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TikTok vs Instagram: Youth Platform Preferences and PR Strategy Implications

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Abstract: The study is aimed at identifying and analyzing key determinants that influence the propensity of youth to prefer one social network over another. The methodological basis of the work consisted of a comprehensive systems analysis and synthesis of scholarly publications combined with the processing of statistical datasets from recognized industry sources. As a result, a close relationship was established between user choices and three interrelated factors: the specifics of algorithmic content ranking mechanisms, the dominant formats of materials and the sociocultural constitution features of each network's community. Thus, TikTok emerges as an ecosystem stimulating authentic self-expression, interactive engagement and the consumption of predominantly entertainment media products, whereas Instagram retains the status of a gallery of visually refined idealized content serving as a means of social validation and personal brand maintenance. The scientific novelty of the study lies in the proposal of an adaptive model of PR strategies that accounts for the unique psychographic and behavioral characteristics of each platform's users. The findings demonstrate the impossibility of effectively applying universal communication solutions and justify the need to design targeted tactics customized to the specifics of TikTok's and Instagram's functioning. The presented materials will be useful to both media communications researchers and PR and marketing practitioners seeking to optimize interactions with youth audiences.

Keywords: *TikTok, Instagram, Generation Z, user preferences, PR strategies, social media, digital marketing, authenticity, aspirational content, audience engagement.*

Introduction

The second decade of the 21st century marked an era of rapid increasing complexity and consolidation of social networks, which have evolved from primitive communication channels into autonomous ecosystems that set the benchmarks for cultural practices, shape consumer attitudes and construct public opinion. This process is particularly pronounced for Generation Z youth (born approximately 1997–2012), for whom the online environment constitutes a key component of social self-identification [1]. At the center of the competition for the attention of this demographic group stand two digital giants: Instagram, which has long maintained its position as the undisputed leader, and TikTok, which has made a rapid surge and transformed the conventional mechanisms of social media interaction [2, 3]. Such a redistribution of time in the digital space points to profound changes in media consumption, which compel public relations specialists to radically rethink traditional PR tools.

The relevance of the study is driven by the growing dissonance between universal PR strategies, which brands and organizations replicate across different platforms, and the fundamental differences in motivational orientations, behavioral patterns and expectations of Generation Z audiences on TikTok and Instagram. Existing PR campaigns often resort to mechanical cross-posting based on a superficial understanding of each platform's functionality and audience, resulting in unproductive resource expenditure and an inability to establish a strong emotional connection with target groups [4]. The scientific gap that this research aims to address lies in the insufficient systematization of knowledge regarding the psychographic and behavioral determinants guiding youth platform choice and, consequently, in the absence of an integrated scientifically grounded model for developing differentiated PR strategies.

The objective of the study is to conduct a comparative analysis of Generation Z user preferences on the TikTok and Instagram platforms in order to identify the key factors contributing to the formation of effective and tailored PR strategies.

The scientific novelty of the research consists in proposing an adaptive model of PR strategies that takes into account the unique psychographic and behavioral characteristics of users on each platform.

The authorial hypothesis posits that the choice of platform by adolescents and young adults is determined by their specific psychological needs: the striving for authenticity and a sense of belonging on TikTok versus the demand for constructing an idealized self-image and tendencies toward social comparison on Instagram, which in turn necessitates the use of fundamentally different interaction tactics by PR specialists rather than mere content duplication across platforms.

Materials and Methods

In the scholarly research discourse on the issue of adolescents' choice of TikTok and Instagram platforms and the resulting PR strategies, sources can be conventionally divided into three thematic groups. The first group combines summarizing empirical reports and digital statistics that offer insight into the audience's scale and dynamics. Poushter, J., Bishop, C., & Chwe, H. [1] in the Pew Research Center report analyze the frequency of social media use among adolescents, highlighting key demographic characteristics and trends in user migration between platforms. Statista data [2] demonstrate a stable increase in Instagram's monthly active audience over 2019–2024, indicating the service's ongoing popularity despite intense competition. Simultaneously Statista [3] records an exponential rise in interest in the topic of TikTok both through direct statistics on download and view counts and through related engagement metrics. The comprehensive Digital 2025 report [11] provides a comparative analysis of metrics for several key platforms, including data on user time spent in applications and their activity levels, which allows comparison of TikTok and Instagram potential in PR campaigns.

The second group of sources focuses on studying the influence of platform algorithms and design on users' psychoemotional state and behavior. Mcphie J., Clarke D. A. G. [4] consider TikTok as an environment that shapes dispersed cognitive patterns and influences youth self-perception and mental state. Carkner B. [5] analyzes how continuous adjustment of recommendations to user behavior enhances addiction and forms a unique digital rhythm that distinguishes TikTok from other platforms. The study by Boursier V., Gioia F. [7] focuses on Instagram and reveals that practices related to bodily objectification and constant comparison with idealized images negatively correlate with male body self-esteem. Velasco-Molpeceres A. et al. [10] demonstrate how brands use Instagram to

promote slow fashion, with visual strategies and storytelling on the platform influencing the perception of sustainable consumption and forming new communication styles.

The third group is devoted to the specifics of influencer marketing, its structures and mechanisms of audience influence. Vrontis D. et al. [12] offer a systematic review of practices and develop an integrative influencer marketing model, synthesizing existing theories and proposing directions for further research. Maddox J. [6] examines the phenomenon of microcelebrities in professional communities (on the example of veterinarians), showing how they calibrate expertise and earn audience trust through linear and network reputation mechanisms. Chen N., Yang Y. [8] in the context of live-stream e-commerce identify that trust in the influencer and the audience's emotional attachment directly influence purchase intention, actualizing the role of personal factors in PR strategies. Shen R. P. et al. [9] propose methods for automatic detection of covert advertising activity by influencers based on analysis of textual and visual cues, which is important for monitoring campaign transparency and evaluating effectiveness.

Although the first groups of sources emphasize quantitative trends and psychoemotional effects, and the third group focuses on influencer marketing mechanisms, the literature reveals several contradictions. Some studies underline the advantage of TikTok algorithmic personalization in creating engagement, whereas others point to the risks of attention fragmentation and deterioration of cognitive control. Meanwhile Instagram is viewed both as a platform for aesthetic self-reflection and as an effective channel for promoting sustainable brands. Conclusions regarding the role of influencers are also ambiguous: some authors see them as catalysts of trust and purchasing behavior, others as potential content distorters and sources of covert advertising. Issues of cross-platform cross-engagement, the comparative

effect of PR activities under different algorithmic regulations, and intercultural and gender-specific features of content perception are poorly covered in publications. Furthermore insufficient attention has been paid to the long-term impact of content strategies on shaping youth value orientations and the effectiveness of real-time feedback.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of empirical data demonstrates the existence of systemic differences in behavior and preferences of young users on TikTok and Instagram platforms, which directly influence the formation of effective PR strategies. These discrepancies manifest in interaction with content, in mechanisms of message perception, and in expectations of brands on each of the platforms.

The key criterion of differentiation is the dominant sociocultural orientation. TikTok is positioned as a space of radical authenticity, where the algorithm elevates primarily creative and genuine content to trending status rather than the author's level of popularity. Any participant can achieve viral reach regardless of audience size, which generates a dynamic of collaborative creativity, experimentation, and self-irony. Youth are attracted by the opportunity for entertainment, discovery of new forms of expression, and belonging to narrowly specialized communities united by a shared aesthetic—sounds, memes, or hashtags [6].

In contrast, Instagram is a platform where a meticulously refined visual feed predominates. Users employ it for comparison with others, for seeking inspiration in tourism, fashion, and lifestyle spheres, as well as for maintaining already established social connections. The culture of Instagram is aimed at demonstrating an ideal public image based on aesthetics and status, which is reflected in the priority given to aesthetically flawless images and carefully curated stories [7]. Below in figure 1 the model of psychological drivers of platform choice by youth is presented.

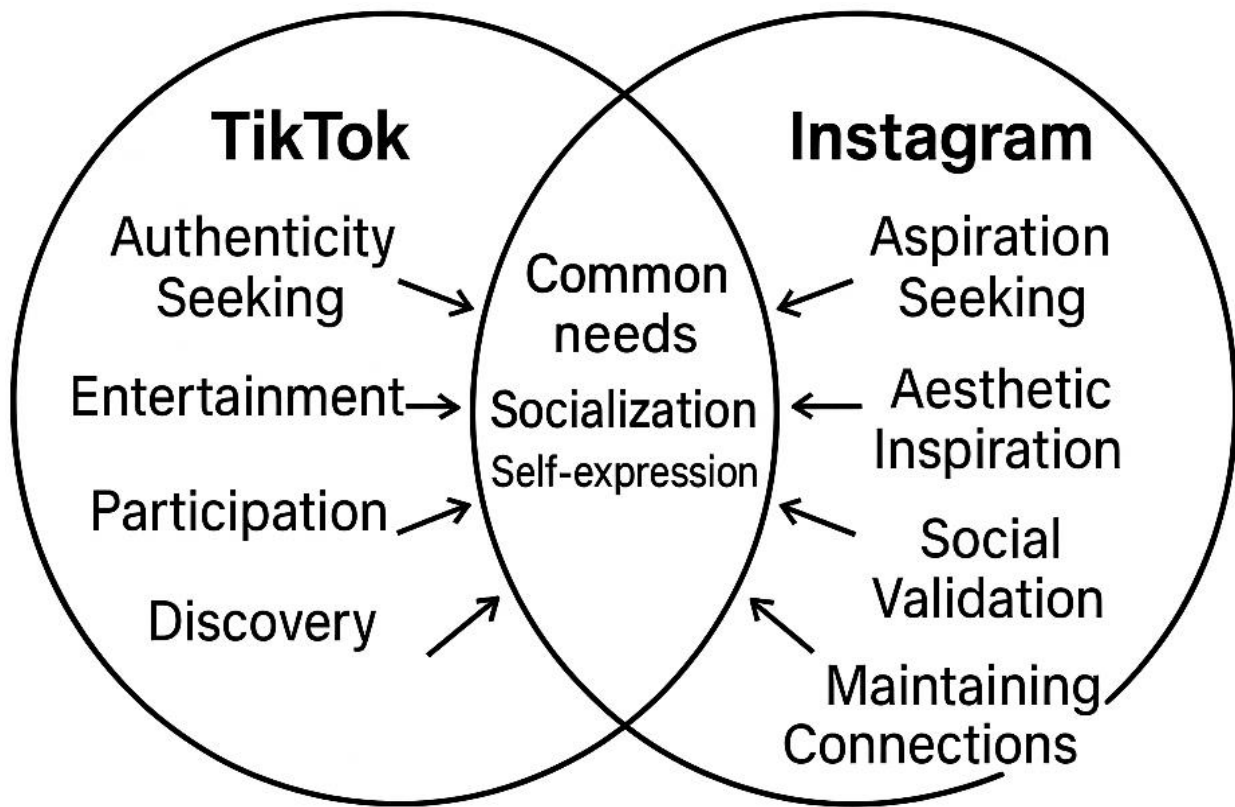


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of psychological drivers of platform choice by young people (compiled by the author based on [6, 7, 9]).

Comparative analysis of content formats and engagement mechanisms reveals that differences in psychographic orientations are directly reflected in audience preferences and activation methods. TikTok appears as a platform focused on short, dynamic video clips with significant acoustic accompaniment. The

success of a publication is determined by its ability in the first 1–2 seconds to capture the attention of the viewer and prompt them to interact through duet, stitch or sound reuse features. According to collected data, approximately 78 % of users in the 16–24 age cohort prefer such concise formats (see Fig. 2).

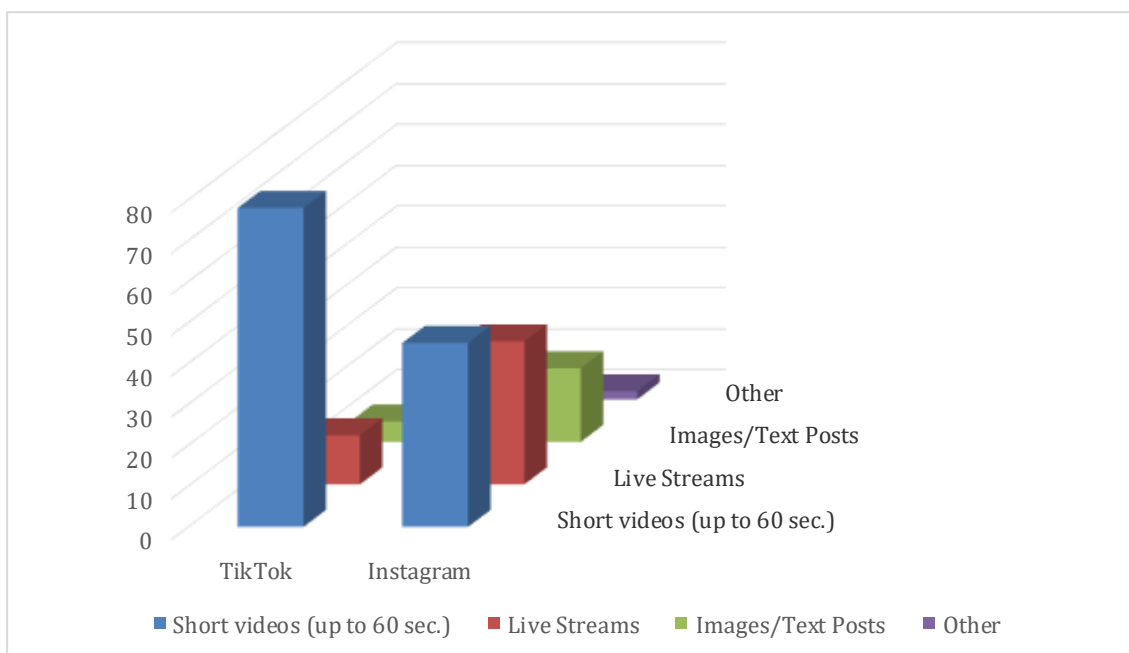


Fig. 2. Preferred content formats among young people (16-24 years old) on TikTok and Instagram, 2024 (compiled by the author based on [4, 10, 11]).

In the Instagram ecosystem, pronounced multimodality of content consumption is observed. Despite the notable increase in popularity of the Reels format, it accounts for approximately 45 % of audience attention, Stories continue to play a key role (approximately 35 %), serving as a tool for daily interaction, and the classic feed (approximately 18 %) is intended for the publication of

the most significant and visually refined materials. This diversification of formats expands the arsenal of PR specialists but simultaneously requires more detailed segmentation of the content plan and the fine-tuning of creative approaches for each communication channel. Differences in audience engagement levels across formats are fragmented and are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of audience engagement metrics on TikTok and Instagram platforms (averaged across all industries, Q1 2025) (compiled by the author based on [3, 4, 6, 9, 11, 12])

Metric	TikTok	Instagram
Average engagement rate (per views)	5.69%	0.83% (for Reels)
Average session length	10.85 min	7.32 min
Percentage of users creating content (Creators %)	~35%	~20%
Positive perception of branded content	High (if entertaining/authentic)	Medium (if aesthetic/useful)

Analysis of the data presented in Table 1 demonstrates that despite the more moderate reach of each individual publication, the TikTok platform ensures a higher level of audience engagement. The algorithmic mechanisms of content distribution generate feedback in which users act not merely as passive consumers but become active co-creators and distributors of materials. Increased values of the sharing coefficient, depth of view and volume of UGC (user-generated content) demonstrate TikTok's potential as an instrument for creating viral PR campaigns thanks to the multiplicative effect of user-driven replication and creative interaction.

Based on the obtained results, the main principles for constructing adapted PR strategies have been formulated, reflected in the generalized conceptual

model. In Table 2 a detailed decomposition of each of these components is provided, including KPI measurement methodologies and practical recommendations for their application under conditions of a dynamically changing media environment.

The scientific conclusion is that mechanistic retransmission of PR activities from one media environment to another inevitably leads to counterproductive results. For TikTok, the optimal strategy is full integration into the cultural landscape of the platform — a deliberate inclusion as part of already established communities and trends, whereas for Instagram it is necessary to build proactive communications aimed at forming and imposing new cultural norms and visual practices.

Table 2. Matrix of differentiated PR tactics for TikTok and Instagram (compiled by the author based on [4, 5, 8])

Element of PR strategy	TikTok: Participation Strategy	Instagram: Influence Strategy
Key objective	Achieving cultural relevance, community building	Building a strong, aspirational brand, reputation management
Content topology	Low-fi (low production quality), authentic, spontaneous, humorous, sound-oriented	High-fi (high production quality), aesthetically calibrated, polished, inspiring

Working with influencers	Focus on micro- and nano-influencers who are an organic part of niche communities. Creative freedom for the influencer.	Collaborations with macro- and mega-influencers for reach and trust building. Clear briefs and control over visuals.
Engagement tactics	Launching branded challenges (#HashtagChallenge), creating viral sounds, encouraging UGC, duets and stitches with users.	Interactive Stories (polls, Q&A, quizzes), tagged contests, live streams with experts, educational content.
Brand role	Brand as one of the creators, the peer who understands memes and trends, unafraid of self-irony.	Brand as expert, opinion leader, source of inspiration and aesthetic enjoyment.
Measuring success (KPI)	Amount of UGC generated, virality (views, shares), increase in brand mentions in cultural context, community growth.	Engagement rate (ER), follower growth, reach, website traffic (via links in Stories/Bio), conversions (for e-commerce).

In practice a PR service focusing its efforts on the youth segment is compelled to develop two autonomous yet coordinated content strategies. For TikTok this entails the development of micro-formatted dynamic video content: a series of home-style clips recorded on a smartphone, using a current audio track and the initiation of challenge calls that stimulate users to create their own material. Simultaneously Instagram necessitates a different approach: the selection of high-quality visual narratives from recognized opinion leaders in the feed, a detailed product breakdown in the Reels format and behind-the-scenes footage in Stories revealing the campaign creation process. The publication of an excessively polished promotional video on TikTok will inevitably encounter audience rejection and algorithmic reduction of reach, whereas an overly raw format on Instagram will undermine the perception of the brand as premium [12]

An empirical examination conducted within the framework of the Uses and Gratifications model demonstrates that the motivational drivers of young TikTok and Instagram users differ radically: the former seek instantaneous emotional release and opportunities for rapid self-expression, the latter seek carefully curated visual content and status confirmation through quality media artifacts. This divergence in psychological needs requires PR specialists not so much to adapt cross-platform messaging but to design two fundamentally distinct paradigms of audience engagement. Under contemporary conditions communication effectiveness is determined not by the scale of financial investments

but by the depth of decoding the cultural code of each platform, understanding its algorithmic mechanics and emotional patterns of perception.

Conclusion

Within the framework of the study a comparative analysis was carried out of how the youth audience perceives and uses the TikTok and Instagram platforms, and key findings for public relations practice were formulated. It was revealed that the choice between the two social networks is neither random nor interchangeable, but is determined by deep psychographic and behavioral determinants. TikTok appears as an ecosystem based on algorithmic content selection, a pursuit of authenticity, entertainment mechanics and active user involvement in the generation of cultural trends. In contrast, Instagram retains the status of a platform for constructing an idealized self-image, social verification, aesthetic inspiration and the maintenance of existing social ties.

The principal practical conclusion of the study is that the application of a single PR strategy to both networks is inherently ineffective. Successful engagement with Generation Z requires the development of differentiated, tailored communication approaches. In the case of TikTok the concept of a strategy of co-participation seems optimal, whereby the brand integrates organically into user culture, participating on equal terms in the creation of content and trends. For Instagram, a strategy of influence proves appropriate: here the brand constructs an aspirational image through

carefully calibrated visual content and partnerships with opinion leaders, thereby reinforcing trust and expert status.

It is advisable in future research to undertake quantitative verification of the proposed model in specific markets and across various industries, as well as to examine the evolution of these platforms under the influence of technological innovations and changing cultural demands of youth.

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