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Scrolling TikTok to Soothe and Foster Self-Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic

İrem Şot[1,2]

Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic reinforced the burden of self-care, which was imperative to maintaining positivity and controlling discontent amid uncertainty. Burdened with caring for themselves in the absence of psychological support covered by social health care, individuals resorted to scrolling through algorithm-ridden social media feeds to contain their stress and anxiety. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 36 individuals, this research explores the extent to which TikTok scrolling, which users would "normally" consider a waste of time, became a modality of fostering mental well-being and self-care in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study initially positions the coronavirus pandemic as a situation that compelled individuals to wait amid uncertainty. The argument weaves anthropological approaches to waiting, critical approaches to self-care, and research on continuous connection to argue distinctive waiting experiences generated different meanings ascribed to TikTok scrolling. The findings center on resorting to algorithmic coping in self-care pursuits and perceiving TikTok scrolling as conducive to gaining practical knowledge, sociality, and physical activity. These understandings are indebted to the pressures of containing discomfort under the uncertainty of the pandemic, which rendered TikTok scrolling useful and meaningful, reducing the guilt attached to the practice. Moreover, the efficacy of algorithms in detaching users from toxic content or delivering useful content constituted a healthy way of engaging with the platform. Both the perception of healthy usage and receiving algorithmic content as contributive to mental well-being marked a shift from wasting time on social media to making time for oneself.

Keywords

TikTok scrolling, algorithms, algorithmic coping, politics of self-care, the COVID-19 pandemic, mental well-being, distraction

> I joined TikTok after watching its content in "zombie mode" with my boyfriend. We would watch it for hours after dinner since our minds would be fried from waiting at home all day. I wouldn't normally do it, you know, spending so much time watching short videos for 3 hours straight. Let alone using TikTok, I feel too old for it. But with the pandemic, I told myself, "allow yourself to be on it" because I needed an activity to empty my mind.
>
> (Cansu, 31, Researcher)

> I joined TikTok during the first wave of lockdowns. My son actually signed me up for it. I have never signed up for a social media platform before, I feel too old. Now my son and I look at it together. It shows stuff based on what I like, so I see it as a way of using my time well. We have too much time on our hands with all the waiting at our homes during the lockdowns.
>
> (Mehmet, 55, A retired I.T. Specialist)

The appeal of, what Cansu refers to as the zombie mode, also known as zombie-scrolling, reached a new intensity when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. A term coined by McAfee in a blog post in 2016 (Birdsong, 2016), zombie-scrolling refers to the negative impacts of the compulsion to devour social media content to escape fear, worry, loneliness, and boredom on individuals' mental well-being. Global organizations (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020) highlighted the same dangers of succumbing to mindless scrolling in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, which attested to an unprecedented rise in screen time. Nevertheless, finding solace in scrolling has become a viable self-help form for

[1]University of Antwerp, Belgium
[2]Koç University, Turkey

Corresponding Author:
İrem Şot, Koç University, Rumelifeneri Kampüsü, Rumelifeneri Yolu, Istanbul 34450, Turkey.
Email: isot18@ku.edu.tr

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individuals like Cansu, who watched TikTok content streams to unwind.

Despite its broad spectrum of content and users, TikTok carries a series of negative connotations, ranging from silly, simple, or as an application for kids (Schellewald, 2021). In addition to these condescending overtones, TikTok use was initially part of boundary-making processes in Turkey, with urban elites criticizing the platform's "rural" users for being inept, spiteful, or shameful (Çelenk, 2019). However, the platform use moved from being peripheral to the mainstream with the coronavirus pandemic, which marked an uptick in the number of downloads and users in the country (Kemp, 2021).

As the statements of Cansu and Mehmet demonstrate, their TikTok use is sourced to waiting at home. Since one is working and the other is retired, their experiences of waiting at home differ. Cansu feels fatigued because of her ongoing workload, while Mehmet says he has a lot of time. The meanings they attribute to TikTok scrolling vary accordingly. Tired of remote work, Cansu sees it as an activity to empty her head, while Mehmet perceives it as a way to use his time well. These reasonings transform their views on wasting time on "a platform targeting younger generation" into taking time for themselves.

The coronavirus pandemic reinforced the burden of self-care, which was imperative to maintaining positivity and controlling discontent amid uncertainty (Gill & Orgad, 2022). In the absence of psychological support covered by social health care, self-care practices offered by profit-driven digital platforms proliferated (Gill & Orgad, 2022). Hashtags "mental health" and "self-care" have been booming on TikTok ever since the outbreak of the pandemic (Avella, 2023). While the "therepautic" appeal of scrolling through TikTok's algorithmic For You pages as a viable way to cope with pandemic-induced anxiety has made it to online discussions (Carbran, 2020).

Drawing on structured and semi-structured qualitative interviews with 36 individuals, this research explores the extent to which TikTok scrolling, which users might "normally" consider a waste of time, became a modality of fostering mental-wellbeing and self-care in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study initially positions the coronavirus pandemic as a situation that compelled individuals to wait amid uncertainty. The argument weaves anthropological approaches to waiting, critical approaches to self-care, and research on continuous connection to argue distinctive waiting experiences throughout lockdowns generated different meanings ascribed to TikTok scrolling. The findings will show that shaping TikTok's algorithms based on specific interests and care needs was central to individuals' motivations for scrolling. The perceived accuracy of TikTok's algorithms in delivering self-care or feel-good content led individuals to consider their activity on TikTok as leading to positivity. Moreover, appropriating algorithms to bar what is perceived as useless, meaningless, and toxic resulted in perceiving the practice of scrolling as useful or a way of using one's time wisely. These understandings are indebted to the pressures of containing discomfort under the uncertainty of the pandemic, which rendered TikTok scrolling useful and meaningful, reducing the guilt attached to the practice. The efficacy of algorithms in detaching users from toxic content or delivering useful content constituted a healthy way of engaging with the platform. Both the perception of healthy usage and receiving algorithmic content as contributive to mental well-being, marked a shift from interviewees' perceptions of wasting time on social media to making time for oneself.

"Life on Hold": Waiting Throughout the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has unsettled habitual modes of action, changing how we work, socialize, get schooled, foster care, and relax. The preventive measures to protect public health introduced lockdowns and social restrictions to our lives, confining individuals worldwide to perpetual waiting (Fang & Berry, 2020; Khosravi, 2021) and putting life on hold (Haladyn, 2021). Life put on hold and slowing down during the pandemic stood in contrast to the productivity and efficiency imperative of the neoliberal era (Andits, 2020), which constructed the discourse of "fast-paced life" (Sharma, 2014).

The pandemic has ushered in a period of uncertainty regarding its duration and how health care systems must deal with it (Koffman et al., 2020). State authorities across the globe touted the role of self-control through repeated emphases on hygiene, mask-wearing, and social distancing to protect public health. Turkey's preventive measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus started in March 2020 with the disruption of educational, sportive, and cultural activities, nationwide implementation of distance learning, restrictions on international and inter-city travel, access bans to parks and shores, and lockdowns for citizens over the age of 65. In the words of the Interior Minister of Turkey, "life was put on hold in the country by eighty percent" (*Bianet—Bagimsiz Iletisim Agi*, 2020).

Life was put further on hold in Turkey with the implementation of consecutive lockdowns. April 10, 2020, marked the first lockdown for the general population in 31 overpopulated cities with punishments running to a fine of 3150 TL ($109) for those who did not comply with the stay-at-home orders (*Bianet—Bagimsiz Iletisim Agi*, 2020b). During the second half of April and May 2020, weekend lockdowns turned into extended lockdowns lasting for 4 days (*BBC News Türkçe*, 2020a; *Deutsche Welle* [DW], 2020). While the announcement dates and starting times of the lockdowns kept changing, the end of each lockdown marked the wait for the following lockdown announcement. Consecutive first-wave lockdowns lasted until June 2020 (*BirGün*, 2020) were

to be replaced with partial weekend lockdowns of the second wave of COVID-19 measures, which surged later in November 2020 (*BBC News Türkçe*, 2020b). These preventive measures attested to the 17-day nationwide total lockdown, marking the most prolonged period for putting life on hold (*CNN Türk*, 2021).

Turkey's implementation of consecutive lockdowns was rife with ambiguous communication from the authorities. The ever-changing start and end times of lockdowns caused nationwide confusion. To illustrate, the announcement of the first lockdown came at 22:00, only 2 hr before its starting time, causing a public backlash as people flocked to supermarkets without wearing masks and ignoring social distancing rules to buy food and essential supplies for the weekend (*Bianet—Bagimsiz Iletisim Agi*, 2020c). The second-wave partial lockdowns also attested to the lack of clear delivery from the state authorities regarding citizens' eligibility to go outside on a specific timeframe based on age and employment status.

Waiting and Feelings of Being Stuck

The stay-at-home orders issued by government authorities generated different waiting modalities based on social differences such as employment status and age. The pandemic experiences are in dialogue with the anthropological approaches to waiting that delve into the feelings prompted by waiting amid uncertainty (Janeja & Bandak, 2019; Hage, 2009) and social differences that generate different attitudes to waiting (Sharma, 2014).

Waiting entails having expectations for the future (Hage, 2009). However, individuals do not wait for everything in the same way. They can actively wait for something and take steps to realize their expectations. Contrastingly, they can be in a state of passive waiting, which compels them to "wait out" events that are not under their control, such as natural disasters and economic crises. Waiting *out* unpleasant events generates" feelings of stuckedness" (Hage, 2009, p. 7), or experiences of immobility, or feelings of not going anywhere in life. Governments promote self-control in times of crisis by instructing individuals to endure the feelings of being stuck, wait passively until the unpleasant period is over, and refrain from any demands for structural changes (Hage, 2009).

Waiting occurs in instances of uncertainty when what is expected or hoped for, fails to materialize (Bandak and Janeja, 2019). This prompts a sense of losing control over time and makes the time individuals inhabit feels like forever, creating a discrepancy between clock time and felt time. Thus, waiting is a way of engaging with time (Bandak and Janeja, 2019). Individuals' engagement with time differs based on social differences (Sharma, 2014). Distinctive ways of experiencing waiting or engaging with time amid uncertainty incite various reactions ranging from hope to doubt and boredom to fatigue (Bandak and Janeja, 2019).

The Burden of Caring for Oneself

The anthropological analyses of waiting focus on asymmetries of power between individuals and institutions that prompt precarious waiting and the advancement of neoliberalism at the expense of the state agency. Such analysis is beyond the scope of this research. But their emphasis on waiting, hope, and enduring feeling of being stuck, shares similarities with the concept of "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). Optimism that things can or will change for the better underpins neoliberal fantasies of "the good life" (Berlant, 2011, p. 2), consisting of career advancement and social mobility expectations. The "cruel optimism" instructs individuals living under the uncertainty of neoliberalism to endure disappointment (Berlant, 2011), especially with changing job market dynamics, increased workload, monotonous jobs with uncertain futures, and erosion of life-work balance (O'Neill, 2020). In other words, individuals continue to pursue the things that hinder their flourishing, convinced that they are actually rewarding for them (Berlant, 2011).

The promise that things can change is embedded in a wide range of cultural products and commercial drives. The self-help industry that burgeoned in the neoliberal era of diminishing social health care suggests that things can change if they change themselves or unstuck themselves (Gill & Orgad, 2022). Neoliberal policies have brought about significant changes in the workforce and health care and championed individualism (Gill & Orgad, 2022). These structural changes offloaded the responsibility to care for oneself onto individuals in two ways. On one hand, the diminishing role of states in social health care and care services transformed caring for physical health and mental well-being into an individual and moral responsibility (Dowling, 2022; O'Neill, 2020; Purser, 2019). On the other hand, increased emphasis on productivity and efficiency in the work-life fuelled anxiety and stress. Individuals became responsible for cultivating positivity in their leisure time to thrive (O'Neill, 2020). In other words, individuals were tasked with changing their moods and habits to keep up with social, political, and economic transformations.

The productivity principle of neoliberalism equates being unhealthy with the inability to work (Berlant, 2007). In service of the neoliberal mind-set, the self-care industry configured the positivity imperative as an individualistic coping mechanism to deal with increasing anxiety and stress levels (Gill & Orgad, 2022). Practices of de-spiritualized mindfulness (Purser, 2019), consumption-driven well-being practices (O'Neill, 2020), and activities conducive to regulating mood and feeling (Gill & Orgad, 2022) appealed to individuals burdened with caring for themselves. These self-care practices, however, pathologize, depoliticize, and privatize the stress and suffering of individuals (Purser, 2019). They serve as a self-disciplining mechanism for individuals tasked with being productive and maintaining positivity while framing an inability to do so as individual failure (Purser, 2019).

In this sense, self-care practices and "the positivity imperative" (Gill & Orgad, 2022, p. 2) renew hope in the neoliberal system. They distract from structural inequalities that cause fatigue, stress, anxiety (Gill & Orgad, 2022), and provide temporary relief from political distress without addressing the political (Berlant, 2007; Purser, 2019).

With the increasing permeation of digital media in every aspect of human life (Eriksson Krutrök, 2021), positivity is accumulated through algorithm-ridden social media feeds. The positivity imperative intensified with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, urging individuals to contain their disappointment and work on regulating their negative moods and feelings instead (Gill & Orgad, 2022). In this period, marked by the lack of psychological and social health care, self-care became monitoring one's mood and pursuing positivity despite distress (Gill & Orgad, 2022). Feel-good and self-care content that aims to prompt a mood change or cultivate positivity proliferated on social media platforms (Gill & Orgad, 2022).

Distraction and Continuous Connection

The implications of distraction and mood changes generated by scrolling through algorithm-ridden feeds have been discussed before (Karppi, 2018; Paasonen, 2016) and during the coronavirus pandemic (Geirdal et al., 2021). Positive or negative mood changes prompted by scrolling through algorithm-ridden feeds distract users from fear, insecurity, and anxiety caused by political instabilities and financial insecurities (Paasonen, 2016). The mood changes felt while scrolling drive users to continually and habitually return to these platforms whenever they seek relief from everyday distress (Paasonen, 2016). However, this automated use of social media has sparked ambivalent reactions in relation to the neoliberal burdens of self-care and productivity (Paasonen, 2016). On one hand, individuals experience distraction through scrolling as pleasurable since it provides relief from negative emotions such as loneliness, boredom, and anxiety (Paasonen, 2016; Schellewald, 2022).

On the other hand, criticisms of continuous scrolling argue that the constant need for distraction is time-wasting and unproductive (Lupinacci, 2021). Continuous scrolling causes boredom as it traps individuals in loops of meaningless repetitions, denying the moments of solitude to cultivate self-growth (Aho, 2017; Hand, 2017). In this sense, the critiques of continuous scrolling echo the former debates on excessive uses of media (Paasonen, 2016) and the internet (Baym, 2010), which were associated with narrowing attention spans, social isolation, and deterioration of physical and mental health due to sedentary lifestyles these uses encouraged.

Disconnection from algorithm-ridden social media platforms is addressed chiefly as mindful (Jorge, 2019; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020), healthy (Sutton, 2017), slowing down to make time for oneself (Sharma, 2014), or caring for oneself (Brubaker et al., 2016). These lifestyle solutions associate disconnection from social media with reclaiming time, the self, and happiness. Like self-care practices, they portray users as responsible for their well-being, arguing that self-control is essential to productivity (Baym et al., 2020). Despite living in a media-saturated culture, individuals have the moral responsibility to administer controlled media use to manage their time well.

Scrolling through TikTok's Algorithm-ridden Feed

However, the pandemic crisis has shown that the implications of continuous scrolling vary depending on the context. For instance, TikTok users took delight in scrolling through their algorithmic feeds to distract themselves from the pandemic-induced anxiety, boredom and loneliness, defining their practice as "me-time" (Schellewald, 2022). TikTok's algorithms were central to users' indulgence in scrolling (Schellewald, 2022). Recommendation algorithms function as a mechanism of entrapment aimed at capturing users' minds to lose track of time or alertness of how one ends up on a specific page (Seaver, 2019). Users become aware of TikTok's algorithms because of their captivating capacity (Schellewald, 2022). This wariness becomes a communication practice, with users advising other users to reclaim their time by slowing down their scrolling in their posts (Schellewald, 2022).

TikTok's algorithms also captivate users due to their capacity to bar disliked content (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022) or unwanted attention (Eriksson Krutrök, 2021). In effect, social media platforms offer disconnective practices, such as hiding, muting, and blocking, to make users spend more time on the platform by preventing the negative emotions that might arise while navigating (Baym et al., 2020). Users take advantage of the TikTok's disconnective affordances, such as the "Not Interested" button, to curate their feeds. The fact that the platform does not show undesired content makes users perceive the platform's algorithm-ridden "For You" page as a reflection of themselves (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

This study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussions on TikTok's algorithms by focusing on how captivating algorithms emerged as a coping mechanism for individuals instructed to contain their negative moods during the coronavirus pandemic. Users perceived navigating For You as contributing to their mental well-being, believing they were in better moods when scrolling. Moreover, algorithms' capacity to bar "toxic, useless" content made the time spent on the platform more useful and meaningful.

Method

During the period between December 2019 and December 2020, I conducted 36 semi-structured and structured interviews with TikTok users from Turkey aged between 21 and 56. The interviews are part of my larger research project on

TikTok practices in Turkey, where the platform use was initially had negative connotations based on class differences. After obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee of my home university, I moved on to the interview process. Due to the pandemic restrictions, the interviews were conducted either on the phone or over Zoom, through voice messages on WhatsApp and Instagram. The duration of interviews lasted between 25 and 70 min. I obtained the interviewees' verbal or written consent before starting my interviews. I used pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

In the initial phase of my research, I set up a TikTok account, posted on the platform, and amassed very few followers, who I also follow back. In my attempts to recruit TikTok users through TikTok, I messaged the users following me on the platform, explaining my project and asking whether they would be interested in talking about TikTok. I did not receive any replies to my messages. Thus, I decided to contact content creators who partook in TikTok trends that put social issues, such as body positivity and mental health, or users whose content was promoted on TikTok's official accounts on other social media platforms.

I interviewed eight popular content creators who amassed a considerable number of followers, ranging between 1500 to 140,000 followers on the platform. Since TikTok allows direct messaging only in case of mutual follows, I primarily relied on emails or direct messages on Instagram to contact them. To grab the attention of popular content creators, I mentioned how much I appreciated their content, and then I explained my project. This bridged my status as a follower with my position as a researcher. I could only interview popular content creators once. I recruited ordinary TikTok users through a sampling method. I posted on my social media accounts (Instagram and Facebook) asking If anyone was using TikTok and would like to discuss their platform uses. A handful of individuals responded positively and shared with me the contacts of their friends who they knew were using the platform.

During the interviews, I asked a set of questions about how users compare TikTok to other social media platforms, how they engage with the platform, what meanings they attributed to the use of the platform, and what type of content they liked or disliked on the platform. After manually transcribing all the interviews, I identified the repeated themes mentioned by interviewees. One recurrent theme was that users (all but two) joined TikTok during lockdowns to distract themselves from the reality of consecutive lockdowns. Since they were aware of the prejudice against the platform in the country, they lent legitimacy to their use of TikTok by linking it to their quests to pass the time during the pandemic.

Although the questions did not specifically address the platform's algorithms, they were central to users' TikTok practices. Their replies showed the extent to which algorithms and individuals mutually shape each other and how interacting with algorithms engenders affective responses in individuals (Bucher, 2017). The ways individuals made sense of, experience (Bucher, 2017) algorithms was contingent on their modalities of TikTok use. Thus, the analysis draws on methodological approaches focusing on how users attribute different meanings to their practices online (Hine, 2015) and how these practices form the realities of algorithms (Seaver, 2017).

Throughout the interviews, I also asked interviewees, If I could follow them on the platform. I intended to utilize TikTok Direct messaging as a communication channel with interviewees through which they could share what caught their eye while scrolling. Most hesitated, saying they were merely scrolling the For You page without creating content, following, or messaging anyone. This form of engagement with a social media platform, according to them, did not qualify as "using the platform."

As of today, with four interviewees, we still mutually follow each other. I also met them face-to-face following the relaxation of pandemic restrictions. Since I could only interview most of these individuals once, my findings do not provide insight into their more prolonged engagement with the platform. As a final remark, all interviewees reside in the largest cities, namely, Istanbul, İzmir, Ankara, and Bursa; all but two are university-educated individuals. Thus, the findings of this study represent a small portion of the population and are not generalizable.

Results

Waiting out the pandemic, during which the hopes of returning to "normal times" failed to materialize, caused anxiety, fatigue, and stress. Different social positions generated different modalities of waiting. While some feared contracting the virus, some dealt with work-related fatigue and insecurity, and some expressed concerns about the alienating experience of online education. Different waiting experiences generated distinctive scrolling modes: in company or alone, zombie-scrolling or "healthier" scrolling. The findings center on resorting to algorithmic coping in pursuits of self-care and positivity and perceiving TikTok scrolling as conducive to gaining practical knowledge, sociality, and physical activity. These understandings were associated with the attempts to cope with the pandemic distress. This reduced the feelings of guilt attached to TikTok scrolling, an activity that interviewees would "normally" deem time-wasting and unproductive.

Scrolling for Mood Change

TikTok scrolling became a way to cultivate positivity or hopes of moving forward for individuals who experienced increased workload or job insecurity. In their efforts to distract themselves from fatigue and anxiety, these individuals referred to algorithmic coping as a self-care practice. They indulged in feel-good content, saying it was comforting, calming, and soothing. Describing their scrolling practice as

"me-time," these individuals put much effort into curating algorithms by barring the disliked videos or engaging consciously with the content they liked.

Cansu, a 31-year-old researcher, is one of these individuals. The pandemic did not put a hold on Cansu's work-related responsibilities as she faced the pressures to be productive and creative. She had difficulties adjusting to working from home since she could never concentrate on work at home before. Her waiting throughout the lockdowns was laden with anxiety, and her sleeping worsened because of the stress about lagging. Unwinding any necessary means became essential for her to fight her worries.

Cansu was using TikTok for almost 3 months, on and off, as she recounted joining the platform right after a session of zombie-scrolling—3- to 4-hr-long screen time "without any mental engagement"—with her boyfriend. Their practice of TikTok scrolling later became a routine. Two or three days a week, when they were "too mentally tired to read a book, watch any film or binge a Netflix series," they would turn on a reality show on the TV and start scrolling. Reality TV did not demand much attention to the narrative, allowing them to scroll comfortably.

After seeing how her boyfriend's For You page streamed only American users' content instead of Turkish users, she wanted a similar feed. She started blocking most of the users from Turkey she came across on the platform. After 2 to 3 weeks, her For You page was "fixed," partially in synch with her boyfriend's. The content they liked to devour was the satirical posts about the everyday struggles (and failures) of coping with the pandemic:

> The way it messed us all on different levels and how they talked about the pains of being confined to home funnily put a smile on your face. You realize that we all suffer from this, we don't know when it will end, but we are all in this together. It felt so empathetic,

recounts Cansu. The posts resonated with their experiences, offering a remedy for wait-at-home stress.

Cansu mentioned the difficulty of staying away from captivating algorithms once individuals align their expectations to distract themselves from negative emotions with habitual scrolling:

> It's like getting caught up in drugs. I accept that it is difficult to disconnect from it completely and that It has become s a part of my life. One needs to control the time she spends using it. Because it taps into your psychology, I sometimes watch my For You page when I am unhappy. It has a very strange effect. I don't know how to explain it. But for example, if I am going through something emotional in life. Looking at such videos, the fact that those people are actually experiencing the same thing as me and making humour out of it makes me feel good about myself,

She explains. However, she was also aware that this mood also renders her more susceptible to the influencers trying to sell products when she is trying to relax and unwind.

Consuming formulaic TikTok videos during the lockdowns, which, according to Cansu, denied her the ability to engage with too-demanding media texts, sparked ambivalent views in her. While she enjoyed the relief from pandemic-induced anxiety and work-related stress, she said she would "normally" avoid scrolling repetitive content for being unproductive. Thus, she often found herself in conflict for seeking comfort in repeatedly watching TikTok videos, as she drew comparisons to her pre-pandemic attention span:

> I often myself in this inner battle. I feel guilty for spending so much time on TikTok, as it messes up my attention span. But then I say, "who cares, it is the pandemic." I need it for my mental health. We all need to wind down a little.

Beril, a recent sales manager aged 26, also oscillated between feeling guilty and finding solace in repetitive skit comedies on TikTok. Beril has been using TikTok for almost one year and a half. In effect, she was one of the few who joined the platform before the outbreak of the pandemic. Throughout the lockdowns, one of her favorite pastime was scrolling through her TikTok feed operated by algorithms, which she meticulously curated only to present her content created by American users. Beril's waiting experience was filled with financial insecurity and anxiety. She was laid off when the pandemic struck, and later on, her father contracted the coronavirus, spawning more worries in her.

As she struggled with sleeping, the trouble she knew she had to deal with on her own, she turned to digital platforms to seek advice on reducing her anxiety levels and fostering pre-sleep habits to have a calm night. Following her online searches on how to calm the body to sleep well, she came across calming content, consisting of guided meditations and relaxation exercises. One of her favorite types of content is individuals pretending to be working at a Spa Center, asking watchers to imagine that they came for a massage:

> They begin the videos with "I welcome you and take care of you." They pretend to do self-care routines, and keep saying, "calm down, everything will pass, it will be a very good day next day." By watching such content on repeat, you slowly get used to it. These videos contain a kind of hypnosis effect. That's somehow what they do, so it relaxes you,

explains Beril. Streaming calming content eventually became a part of her before bedtime routine. She intentionally accesses TikTok, expecting to receive what she considers relaxing. This rendered her practice of scrolling more meaningful than remorseful.

Consuming Healing Content

Making TikTok scrolling more meaningful was strongly present in explanations of Aylin, a 21-year-old psychology student, who viewed her TikTok use as taking time for herself. But her scrolling marks a shift from feel-good content to healing content. Aylin recounted how online education

has adversely affected her ability to concentrate, making her worry about her mental health and feel guilty for falling behind.

Aylin has been using TikTok for 8 months. As an avid TikTok user, she mentioned she spends 7 hr on the platform daily, which caused ambivalent reactions in her. On one hand, she complained how TikTok messed with her attention span, reducing her ability to watch a film, read a book, activities that she deemed contributing to quality resting. On the other hand, her awareness of spending a lot of time on the platform led her to find ways to make her time on the platform more meaningful. One of these strategies was to curate her algorithms to present her with content that offers intellectual and practical information on various topics, such as film criticism or practices to cope with distraction and stress.

She found solace in algorithmic content on positive thinking and mental health to grapple with the guilt of not keeping up with classes on Zoom, which distanced her from her studies. But then, as she explained, "her algorithms" steered toward posts soliciting more empathy. She started viewing users posting about their recovery experiences from a serious long-term illness or struggles with various disease stages. She strived to make her time worthwhile by following these users from the United States who frequently shared updates on the stages of their illnesses. According to her, following these users she did not know in real life, expanded her capacity to care about others. In addition, the possibility of learning something new (about stages of serious illnesses, also in English) rendered her time on the platform productive/useful.

When asked whether following these topics did not upset her, she said that anonymous scrolling through individuals' healing posts, felt "like reading fiction." "There are very different worlds out there. You feel like you are entering into a whole different universe. Exploring these new worlds feels like I am making something useful with my time," stated Aylin. This approach helped her compensate for her guilt for not reading an actual or watching a full-length film. Another aspect that made her feel she was using her time wisely was her penchant for text-based posts requiring advanced fast-reading skills. "TikTok improved my reading skills in English. You have to be really fast to grasp everything written there," she said laughingly.

Aylin's statements reflect "cruel optimism." Despite her discontent with scrolling, she continues engaging with it, believing that this practice is good for her. The stream of explanatory videos evoked a sense of learning something or gaining practical knowledge from TikTok. Watching healing content, she believed, contributed to improving her soft skill, namely empathy. Likening scrolling through posts on recovery to reading also helped her alleviate her guilt for not reading books and watching films. Streaming healing content constituted a way to be productive or use her time wisely. In this sense, watching healing content differed from indulging in feel-good content, which appealed to Beril and Cansu as a self-care practice. They viewed their algorithmic scrolling as leading to positivity, unwinding against the backdrop of the pandemic that intensified the burden of self-care. This alleviated the guilt from watching repetitive content they would typically deem unproductive. Although all three feel guilty for their time on the platform, how they lend legitimacy to using it differed. Aylin strives to make her time more meaningful by following content she can learn from. Whereas Cansu and Beril mention how consuming an influx of content with formulaic plots is soothing and more suited to their mental tiredness.

Scrolling as Conducive to Sociality

In addition, during the lockdowns, Beril and Cansu cast their TikTok scrolling as part of their sociality efforts. Cansu described the shared discovery of TikTok with her boyfriend as a social activity which felt like she was "trying something new outside." Likewise, Beril considered her attempts to mimic TikTok content as a family time. In effect, the perception that TikTok scrolling is conducive to sociality, discovering something new, and physical activity, thus constituting a wise way of using one's time, was a recurrent theme in interviews. The emphasis on sociality or doing something together was equivalent to using one's time wisely or engaging in a useful activity, reducing feelings of guilt and concerns over wasting time.

How TikTok scrolling was conducive to sociality was evident in the recounts of Mehmet, a retired I.T. specialist in his mid-50s, who preferred specifically to scroll down his For You page simultaneously with his son. Mehmet's experience of waiting out the pandemic was shaped by his worries about contracting the coronavirus due to his medical history. Reluctant to go out, he daydreamt of returning to fishing, one of his favorite hobbies, under lockdowns. His weariness of watching television, which did not involve any programming on his specific interests, led him to evoke his daydreams in other media. "As soon as I logged on TikTok, it started showing me these videos, like people fishing in the Bosphorus," recalls Mehmet. Describing TikTok as "an animated screen," he soon indulged in videos on fishing to remedy his immobility during the lockdowns.

At the time of the interview, Mehmet was using the platform for two months. He and his son, working from home, scrolled through their feeds together:

> We would show each other the videos we liked and laugh together at them. Normally, he would just play video games in his room, and I would watch the T.V. But this became a new thing during the pandemic. I don't know how long I will be on the platform,

Mehmet explains. Despite his uncertainty regarding his future on TikTok, Mehmet enjoyed co-scrolling TikTok feeds with his son at least to "have something social still going on

in the house." We are sitting at the house all the time with the lockdowns that dragged the time. I use it to take time for myself. I am on there when I am bored when there is nothing to do," is how he recounts his time on TikTok.

Müge, a 21-year-old physiotherapy student, also casts her TikTok use as a way to deal with immobility and physical inactivity caused by the lockdowns. When her classes migrated onto Zoom, she hoped the restrictions would be lifted soon, and she would return to normal life. But as one lockdown followed another, she set aside her hopes and sought alternative activities more suited to "all the waiting at home." In 5 months of TikTok use during the lockdowns, she and her friends transformed their habit of viewing dance videos into something social by mimicking TikTok choreographs. Each recorded their mimicry of dance moves and shared them on their group chat on WhatsApp to get feedback, but mainly to blow some steam off. "At least we were doing things rather than just sitting," Müge recounts. Since TikTok scrolling was conducive to physical activity in real life, Müge described her engagement with the platform in a positive light.

Müge convinced her sister Ceyda, a 26-year-old IT specialist, to join the platform. How Ceyda waited for the lockdowns to end differed from her sister. The lockdowns increased her workload and required her to be more accessible, making her remote work more stressful and isolating than "normal times." During this period, her company installed software designed to measure her productivity, tracking her log-in and log-off times and her speed of getting back to requests. This was complimentary to another software, which inhibited her from accessing banned distractive social media networks.

To take a break from the computer screen, Ceyda gravitated toward TikTok scrolling, an activity she only carried out in her sister's company. She was using the platform for 3 months. In her efforts to cultivate "a more mindful usage of social media," she blocked the content she found overwhelming or prompted her to compare herself to others. For her, there was a contrast between scrolling through toxic and pointless content and "useful" videos depicting people doing practical things, such as crafts and cooking, which she can learn from or put into practice any time in the future. The prospect of learning something new or gaining practical knowledge gave her the impression that she was doing something useful with her time. As a person who is accustomed to having her screen time monitored to be more productive, she shaped her use of the platform accordingly.

Discussion

The meanings attributed to TikTok coping are at the intersection of the burden of self-care, the positivity imperative, and the internalization of being productive. The pandemic compelled individuals to *wait out* a crisis beyond their control. It also reinforced inadequacies in psychological assistance and social health care while positing self-care as enduring discontent under uncertainty (Gill & Orgad, 2022). In the face of the increased burden of self-care, scrolling has become a mechanism of self-discipline, distracting individuals from the structural inequalities that cause rising levels of discontent.

As the findings have shown, all interviewees thought they had to cope with pandemic-induced distress individually. This parallels the critical discussions of self-care, which shed light on how neoliberal health care policies and individualism transform the distress they cause into individual problems. Interviewees were aware that they held individual responsibility to alleviate their distress. Along these lines, the meaning they attributed to their TikTok practices reflected their attempts to police discontent, stress, and anxiety caused by the pandemic.

Facing the burden of caring for themselves and containing their discomfort, individuals resorted to algorithmic scrolling and curated their feeds according to their care needs. The efficacy of TikTok's algorithms in providing content that prompts mood change, marked a move from perceiving social media use as unproductive, time-wasting, and detrimental to mental well-being and sociality. Individuals who suffered from work-related fatigue and stress extended their understanding of self-care to include indulging in algorithmic coping. Their previous understanding that to scroll was to waste time has shifted to perceiving their time on TikTok as me-time, contributing to their mental well-being.

Users also linked algorithmic coping to disconnective affordances of platforms that allow users to bar toxic content that fuels anxiety or drives them to compare themselves to others. Disconnection from what is perceived as toxic, useless, and frivolous through algorithmic curation leads users to consider their new habit of scrolling as healthy and mindful. Users take advantage of algorithms either to detach themselves from toxic content or connect them with feel-good content. The perception that the algorithms, reflective of individuals (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022), present informative and useful content that "one learns from," constitutes a guilt-free healthy way of scrolling through TikTok's feed. Healthy engagement, in this case, refers to using one's time wisely and doing something useful. This emerging practice points to how people reclaim their self, time, and mental well-being, not by disconnecting from platforms, as the critiques of continuous connection suggest, but by disconnecting from useless and meaningless content through algorithmic curation.

Efforts to render her TikTok use meaningful, useful, and healthy through algorithmic curation alleviate the guilt attached to the practice of continuous scrolling. Focusing on the utility aspect of TikTok use reflects the internalization of being productive. However, this aspect can be a source of "cruel optimism." The perception of taking out something "useful" from the platform use leads users to spend more time on a platform that they find harmful to their attention span and quests for quality rest.

Concluding Remarks

Through a combination of anthropological approaches to waiting, critical approaches to self-care, and research on continuous connection and scrolling, this study demonstrated the extent to which TikTok scrolling during lockdowns became integral to self-care activities. The pressures to contain the pandemic-related discontent transformed interviewees' perceptions of wasting time on social media into cultivating me-time. Waiting with anxiety and work-related or academic-related stress led interviewees to rely on algorithmic streams to police their discontent or improve their mood. Facing the pressures of containing discomfort under the uncertainty of the pandemic made TikTok scrolling useful and meaningful, removing the guilt attached to spending time on the platform. Perceptions that algorithms effectively detach users from toxic content or deliver useful content fostered a healthy attitude toward engaging with the platform rather than totally disconnecting from it. The perception of healthy usage and receiving algorithmic content based on care needs marked a shift from wasting time on social media to making time for oneself.

The research explored how TikTok has become part of the self-care practices for individuals burdened with caring for themselves during the lockdowns. Since the primary focus of this study was not specifically on self-care, it did not pose questions about other self-care practices that the users engaged in before and throughout the pandemic. Applications that promise to cultivate self-care and mental health have burgeoned, offering journaling exercises, motivational quotes, and breathing exercises (Gill & Orgad, 2022). Further research could delve into how individuals take advantage of the emerging environment of self-care applications together with their social media practices.

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ORCID iD

İrem Şot https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2651-9535

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Author Biography

İrem Şot is a joint PhD candidate in Design, Technology, and Society program at Koç University and the Film Studies and Visual Culture program at the University of Antwerp. Her current research focuses on social media practices in Turkey.