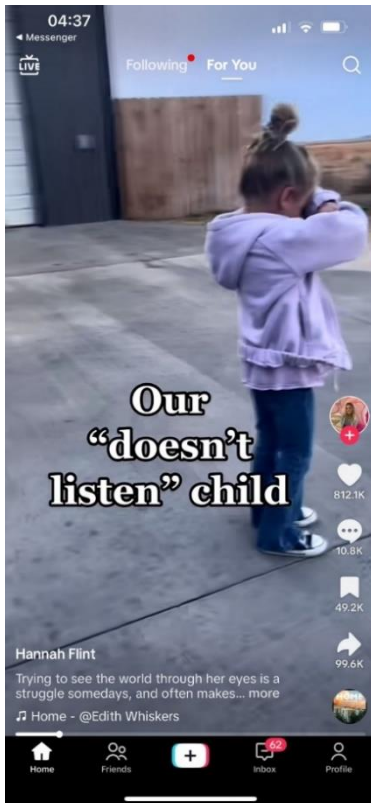


Figure 1: Screenshot from video no. 1



Figure 2: Screenshot from video no. 1

4.2. Video No. 2: @thedad.father on #parenting

The Dad Father (@thedad.father) posted a video which starts with a frame of a man and a child (presumably the creator with their child) playing while the written linguistic device “One of the biggest mistakes we can make as parents told by Mr. Rogers himself” is seen in the top portion of the frame. Compared to similar verbal segments in video no. 1, here first person plural is used. By using “we”, the author creates a sense of community and connection for the audience, including them into his parenting experiences. The creator added subtitles displayed at the bottom portion of the video as another verbal element. Subtitles are another TikTok affordance that makes it possible for people hard of hearing or those whose first language is not English to be able to follow along with the video, or simply allow users to watch videos on silent but still being able to follow the audio.

After seeing the introductory frame with the father and child playing for the first few seconds, the frame then fades into a video from 1985 (as it is marked in the frame) from a talk

show where Oprah Winfrey is interviewing Mr. Rogers about mistakes parents make. Oprah Winfrey is known as a talk show host whose success shifted the power balance in the publishing world, making way as an African American host and author (Young, 2001). Mr. Rogers, her guest, was a television host, minister, producer, and writer most known for his television shows for children called *Mister Rogers' Neighbourhood* (Britannica, 2024) and *Sesame Street* (Rice & Haight, 1986). Winfrey's success and Rogers' expertise amplify the importance and reliability of the content of the video.

Rogers proceeds to explain how parents tend to forget what it was like to be a child resulting in harsh behaviour, all while the video is showing both participants of the conversation and the children with their parents in the audience. His voice is calm and soft making the audience listen closely, and his sentences direct and simple for people of all backgrounds to understand. The calmness of his voice is supported by the nostalgic music playing in the background.

TikTok's affordances allow users to be creative when creating content, for example by allowing to put together videos that can be found online with those from a photo and video gallery on one's device. User @thedad.father used this feature to post an excerpt of Winfrey's talk show from 1985 making Mr. Rogers the expert, rather than himself. To support the message he wanted to convey, he gives a personal take on Mr. Rogers' words with the caption of the post: "I think in order to be a better parent you have to go back to seeing the world through your kids eyes (...)."

4.3. Video No. 3: @drjoe_md on #parenting

Next video of the sample is by Dr. Joe, M.D. (@drjoe_md) which shows him reacting to a video of a child on the bed wrapped up in a blanket when suddenly a parent pulls the blanket making the child roll out of it and burst into laughter. Dr. Joe, wearing scrubs, is positioned in the bottom left corner pretending to watch and react to the video in time with the viewers. Shortly after, the video cuts to Dr. Joe filling the frame and speaking on the topic of roughhouse play and how it has a positive effect on the child, even later in the child's life. Dr. Joe's background in the beginning is the video showing roughhouse play and changes into a screenshot of an article about research he mentions. He presents himself in a way it is clear that

he is a doctor by his username and uniform, which makes him seem very reliable. What also supports his reliability is his mention of scientific research.

To make his video accessible, he did not use complicated medical vocabulary, he opted for a more simplified register, understood by the wider audience: “But did you know there’s actually studies that show that parents who roughhouse play with their children when they’re younger, actually grow up to be more confident and well-adjusted adults.” Additionally, to that, he made his own subtitles alongside those automatically generated by TikTok which are much smaller and positioned at the bottom portion of the video as seen in Figure 1. Some of the words and phrases in his subtitles are bigger and coloured yellow, instead of white, to emphasize key words which is shown in the same figure.

Dr. Joe directly addresses the audience by using the pronoun “you” while speaking directly into the camera simulating eye-contact making this a direct message to the viewer. He also used the phrase *Did you know?* to capture the attention of the viewer. This phrase implies that the creator is about to say a piece of information that not many know about and that may be shocking.

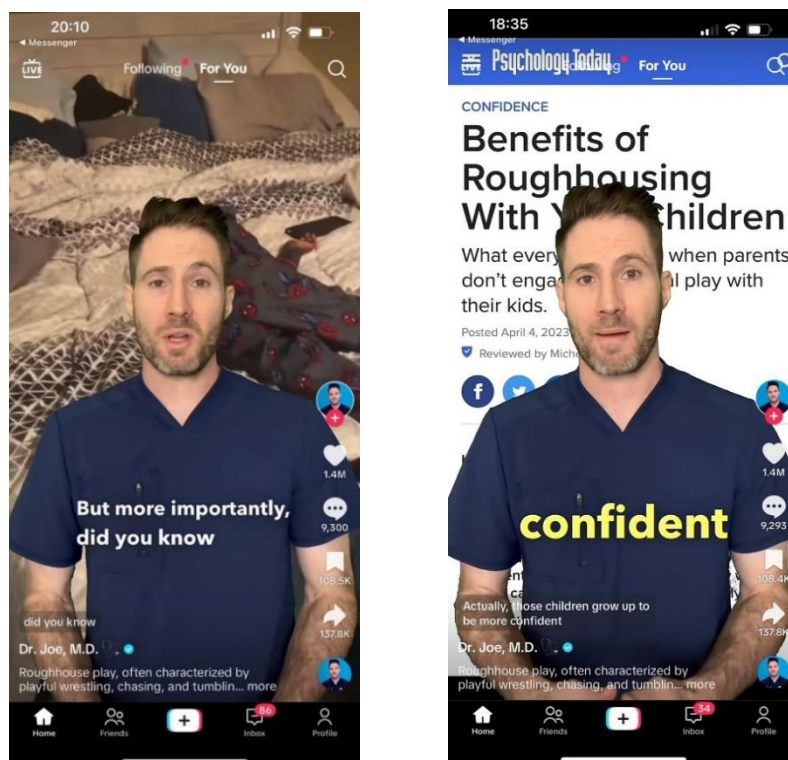


Figure 3: Screenshots of video no. 3

4.4. Video No. 4: @willow.allen on #parenting

Willow Allen (@willow.allen) added her own experience to the discussion on parenting. In the very beginning she poses the question “Did you know that Inuit are considered to have one of the most gentle parenting styles in the world?” Just like the creator of the previous video, she uses the phrase *Did you know?* to introduce a topic not many know about. In the top portion of the frame, the words “Inuit parenting style” act as the title of the video and disappear after the introductory question. The creator continues to present values of upbringing children in the Inuit culture, some of which are speaking calmly to a child, not getting angry with them, treating them with respect, letting them choose for themselves what feels most comfortable for them, etc. Simply by her introduction of the video, the viewer can assume she is Inuk. When speaking about the Inuit community she refers to it as “my community” and when mentioning family members, she uses terms of the respectable Inuit language. She is also wearing jewellery which appears to be cultural. Finally, her profile description states “*Inuk from the Arctic*”. These elements all show that she does belong to the Inuit culture making her legible to speak on the topic of Inuit parenting.

There is no present background noise, only the creator talking about the culture’s parenting values and telling a story about her grandparents as an example. The visual background is scarce, only white walls with a blue hung painting. Unlike the prior videos, she does not rely on the platform’s many affordances. There are no frames of different videos, subtitles, effects, filters, or background music. The video is comprised of the same face-front frame with minimal editing.

The video is edited to cut out any silent moments, making it seem as though the creator is not making pauses in their speech. Her tone and tempo of speaking stay the same throughout. All the attention is to her speech as the video is visually quite simple – the creator speaking into the camera. Additionally, she simulates eye-contact with the audience for them to be more engaged and to listen more carefully.

4.5. Video No. 5: @thiaga2678 on #parenting

Unlike the previous ones, this video does not include anyone audibly talking. Creator Thiaga (@thiaga2678) posted a video of a woman who is, most likely, not the owner of the account as the profile picture and a few of posted videos show the same man. According to other videos posted by this user, she is presumably a different creator whose work is being posted under this account.

In the video, a woman is sitting and looking into the camera while motioning above and below her head to black captions in light-coloured “boxes” that carry the message of the video which is seen in Figure 2. First, the top caption appears presenting a problematic situation, e.g. “When your child is throwing a tantrum”, which is then followed by stating a common misconception is incorrect, “They are not being unreasonable,” and concluding with the explanation of the child’s behaviour, “They are emotionally struggling and need your help.” Because of the affordances of TikTok, this creator uses verbal modes to express herself in contrast to using her own voice to verbalize her message.

She is simulating eye-contact with the audience and using “you” to address them while smiling the whole time. The woman in the video is also nodding her head to indicate which text writes a true statement and which writes an incorrect one. Even though she does not speak, there is calm music playing to set the inviting tone of the video.



Figure 4: Screenshot of video no. 5

4.6. Video No. 6: @mom.ma.gi on #parenting

What makes this video stand out is that the creator, Gigi | Gentle Parenting (mom.ma.gi), shows the viewers a real situation that happened between herself and her child. The video shot from a camera positioned on the floor of a living room capturing an interaction between the mother and the child. The mother, Gigi, is crouched down to meet her child's eyes and holding their hands talking in a calm manner saying she does not want to carry them and apologising for yelling at them. The child is crying but remains calm and tries to talk to their mother. It is evident Gigi is showing the viewers a private moment by the setting of a living room, their clothing being comfortable and typical to wear at home, the camera being set on the floor, and the raw emotions of both participants. This raw moment seems to be set as an example of the struggles of parenting which is not usual because most creators do not show the negative aspects of themselves or their lives in order to obtain a good social media image. At the same time, while representing a seemingly spontaneous raw moment, it should be taken into account that the creator positioned the camera and started recording the interaction intentionally.

There are two verbal elements integrated in the video. The bigger serves as a guide and creator's commentary on how this situation can be learned from, e.g. "What if I tell you I yell at my child, too" and "But what we do 🌻 after 🌻 is more important." Gigi relates to the viewer admitting her mistakes showing that what is seen online is only what the creators want to show, and even though she may seem close to perfect, she is just a person who is going through life learning by making mistakes. The smaller verbal elements are the subtitles for the conversation that is shown on the video, along with TikTok's automatically generated subtitles at the bottom of the screen.

Throughout the entire video, a melancholic piano instrumental is playing which helps evoke an emotional reaction in the viewer to the already emotional situation being shown. To further the point of educating her viewers on parenting by her own example, she writes a lengthy caption expressing the difficulties of being a parent and reassuring the viewer. She invites the viewers to share their own similar experiences through commenting and to follow her account for more "positive discipline" and "gentle parenting tips." This indicates that her primary aim while creating content is to produce educational content and share her experience on gentle parenting which is an upbringing method that is becoming more frequently seen on social media platforms. Even her name on the platform includes "Gentle Parenting" which indicates to the viewer what kind of content they are watching. Even though she might produce content with a

strong educational or relatability message, it cannot be said with certainty that her aim is to educate and provide support. Joining in on trends can better a creator's chances of reaching more users by because of the algorithm that shows more content that is similar to the content the user watches and interacts with. Her intentions might be rooted in the wish of gaining a loyal audience in order for her account to grow to receive benefits as a successful influencer.

4.7. Video No. 7: @kerwinrae on #parenting

Kerwin Rae's (@kerwinrae) video on the topic of #parenting is a video excerpt of him holding a lecture to an audience that is not visible on video.

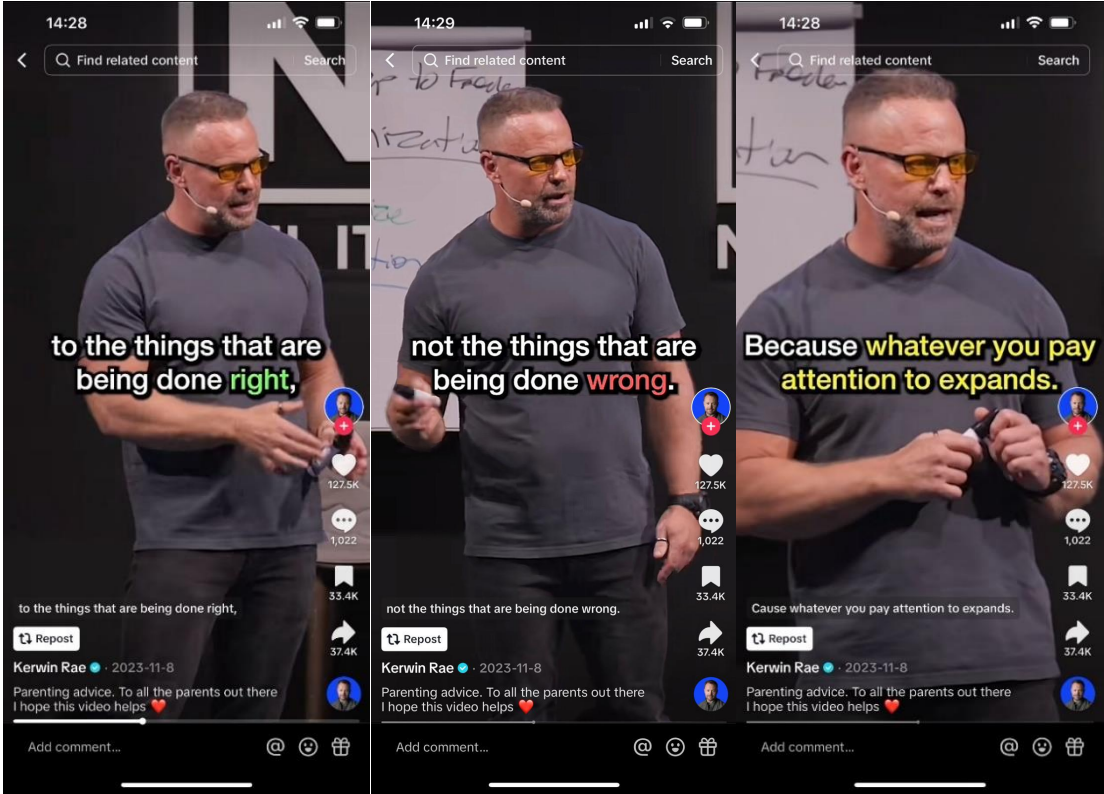
The video shows Rae with a microphone presenting and while he walks back and forth the viewer can see two big flipcharts or two smaller whiteboards behind him filled with notes. His gaze is constantly shifting between points directly in front of him giving the impression he is speaking to an audience.

The creator uses the pronoun "we" when mentioning parents, indicating to the viewers that he is one of them and has made these mistakes before, which creates a sense of community and vulnerability. The caption supports his image of giving constructive advice as it states: "Parenting advice. To all the parents out there I hope this video helps ❤️"

The creator also included subtitles (along with the platform's automatic subtitles) placed in the middle of the frame of the video which draws focus to his speech. The subtitles are white with black grids in a simple and large font making them easy to read. Some of the words and phrases he says are coloured in green, red or yellow (instead of white) to emphasize them which can be seen in Figure 4.

Rae mentions he works with "three of the top early developmental child psychologists on the planet" and goes on to explain that their work supports his statement that badly behaved children are not to blame for their actions, i.e. children's behaviour is a result of their upbringing and their parents. This might make the users see him as a reliable source, however he merely mentions experts. Rae swiftly moves on and does not name these experts who, as he describes them, are the best in their field. The users have no real evidence of the fact that Rae knows who they are, let alone works with them. Rae vaguely mentions experts to help him achieve

credibility and moves on to deflect from the lack of reliability. He acts as a knowledgeable lecturer sharing crucial information with an audience. However, the video shows only an excerpt of a lecture: Rae as the speaker standing in front of a crowd with a marker and a board with notes in the background. Even though the video does not show it, him holding the marker insinuates he wrote those notes to highlight important points in his speech. The frame of the video gives up the clue that the camera was not close to Rae, rather a bit far as it is possible to notice it has been zoomed in. Framing him in this manner gives the impression there is a lot of space between him and the camera, most likely because of something else taking up a lot of space, for example an audience. It is implied by his gaze and body language that he is speaking to people in front of him, yet they are never actually visible. This setting may or may not be real, but either way – he holds power and is more persuasive when promoting his ideologies.



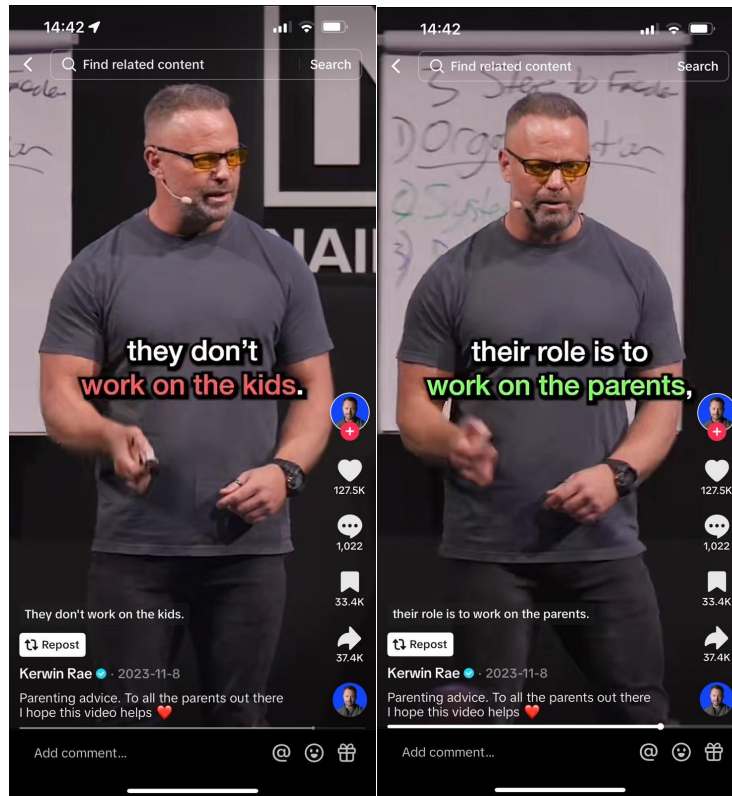


Figure 5: Screenshots of video no. 7

4.8. Video No. 8: @bencoleedwards on #parenting

Right at the beginning of this video, the creator, Ben Cole-Edwards (@bencoleedwards), introduces his topic with the sentence: “Here are three signs that you grew up with toxic parents.” This sentence is followed by his introduction and welcoming the viewer to “Ben’s Trauma Corner” which automatically gives an idea that he highlights the topic of trauma, so much so that he presents it as a series on his profile. Additionally, as seen in Figure 5, the positioning of the camera allows the audience to see that he is sitting in his home in casual clothing, and it points to one of the corners of the room he is filming in.

Unlike previously analysed TikTok videos, Cole-Edwards’ video is targeted at the children rather than the parents. It is important to mention that he does not target young children, but adults that reflect on their parents which is evident from introducing the topic of the video in the very beginning. What also supports this is that fact he speaks as though he might be talking to a friend and does not use a register understandable to young children, e.g. “burden”,

“authentic”, “benefiting”, and strong language. Not only that, but he also speaks about concepts young children would have a hard time understanding, e.g. “having your children taken away from you” or “they hated seeing how happy you were in your own skin.” The creator also addresses the viewer directly by using the pronoun “you” and by looking directly into the camera to simulate eye-contact especially when referring to the viewer for a more dramatic effect (see: Fig. 5).

The creator included subtitles which makes it more accessible and easier to follow. In his subtitling, he added emojis that are a reference to a viral meme (as seen on previous two screenshots): “I put food on the table ✨ for you ✨ “. Adding two sparkling emojis before and after a word or phrase can be seen as connecting a symbol for glamour with a word that is the complete opposite. This can also be used to emphasize the irony and add humour to a difficult situation. What is more, he smiles throughout the video keeping it light-hearted while talking about a difficult subject. His humorous approach to the topic is seen in his caption: “This is a list of 3 things because I couldn’t fit 194729471937293 into one video 😊”

Nearing the end, the creator concludes this video with an encouraging message to not identify with what one’s parents think or say, but to focus on oneself.

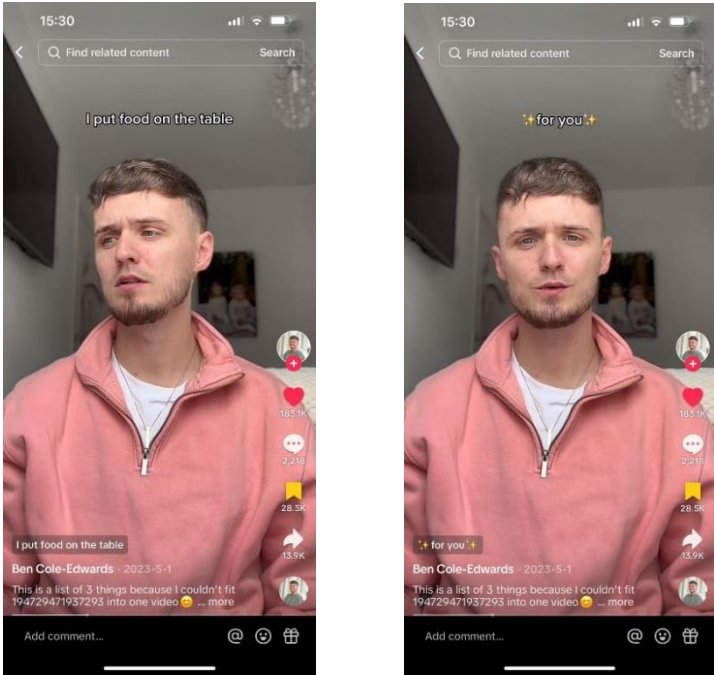


Figure 6: Screenshots of video no. 8

4.9. Video No. 9: @mumc2 on #parenting

Maria (@mumc2) posted a video in which Oprah Winfrey is interviewing a woman at a table in a room with plants and sunshine coming in. As mentioned previously in the analysis of video no. 2, seeing her interviewing someone automatically gives an idea that they are important, knowledgeable and reliable. Additionally, Winfrey's interlocutor looks very sophisticated because of her elegant clothes and makeup along with styled hair. According to Verhulst et al. (2010), people who are seen as more attractive are perceived as trustworthy.

In the middle of the screen is a verbal element which is present throughout the entirety of the video, and it is a comment added by the creator who posted the video, saying: "parenting, we learn daily 😊" Under this element are subtitles in a simple white font that, as previously mentioned in this analysis, make the video more accessible and easier to follow.

Winfrey, in the role of the interviewer, asks a question relating to her interlocutor's work, i.e. asking to elaborate more on the topic of being "irrelevant to your children". The interlocutor, sitting across from Winfrey, goes on to speak more on the subject connecting it to herself and reflecting on how she feels about being irrelevant to her child. She admits she loves when her child needs her, but still states how that is not something that is preferred in one's parent-child relationship. With this confession that goes against what she herself states is desirable, she becomes vulnerable and connects to those viewers who might disagree with her statement making them more likely to listen to what she has to say. What is more, she deepens the connection by using "we" and "our" when talking about parents. She uses few to no filler words, she takes her time and speaks slowly while occasionally using vocabulary that might not be familiar to a wide range of viewers which confirms the idea of her presenting herself as elegant and sophisticated. Her eye contact stays on the interviewer almost the whole time while the interviewer nods her head showing she is listening to her interlocutor.

This creator did not use a video of herself, rather a video of a popular and successful television host who has a reputation of speaking on controversial topics and bringing forward true information. She states her beliefs through a reliable source. The only input of the creator is the verbal element commenting in support of the ideologies presented.

4.10. Video No. 10: @jonathanjoly on #parenting

The last video of the sample is one by Jonathan Joly (@jonathanjoly) that is a Part 14 of his own playlist called “Vlogs 📺”.

This video is constructed as a montage of video clips from different points in time of the author and his children all connected to tell a story. TikTok as a platform gives way to creators to edit their videos by combining multiple videos from any point in time in any order.

Joly starts by setting the topic of the video with his voiceover: “Before Edie came out to us, and we as a family went on this journey together, we had no experience or understanding of what it meant to be trans.” This sentence is followed by a frame of him with an accompanying phrase saying “3 years ago on a podcast” in the bottom portion of the frame talking to two other interlocutors about how he would react to his children being homosexual and transgender. Here the creator used the freedom to “jump” back in time by adding an excerpt from an older video. In this clip he says if his child was transgender, he would have to “evolve” to accept them. Continuing the voiceover, he goes on to explain what his family and himself did to understand their child and provide them with everything they need. Joly speaks on his mistakes and challenges he faced, but also talks about what he learned showing growth and setting an example to other parents, encouraging them to approach their children with love.

His voice is peaceful and soothing which creates a calming atmosphere along with a piano instrumental that serves as background music evoking an emotional response from the viewer.

5. DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore the discourse surrounding parenting on TikTok. The discourse on this social media platform is influenced by both the content creators and the users who consume said content. The creators produce their content on the topic of parenting and branding it as such by incorporating #parenting in the captions of their posts. In this study, 10 videos which were the first 10 results for #parenting search on March 12, 2024, were taken as a sample to analyse.

The analysed videos range from 30 seconds to 90 seconds which is, according to Statista (2023), average and above average length of TikTok videos. It appears that creators dealing with themes of parenting, according to the sample, opt for longer videos. With the rise of short form videos, many social media users report of preferring shorter videos over longer ones. They mention their struggle with concentration and constant distraction. This may be linked to the desire for instant gratification because of the short attention span that has become a trend with users (Asif & Kazi, 2024). This may imply that creators talking about parenting are good at captivating the users' attention or that the topics are simply too complex to present in shorter videos.

About half of the sampled videos show the same attention-grabbing strategies. The creators use the pronoun *you* in auditory and written form to address the audience directly. Also, two of them repeated the phrase *Did you know?* to captivate the user. The creators address each viewer directly, most times even looking into the camera, i.e. breaking the fourth wall. By simulating eye contact with the viewer, they imitate an interaction happening in real life, rather than online. This might make people more attracted to the creator leading to watching more of their content. Eye contact is known to mark shared attention in interlocutors (Wohltjen & Wheatley, 2021) possibly influencing the viewer to pay attention rather than scrolling away. What is more, eye contact betters the chances of interlocutors trusting one another while conversing (Lucas et al., 2016).

A common verbal element that is used among these creators is speech in first person plural (exemplified in videos no. 2, 6, 7, and 9). They use it to find or create an idea of community to provide a space for the user to join in. Users like to feel welcome and a part of a community, especially when struggling and looking for support. To join that community, users need to interact with other members of the same community which is automatically done through the creator's video and/or account (by following the account, commenting, sending,

saving, reposting, etc.). Another verbal element that occurred in the analysed videos is the usage of second person singular (as seen in videos no. 3, 4, 5, and 8). They address the user directly, sometimes even calling them out. The user feels seen and encouraged to interact with the creator's video.

Linguistic devices that appeared in half of the videos are subtitles. Subtitles are very useful as they provide a written display of what is being said. People who have a hard time hearing and understanding what an English speaker is saying can consume content more easily. TikTok has a feature of automatic subtitles for most videos, but they are rarely accurate. Not only do subtitles allow a wider audience to enjoy content, but creators can also use subtitles to visually manipulate the attention of users. They can alter words in colour, size, and font. Each creator can alter the text to make it recognizable as their specific subtitles. They can even change the size or colour of words in sentences to bring their users' attention to what they want to emphasize (as shown in videos no. 3 and 7). Creators can also include emojis in their subtitles to make a joke or reference to a trend (as seen in video no. 8).

Eight videos out of 10 are supported by background music. This tool is useful to subtly introduce a targeted feeling or atmosphere to the audience and set the tone of the content that is playing. Songs used in videos are often assigned a (specific) meaning as users pull the audio clips from videos with the same meaning and use it for their video in the same fashion. They both draw from and contribute to a collective meaning of an auditory element of content. Therefore, background music carries a message, whether it is evident or inconspicuous (Serrano et al., 2020).

Most, more precisely eight, videos had at least one audible speaker. Three of these featured female speakers and five featured male speakers. It is also interesting to point out that there are five creators talking from their own experience in parenting, while four videos show speakers portrayed as experts in fields connected to upbringing and childcare. Considering the fact that half of the speakers talk from experience and almost half are experts (or use various strategies to position themselves as experts), it can be said that the pool of creators observed in this sample of parenting videos on TikTok is balanced. Creators who speak from their experience aim to present a realistic perspective which is not a common occurrence on social media platforms as most users tend to show themselves and their lives in the best light. This approach to social media content feels refreshing to the audience as they can relate. Relatable content is more liked by all users, especially parents (Entjes, 2023). Although it may seem as creators truly present their lives as they are, it could all be a strategy to attract a bigger following. Many situations that seem real and genuine may just be a farce that helps creators

join in on trends in order to be pushed to more users' timelines to gain more views, followers, and interactions.

Almost all videos, except for video no. 1, show the speaker of the video. Some are edited in a more complex manner, e.g. including frames from talk shows (as seen in videos no. 2 and 9) or their own filmed material from different points in time (as shown in videos no. 1 and 10). Others are simpler, showing a single frame with the speaker visible throughout (as seen in videos no. 4 and 8). Videos primarily showing the speaker exhibit similar framing, i.e. similar camera positions. The frame usually captures the speaker's torso and a third (or less) of the frame is the background that is usually an interior (as seen in videos no. 4 and 8).

Another element that is important to discuss is the footage of children in videos. From the analysed sample, half of the videos contain footage of children while the other half does not. Out of the five videos showing children, four videos featured footage of the creator's children (as implied by the creator) and only one video (video no. 3) contained footage of children obtained from a different source. This is relevant as there is an ongoing conversation on the topic of exploiting children on social media. On one hand, it is believed that sharing footage of children and their information is only a part of being a parent who is a creator on social media. To defend this viewpoint, this practice is compared to practices of other (childless) influencers who share a lot of information about their lives online. Creators who have children are only doing the same – sharing different aspects of their life – and their children just happen to be one of the biggest aspects of their lives. This practice is a crucial part of a strategy that involves sharing the creators' own experience with parenting because it is helpful to users who might be struggling in their role as parents. On the other hand, children's privacy is being invaded without their consent. The children are too young to understand the situation they found themselves in. What makes this so dangerous is when something is posted online, it is available to anyone. There are people who truly seek advice and support online in the process of upbringing their children, but one cannot overlook the possibility of users taking advantage of the children's information for criminal purposes. The parenting creators might jump to defence by saying something along the lines of *I never said our address, or I never shared my child's personal identity number*. While this can be true, those who want to find out personal information will do so by examining details in posted content. For example, one can notice a house number in a video filmed in front of the creator's home or they might take notes of the people (e.g. family members, friends, teachers, nannies, etc.) being mentioned in the video, as exemplified by Steinberg (2016). To avoid such possibilities, creators could take the approach of using minimal footage of their children and carefully examining what is shown, using stock

footage or not using any at all. An example of an alternative would be a video of them retelling a story giving an insight into their lives and providing support without directly endangering their children.

While looking at all the sampled videos, by using the abovementioned strategies, the video creators generally imply that parents are the ones who should be held accountable and responsible for their child. Creators in sampled videos who are parents and speak from their perspective very clearly take on responsibility for their mistakes (as shown in video no. 6). They highlight the human aspect of parents and encourage others to embrace it. Making a mistake is not considered shameful, it is an opportunity to learn. Admitting mistakes in front of a large audience, when many think there is no room for making mistakes, is empowering. These kinds of creators talk about taboo topics breaking the stigmatization around them. They send a message of acceptance and accountability.

It can also be argued that the previously mentioned verbal, auditory, and visual elements are used to manipulate the user. For example, subtitles are used to make content more accessible, i.e. inviting more users to watch said content. Subtitles can be modified to emphasize certain words. The user, naturally, pays attention to the words the creator chooses to emphasize. Framing can make an impact as well as certain framing of the video gives an impression of where the creator is. As mentioned in the analysis of video no. 7, the creator, Kerwin Rae, is shown to be holding a lecture or speech in front of a crowd. This gives the impression of Rae being important, knowledgeable, and respected expert. From the user's perspective, this puts him on a pedestal of reliability and legitimacy, even though there is no visible crowd or any context of the lecture. Not only is there no context of the lecture, but there are also no certain signs that Rae is a reliable source for the topic of parenting. One auditory element that is used for manipulation is background music. Background music is used to support the content and helps build the atmosphere the creator wants to achieve. The creator uses this as a tool to help evoke an emotional reaction in the user. In the example of video no. 10, the creator uses a soothing audio along an emotional video with a controversial topic in order to make the user feel empathetic and connected to them. Feelings of empathy and connection are very useful for the creators because they make users more likely to interact with their content which makes it more popular. The algorithm then works in their favour by making more users see the video. This is most of the creators' goal on TikTok as higher viewership means they are reaching a bigger audience.

6. CONCLUSION

The current research in discourse analysis is getting wider and richer with the introduction of digital discourse. Technology and social media have established their place in the modern society providing a new “playing field” for discourse analysts. They have embedded themselves into everyday life calling for further research.

The aim of this thesis was to uncover and explore the discourse regarding parenting on TikTok adopting the approach of digital discourse analysis. The analysis was done on a sample of 10 videos, which were chosen by searching for #parenting and sampling the first 10 videos listed as results of the search.

The sampled videos showed what the discourse of parenting consists of and how it is communicated. Many videos focused on the methods of parenting, providing instructions and support for users who are parents. The pool of creators of the sampled videos is in good balance regarding to the expertise of said creators. This balance may indicate that users view this specific sort of TikTok content with a critical lens, giving attention to both experts and parents on the platform. When it comes to the discursive strategies and various verbal, visual, and aural elements, the creators combine in various ways to appeal to the audience and get their message across in the TikTok video format. Some elements which were found in most of the videos are background music, subtitles, and simulated eye contact. Simulating eye contact, i.e. looking directly into the camera, is a common tactic used by creators to attract the users’ attention. Regarding the visual aspect, most of the videos show the creator or another speaker on video, sometimes accompanied by video clips of children in everyday situations. What makes this controversial is footage of children, especially creator’s children. On one hand, it is considered normal to film and post one’s own children online as technology and media are a part of our everyday lives. On the other hand, this practice puts children in danger of being subjected to various illegal and immoral actions. The analysis of the selected videos indicates that the overall discourse of parenting that circulates TikTok is positive. It aims to provide education and support while promoting self-reflection and accountability.

The limitations of this study are present in sampling as TikTok is a very user oriented social media platform. TikTok always attends to the user’s interests with its algorithm. It is a feature that cannot be avoided. Nonetheless, the chosen sample is valid as it is representative of the discourse analysed.

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