

The Role of Humour in TikTok Communication

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Abstract: *Every day, significant hours are spent consuming content across social networks, with Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok being among the most frequently used platforms in Romania. A brief look at TikTok reveals a vast array of content types. "Variety" here encompasses aspects such as content quality, subject matter, presentation style, filming and content creation techniques, expression, strategic approach, and the influence of trending topics at the time of publication. This research was, therefore, initiated to investigate the role of humour in communication, particularly in relation to its potential to enhance a video's chances of going viral, foster community building, and improve organisational reputation.*

Keywords: *TikTok, humour, communication, reputation, notoriety, viral, community, online community*

1. Introduction

Diana Cismaru, referencing various scholars, explores both the distinctions and commonalities among the terms *reputation, image, and organisational identity* (Cismaru, 2015). According to Fombrun (1996),

identity plays a foundational role in shaping a company's operations across all levels, from employee relations to responses in crises, ultimately shaping its reputation. Balmer and Gray (1999) share a similar perspective, emphasising that organisational communication is a process through which stakeholders collectively shape the organisation's image, identity, and reputation (Cismaru, 2015).

In contrast, Barnett et al. (2006) highlight the distinctions among these terms, suggesting that organizational identity encompasses the impressions formed by both internal and external audiences, while "reputational capital" is a qualitative, intangible economic asset attributed to reputation. Whetten and Mackey (2002) further discuss reputation as a social component of organisational identity. They propose that image and reputation are integral to the two-way communication process between the organisation and its key publics. Here, *image* refers to the unique and enduring qualities the organisation wishes its publics to perceive (Cismaru, 2015).

Social networks encompass various media that facilitate online communication for social purposes, such as blogs, wikis, and photo-video sharing platforms. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram serve as key social networks, enabling users to create personal profiles and engage in community interactions with friends or like-minded individuals (Scott, 2011).

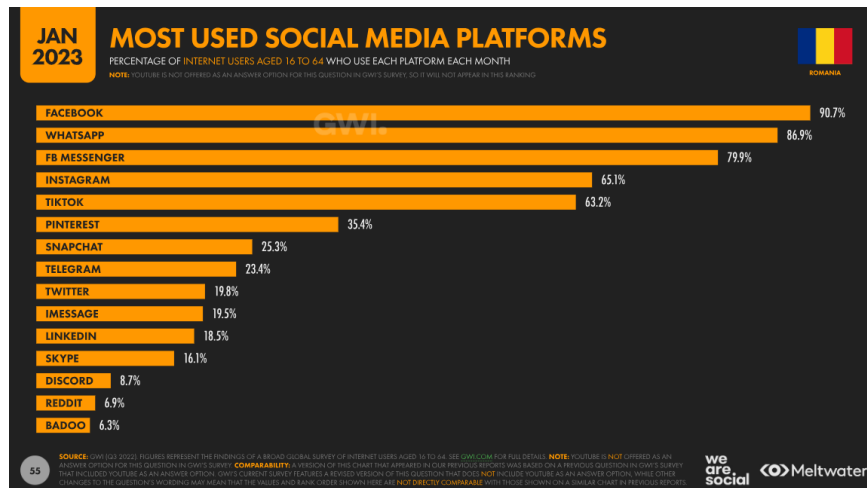


Fig. 1. TikTok in the ranking of most used social networks

The data presented in Figure 1 shows that users aged 16-64 in Romania have Facebook, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Instagram in their top preferences, and TikTok on 5th place.

Humour not only evokes emotions that we experience but also encourages us to share them with others. Its social dimension is highly influential, fostering interactions and supporting the development of interpersonal relationships. Berger (1993) highlights this role of humour as a bridge for interpersonal connections and as a complex form of communication, enabling the conveyance of information and expression of emotions in a way that others find enjoyable (Berger, 1993).

This analysis adopts the humor typology model proposed by Cătănescu and Tom (2001) for communication in broadcast and print media, which categorizes humor into types such as comparison, personification, exaggeration, puns, sarcasm, goofiness, and surprise (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015).

2. Research methods

This research employed both questionnaires and interviews to capture perspectives from both users and content creators. The questionnaire sample consisted of 45 young adults from Timisoara, aged 19 to 25.

Participants watched six videos and were then invited to describe how they would interact with each piece of content and explain their motivation for these interactions.

A questionnaire survey is a method of collecting data by posing standardised questions on a particular topic to a representative sample, allowing for consistency and comparability in responses (Cauc, Manu, Pârlea, & Goran, 2004).

For the interviews, five TikTok content creators from various for-profit and nonprofit organizations in Timisoara were selected. These interviews sought to gather their insights on using TikTok as a platform and their views on incorporating humour into communication on this social network.

The individual interview is a research method commonly used in program evaluation—in this case, to assess the use of humour on the TikTok platform. This approach involves a small number of participants who are asked a series of pre-determined questions during a meeting between the interviewer and interviewee (Gârboan & Şandor, 2006).

3. Results

The following section presents the research findings, starting with the questionnaire responses.

Regarding daily time spent on TikTok, a substantial portion of respondents—21 participants—indicated usage between one and two hours per day. This was followed by 15 participants who reported spending less than an hour daily, and 6 participants who noted spending between two and three hours. Only one respondent reported usage exceeding four hours per day.

This analysis reveals that videos focused on storytelling and educational content are generally less likely to be viewed in full compared to other types of videos. This may be attributed to their longer duration and the content's tendency to engage viewers less immediately, making it less compelling to watch in its entirety. Videos featuring pets top the viewership rankings, appealing strongly to audiences interested

in this type of content. Following closely are humourous, sarcastic, and exaggerated humour videos, which are simpler in production style. Food reviews and music-humour videos also rank highly.

A correlation was observed between the number of complete views and the levels of engagement metrics, such as likes, saves, and shares. An exception to this pattern is the music-humour video, which received only 18 likes from 36 complete views, compared to the educational video, which received 25 likes from 27 complete views. A similar trend is noted with pet videos, as well as humourous and sarcastic content, even for videos with fewer complete views, such as one featuring various humourous stories (which, with 11 complete views, received 7 likes).

User feedback provided valuable insights into motivations, perceptions, and behaviors regarding existing content on the analysed platform. To deepen the understanding of these findings, an additional method—interviews with content creators—was employed. The following section presents insights and perspectives from five TikTok creators, who graciously offered a "behind-the-scenes" look at their process. For clarity, respondents are identified by initials, and anonymity has been preserved to ensure the authenticity of responses and the quality of this research.

- **Why do you use TikTok?**

PJ: I believe that through TikTok I have the opportunity to reach people with similar interests to those that the brand I create content for supports, in a way that is closer to what the audience consumes.

BS: Promoting the organisation, observing new trends and marketing strategies/capturing audience attention, but also for entertainment.

GA: The main reason I use TikTok is to create a community where it is easy to communicate. Messages reach the audience more effectively and go viral more easily.

CG: I use TikTok to promote the association's activities and projects, but also to create educational or entertaining content for followers.

AC: It's the easiest way to go viral. If you have a good recipe for a particular TikTok, it's not very hard to have a video that becomes very popular. At work, we usually do reminisce videos or behind-the-scenes footage, sometimes funny, but if I have a brilliant idea that I can put into a video on my page, 100% I will.

All interview participants view TikTok as an effective channel for reaching their target audience. They describe it as a platform that enables them to build a community of followers and maintain engagement through various strategies, including the use of humour. A key approach, they note, is to be present where the audience is and to deliver information in a format that resonates with them. One content creator highlighted TikTok's potential for virality, mentioning that a successful "recipe" can lead to widespread reach, though they did not disclose specific details of this approach. From the interview responses, it appears there is no single formula for success on TikTok.

- **What is the process you go through when making a TikTok video?**

PJ: It differs a lot depending on the type of content and the message you want to convey. Sometimes, the easiest to do is trend-based content, which is also the most effective in terms of audience effort/feedback ratio. The easiest are obviously the CapCut templates, which seem to me to be a sort of offspring of the memes of a few years ago, where people make them relatable to the niche audience they're targeting. I'm not a fan of this type of content, I find it lazy and akin to fast food content. However, through these, the audience comes to notice that it is relatable. There's also informative TikTok, where we have a pre-written script and a clear idea of the message, but we allow ourselves to change things on

the fly if they don't fit (for example, it sounds weird when it's said but made more sense when it was written). We also have content where we try to put the audience front and center with questions.

BS: I check current trends, identify the needs and usefulness of promoting/approaching a particular topic, choose a suitable sound (if the trend doesn't contain an ideal one), shoot parts of the material several times until I get at least two good versions, edit the pieces of material, add or record sound, include effects if needed, subtitles if needed, and suggestive images to complement if needed. Then I send the result for feedback.

GA: Our process for making a TikTok starts with identifying our target audience and the message we want to convey. Once this is clear, we move on to brainstorming, looking for concepts that will attract and capture attention.

CG: The first step in making content is conducting research to discover what's trending and what's popular on the platform. After identifying the templates and the types of content to be created, we create a promotion plan (identifying the target audience, determining the frequency of posts and the message to be delivered). Finally, the team oversees filming and editing the videos, which are then posted.

AC: I can imagine it. I sit and think about what I envision TikTok to look like, and then I gather the resources I need - be it videos, pictures, sounds and all that stuff. If I don't have them, I make them, depending on the idea. After that I edit the video, of course, and at the end I sit back and think about whether it reached the quality I wanted. Often you simply must make a TikTok, and whether it goes viral is like flipping a coin.

In this respect, experts said that it differs greatly from one type of content to another. There are technically more complicated or simpler ways to make a video. Current trends on the platform, the target audience, the frequency of posts and the way content is delivered are considered. Interviewees also note the flexibility that is needed in the

writing of material, both in terms of content and quality. It is also difficult to ensure the virality and impact of a video, as it depends on many factors such as trends, placement in time, message, quality of editing.

• **What is, in your opinion, the purpose of communication on TikTok?**

PJ: I think the purpose of communication is to raise awareness and bring something useful to the table. "Useful" can also mean pure entertainment and amusement or relevant information conveyed in a less formal way. But it also depends on what you're looking for from your position as a content creator. If you're looking for exposure, okay. If you want brand partnerships, that's ok too. I can tell you based on what we do.

BS: Content promotion. You attract audiences from different places based on their preferences and that's how you reach your target audience. Communication is more flexible, a TikTok goes viral more easily than any other type of video. At the same time, TikTok allows people to use the "featuring" option to add comments to a video, in turn making a video of their own. The goal is to convey information in a way that is engaging and interactive, and that appeals to the audience's curiosity.

GA: I think the main purpose of communicating on this platform is to create a connection with a certain segment of the audience so that they are motivated to continue watching our clips. By strengthening this connection, we aim to increase the visibility and impact of the page.

CG: For a student association, the purpose of communicating on TikTok can be diverse:

- Promotion of activities and events: TikTok can be used to announce and promote events, workshops, conferences or other activities organized by the association.

- Informing students: TikTok can provide useful information about available resources, rights, obligations, career opportunities, scholarships and other issues important to students.

- Engaging and recruiting members: Engaging content on TikTok can attract new members to the association by showcasing the benefits and opportunities offered by the organisation.

- Creating educational content: The association can produce short videos that explain academic concepts, provide study tips or discuss topics relevant to the field of study.

By using TikTok, a student association can reach a young and dynamic audience, maximising the impact of its messages and facilitating interaction with students.

AC: TikTok makes communication easier and somehow helps you to get the information out as quickly and as much as possible. The key to the platform is that you must grab attention instantly, otherwise your video becomes just a simple swipe up to the next one. Even so, on TikTok it's easier to be human and make even a brand more humanized and with a personality (Duolingo, for example).

Most agree that the purpose of communicating on TikTok is to raise awareness for a particular topic and to create a connection with the user. One interviewee argues that you can communicate on an even very wide range of topics on TikTok. It is also emphasised that information travels faster on TikTok, it is easier to understand and explain to the audience, who no longer invests time in documentation, but receives the information in a short, complete and already processed form.

- **Do you have a strategy for communicating on TikTok?**

PJ: For the most part, yes, but it's important in communicating on TikTok (and, I would say, everywhere) to allow yourself to be flexible and create content spontaneously, without wasting too much time. People are looking for authenticity on TikTok, not something heavily

edited and worked on (or at least not to give that impression, I would say, because you can work a lot on content, but you can make it so that the audience feels like it could have been them). We have some bigger benchmarks set, but we can afford to adapt things.

BS: Simple: observing the needs in society, approaching the issue in both Romanian and English, rendering it in an internationally known and liked trend, using key words or short phrases, expressions or a tone and language common to the current generation, and emphasizing the visual more than the auditory.

GA: Yes, in my organisation there is a person solely responsible for this aspect, and this position is rotating, changing every 4 months. The person in charge must have a strategy to be able to apply for this role.

CG: Among the communication strategies on TikTok, I frequently use creating interactive and engaging content, using hashtags, capitalising on trends and posting interviews or testimonials.

AC: No, I usually post whatever comes to mind. I'm not disputing the fact that on TikTok you could use a clear strategy, but I tend to believe that even without a strategy, you can somehow have a video with a bigger impact than you would expect. It's no different at work either, we don't use a clear strategy for TikTok, but I want to put more emphasis on TikTok in the future as it can bring a lot of image (positive or negative) to a brand very easily.

The strategies employed by content creators vary widely, offering a high degree of flexibility. Some creators focus on spontaneity and authenticity in their posts, while others aim for broader reach by using an international language and including subtitles. Certain organisations rotate their TikTok content creation team every four months to bring fresh perspectives. Approaches differ, with some emphasising a specific content type that performs well for their audience, while others post spontaneous content without a fixed strategy, believing that this can be equally effective.

- **Do you use humour in your communication on TikTok? How does humour help you achieve your communication goals on TikTok?**

PJ: Yes, of course. As I said above, it's a way to increase brand awareness, and the thought from the beginning was: you make relatable content, the audience interacts, they follow, you also create useful content, but in a way that is easy to consume. And things worked. Using pop culture references helps a lot, because that's how you get closer to your audience, showing useful things with inserts related to your content. But for that you need to constantly have an online presence and consume a lot of content to stay on top of trends.

BS: Yes. Humorous phrases keep your audience's attention. They don't allow boredom to intervene, so the audience doesn't immediately scroll to the next TikTok.

GA: Through various methods, including funny videos designed to bring a smile, we try to get as close as possible to students and be accessible to them. Humorous content helps us to capture attention and get our messages across in a more engaging and, I think, more memorable way.

CG: Yes, I use humour in my communication on TikTok. Humour helps by attracting the attention of a wider audience, facilitates emotional connection with the audience, simplifies some complex messages, and encourages content sharing.

AC: Yes, especially. Now, even more serious videos can catch on, but when you combine a more serious topic with humour you make it even easier to explain and make it accessible to a much wider mass of people. However, you can also post a nonsensical video and have it simply be something funny without a more complicated goal of making people laugh, but the platform has shaped itself into being something where you expect to find amusement and entertainment when you click on the icon.

When asked specifically about the role of humour in TikTok communication, all interviewees agreed that it is highly effective and widely used, often forming a significant part of their approach. They cite its benefits for boosting brand awareness, capturing audience attention, and making content more accessible and relatable. Understanding the audience and staying updated on platform trends are also considered essential for effective communication, whether for campaigns, regular updates, or entertainment purposes.

According to the interviewed specialists, TikTok serves as a critical platform for content creation and distribution, with strong potential for reaching target audiences effectively. They unanimously agree that success on TikTok does not adhere to a set formula; rather, it depends on factors like trends, audience demographics, and content quality. Flexibility and adaptability are viewed as essential in content production, with humour playing a central role in drawing attention and enhancing brand visibility. Overall, TikTok is seen as a dynamic platform where creativity and audience insight are key to success, and humor is a valuable tool for building awareness and fostering communities.

4. Conclusions

In the applied section of this paper, the analysis of questionnaire and interview responses from content creation specialists indicates that humour significantly boosts a video's likelihood of attracting views, likes, saves, and shares. With a well-crafted strategy, these interactions can enhance an organisation's reputation and broaden its visibility.

TikTok is highlighted as a powerful platform for content creation and distribution, offering substantial potential for reaching target audiences effectively. Specialists agree that TikTok success does not follow a one-size-fits-all formula; instead, it relies on adaptable factors like trends, audience preferences, and content quality. Flexibility and adaptability are crucial in content production, with humour serving as a valuable tool for capturing attention and building brand awareness. In

essence, TikTok is viewed as a dynamic space where creativity and audience insight are key, and humor is a strategic way to reach diverse audiences and foster community.

Interviews with content creators reinforce TikTok's role as an effective channel for motivating, informing, and engaging users through humour. It stands out as a platform where content can go viral with relative ease. Content creators confirm humour's effectiveness in raising brand awareness, drawing in audiences, and making content more accessible. Although each creator follows a similar process, adapted to their style and order, all emphasise the importance of understanding the target audience, staying aware of trends, and tailoring messages accordingly. On TikTok, humour is no longer optional—it is an essential ingredient for success.

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