



Utrecht
University

Student: Margot Schlögel
Supervisor: René Glas

The Gamified and Monetized Spectacle of TikTok Live Matches



Master Thesis

New Media and Digital Culture

2023-2024

Abstract

TikTok Live Matches (TLM) are a specific feature of the TikTok social media platform showcasing a five-minute competition between two or four content creators with over 1,000 followers. During that contest, creators call for donations from their audience. This research explores how TLM incentivizes spending from viewers to purchase virtual gifts for their favorite content creators. Utilizing a walkthrough analysis (Light et al., 2016) and content analysis of live matches, the study examines how gamification, dark patterns, and parasocial relationships influence viewer spending behavior. The findings reveal that TLM leverages game elements (e.g., rankings, challenges, badges) to gamify the competition, motivating viewers to spend real money for in-game rewards. Furthermore, the platform strategically employs dark patterns (e.g., pop-up messages, complicated conversion rate, hidden spending limits) to nudge viewers towards spending. Finally, content creators foster a strong sense of closeness and familiarity with their donators, blurring the lines of traditional parasocial relationships and encouraging viewers to spend on gifts to strengthen these connections. Additionally, content creators strategically motivate viewers to spend by offering unique rewards going beyond the automated system. The research concludes by urging platforms like TikTok to prioritize user well-being, for instance, by implementing transparent spending controls and potentially regulating content creator discourse to create a more responsible user experience. Future studies may explore ethical dimensions to complete the full impact of the TLM.

Keywords: TikTok Live Matches, gamification, dark patterns, spending behavior, parasocial relationship

Table of Content

Quest Commencement	1
Theoretical Nexus.....	4
Ready Player One	4
Insert Coin	6
Connect to a Network	7
Strategy	9
Analysis of TLM Winning Tactic.....	11
Side Quest: Searching the hook	12
Side Quest: Find the dark mode	20
Side Quest: Infiltrate matches.....	24
Completing the Quest	30
Codex.....	33
Bonus Content.....	35
Appendix A: Transcription of five matches	35

Table of Illustrations

Figure 1: FYP and access to TLM (a.) and TLM (b.).....	12
Figure 2: content creators ranking	13
Figure 3: ranking-related rewards for content creators (a.) and promotion for money earning on the app (b.)	14
Figure 4: contributor ranking display (a.) and leaderboard (b.).....	15
Figure 5: MVP and power-up	15
Figure 6: announcement of gifter rank in the chat	16
Figure 7: speed challenge (a.) and daily missions (b.).....	17
Figure 8: LIVE community (a.) and its advantages: shoutouts, emotes, badges, etc.(b.)	18
Figure 9: announcement of new team member in the chat.....	18
Figure 10: customized pop-up messages encouraging gifting	20
Figure 11: money conversion	21
Figure 12: set gift limit (found on TikTok's website)	22

Figure 13: clustering of interactive elements..... 22

Figure 14: pay to ascend the ranking 23

Table 1: description of the five Matches analyzed..... 25

Table 2: quotes of Matches where content creators encourage the audience to send gifts 26

Table 3: instances of Match 2 where content creator provides special rewards 27

Table 4: instances of Matches 1, 3, 5 where content creators demonstrate their familiarity with viewers 28

Table 5: instances of Matches 3 and 1 where content creators demonstrate closeness with viewers 28

Table 6: role-playing of content creators 29

Quest Commencement

Is it conceivable that I would give my friend 10€ without a specific reason? Likely not. Nevertheless, when considering offering the same lump of money for a digital animation in support of a content creator, the probability increases. While this rationale seems illogical, it is the basis of the principle of TikTok Live Matches (TLM). TLM represent a segment of the TikTok social media platform, featuring a competition between two or four content creators with over 1,000 followers striving for donations within a five-minute timeframe. It showcases an arena where creators actively solicit monetary support from their audience through the acquisition of digital gifts. The winner of the match is determined by the content creator scoring the highest number of points. Those points are converted from the monetary value of gifts purchased by their audience. TLM is a widely adopted source of income among content creators (Yesisca & Menayang 2023). They earn 50% of the accumulated funds, while TikTok claims the remaining half. The gifts are purchased using the in-app currency previously bought with real money. The price range of those gifts varies from fractions of cents to over 500€. The gifts bought by the audience are displayed through playful visual effects during the match, the more expensive the gift is, the more impressive the visual is. The audience engages with the content creators through the chat, and so actively participates as actor in the play.

Drawing on Deterding et al.'s (2011) conceptualization, gamification involves the incorporation of game design elements into a non-game context, thereby fostering user engagement for utilitarian outcomes as evidenced by Hamari and Lehdonvirta (2010). It is essential to recognize that gamification does not necessarily entail a shift towards a fully structured game characterized by the rigid rule systems typically associated with traditional gaming paradigms (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2015). In addition to gamifying financial spending, TikTok utilizes targeted design strategies known as dark patterns. These design mechanisms are strategically crafted to influence users into making decisions that may diverge from their inherent goals and immediate interests (Gray et al., 2018), such as the action of sending virtual gifts with real money. The cultivation of a sense of community emerges as a pivotal motivator within the live streaming domain, inherently characterized by spectator-driven dynamics (Taylor, 2018, p.22). Parasocial relationships, nurtured through creators' discursive practices, amplify the immersive experience. The act of gifting, even as a mundane transaction, assumes a role as an incentivizing mechanism for the establishment and perpetuation of relational bonds (Dolfsma et al., 2008, p.320-322). This intricate interplay within TLM lays the groundwork for the research question explored in this study.

**How do gameful elements, dark patterns, and parasocial interactions within
online communities contribute to the financial spending on virtual gifts during
live matches on TikTok?**

To elucidate this overarching question, the research undertakes an exploration of various subquestions, each dissecting specific facets and collectively providing a nuanced understanding.

1. How does TikTok present gift sending as a gameful activity?

In this context, the playful aspect of virtual gifting and the gaming structure are explored as they could profoundly influence viewers' motivation to make financial contributions to the match. The theoretical framework addressing this research subquestion draws upon gamification theory (Deterding et al., 2011; Hamari, 2015; Hamari & Lehdonvirta, 2010; Huotari & Hamari 2012; Zhang et al., 2019), as well as the modern interpretation of Caillois' (1961) concepts of *ludus* and *paidia* by Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. (2015). These topics will be further elucidated in the Theoretical Nexus section. The aim is to unveil the influence of gamification in prompting audience to spend on gifts and to understand the underlying structure.

2. How is TLM designed to encourage monetary interactions?

To promote gift sending, specific strategies beyond gamification are designed to influence users and encourage spending. To unravel these strategies, the concept of dark patterns (Brignull, 2010; Gray et al., 2018; Zagal et al., 2013) is employed. The goal is to identify and analyze design mechanisms known as dark patterns, which aim to maliciously manipulate users towards specific actions they would not take otherwise. These patterns exploit cognitive biases and psychological vulnerabilities to benefit the platform or designer at the expense of the user's best interests. These subtle influences have the potential to guide users, possibly leading them to purchase TikTok virtual gifts.

3. How are the parasocial relationships shaping TLM?

This question is pivotal as TLM rely on the audience monetary participation. The narratives woven by content creators through the chat wield substantial influence in shaping the users' engagement. To address this question, a range of scholars (Blight, 2017; Brock, 2017; Dolfmsma et al., 2008; Lu et al., 2018; Taylor, 2018; Wohn et al. 2018) are used to establish a robust theoretical framework. This framework delves into the concept of live streaming as a spectator-driven activity, exploring the dynamics of the parasocial relationships underpinning the phenomenon of gift exchange. Further details on this theoretical foundation are detailed in the Theoretical Nexus section. I anticipate uncovering the ways in which the participatory culture is ingrained in TLM, by analyzing

the content creators' discourse during live matches. The goal is to understand how the parasocial relationships shape and impact financial spending behaviors among users.

To comprehensively explore the intricate nature of these live events, this research employs a walkthrough analysis enabling to critically navigate the feature (Light et al., 2016). This method is tailored to meet the specific research requirements outlined in the methodology, here referred to as the Strategy section. The research aspires to achieve a nuanced understanding of the interactive dynamics inherent in TLM by thoroughly examining the app interface and its diverse affordances.¹ Supplemented by a content analysis of five live matches explored in "Side Quest: Infiltrate matches", this approach enables an in-depth examination of these live events, providing insights into the discursive elements that shape the participatory culture within these matches. The goal is to uncover various facets, unraveling the complex mechanisms that influence user engagement in financial spending.

At the crossover between the academic discourse surrounding gamification, design patterns, and streamer-viewer relationships, the study provides fresh insights by exploring the live streaming domain. It extends Hamari and Lehdonvirta research (2010) about the motivations to gamify a service and its effects by closely examining how the implementation of gamification principles on TLM contributes to the platform's utilitarian objectives and outcomes. Furthermore, this research expands the exploration of dark patterns (Gray et al., 2018) by analyzing their impact within the realm of financial transactions on social media. Finally, a primary relevance lies in its contribution to enhancing the parasocial relationships understanding and the extent to which these relationships serve as motivators for viewers to financially support their favorite content creators. This research completes and updates Dolfsma et al.'s (2008) principle of gift exchange, contextualizing it within the branch of parasocial relations on social media. Additionally, Taylor's (2018) exploration of the social and cultural dimensions within the streaming platform Twitch is used to study its possible extension to a social media platform.

The investigation of TLM contributes to behavioral economics by offering insights into spending behaviors in playful online contexts. It advances digital media studies by dissecting the intricate structures of platform-user interactions, enhancing the understanding of user engagement dynamics. Given the considerable involvement of minors in gift spending during matches (Tidy, 2019), this research triggers ethical discussions about the implications of fostering such spending environments. Furthermore, its relevance extends to financial literacy education, providing a foundation for developing strategies that encourage responsible financial behaviors in digital spaces.

¹Affordances encompass a broad spectrum of potential actions and interactions that are naturally available within a given environment (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

Theoretical Nexus

To unravel the intricacies of the research question and its corresponding subquestions, this study employs a multifaceted theoretical framework. Building upon a comprehensive understanding of key concepts established in existing literature, this study establishes a robust foundation to contextualize and contribute to scholarly discourse. In aligning with established concepts, the study not only builds upon prior findings but also introduces fresh insights within the specific context of TLM. This theoretical lens acts as a guiding framework, facilitating the interpretation of data and offering a holistic perspective on the complex dynamics behind the platform.

The theoretical framework is divided into three parts corresponding to the three subquestions investigating the playful nature of the matches, the malicious platform's design mechanisms, and the streamer-viewer relationship. Each segment of the framework draws insights from scholars to provide a comprehensive understanding.

Ready Player One

Through its website communications aimed at brands and creators, TikTok showcases its expertise in integrating gamification not only within TLM but also through templates and interactive games to promote brands on its platform. This highlights the platform's adeptness at leveraging gamification for broader marketing initiatives aimed at engaging users and promoting brand interactions (*TikTok Branded Effect Specs | TikTok Ads Manager, 2023*). The integration of game design elements into non-game contexts with the aim of motivating and enhancing user engagement and retention is referred to as gamification by Deterding et al. (2011, p.9). Huotari and Hamari (2012, p.19) challenge this definition, arguing that there is no defined set of elements exclusive to games, nor do these elements automatically create gameful experiences. Instead, they define gamification as a process of enriching a service with gameful experiences, supporting users with a value creation. In the TLM Winning Tactic section, a mix of these definitions is used to analyze TLM. I identify elements commonly found in games, such as rankings and challenges, that contribute to making TLM a more gameful experience.

Game design elements are enjoyable and motivating features promoting utilitarian or beneficial outcomes. In practical terms, gamification encompasses elements like rankings, level-ups, and achievements. Marketing strategies leverage these game design patterns, engaging consumers through choices, restrictions, and incentives including progression, levels, prizes, collectibles, memberships, and points (Hamari & Lehdonvirta, 2010, p.27). User engagement with badges has been correlated with increased service utilization and transaction completion (Hamari, 2015, p.36).

Previous studies have extensively explored the gamification of Chinese platforms such as YY Live, Douyu TV, and Panda TV (Zhang et al., 2019). Zhang et al. (2019, p.344-357), experts in critical communication, contend that these platforms have undergone a substantial redesign aimed at optimizing profit generation. This is achieved through the implementation of motivational visual stimuli, where the value of the gift directly correlates with the spectacle of the visual effects. They point out the shift in popularity-ranking algorithms, now emphasizing the monetary value of virtual gifts to gauge popularity. This contrasts with past approaches centered on viewer counts or votes. In the TLM Winning Tactic section, parallels with TLM are highlighted, with particular emphasis on the creators' ranking as an indicator of popularity.

Gamifying a system, service, or activity does not inherently turn it into a game. Huotari and Hamari (2012) illustrate this concept with the example of loyalty stamp cards at dry cleaners, while it introduces playfulness, it does not embody the essence of a full-fledged game. Play is characterized by its free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, rule-governed, and make-believe/fictive nature. On the other hand, games provide specific frameworks within the broader domain of play (Caillois, 1961, p.9-10). The concepts of *paidia* (playfulness) and *ludus* (formal, rule-based game behavior) by Caillois can be used to understand the subtleties between play and game. *Paidia* characterizes activities not constrained by rigid rules, whereas *ludus* pertains to systems with formalized rules. In *paidia*, the dynamics of winning and losing are not the driving force, while in *ludus*, winning is the outcome. Nevertheless, one should refrain from conceptualizing play and game as entirely discrete entities. Play, by nature, incorporates *ludus* elements through implicit and flexible guidelines. Conversely, forms of play exhibiting more pronounced *ludus* characteristics are characterized by well-defined rules and a measurable outcome (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2015, p.36-38). Altering the *ludus* aspect of a game is part of the marketing strategy of virtual goods (Hamari & Lehdonvirta, 2010, p.26).

Modern video games frequently allow players to choose between actively pursuing set goals (*ludus*) or freely exploring the game map (*paidia*) (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2015, p.36-38). To illustrate, Hamari (2015, p.476) contends that badges and gamification introduce *ludus* by imparting structure and objectives to the experience, while also infusing *paidia* by fostering an exploratory mindset towards service utilization.

These scholars facilitate the identification of gamification processes related to money spending by elucidating how framing monetary spending as a game can incentivize users to spend. Moreover, Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. (2015) are referred to interpret Caillois' concepts of *paidia* and *ludus*, elucidating the TLM's underlying structure. Overall, these concepts provide insights to tackle the first subquestion focusing on the gameful nature within TLM. Just as loyalty stamps alone do not turn dry cleaning into a game, gamification by itself is not enough to influence users to send gifts; specific design patterns also play a crucial role.

Insert Coin

In a study conducted in China by Lu et al. (2018), 66% of respondents were found to participate in sending gifts during live-streaming sessions. It is important to acknowledge that the platform's interface is intentionally designed to steer users towards this behavior. This dynamic interaction between user behavior, platform design, and the act of giving gifts emphasizes the significance of principles in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI). The concept of dark patterns in HCI, as introduced by Brignull (2010), encompasses design mechanisms strategically crafted to influence users in making decisions that may deviate from their inherent goals and immediate interests. It involves the exploitation of users through the incorporation of deceptive functionalities within the user interface, exerting profound effects on users' emotions and behavioral patterns.²

The dark patterns are categorized into five classifications by Gray et al. (2018, p.5): (1) nagging, which entails the interruption of an action by introducing another element, such as a pop-up message; (2) obstruction, deliberately complicating a process to discourage user engagement; (3) sneaking, entailing the design of the interface to conceal, disguise, or delay information; (4) interface interference, involving manipulation to prioritize certain actions over others; and (5) forced action, compelling users to perform an activity to gain access to additional functionality. Zagal et al. (2013, p.3-5) have identified dark patterns in game design³, two of which provide intriguing perspectives for this study. The concept of pre-delivered content, where players must pay to access the full game, is a frequent practice in video games. Certain games are initially sold with limited content, and players must purchase additional content or features through additional fees. Furthermore, the pattern of monetized rivalries exploits players' competitiveness by encouraging them to spend money to achieve in-game status, such as high placements in rankings. To reach a higher score, players often find themselves needing to use power-ups to be purchased with in-game currency. This pattern, often referred to as "pay to win" or "pay to cheat", can provide unfair advantages as they are not based on players' skills but on their ability to constantly spend money to remain competitive (Zagal et al., 2013).

The concept of dark patterns enables a critical examination of the TLM interface. The identification of dark patterns in game design by Zagal et al. (2013, p.3-5) provides valuable insights into TLM by revealing parallels with traditional game design. While TLM may not fit the traditional definition of a concrete game, it is important to note that these patterns extend beyond gaming contexts. They can be applied to various non-game scenarios, demonstrating their versatility and

² Dark patterns are unethically utilized for various purposes, including obstructing user privacy within social media (Kaldestad & Myrstad, 2018), and nudging online buying behavior (Sin, Harris, Nilsson, & Beck, 2022).

³ Some dark patterns identified by Zagal et al. (2013) aim at compelling users to perform repetitive tasks (grinding), adhere to specific play schedules dictated by the game (playing by appointment), and pay to bypass nagging (pay to skip). However, these dark patterns may not directly correspond to TLM's mechanics.

relevance beyond the realm of gaming. For example, purchasing a pass to skip the line at an amusement park could be seen as a form of “pay to cheat” design. In the TLM Winning Tactic section, these dark patterns are identified and subsequently interpreted. This framework lays the foundation for addressing the third subquestion, which pertains to the malevolent design that incentivizes financial interactions.

Connect to a Network

Video game streaming has revolutionized entertainment with platforms like Twitch, drawing millions worldwide to watch gamers play and interact in real-time. This shift has fundamentally transformed how we engage with video games, offering a dynamic and immersive experience for players and viewers alike (Benjamin, 2024). Taylor’s book “Watch Me Play” (2018) explores the rise and impact of live game streaming on Twitch, delving into its cultural and social dimensions. She highlights how game streaming has transformed gaming into a communal and spectator-driven activity.⁴ The participatory culture is evident through audience engagement in chat, turning viewers into active contributors. Streamers employ body language like facial expressions and reactions to immerse the audience. The user experience and the fan interactions play an overarching role in this dynamic. Streamers can turn broadcast into a professional income revenue by utilizing various forms of monetization, such as donations. Donation trains, defined by Taylor (2018, p.96-97) as a continuous flow of donations, are evident during live streams and imply a collectivity to sustain the streamer. These donations disrupt the flow of the live session and may spin out of control, preventing the streamer from focusing on the main topic. Observing a donation train elicits a palpable sense of energy as both the streamer and their audience become increasingly excited when large sums of money are contributed. Pop-up notifications, often accompanied by sounds, consistently appear on the screen, heightening the viewer experience. As Taylor (2018, p.96-97) explains, in certain scenarios, a persistent tally displaying the largest donation amount and the donor’s name remains visible throughout the entire broadcast. This financial ecosystem is intricately linked to an attention economy rooted in fandom, where every element is intentionally designed to engage and maintain viewers’ active participation. It transforms Twitch into a promotional hub for both gaming companies and self-marketing, diluting the platform's transformative essence (Taylor, 2018, p.256). Referring to Caillois, Brock (2017, p. 322) raises concerns about the corruption of pure play through professionalization, suggesting that the competition element (*agôn*) in the game is compromised when the boundaries

⁴A similar phenomenon has been noted on YouTube, where the focus is not on storytelling a game but rather on capturing gaming sessions, often in a humorous and playful manner (Glas, 2015).

between work and play become blurred. Professional streamers shift their focus from broadcasting for the sake of play to broadcasting primarily for financial gains. On the contrary, certain streamers perceive it as ethically questionable to profit excessively from what might be considered impulsive and irrational financial decisions made by viewers (Taylor, 2018, p.96-97).

Current research about live streaming primarily delves into the motivations behind individuals watching others play games or forming communities, leaving lesser-explored phenomena such as straw polls, donation messages, and stream-integrated games in the shadow. Brandis and Bozkurt (2021, p.166-167) name these aspects “audience gaming”⁵ and will not be explored in this paper.

When examining the audience of these live streams, Blight (2017) argues that parasocial relationships between content creators and their fandoms tend to be non-reciprocal, yet they are perceived as authentic by viewers, leading to a sense of considering the streamer almost as a friend. Moreover, the continual presence of these microcelebrities strengthens the intimate bond viewers share with them by enhancing accessibility. Viewers’ sense of community is closely linked to the acts of expressive information sharing (i.e., personal, or exclusive information) and social interactions. The immersive qualities of streaming platforms—marked by transparency, realism, and real-time interactions—significantly shape both parasocial relationships and fandom (Blight, 2017).

Buying a gift to a streamer may be perceived as compensation for the content or an emotional attachment and reflect a genuine desire to engage in interactive communication (Wohn et al., 2018, p. 5-8). The act of sending gifts is visible by all during the stream and becomes a public declaration of admiration and appreciation for the streamer (Lu et al., 2018, p.7). Dolfsma et al. (2008) state that the gift exchange plays a cultural crucial role in shaping social networks and serving to initiate, maintain, or strengthen relationships. While often considered altruistic, the exchange of gifts can be motivated by self-interest. Gift giving can serve as a strategic, self-motivated action aiming to create an obligation for reciprocation. Trust is implicit in the expectation of a counter-gift, yet it is not explicit. Gift exchange, devoid of legal contracts, creates a social debt when gifts are not reciprocated. In a community, individuals feel obligated to give, receive, and reciprocate. The initial gift acts as an offer to become a member of the social capital community, thus positioning gift exchange as an incentive to create relationships as a social capital (Dolfsma et al., 2008).

The concept of capitalized relationships between streamers and viewers provides valuable insights into the dynamics of the TLM, as addressed in the second subquestion. These insights contribute significantly to comprehend how the professionalization of play in the live streaming domain and the cultivation of parasocial relationships generate a sense of social capital community. In

⁵Audience gaming involves a dynamic interaction among a game, a player, and an engaged audience, fostering direct communication between the audience and the game system, regardless of the streamer’s influence. In this setting, both streamers and audiences assume the role of players within the game.

the TLM Winning Tactic **Erreur ! Source du renvoi introuvable.**section, these concepts play a crucial role by deciphering the discursive tendencies of content creators.

Strategy

In the pursuit of comprehending the multifaceted nature of TLM, the walkthrough analysis by Light et al. (2016) emerges as a valuable methodological tool. As a synthesis of scientific, technologic, and cultural studies, this approach embodies the principles of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), where a relational ontology between sociocultural and technical processes are inseparably entwined. This research demonstrates the integration of sociocultural and technical processes, effectively applying principles akin to ANT without a strict adherence to its framework.⁶

Selecting Light et al. (2016) for the walkthrough analysis is based on its proven effectiveness in providing a comprehensive and insightful exploration of interactive dynamics. By providing a nuanced examination of the app interface and affordances, this method aligns with my study aiming to uncover mechanisms shaping user financial engagement. Chosen for its thoroughness and critical approach, the walkthrough analysis offers valuable insights into the reciprocal influence of sociocultural dynamics and technological affordances. By systematically navigating through the app's interface, the method establishes a foundational corpus of data that forms the basis for a nuanced examination of the app's intended purpose, cultural connotations, and the implied ideals of both users and uses. Furthermore, the walkthrough serves as a launching pad for in-depth user-centered research, highlighting how users resist predefined structures and repurpose app technologies for their individual needs (Light et al., 2016, p.881).

The walkthrough involves a step-by-step observation and documentation of the app's screen, features, and activity flow. It encompasses two crucial dimensions: the environment of expected use and the technical walkthrough.

The environment of expected use (Light et al., 2016, p.889-890) is scrutinized by delving into the app's vision, operating model, and governance, shedding light on how the app provider envisions its reception, profit generation, and other potential benefits, including regulating the user activity. The app's vision encompasses its purpose, target user base, and scenarios of use, which are typically conveyed through the app provider's organizational materials. In the scope of this research, the analysis will focus solely on TLM rather than the communication surrounding it. In this context, the vision becomes apparent through the observation of various affordances and functionalities. For

⁶ The research selectively integrates ANT principles without fully adopting its detailed methodologies. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of sociocultural and technical dynamics without being constrained by the specific requirements and terminology of ANT.

instance, the recognition of *paidia* reveals the scenario of use by emphasizing the playful essence of the competition. This insight illuminates how users interact with the platform in a spontaneous and unrestrained manner, offering also valuable perspectives into the characteristics of the targeted user base. Light et al. (2016, p.889-890) argue that the app's operating model involves its business strategy and revenue sources⁷, providing insights into the underlying political and economic interests. In this study, the evaluation of the operating model revolves around the gamification of financial engagement within the app and the app's revenue share extracted from each live match. The governance of the app refers to how the app provider strives to manage and regulate user activity to maintain their operating model and reach their vision. This governance is obvious in the app's rules and guidelines, delineating the perimeters for user conduct, and determining the eligibility criteria for app users. The governance of TLM is examined by scrutinizing its structure and the *ludus* elements embedded within the game.

The technical walkthrough (Light et al., 2016, p.891-892) entails a thorough analysis and observation of technical elements, including the arrangement of the user interface, functions and features, textual content and tone, and symbolic representation. The user interface arrangement involves guiding users through activities by strategically placing buttons and menus according to factors such as their size and accessibility. The technical walkthrough's exploration of functions and features incorporates sets of arrangements that either require or facilitate various activities. This includes elements such as pop-up windows, mandatory fields, and requests to connect with other user accounts. However, the analysis excludes aspects like compulsory fields and requests for linking with other user accounts, as they do not provide direct insights into financial spending behavior. In the TLM Winning Tactic section, the user interface, and functions and features are explored utilizing the dark patterns framework (Gray et al., 2018; Zagal, Björk, & Lewis, 2013). Leveraging principles from HCI, this approach aims to understand how design influences user actions. The textual content and tone characteristic of Light et al.'s technical walkthrough (2016, p.891-892) focuses on the text embedded in the user interface and its impact on shaping user behavior. This research incorporates and refines this characteristic by conducting a conventional content analysis of five live matches, which are explored in detail during the analysis phase. As advocated by Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p.1279), I deeply immerse myself in the data, allowing for the emergence of new insights. This content analysis delves into the discursive impact of content creators and the cultivation of a sense of community, thereby contributing to the analysis of parasocial relationships within TLM. The final aspect of the technical walkthrough is the symbolic representation, utilizing a semiotic approach to scrutinize the visual aesthetics and overall

⁷ Revenue generation within this model may entail payments for the app itself or in-app purchases, granting users access to additional functions, heightened levels of engagement, or tokens for increased interaction.

impression of the app. This analysis encompasses elements such as branding, color schemes, and font choices. In this study, a complete exploration of symbolic representation is not undertaken. Nevertheless, connections are drawn to the symbolic representation of gifts, suggesting that the attractiveness of more expensive gifts could potentially influence users' spending behavior.

As argued by Light et al. (2016, p.884), the walkthrough allows for adaptability, enabling tailoring to specific study requirements. The focus of the research is specifically on the TLM feature, rather than encompassing the entire TikTok app. In this research, data collection entailed navigating platform features to identify gameful elements and dark patterns. Furthermore, I explored the rankings of top content creators, identifying those engaged in English-language matches. I recorded five matches to conduct an in-depth examination of their content, aiming to extract valuable insights from the discourse of content creators.⁸ This sample size is chosen to strike a balance between obtaining meaningful insights and ensuring a manageable analysis process, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the observations. In addition to analyzing the matches, I explored the interface thoroughly. I proactively interacted with the feature, seeking out functionalities driving financial spending. Given the method's adaptability, some degree of subjectivity is inherent, as the researcher must make choices regarding the elements to include or omit during the data collection. Additional limitations are discussed in the conclusion.

Analysis of TLM Winning Tactic

The corpus is meticulously organized around distinct subquestions, contributing to the overall structural clarity of the study. Each subquestion is approached through a different facet of the walkthrough method outlined by Light et al. (2016).

Firstly, an overview of the process of these matches is provided. To find a live match on TLM, users must navigate away from the traditional For You Page (FYP). Live matches are accessible within the app's live section, via the live button or through the search bar as indicated by the arrows in Fig. 1a. Within the live section, users need to scroll through the streams to find a live match. Interestingly, the TLM screen layout diverges from the classic TikTok format, the video does not cover the entire page and includes additional affordances and functionalities such as a progress bar and options for sending gifts.

⁸ In the collected data, the full names or usernames of participants are anonymized to ensure privacy, adhering to the Utrecht University guidelines outlined in <https://students.uu.nl/sites/default/files/Student%20checklist%20-%20human-subject%20related%20research-FETC.pdf>

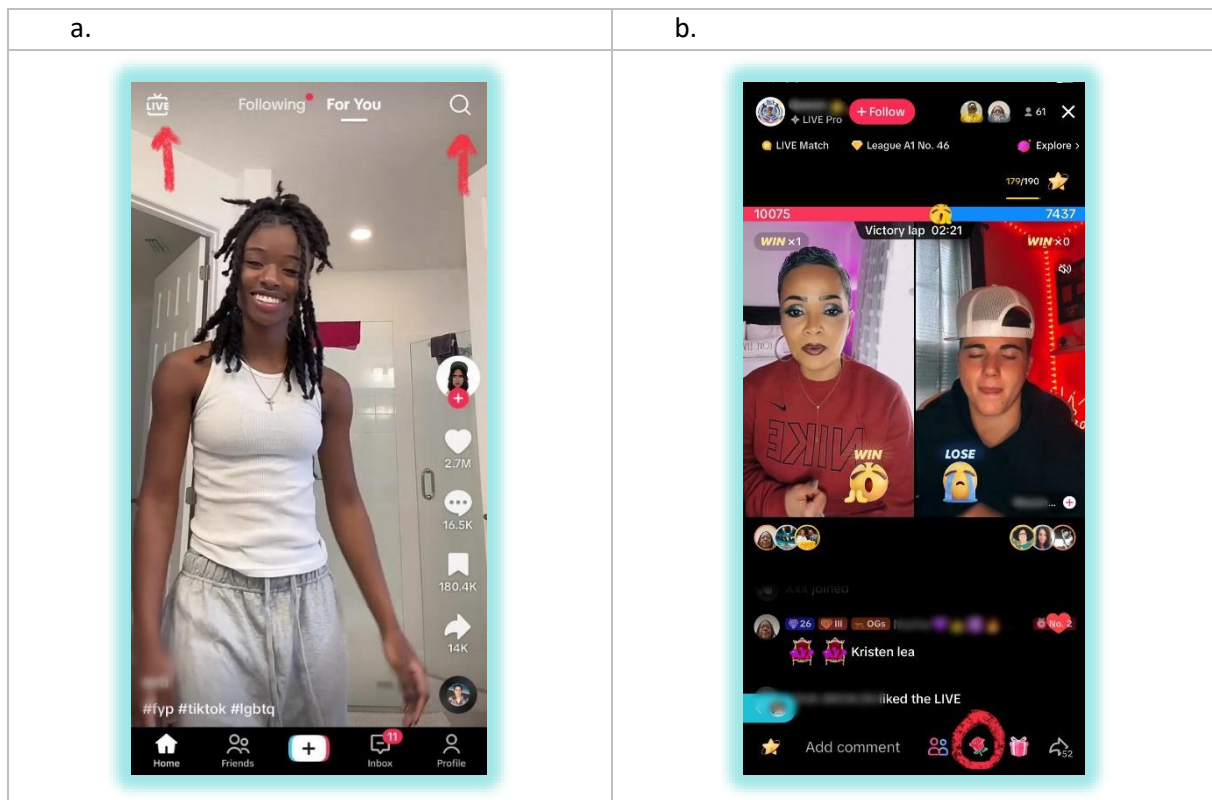


Figure 1: FYP and access to TLM (a.) and TLM (b.)

To be eligible for a live match on TikTok, content creators must be over 18 years old and have at least 1,000 followers.⁹ During the five-minute match, competitors aim to gather the most match points. These points come as gifts from the audience. To send gifts, users purchase TikTok coins from the designated section of the app encircled in Fig. 1b. Each coin corresponds to 0.013€ and is equivalent to one match point. Gifts range from one coin to 44,999 coins. Contrary to TikTok videos, once the matches are finished, they are no longer visible on the creators' profile. Content creators initiate matches spontaneously without any scheduling or oversight from TikTok. Users can only become aware of ongoing matches by enabling notifications for their favorite content creators¹⁰ or by stumbling upon the match randomly while browsing the platform. Unlike other entertainment platforms like YouTube, videos on TikTok do not have titles. Similarly, matches lack clear topics, causing users to refer to them by naming the content creators.

Side Quest: Searching the hook

The first subquestion, “How does TikTok present gift sending as a gameful activity?”, delves into TLM’s affordances and functionalities, and their connection to game-like elements. This analysis draws upon the environment of expected use as delineated by Light et al. (2016), encompassing the

⁹ These conditions are clearly outlined on their website and in the app’s guidelines. Without adhering to these conditions, users do not even see the option to start a live match on TikTok.

¹⁰ This can be achieved by visiting a content creator’s profile and clicking on the bell icon next to their name.

app's vision, operating model, and governance. The affordances¹¹ presented here contribute to the governance of the app as users are unable to play without them, except for the content creators' ranking and the LIVE community. The game elements within TikTok are strategically deployed to both manage and optimize user engagement. The elements examined in this study are rankings, challenges, and community. Rankings serve as the primary governance element in the feature, structuring gameplay and offering monetary rewards. Challenges govern by setting match objectives, structuring gameplay around specific targets. The community aspect demonstrates governance by leveraging parasocial relationships.

Rankings

TikTok's ranking system revolves around the acquisition of virtual diamonds, whose exact valuation remains undisclosed within the app's interface. The implicit correlation between diamonds and monetary value is revealed when TikTok actively prompts audiences to send gifts, thereby fueling creators' progression in the rankings (Fig. 2). This mechanism mimics other systems in Chinese live streaming platforms as documented by Zhang et al. (2019, p.344-357). This indicates a common practice for ranking users based on their earnings on the platform and so their financial success.

By fostering a competitive atmosphere, TikTok leverages these rankings to emulate user engagement requiring then a constant activity. Determining the order in which creators are displayed to viewers directly influences audience engagement, content consumption, and ultimately, financial success of creators. There are various ranking systems based on hourly, daily, or weekly metrics, which influence the behaviors of content creators on the platform.¹² These dynamic rankings are further complicated by the introduction of diverse leagues and locations. It exerts a pressure on content creators to keep high activity levels to maintain their position. The app employs this strategy to bolster user activity and sustain its operating model. The competitive nature of the rankings sometimes leads creators to opt for non-participation.¹³ In the content analysis, two content creators¹³ discussed the pressure associated

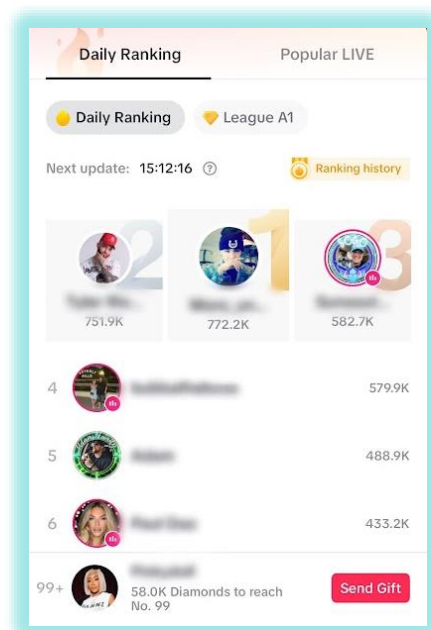


Figure 2: content creators ranking

¹¹ Affordances highlight the actionable possibilities that users perceive and interact with, influenced by the features and design of the platform or tool. The star button on Twitter serves as an example of an affordance, enabling users to mark content as "favorite" (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

¹² The fluctuations between rankings are irregular and sometimes nonexistent. For example, I observed that creators from Dubai only have access to hourly rankings.

¹³ They can still participate in matches but will not be included in the rankings.

with weekly rankings, one remarking: “80% of these people in the dailies, they wouldn’t survive in weeklies” (Match 1). It suggests that while daily rankings may offer smaller creators an opportunity to secure a spot, weekly rankings are more challenging. They also expressed that some creators opt for non-participation due to the pressure to secure a position in rankings or the anxiety of falling behind. The platform’s capacity to rearrange rankings, challenging content creators, highlight its pervasive governance over the gameplay experience.

The multitude of rewards (Fig. 3) provided to content creators intensify the commercialization of the platform’s gaming environment.

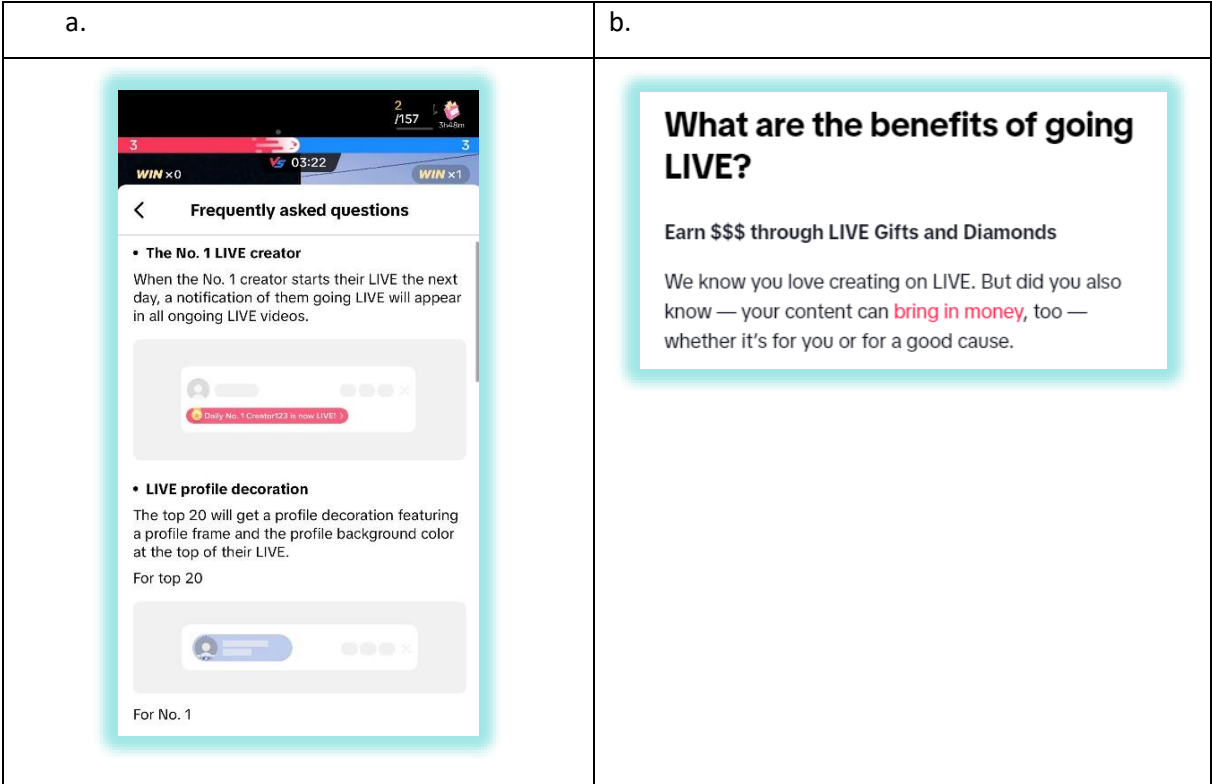


Figure 3: ranking-related rewards for content creators (a.) and promotion for money earning on the app (b.)

The introduction of rewards, including both monetary and virtual elements, fosters a competitive environment among content creators. This strategy serves as a marketing tool that incentivizes creators to actively engage in broadcasting and encourages viewers to send gifts. These rewards embody the app’s vision (Light et al., 2016) by illustrating the expected scenario of use. With a diverse range of rewards, users are encouraged to actively engage with the feature, striving to achieve objectives that align with both their personal interests and the operating model of the app. The appeal of rewards may attract users to create content on TikTok instead of alternative platforms like Twitch, where gamification is less prevalent and successful streamers do not receive additional monetary rewards.

Aside from the top content creator ranking, the top contributor ranking specifically highlights the users who contribute the most to a single content creator during a match (Fig. 4). This system aligns

with Light et al.'s (2016, p.890) description of the app's operating strategy bolstering its business model. The emphasis on top contributors promotes increased user engagement, fostering community dynamics and driving revenue generation through enhanced user interactions and spending behaviors.

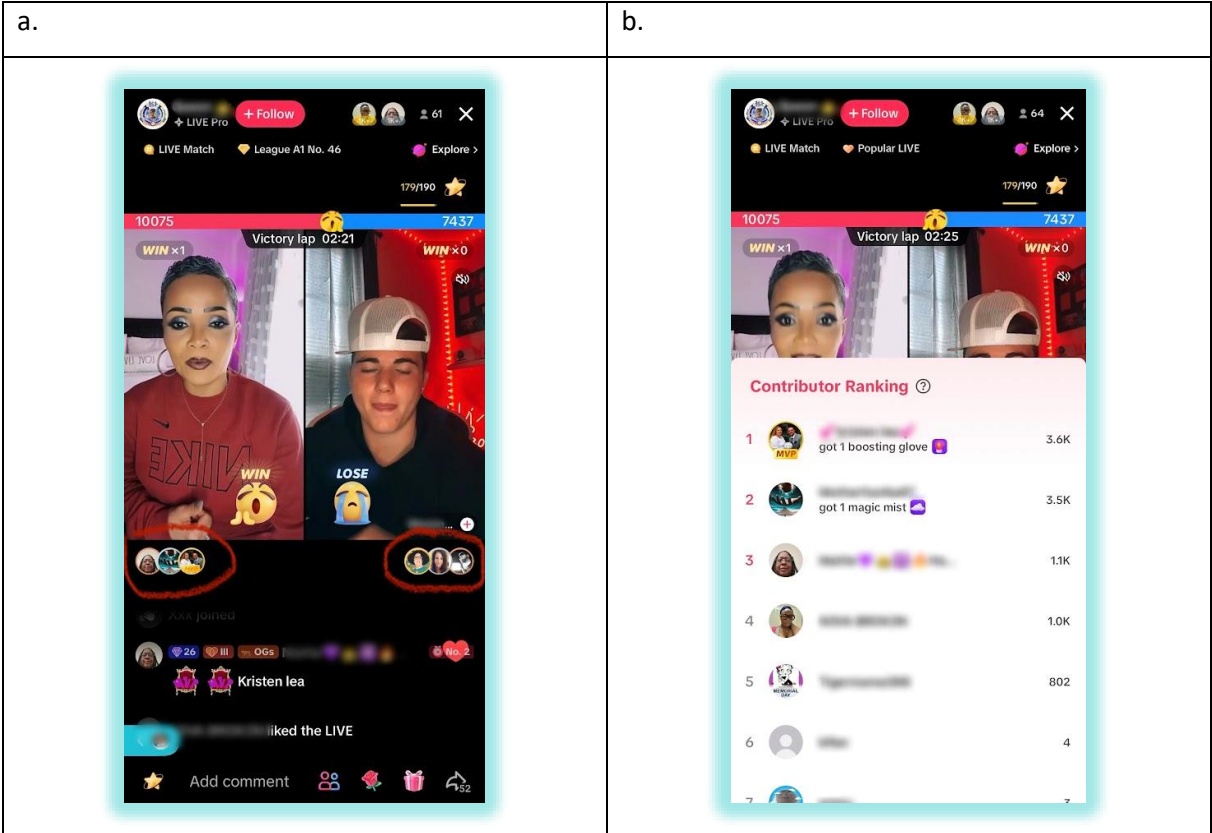


Figure 4: contributor ranking display (a.) and leaderboard (b.)

The distinctive setup of the top contributors ranking on TikTok introduces a temporary leaderboard that lasts only for the five minutes duration of a match. This ephemeral nature fosters a climate conducive to spontaneous and short-lived spending behaviors. Viewers may feel compelled to engage in impulsive spending during matches, like in a bid, to secure a higher position in the ranking, thereby prioritizing immediate gratification over sustainable contributions over time.

When exploring the app, elements identified by Light et al. (2016) as tokens for increased interactions and contributing to the app's operational model were evident in the numerous badges and power-ups provided to top contributors. These elements are reflected in the top contributors ranking. The viewer who contributed the most during a match is awarded the MVP (Most Valuable Player) badge for the subsequent match (Fig. 5).

Additionally, the allocation of power-up rewards to the top three top donors during matches amplifies the gamification elements

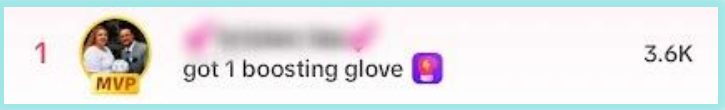


Figure 5: MVP and power-up

inherent in TLM. These power-ups, ranging from boosting gloves to magic mists and stun hammers,

inject a sense of dynamism and unpredictability into the gameplay. Viewers have the option to store the power-ups and use them at their discretion. By granting viewers who contribute the most with these coveted prizes, TikTok effectively empowers high-spending viewers and reinforces their propensity to continue spending during matches. These game elements contribute to *ludus* by providing users with clear goals and incentives, mirroring traditional gaming contexts where players strive to achieve specific accomplishments.

In contrast to the short-term visibility of the top contributors ranking, TLM offer a mechanism to recognize long-term behaviors through gifter ranks. Viewers can level up in these rankings, with each advancement celebrated in the chat (Fig. 6).

This feature acts as a powerful motivator for users to escalate their spending, offering a tangible indicator of their status and generosity within the community. This aspect of TLM adds a

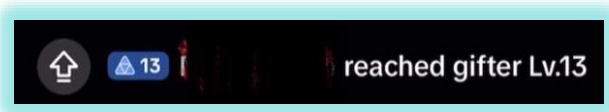


Figure 6: announcement of gifter rank in the chat

personal dimension to the viewer experience, as it incentivizes gifting primarily to progress to the next level rather than gifting to impact the match outcome. This distinct challenge encourages users to increase their spending, thereby enhancing their sense of achievement. In accordance with Light et al.'s (2016) methodology, the progression of gifters' levels unveils insights into the app's envisioned user base. This feature suggests that the platform aims to engage and retain users inclined towards interactive and competitive experiences, aligning with the app's vision of fostering active participation and community engagement.

Challenges

Another gameful element within TLM is the inclusion of speed challenges¹⁴ during live matches, engaging both content creators and viewers (Fig. 7). These challenges are curated by TikTok and are scheduled to occur once a match. On the viewer side, daily missions¹⁵ offer opportunities to level up within the creator's team by earning member values and team points, which contribute to the popular content creators ranking. The speed challenges and daily missions contribute to the platform's operating model by generating revenue for TikTok and keeping users active on the app.

¹⁴ During these challenges, content creators must meet specific targets within a set time frame, such as receiving gifts from a certain number of unique viewers and accumulating gifting points. Upon achieving these targets before the countdown ends, content creators earn double or triple points for a duration ranging from 30 to 60 seconds.

¹⁵ These missions include sending "Heart Me" gifts to gain 45 team points, sending gifts to collect one team point for each coin used, and commenting to earn 30 team points.

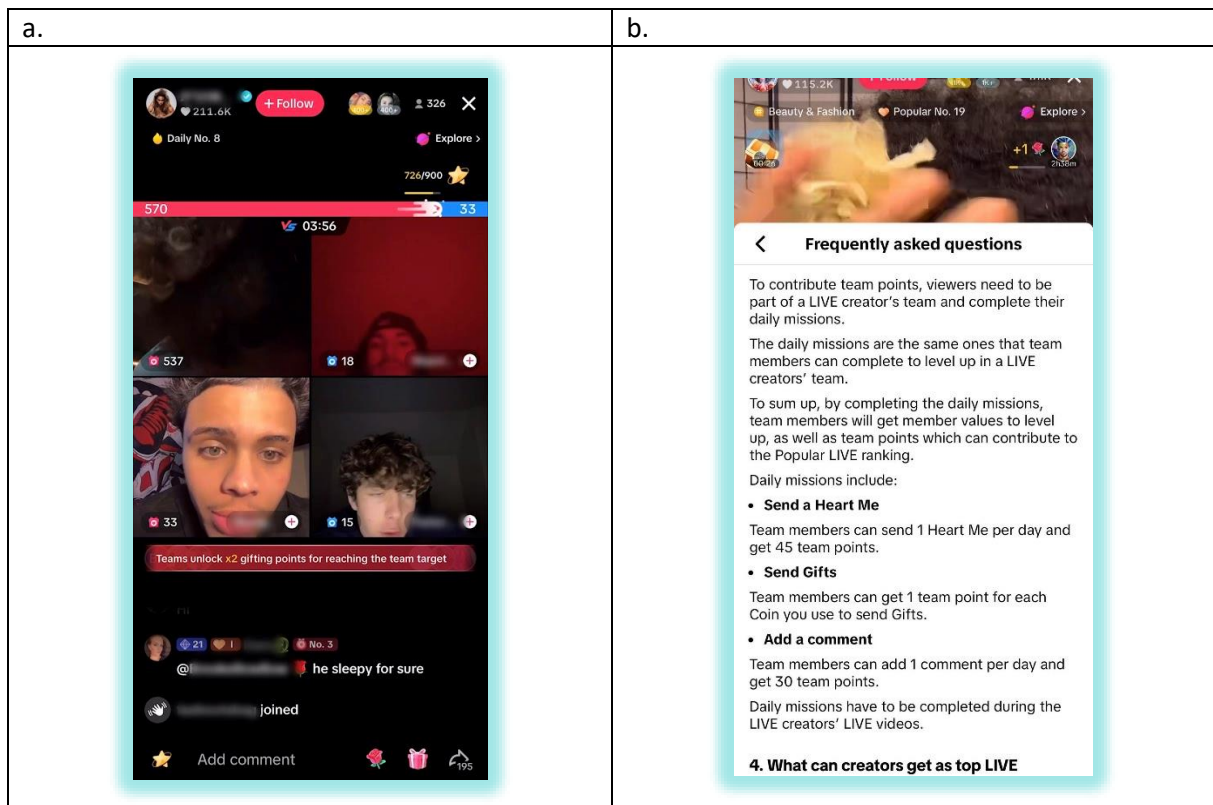


Figure 7: speed challenge (a.) and daily missions (b.)

These elements exemplify the platform’s strategic incorporation of gameful elements to incentivize viewers to engage in gift spending. By imposing specific targets and time constraints on content creators, TLM effectively gamifies the process of receiving gifts, encouraging creators to actively solicit contributions from their audience within a limited timeframe. This urgency not only stimulates viewer participation but also intensifies the competitive atmosphere of the live match, fostering a sense of excitement and urgency encouraging viewers to contribute. Moreover, the implementation of daily missions for viewers further reinforces the gamified experience, offering tangible rewards and progression opportunities within the creator’s team based on their gift-giving and engagement activities.

Community

On TikTok, a sense of community is fostered and gamified through various affordances, one of those is the LIVE community (Fig. 8).

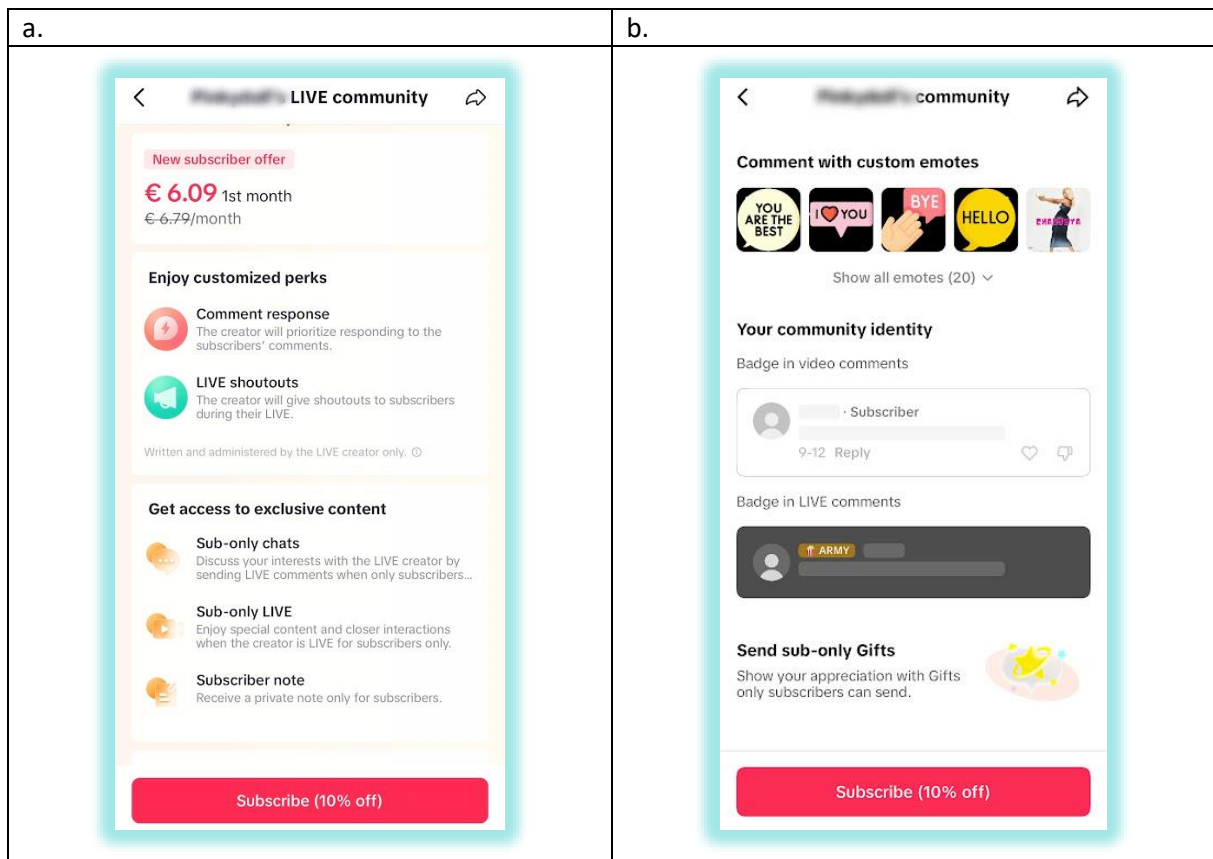


Figure 8: LIVE community (a.) and its advantages: shoutouts, emotes, badges, etc.(b.)

Content creators are empowered to establish this community, set the monthly subscription fee, and determine the services linked. Within the LIVE community, gamification is employed to enhance user engagement and interaction. One prominent aspect of this gamification involves offering prizes and collectibles to subscribers. These rewards, which can range from exclusive virtual items to badges or other digital assets, serve as tangible symbols of a user’s membership status or level of involvement within the community. By offering such rewards, TikTok encourages users to join the community and to actively participate in its events and activities, for enhancing the sense of belonging and engagement among members.

An alternative element that fosters unity between content creators and viewers is the concept of teams. This affordance gamifies the relationship by offering users the opportunity to join a creator’s team by sending them a special gift called the “Heart Me gift”, which costs just one TikTok coin. Joining a creator’s team comes with various privileges, including acknowledgment in the chat upon joining (Fig. 9), access to exclusive gifts, receiving a member badge, and special notifications.

The gamification aspect lies in the psychological manipulation through persuasive messaging

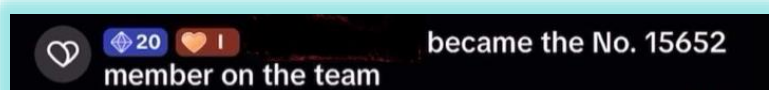


Figure 9: announcement of new team member in the chat

associated with the Heart Me gift. Slogans like “there is a new way to get your favorite creator to notice you” and “show your love and join your creator’s team today” encourage user participation. Overall,

this combination of exclusive benefits and persuasive messaging effectively incentivizes users to engage in gifting within TLM.

These two features reflect the underlying purpose of the app as described in the app's vision step of the walkthrough (Light et al., 2016). They illustrate how the dynamics of the matches are positioned on fostering connections between content creators and viewers. By gamifying this aspect, the platform encourages viewers to join teams, enhancing their sense of belonging and participation.

Back to The Main Quest

The integration of diverse game design elements within TLM fundamentally transforms the act of gift sending into a gameful experience, effectively incentivizing users to invest more and more in virtual gifts. The gift system in TikTok straddles the boundary between *ludus* and *paidia*. On one hand, the quantification of gifts and rankings imposes structure, resembling *ludus* with its defined rules and objectives. By leveraging affordances such as rankings, rewards, challenges, and badges, TLM cultivates a sense of purpose-driven behavior and active engagement reminiscent of traditional gaming contexts. This gamified environment not only enhances user experience but also serves as an effective marketing strategy for TikTok. By altering the rankings system or adjusting the conversion rate of gifts to match points during power-ups, TikTok efficiently implements a marketing strategy that encourages viewers to purchase gifts. This strategic manipulation of *ludus* elements aligns with Hamari and Lehdonvirta's (2010) findings, emphasizing the pivotal role of modifying *ludus* characteristics in the marketing of virtual goods. Through these adjustments, users are incentivized to send more gifts within a short timeframe. However, TLM does not provide implicit or flexible guidelines like the concept of *paidia* described by Hamari and Lehdonvirta (2010). The rules are rigid: the winner is determined by the contender who receives the most money through gifts, and users can only send gifts available on the app and with a fixed cost. Nevertheless, the spontaneity inherent in gift sending introduces an element of improvisation, akin to *paidia*'s free-form play. This spontaneity is further accentuated by daily challenges, strategically designed to exploit users' impulsive tendencies, and encourage excessive spending behaviors within TikTok's user base. Consequently, users may develop a sense of dependency on the platform for instant gratification. However, the rewarding of impulsive spending behaviors through badges and prizes raises significant concerns regarding the potential exploitation of viewers' susceptibility to engage in precipitate and uncontrolled spending. Moreover, the display of the MVP badge during a match may intensify social pressure on the MVP, potentially influencing their behavior and encouraging further engagement or contribution. In his work, Hamari (2015, p.36) emphasizes the motivating influence of badges on monetary contributions. When examining TLM, it is evident that TikTok fosters a self-sustaining loop of giving by highlighting badges in its reward system. This approach encourages users to compete for recognition and status within the platform's community, thereby promoting continued engagement and contribution.

As highlighted by Caillois and echoed by contemporary scholars like Brock (2017, p. 322), the introduction of financial elements into play fundamentally alters its pure dynamics, infusing it with both financial and competitive intensity. However, this notion is nuanced by insights gathered by Taylor (2018, p. 96-97) from Twitch content creators who express discomfort with receiving donations. In contrast, based on my research and extensive experience on the app, content creators participating in TLM do not seem to share similar sentiments. If these creators harbored reservations about accepting money from their followers, they would likely opt for basic live streaming on TikTok. TLM fully embrace monetary incentives as integral components of their gaming ecosystems, where viewer contributions are indispensable for success. In the context of *ludus*, the ultimate outcome of the game is winning. Within TLM, winning is synonymous with amassing the most money, thereby making money the ultimate objective. Ethical discussions are warranted to mitigate potential adverse impacts on user well-being and the integrity of the gaming experience. These ethical considerations remain unexplored within this study but represent valuable avenues for future research.

Side Quest: Find the dark mode

The second question, “How is TLM designed to encourage monetary interactions?”, scrutinizes the design elements of TLM that are crafted to encourage specific actions. These design elements are referred to by Brignull (2010) as dark patterns and classified by Gray et al. (2018, p.5). Moreover, Zagal et al. (2013) have identified specific dark patterns in game design. They are analyzed with a focus on the technical walkthrough to dissect the arrangement of the user interface, functionalities, and features designed to foster financial engagement.

Dark Patterns

The technical walkthrough delves into the functionalities and features, which include arrangements facilitating or necessitating various activities such as pop-up messages (Light et al., 2016) (Fig. 10). These messages, perceived as nagging elements by Gray et al. (2018, p.5), are strategically incorporated within the platform’s operational framework and governance. They are strategically programmed by TikTok to appear at regular intervals during match viewing sessions. I observed that, they typically appear approximately every five

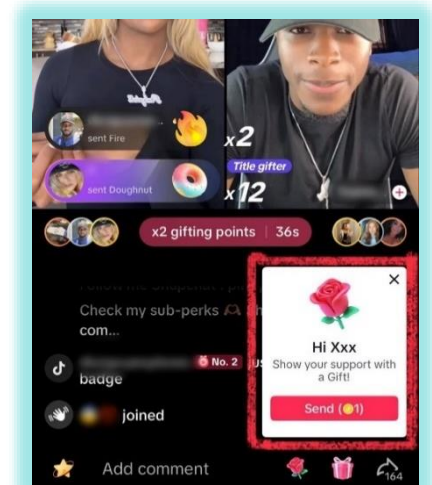


Figure 10: customized pop-up messages encouraging gifting

matches, roughly every 35 minutes.¹⁶ These intrusive messages serve as pivotal components aimed to steering user behavior towards the lucrative action of sending gifts during matches, bolstering TikTok's financial gains through a profit-sharing model. By prompting users to engage in gift-giving, these pop-ups instill a sense of urgency, creating a psychological pressure that nudges individuals towards spending on virtual gifts. As highlighted by Taylor (2018), such messages serve the purpose of sustaining viewers' attention and encouraging active participation. This persistent reinforcement of gift-giving behaviors not only drives immediate revenue but also cultivates a pattern of expenditure among users, consolidating TikTok's revenue stream over the long term. Furthermore, the strategic integration of subtly animated images with these messages captivates the user's attention. These animations elevate the message, ultimately amplifying its persuasive appeal. This symbiotic relationship between nagging pop-up messages, visual stimuli, and user spending reveals the platform's persuasive design techniques to drive revenue generation.

TikTok's approach to money conversion (Fig. 11) includes deliberate complexities, identified as the dark pattern of obstruction (Gray et al., 2018, p.5) where processes are intentionally complicated. By setting the conversion rate of TikTok coins to real currency at 0.013€, users face significant difficulty in discerning the genuine cost of gifts and assessing their expenditure on the platform. This deliberate complexity is designed to blur users from their financial outlays, fostering a sense of disconnection between the virtual transactions and their real monetary implications. Consequently, users may unintentionally overspend, particularly amidst the heightened excitement of live matches, where the focus is on participation rather than financial scrutiny. This strategy closely aligns with the concept of sneaking within dark patterns (Gray et al., 2018, p.5), where vital information is obfuscated to manipulate user behavior. By presenting gift values exclusively in TikTok coins, the platform effectively conceals the actual monetary implications of user actions, thereby perpetuating a cycle of uninformed spending and reinforcing its revenue streams.

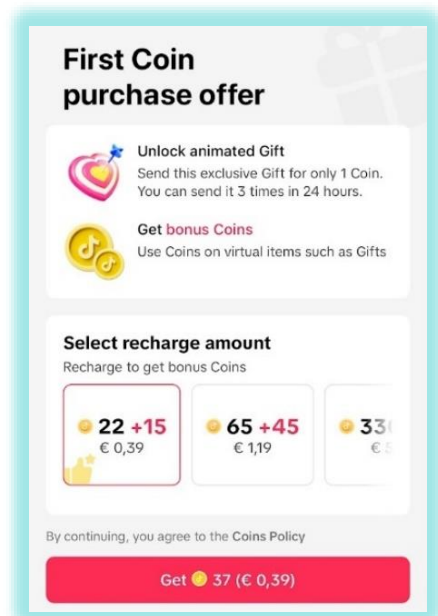


Figure 11: money conversion

¹⁶ Falling within the average attention span range observed from 11 years old to 16 years old and beyond (Keshirim, 2023). In the context of platforms like TikTok, which are designed to capture and retain user attention, understanding these attention spans helps understand strategies to optimize content and features to maintain user interest.

Another obstructed feature is the gift limit (Fig. 12). Users have the option to set a daily limit on gift spending, although this functionality is not prominently promoted within the app. Users must seek information online to

How to set your Gift limit on TikTok

To set your Gift limit:

1. In the TikTok app, tap LIVE at the top.
2. Tap the Share button at the bottom.
3. Tap Settings.
4. Tap Gift limit notification, then turn the Gift limit notification setting on and follow the steps to set a daily gift limit.
5. Tap Set. We'll notify you when you reach the limit.
6. When you receive the Gift limit notification, tap Manage limit to adjust your limit, or you can choose to switch off the notification for 7 days.

Figure 12: set gift limit (found on TikTok's website)

discover the procedure. Furthermore, its accessibility is impeded as the feature is not listed in the general settings of the app. Users who could benefit from this notification to better control their spending might overlook it, as they must browse for such feature. Like gambling platforms, the concealment of the gift limit creates a sense of ambiguity and unpredictability around spending behavior. This ambiguity fosters *paidia*, where users engage in spontaneous and explorative spending without clear constraints or boundaries, akin to the thrill and uncertainty experienced in gambling contexts. Obscuring access to important spending controls underscores the responsibility of platform developers in mitigating addiction risks.

The interface interference dark pattern category (Gray et al., 2018, p.5) aligns with the user interface step described in Light et al.'s technical walkthrough



Figure 13: clustering of interactive elements

(2016, p.891), as both examine the interaction between the user and the interface. In the context of TLM, although the size of buttons appears uniform and the prominence of the gift button is not exaggerated, there exists a conspicuous clustering of interactive elements primarily at the bottom of the screen. By positioning the revenue-generating functionalities near each other, the interface subtly nudges users towards monetary interaction, thereby amplifying the likelihood of user expenditure within the platform. Moreover, this strategic clustering of interactive elements serves to ensure the consistent visibility and accessibility of key revenue-generating functionalities throughout live streaming sessions. By strategically placing these elements within the user's immediate field of view, the interface effectively streamlines the user experience, making it effortless for users to navigate and engage in monetary transactions.

In TLM, the platform's design mandates that users make monetary contributions if they wish to play an active role in the gameplay and exert influence over match outcomes.¹⁷ This intentional

¹⁷Estimating the conversion rate of non-donors to donors in TLM proves challenging due to the unique behavior of each content creator's team, which varies significantly from match to match.

design strategy effectively coerces users into opening their wallets to progress in rankings or support their chosen team, thus employing the coercive mechanisms inherent in the forced action (Gray et al., 2018, p.5) and pre-delivered content (Zagal et al., 2013) patterns. It mandates monetary payment as a prerequisite for accessing these enhanced functionalities within the game environment. This dual-pronged approach may elicit feelings of frustration and disenchantment among users, as they grapple with the realization of their passive role in the gameplay and their inability to contribute meaningfully to their team’s success. Such a coercive design strategy runs the risk of alienating users and undermining their sense of agency within the platform. To avoid feeling like mere sidelined spectators in their own gaming experience, users may feel compelled to purchase gifts to rectify the power imbalance and reclaim an active role in participation. Thus, while this design tactic may initially serve to drive revenue generation for the platform, its long-term ramifications on user satisfaction and engagement merit critical scrutiny and consideration. Moreover, the symbolic representation of gifts within TLM, coupled with the portrayal of more expensive gifts generating more impressive visual effects, serves as a subtle yet potent mechanism to incentivize users towards purchasing higher-priced gifts.¹⁸ This manipulation of user perceptions and behaviors underscores TikTok’s exploitation of cognitive biases to drive increased spending among its user-base.

I observed that the competitive dynamics within TLM bear a striking resemblance to the monetized rivalries pattern identified in game design literature by Zagal et al. (2013). Users are strategically nudged to deploy their financial resources to ascend the rankings ladder (Fig. 14).

It employs a persuasive tone that encourages users to assist their favorite content creators in advancing their ranking position, effectively leveraging parasocial relationships within the platform. TLM actively cultivates an environment conducive to spending among users, thereby perpetuating a cycle of benefits for content creators: heightened gifting levels directly translate to tangible monetary gains and an increased likelihood of clinching match victories, which in turn augments one’s visibility within the rankings’ hierarchy. Moreover, viewers with the highest spending propensity are granted distinct advantages by the platform, thereby reinforcing their favored content creator's position in the ranking race. This strategy exploits the strong connection between viewers and content



Figure 14: pay to ascend the ranking

¹⁸ It plays into the psychological phenomenon of perceived value, where users are inclined to perceive more expensive items as possessing greater worth or desirability. By associating larger gifts with more dazzling visual effects, TikTok strategically amplifies the allure of higher-priced gifts, enticing users to splurge on these premium offerings in pursuit of enhanced social recognition or status within the platform’s ecosystem.

creators to incentivize further engagement and spending. This recursive interplay underscores the inseparable bounds between monetary outlays, gameplay triumphs, and platform prominence within the ecosystem of TLM. Such insights shed light on the sophisticated mechanisms at play, where financial investments seamlessly intertwine with competitive gameplay and parasocial relationships.

Back to The Main Quest

By exploring the impact of dark patterns on financial spending during live matches on TikTok, several critical insights emerge. These design tactics underscore the platform's objective of maximizing user monetization while simultaneously fostering user engagement and interaction within the TLM ecosystem. Content creators have limited control over these affordances. The only incentives content creators can offer are launching their LIVE community and the associated benefits, as well as their discourse during these matches, as discussed in the following section.

From a critical perspective, this manipulation of user behavior raises ethical concerns regarding the exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities for financial gain. Building upon Brignull's (2020) discussion of dark patterns as design techniques that divert users from their immediate interests, the pervasive use of these tactics in TLM may contribute to fostering a culture of compulsive spending. These patterns raise concerns about the potential impact on certain users' financial well-being. By subtly steering users towards monetary transactions through strategic user interface design, the platform potentially infringes upon user agency, manipulating their behavior. It underscores the importance of ensuring transparency to raise donor awareness, thereby empowering users to understand how their actions are influenced. Regulatory measures are essential to combat unethical design practices, safeguarding users from exploitation and upholding their autonomy. Platforms can contribute to this by offering clear explanations about the intentions and implications of features such as in-app purchases or donation prompts. Interestingly, TikTok offers the option to set a notification when the gift limit is reached. However, the accessibility to this option is obstructed. Expanding on the discussion of user manipulation through design patterns, exploring parasocial relationships within TLM provides insight into elements influencing user spending behaviors beyond interface design.

Side Quest: Infiltrate matches

The last question, "How are parasocial relationships shaping TLM?", involves a content analysis of five live matches. The textual content and tone were examined in the technical walkthrough. A content analysis of five matches was conducted to find insights about the parasocial relationships inherent in TLM.

The five matches

The analyzed matches (Table 1) scored amounts ranging from 151.30€ to 1,912.88€ and showing no direct correlation with position in ranking or number of viewers. This highlights that each

match exhibits a unique gifting dynamic. For example, the match that had the deepest conversation¹⁹ and the highest number of viewers (Match 1) generated the least amount of money. Interestingly, the match where one content creator was not interactive with the audience due to attending a physical event²⁰ (Match 4) received the second-highest amount of donations. Moreover, the match with the fewest viewers (Match 3) received the highest number of donations. The prevalence of gameful elements and dark patterns across all users implies that parasocial relationships play a significant role in motivating gift giving. Additionally, certain content creators have developed specialties that attract followers. For instance, the creator of Match 2 is renowned for role-playing NPCs and delivering unique lines for each gift received. This distinctive approach has garnered her a substantial fan base. In 2023, during an appearance on the Canadian show “Tout le monde en parle”, she revealed that she typically raises \$7,000 per streaming session²¹ lasting one or two hours on TikTok (ICI Tou.tv, 2023).

Table 1: description of the five Matches analyzed

Match	1	2	3	4	5
Place in the ranking	2 (daily)	4 (daily)	4 (daily)	4 (weekly)	8 (daily)
Date and time	March 15, 2024, 9:00 PM	February 15, 2024, 6:00 PM	March 14, 2024, 6:00 PM	March 16, 2024, 10:00 PM	March 18, 2024, 2:00 PM
Number of viewers	1,300	1,400	226	881	336
Money collected	151.30€	345.852€	1,912.88€	414.08€	163.21€
Configuration	One vs. one	One vs. one	One vs. one	One vs. one	Two vs. two
Style	Friendly conversation	Playful battle between humans and AI	Dynamic promotion	Asymmetrical participation	Messy competition
Content	Discussing dynamic of rankings	Role playing Non-player Character (NPC)	Encouraging donators	C1 not actively participating, C2 singing and dressing up as a ring girl	Simultaneous dialogue to prompt donations

Each side of the match has its own chat, so when choosing one creator’s side, the chat is revealed. This functionality fosters parasocial relationships as the two teams are distinguished, you are not watching the match as a whole but the match from one team’s point of view. It compels viewers to take a stance and effectively fosters connections with other users who align with the same side. Thereby creating a strong community around each content creators. Among the matches analyzed, an

¹⁹ Regarding the mental health issues associated with the pressure of rankings experienced by certain content creators.

²⁰ He was dividing his attention between looking at the match and attending a boxing event.

²¹ These streams are not live matches but traditional live streaming sessions on TikTok. No data is recorded or maintained for the live matches.

average of 51 messages were sent on the C1²² side of the chat, with a top of 100 messages (Match 1) and a down of 15 messages (Match 5). It indicates that viewers send an average of ten messages per minute, which seems relatively low compared to my experience on other streaming platforms like Twitch. The chat messages revealed that viewers sometimes recognized each other, but mostly responded to the content creators' remarks with a notable use of emojis. From these observations, it appears that the chat does not actively promote financial spending among viewers, as there is little encouragement or discussion related to spending. Additionally, the viewers in the chat show limited interaction with each other. This suggests that these relationships might resemble more of a fandom than a community. While viewers are connected and support the same creator, they may not have strong connections with each other.

Creators' discourse

Unlike Twitch, where donations occasionally form continuous donation trains, TLM centers its dynamic around these financial contributions. In TLM, donation trains are the essence of live matches. Taylor (2018) highlights that some Twitch streamers may view this incessant stream of donations as ethically questionable and potentially bothersome. Yet, such sentiments are not prevalent among content creators on TLM. During matches, content creators actively engage with and express gratitude for donations, often encouraging their audience, as illustrated in Table 2 with quotes excerpted from the transcribed matches.

Table 2: quotes of Matches where content creators encourage the audience to send gifts

Match 1	Match 2	Match 3	Match 4	Match 5
<p><i>MVPLidia, Catherine, Panen, Amber, Lana, lil Bianca, (...), everybody who tap, share and watch, thank you guys so much. TikTok shop, baby, TikTok shop.</i></p>	<p><i>Give me a heart, I love you. Emily let's go! (...) Double tap the rose (...) Guys, we need to win, come on chat, where you at? We can win against her, I know we can, beat her ass, like we did yesterday, come on chat. (...) Everybody be ready, all ready to play. That is the energy I wanna see. Let's go. Janice with the galaxy, that is what I am talking about.</i></p>	<p><i>Heidi, on the speed. Heidi, please. On the speed, Heidi, please. All right, chat tap my screen.</i></p>	<p><i>MVP Mimy, in the chat, thank you so much Mimy. Vodka, KD, Chantal, fam in the chat.</i></p>	<p><i>Kena, thank you Kena. Everyone drops a rose, chat we gotta lock in. On the doubles we go big. On the doubles we play chat (...) Tarsha, yeah Tarsha my number one. That is Tarsha yes (...) I fucking love you, thank you.</i></p>

²² The creator I was watching the match from.

Unlike Twitch’s approach of prominently displaying large donations in a tally, TLM adopts a different method. Instead of highlighting significant donations, the platform opts for a more personalized acknowledgment by displaying the profile pictures of main donors near the content creator’s name. Emphasizing the donors rather than the donations themselves personalizes the process, potentially fostering a sense of closeness between the audience and the content creator. Showcasing top donors not only foster a community but also states a public admiration and appreciation for the streamer, as proposed by Lu et al. (2018). Donors may engage in a gift battle to demonstrate their utmost appreciation for the creator, thereby highlighting the participatory culture inherent in these matches. The professionalization of play within this context underscores the importance of fostering a strong community to generate substantial revenues. Content creators recognize this and leverage it in their discourse by referring to their donors as “family” and expressing sentiments like “I love you”. This language reinforces parasocial relationships, encouraging donors to further engage and support the creator financially.

Content creators find ways to reward their top donors beyond the app’s automated features. By offering personalized gestures such as private messages to thank them and invite them to participate in their next match, asking the audience to follow their account (Table 3), or special roles like moderators, content creators not only express gratitude but also create incentives for continued engagement and future donations.²³

Table 3: instances of Match 2 where content creator provides special rewards

Special reward 1	Special reward 2
<i>Guys, please go follow the MVP number 1, 2, 3. Please, do the green heart when it's done.</i>	<i>Put a W in the chat for Nikkita, for Adam, Emily, Tom.</i>

This strategic reciprocity serves to deepen the bond between content creators and donors, incentivizing further contributions and solidifying the donors’ status within the community hierarchy. In TLM, gifts serve as tangible expressions of gratitude and appreciation, functioning not only to initiate but also to maintain and strengthen relationships within the community. As Dolfsma et al. (2008) argue this reciprocal exchange could be driven by self-interest, individuals seek to cultivate social connections and enhance their status within the social hierarchy.

²³When observing beyond the English-speaking side, a French influencer took engagement to a new level by tattooing the names of his five biggest TLM donors as a form of reward. When a viewer asked, “and me?”, he casually replied, “I still have some space”, suggesting that further donations could lead to similar rewards. This interaction highlights a manipulative tactic aimed at encouraging viewers to donate more in hopes of receiving similar recognition or rewards.

In the five matches analyzed, I observed creators demonstrating familiarity with long-term donors through various remarks and interactions (Table 4). These comments highlight the creators’ recognition of individual donors and their significant contributions to the streaming community.

Table 4: instances of Matches 1, 3, 5 where content creators demonstrate their familiarity with viewers

Recognition of an impressive donator	Confidence in a donator	Awareness of the gifting patterns of a donator
<i>Crystal had that millionaire madness lady.</i>	<i>Amanda would have humbled the fuck out of her. You must know Amanda (...)</i>	<i>Tarsha is my interstellar queen (...) She comes in and sends me an Interstellar and then leaves.</i>

Additionally, remarks like “She just started gifting big recently” (Match 5) indicate an awareness of donors’ evolving support over time. Donors who receive special recognition may feel a sense of obligation to continue supporting the content creator, perpetuating a cycle of continuous giving that may not always be driven by genuine altruism but by social expectations and the desire for continued status within the community. By bestowing special privileges or recognition, content creators effectively harness the social influence of their top donors, thereby enhancing their own visibility and credibility within the community. Furthermore, the emphasis on reciprocation and social capital within the TLM gifting ecosystem can inadvertently create a sense of exclusion for viewers who are unable or unwilling to contribute financially. This exclusionary aspect raises questions about the democratization of participation within live streaming communities and the potential marginalization of those who cannot afford to engage in gift-giving practices.

Some content creators may exert pressure on viewers. For instance, in Table 5, there is an implication that it could be Amanda’s final opportunity to participate before leaving, which might encourage her to send gifts. It creates a sense of urgency and emotional appeal by encouraging her to take action (i.e., sending gifts) to potentially extend or conclude the interaction on a positive note.

Table 5: instances of Matches 3 and 1 where content creators demonstrate closeness with viewers

Valuing a donator	Acknowledging strong teams
<i>If Amanda can play, chat, it's Amanda's last battle because she has to get off before ten.</i>	<i>Who else was one of the strongest teams in weekly? All Money, John. They had thousands of people in their rooms, bro.</i>

Content creators effectively harnesses the principles of social interaction and real-time communication to create a vibrant and cohesive online community centered around shared interests and content consumption (Table 5). This observation reinforces Blight’s (2017) finding that real-time interaction plays a significant role in shaping both parasocial relationships and fandom. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that the transient nature of the matches may have implications for broader social and psychological dynamics. It could potentially foster heightened competition for attention and increased

financial engagement within the community, as individuals may seek to compensate for their absence during certain matches.

During live matches, content creators ingeniously incorporate elements reminiscent of gaming scenarios, such as role-playing NPCs (Table 6), to immerse the audience in a captivating narrative.

Table 6: role-playing of content creators

NPC	Ring girl
<p><i>We are the real human. You know AI does not take over America. You know that. We're not letting AI take over real. No AI beat me. Me a human girl. The human here. We united. Humans unite. We don't let the AI beat us. Where is your AI team ?</i></p>	<p><i>Alexa, play something. (...) This is my ring girl audition. (He writes on a whiteboard like ring girls and starts singing and dancing). Your most official ring girl. You had it here first.</i></p>

This strategic integration of gaming elements not only enriches the viewing experience but also serves as a subtle mechanism to incentivize audience engagement and participation. Furthermore, the utilization of playful antics like singing songs and employing filters adds an interactive dimension to the matches, fostering a lively and dynamic atmosphere. These creative endeavors not only entertain the audience but also evoke a sense of friendship and interaction among viewers. The introduction of twists, such as muting the losing creator, adds an element of unpredictability, further heightening the playful dynamics of the experience. By intertwining playful elements in their live streaming content, content creators effectively create an environment where viewers feel compelled to participate actively, including sending gifts as a form of appreciation, as previously established by Wohn et al. (2018, p. 5-8). These practices blur the line between leisurely entertainment and commercial transactions, potentially exploiting user enjoyment for financial gain.

Back to the Main Quest

In examining the role of parasocial relationships in driving financial spending on gifts during TLM, several critical insights emerge. TLM operates as a spectator-driven activity, and without contributors, the game cannot progress. Consequently, content creators use discourse to immerse viewers in the play and cultivate a sense of community among the audience. This strategy effectively encourages viewers to send gifts by fostering a sense of closeness and appreciation, making them feel valued and motivated to participate in supporting the content creators.

In the context of TLM, the relationship between content creators and their audience differs from traditional parasocial relationships characterized by one-sided interactions. Unlike purely non-reciprocal relationships described by Blight (2017), TLM content creators actively engage with their audience in ways that foster a more interactive and personalized connection. These creators seem more accessible than microcelebrities because they interact directly with viewers in real-time, especially with those who send gifts. Based on my observations, frequent gift-givers are more likely to have their names remembered by the creators and mentioned during matches. The audience feels

acknowledged and valued when the content creator engages directly with them, addressing them by name, responding to their comments, or referencing shared experiences. The audience perceives the content creator as approachable and relatable, which encourages viewers to send gifts as a means of strengthening and perpetuating their relationships with the creator. Dolfsma et al. (2008) state that gifts serve to enter and reinforce social capital within the community. By contributing gifts to content creators, viewers position themselves as active participants and valued members of the community. This social capital is cultivated through reciprocity, where viewers expect acknowledgment, appreciation, and continued engagement from the content creator in return for their financial support. This is what content creators do when they mention their name or encourage other participants to follow them.

The creators' discourse also highlight potential concerns related to the exploitation of parasocial relationships for financial gain. Content creators may leverage these relationships to encourage excessive spending among vulnerable viewers, leading to ethical considerations regarding the platform's responsibility to mitigate risks of financial exploitation.

Completing the Quest

The key findings of this study revolve around three main subquestions. First, the integration of various game design elements within TLM transforms matches a gameful experience. Gamification motivates users to send virtual gifts to achieve personal goals such as winning the match, earning badges or power-ups, or reaching higher gifter levels—all of which involve spending money on gifts. This study builds upon the findings of Hamari and Lehdonvirta (2010) by demonstrating that gamification can extend beyond marketing strategies to transform spending money into a game-like activity. Expanding on Hamari's argument (2015) regarding badges correlating with an increased utilization and transaction completion, my observations suggest that badges on TikTok play a role in cultivating a dependency for instant gratification. This dependency incentivizes viewers to spend more, as they recognize that such actions are get rewarded. Secondly, dark patterns employed in TLM influence users to spend by strategically guiding their attention towards monetary contributions through pop-up messages, complex conversion rates, and hidden spending limit options. These tactics exploit psychological vulnerabilities for financial gain and may foster compulsive spending, highlighting the importance of transparency and user education to empower informed decision-making. These observations reinforce Brignull's (2020) argument that users can be exploited through the incorporation of dark patterns. TikTok utilizes these tactics to encourage users to send money, ultimately benefiting the platform's operating model. Lastly, content creators strategically use discourse to foster a sense of community and connection among the audience, encouraging gift giving

as a means of strengthening relationships. This personalized engagement diverges from traditional parasocial relationships, as described by Blight (2017), by actively involving viewers in interactive and reciprocal interactions. This fosters a sense of accessibility and closeness that not only motivates gift-giving but also encourages increased community participation.

I argue that large platforms like TikTok should prioritize user well-being by implementing transparent and accessible features that support responsible usage. This includes enhancing the visibility and accessibility of important functionalities, such as gift spending limits, to empower users with clearer and more transparent controls. Additionally, implementing measures to regulate content creators' discourse can mitigate potential pressures on users, ensuring a more positive and respectful environment.

Reflecting on the validity of the findings, they are strengthened by employing an interdisciplinary approach, and rigorous theoretical grounding. The study's exploration of TLM aligns with existing research on gamification and digital platforms, providing a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the observed phenomena. Direct observations on the platform, illustrated with screenshots of features, further enhance the credibility of the study's claims. Moreover, the study critically examines the ethical implications of TLM, identifying potential risks associated with compulsive spending and unethical practices by content creators. This consideration of ethical concerns demonstrates a balanced approach to analyze the impact of digital engagement strategies on user behavior. By exploring how content creators leverage parasocial relationships to cultivate connections and promote gift giving, the study offers valuable insights into the intersection of social dynamics and digital monetization strategies. However, like any research, there are limitations to consider, such as the specific context of TLM and the potential for variations over time in user behavior and platform affordances. Future research could build upon these findings by conducting empirical studies to validate or track changes in the observed dynamics.

Regarding the method reemployed, the walkthrough offers a nuanced perspective by directly engaging with a digital platform and extracting valuable insights into user experience, feature functionality, and real-time interactions. This method allows for firsthand exploration of the platform's interface, enabling the identification of usability issues and discovery of hidden or less-visible features that influence user behavior. By engaging directly with users in their environment, the walkthrough approach deepens our understanding of how individuals navigate and interact with digital platforms, revealing insights that may not be discernible through external sources or static analyses alone. One challenge encountered during the data collection was the identification of live matches conducted by top English-speaking content creators, given the five-minute duration. To address this, a strategic

solution involved continuous monitoring of TLM over an extended period.²⁴ This approach enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the platform's dynamics, effectively overcoming the inherent difficulty posed by the matches' short duration. Furthermore, the method presents limitations, especially in accessing backend operations, historical data, or detailed user behavior analytics. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of a digital platform, it would be beneficial to combine walkthrough observations with other research methodologies, such as data analysis, user surveys, or collaboration with platform developers for deeper insights into system-level behaviors. Future research could delve into more personalized data, exploring the effects of TLM's rankings and monetary-driven activities on content creators' mental health, and studying variations in user behavior across cultural or demographic groups.

²⁴ For this research, I actively observed TLM from January to April 2024, leveraging my one year of prior experience engaging with this feature passively.

Codex

- Baharom, S. N., Tan, W. H., & Idris, M. Z. (2014). Emotional Design for Games: A framework for Player-Centric approach in the game design process. *International Journal of Multimedia and Ubiquitous Engineering*, 9(10), 387–398. <https://doi.org/10.14257/ijmue.2014.9.10.37>
- Benjamin, C. (2024, March 31). The rise of video game streaming: A new era of entertainment. *Medium*. Retrieved April 18, 2024, from <https://medium.com/@cook.benjamin/the-rise-of-video-game-streaming-a-new-era-of-entertainment-591ea50e0d6c#:~:text=In%20recent%20years%2C%20video%20game,their%20audience%20in%20real%2Dtime>.
- Blight, M. G. (2017). *Relationships to video game streamers: examining gratifications, parasocial relationships, fandom, and community affiliation online* (Theses and Dissertations). University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Retrieved from <https://dc.uwm.edu/etd/1255>
- Brock, T. (2017). Roger Caillois and E-Sports: on the problems of treating play as work. *Games and Culture*, 12(4), 321–339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016686878>
- Brandis, R., & Bozkurt, C. M. (2021). Player agency in audience gaming. In *Paratextualizing Games* (Vol. 13, pp. 165–180). Crossref. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454213-007>
- Brignull, H. (2010, July 8). Dark Patterns: dirty tricks designers use to make people do stuff. Retrieved February 14, 2024, from <https://90percentofeverything.com/2010/07/08/dark-patterns-dirty-tricks-designers-use-to-make-people-do-stuff/index.html>
- Bucher, T., & Helmond, A. (2018). The affordances of social media platforms. In *SAGE Publications Ltd eBooks* (pp. 233–253). SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473984066.n14>
- Caillois R. (1961). *Man play and games*. Free Press of Glencoe.
- Deterding, S., Dixon, D., Khaled, R., & Nacke, L. E. (2011). From game design elements to gamefulness. *MindTrek '11: Academic MindTrek 2011*, 9–15. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2181037.2181040>
- Dolfsma, W., Van Der Eijk, R., & Jolink, A. (2008). On a source of social capital: gift exchange. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 89(3), 315–329. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-008-0002-z>
- Egenfeldt-Nielsen, S., Smith, J. H., & Tosca, S. (2015). *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Glas, R. (2015). Vicarious play: Engaging the viewer in Let's Play videos. *Empedocles European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication*, 5(1), 81–86. https://doi.org/10.1386/ejpc.5.1-2.81_1
- Gray, C. M., Kou, Y., Battles, B., Hoggatt, J., & Toombs, A. L. (2018). The Dark (Patterns) Side of UX Design. In *CHI '18: Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3174108>
- Hamari, J. (2015). Gamification - Motivations & Effects [Doctoral Dissertations, Aalto University]. In *uta-fi*. https://www.academia.edu/27414247/Gamification_Motivations_and_Effects
- Hamari, J., & Lehdonvirta, V. (2010). Game Design as Marketing: How game mechanics create demand for virtual goods. *International Journal of Business*, 5(1), 14–29. https://people.uta.fi/~kljuham/2010-hamari&lehdonvirta-game_design_as_marketing.pdf
- Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277–1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Huotari, K., & Hamari, J. (2012). Defining gamification. In *MindTrek '12: Proceeding of the 16th International Academic MindTrek Conference*. Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2393132.2393137>

- ICI Tou.tv. (2023, October 10). *Pinkydoll*. TikTok. Retrieved March 26, 2024, from <https://www.tiktok.com/@icitoutv/video/7288418511301496070>
- Kaldestad, Ø., & Myrstad, F. (2018, June 27). New analysis shows how Facebook and Google push users into sharing personal data. Retrieved February 14, 2024, from <https://www.forbrukerradet.no/side/facebook-and-google-manipulate-users-into-sharing-personal-data/>
- Kesherim, R. (2023, February 24). *Average Human Attention Span (By Age, Gender & Race)*. Supportive Care. Retrieved April 8, 2024, from <https://www.supportivecareaba.com/statistics/average-attention-span>
- Light, B., Burgess, J., & Duguay, S. (2016). The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 881–900. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816675438>
- Lu, Z., Xia, H., Heo, S., & Wigdor, D. (2018). You watch, you give, and you engage: A study of live Lu, Z., Xia, H., Heo, S., & Wigdor, D. (2018b). You Watch, You Give, and You Engage. In *CHI '18: Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3174040>
- Nieborg, D. B., & Hermes, J. (2008). What is game studies anyway? *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11(2), 131–147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407088328>
- Sin, R., Harris, T., Nilsson, S., & Beck, T. (2022). Dark patterns in online shopping: do they work and can nudges help mitigate impulse buying? *Behavioural Public Policy*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1017/bpp.2022.11>
- Taylor, T. L. (2018). *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77jqw>
- Tidy, B. J. (2019, July 2). TikTok's young fans "exploited" for digital gifts. *BBC News*. Retrieved February 26, 2024, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-48725515>
- TikTok Branded Effect Specs | TikTok Ads Manager*. (2023, June). TikTok Business Help Center. Retrieved March 2, 2024, from <https://ads.tiktok.com/help/article/tiktok-branded-effect-asset-commercial-benefits-specs?lang=en>
- Wohn, D. Y., Freeman, G., & McLaughlin, C. (2018b). Explaining Viewers' Emotional, Instrumental, and Financial Support Provision for Live Streamers. In *CHI '18: Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3174048>
- Yesisca, L., & Menayang, A. P. (2023). The hyperreality of TikTok live streaming. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies*, 5(10), 56–60. <https://doi.org/10.32996/jhsss.2023.5.10.8>
- Zagal, J. P., Björk, S., & Lewis, C. (2013). *Dark Patterns in the Design of Games*. Presented at the Foundations of Digital Games 2013. Retrieved February 26, 2024, from <https://gup.ub.gu.se/records/fulltext/177148/177148.pdf>
- Zhang, X., Xiang, Y., & Hao, L. (2019). Virtual gifting on China's live streaming platforms: hijacking the online gift economy. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 12(3), 340–355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2019.1583260>

Bonus Content

Appendix A: Transcription of five matches

C1 = creator 1

C2 = creator 2

Repetitive or irrelevant parts are omitted from transcription.

You can only view the chat from C1's perspective because you must select which creator's side to watch the match from, and then you can access the chat from that chosen side.

Match 1

11,639 points

- A relaxed atmosphere prevailed, with content creators engaging in casual chats.
- Content creators showed limited interaction with the chat.
- Discussions revolved around TikTok governance, particularly focusing on rankings and their implications.

Transcription:

C1: Who else was one of the strongest teams in weekly? All Money, John. They had thousands of people in their rooms, bro.

C2: Even Vamp had a strong team back then.

C1: Red TV had thousands... Red came, like, later in weekly, though, bro. He was like a second half of weekly, dude.

C2: Millie had a strong ass team. Crystal had that millionaire madness lady.

C1: You know what really pisses me off, though, and can I be honest? (...) The creators who did weekly, who talk shit about the rankings now and all this bullshit. The reason why they're talking shit is because they fell off and they can't rank because if they were able to rank, every single one of them would be ranking, bro. I see a lot of creators who used to be in weekly talking shit about fucking the people who rank: "I stopped. It's toxic." The only reason why you're talking shit is because you fell off, bro. (...)

C2: It's all because we hit top one (*in daily ranking*). No fucking drama. Weekly? Hell of drama, dude.

C1: They say, "I don't push anymore because it's toxic, rankings suck." (...)

C2: You build a family in a team, automatically it'll just come, bro.

C1: (...) They say I don't rank because they choose not to, bro. If they tried to push, they still wouldn't be able to. That's the whole thing I'm trying to say, I guess.

C2: Yeah, I agree. VPNs mess up the ranks (...) And then a lot of people sell themselves out for fucking coin. I lost one of my biggest supporters because of some bullshit she did (...)

C1: You just said you fell off all this bullshit. Didn't you just get top one the other day?

C2: No, there was a point where I had, like, 60 people in my room (...)

C1: What I'm saying is, at least you never stopped. You actually cared about your team and your people. There're people who, if they can't touch the shit, they'll stop going live and that happened to a lot of people, they stopped completely.

C2: Some people never stopped.

C1: 80% of these people in the dailies, they wouldn't survive in weeklies, bro. A lot of them move up in one day or whatever, and that's it.

C2: I don't think All Money fell off. I think he just chose to just take it more easy.

C1: No, you know what all money did that really fucked him up? He went to Dubai, bro (...) I'm not saying he fell off. I'm talking about with the amount of people in his room, no one sees him on, bro. He's in Dubai.

C2: No, that's true.

C1: Nobody in the US even knows when he's on. Nobody sees him in the ranks, bro (...)

C2: He used to put up thousands of people in his shit (...) Is it weekly in Dubai? *Chat saying that the ranking in Dubai is only hourly.* Yeah, that's just insane, bro. I've seen some of the battles over there, it's not even funny. What's the biggest battle you ever seen over there? It was like 56 million in five minutes.

C1: But listen, is it legit? That's the question. Because listen, they keep taking down Yusuf, Alex, all these people. Why are they taking them down?

C2: What even happened with the beanie and the sweater, that dude was chill as fuck.

C1: There got to be some shit going on, dude. They're not just banning him from the app for no reason, bro.

C2: That dude was the chilliest dude. I've ever seen in my life. He was like a nice person.

C1: A lot of people are really strong, bro. There's some shit going on, bro.

C2: I see what you're saying (...) Guys can we wake the fuck up, please? ... All my moderators are fired, I swear to god. I am looking for new moderators (...) Bianca, thank you. (...) Everyone is saying this app is gone...

C1: I don't think it's gone anywhere, bro.

C2: It still needs to pass Senate, right, and then needs to pass to the president. And honestly, dude, if the president bans this shit, I'm just saying there'd be a lot of people maybe mad at him. The voting wouldn't pop. I mean, there's a lot of people on this fucking app. I'm just saying. (...)

C1: I think it will be bought, bro.

C2: I've been on other apps, and this one is actually not bad.

C1: I think Biden said he would pass it, bro (...) MVPLidia, Catherine, Panen, Amber, Lana, lil Bianca, (...), everybody who tap, share and watch, thank you guys so much. TikTok shop, baby, TikTok shop.

Chat:

Approving C1 discourse about rankings: exactly, facts, ranks are high now it's hard to keep up for most

Citing content creators who fell off the rankings

Complimenting C1: you're pretty, you're the best

Reacting to each other's messages

Match 2

26,604 points

- Role play: C1 assumed the role of an AI (using accessories such as a costume and led glasses), while C2 portrayed a human character.
- The AI character adopted a distinct manner of speaking and reacted uniquely to special gifts.
- The losing content creator is muted.

Transcription:

C1: Give me a heart, I love you. Emily let's go! Yeah, shut your ass. Booyah your ass. Let's go, guys. Keep pushing. Keep pushing. Double tap the rose. We can do it, guys.

C2: We are the real human. You know AI does not take over America. You know that. We're not letting AI take over real. No AI beat me. Me a human girl. The human here. We united. Humans unite. We don't let the AI beat us. Where is your AI team? Where's your AI people? What are the people who AI for you? We beat the AI ass and we bring the real Pinky back. We don't care about none of that. Let me tell you guys. May have to be rude

gurl because may not play the real Pinky. So, she brings up the rude gurl. Me talking with my girl. You know Jazz? Let me call Jazz. Hello, Jazz, you heard for the NPC Pinky, what happened? What goes on with that? For real? No, Jazz, don't say that. That's what they said? So they said that the NPC take over the real pinky body. The NPC got more ass than the real Pinky. The NPC got the shirt better than Pinky. So, the NPC win pinky body. So how we get the pinky body back? Jazz, if you hear anything about how we get the pinky body back... Oh, all you know, you don't want the AI to take over the world? Okay? So, you beat the ass. Love you Jazz may talk to you soon, baby. Let me know you hear anything else about the AIs. Okay, girls. Latin mommy. Thank you. Sarah, everybody. Triples, triples, triples. Pinky, I may need your team to go. Tell your team go. That's not enough. Pinky. They need more. It's the triple. Crazy girl, what going on with your team? Your team, they are broken girl need to get more. They say we just need your people to go harder. Oh, my God. We go rude on your girl. Let me help you, Pinky. May not have time for this. Let me see. Listen, guys, don't hurt my feelings. I have the Jamaican in my blood. *Plays music and sing "Pinky, are you okay? Are you okay Pinky (...) you are NPC, can we get the real Pinky (...) Where is your team Pinky? (...) Pinky are you okay, are you okay, are you okay Pinky?"*.
End of the match C1 muted C2 during victory lap so they both can talk to their team without the other team listening.

C1: Guys, guys, what is happening? Put a W in the chat for Nikkita, for Adam, Emily, Tom. Guys, please go follow the MVP number 1, 2, 3. Please, do the green heart when it's done. Thank you so much. Thank you for the green heart. Guys we are losing, we are losing, I know we can be winning. Guys share the live, tag the people, let's go chat, we can do it chat. Let's go. Let's go. Recharge be ready. Double tap is perfect, thank you for the double tap, double tap going crazy everybody. Thank you for the green heart, guys we need to win. Guys, we need to win, come on chat, where you at? We can win against her, I know we can, beat her ass, like we did yesterday, come on chat. We can do it chat. Come on, where you at? Recharge. Everybody be ready, all ready to play. That is the energy I wanna see. Let's go. Janice with the galaxy, that is what I am talking about. Yeah, we came to woop some ass and not to get our ass wooped. Am I right, am I right chat? Good mode activated. Be ready, here to cook some ass.

Start a new match

Chat:

Encouraging messages: keep focused, unite

Laughing emojis and messages: xd, I'm crying

Green heart emojis, W → inside meaningful message in C1's team

Messages to support the creator: npc, pinky, w, green hearts

Match 3

147,145 points

- Really competitive
- C2 has a strong donator in her team who carry her victory
- C1 is frustrated that his bigger donator could not take part of the live
- C2 win with 142,352 points

Transcription:

C1: If Amanda (*viewer*) can play, chat, it's Amanda's last battle because she has to get off before ten, but everybody taps on screen. *Reading chat*. She's (C2) about to dust me?

C2: We are humbling our big battlers.

C1: Don't say that shit doing because you don't know what the fuck I'll put up. We've been putting up crazy shit all morning. What do you mean? We have a 15 game winning. One hundred and fifty k a game. How much points did you put up? How much points do you put up to cook bubba? How much points you put up? Chat everybody tap my screen. Over 100K? I've been doing that for the last five freaking games. Maybe not this game, though. Oh, crap. Chat tap my screen, y'all let's go. (...) All right, listen, y'all, everybody tap my screen.

C2: Your makeup, your foundation is running.

C1: *mocking tone* Your foundation is running. *Mute C2*. Heidi (*viewer*), on the speed. Heidi, please. On the speed, Heidi, please. All right, chat tap my screen.

C2: Go, chat we work together as a family. It don't matter if you drop, hand heart, rose, whatever you drop, it can still take his treat. *Challenge ten gifts in 50 seconds*. Chat, ten roses.

C1: Ten points chat. Heidi, on the speed, please. Heidi, let's go.

C2: Let's go chat, work together as a fam. (...)

C1: *Challenge x2 gifting points for 1 minute*. 30 seconds. Heidi, 30 seconds. Heidi, 30 seconds. Heidi, 30 seconds, please.

C2: It's 30 seconds with them. Okay, wait and let's go chat. Tap a go. Tap a go. Chat. Tap a go. Tap a go. Chat. Tap a go. Use it, Jay, use it. We got to go hard chat. We got to go hard. *Receives big gift*. Mecy!! (*viewer*).

C1: Doubles on the glove, chat, doubles on the glove.

C2: We gotta go chat, let's go. *Receives big gift*. Mecy, let's go!

C1: Doubles on the glove, chat, doubles on the glove. We got to go hard chat.

C2: *Receives big gift*. Mecy! Let's go.

C1: We got to snipe this. Chat, we got to snipe this, y'all. We got to snipe this. We got to snipe this. We got to snipe this.

C2: They gave up on you. Brianna, appreciate you, baby, for the five. Mecy with the interstellar!

C1: I wish you would have her.

C2: Tap screen, tap screen. Chat.

C1: I wish you would have her instead of fucking, instead of doing a ten piece on Jbase (*other content creator*) Wasted a ten piece on Jbase. We put up one hundred and fifty k a game. I wish we would have come to you for...

C2: Yeah, whatever. I don't want to hear. You are a baby now. Go get your car. Get it off and go get your car.

C1: I'm about to (...)

C2: And when you get in it, say, bfg kicked my ass today. I want you to yell it out the sunroom.

C1: I don't care. We had a crazy push this last hour. I wish instead of Jbase I would have come to you, though. I didn't know you had smoke like this. I had my second biggest shooter who put up 150K for four games in a row. We went from 400 something k to now we're at 725K in four battles. We would have given you a good ass battle. Damn.

C2: No, it ain't working.

C1: *Talking to chat*. Seriously, don't use it. Don't even waste your glove. Save it for somebody else. Toy. Thank you, Toy. (...) She went crazy.

C2: I still don't like his hair. He read y'all coming. I know he read y'all coming because I never even said no about a glove. He already saying don't throw a glove.

C1: I'm not arguing with nobody, bro. Mecy went crazy, though. That's her first time ever shooting for you?

C2: No, she's shooting those.

C1: I would have humbled the fuck out of her. Amanda would have humbled the fuck out. I promise you.

C2: Yeah, we didn't kick your ass plenty of times.

C1: Amanda would have humbled the fuck out of her. You must know Amanda.

C2: Amanda has been over plenty of times, we kick your ass. It we don't just got Mecy. So Amanda needs more than just Amanda.

C1: No, she doesn't.

C2: We have a whole family. Amanda. Manda. Amanda. Manda.

End of the match C1 muted C2 during victory lap so they both can talk to their team without the other team listening.

C1: Caroline. Toy. Heidi. Thank you guys. Thank you so much, chat. I promise I am not mad about her... Good shit, man. Good shit.

Chat

Warning C1 how C2 is powerful in TLM: she got smoke rn no cap, she just destroyed bubba, she just cooked bubba, she boutta dust you ngl, she just cooked bubba.

Encouraging content creator: good

Reacting to C2 getting points: oh that escalated, oh snap, rip, I warned you bro

Talking to other members in the chat: @ hi pretty, @ hi girl!!!, good morning

Emojis crowns, hearts, joined hands

Match 4

31,852 points

- C1 is at a boxing event not really minding the live match
- C2 is mainly doing the animation
- C1 wind the match not with much more points than C2

Transcription:

C1: I need a ring girl.

C2: Why? Can I audition? Let me audition right there. I'm going to audition. I'll make a good ring girl. Don't underestimate the power of the ring.

C1: Chloe is ring girl mate.

C2: Ring girl Energy. *Dresses up and put a filter on.*

C1: Yeah, Chloe is ring girl.

C2: Look, Alexa, play something. (...) This is my ring girl audition. *He writes on a whiteboard like ring girls and starts singing and dancing.* Your most official ring girl. You had it here first. Vodka, KD, Sarah Jane, Laura (*viewers*), they're going to smash those double.

C1: We are gonna smash him, come on.

C2: I'm a good ring girl. I am. Samantha, tell him.

C1: No. Fuck off.

C2: No.

C1: Boy, how do I get on one of these bikes though?

C2: What one? Show us. Oh, you have to scan the barcode, or tap your debit card.

C1: Who says I won't go for a bike ride and get some cardio in right now?

C2: Absolutely do it. That is called dedication, motivation for the nation.

C1: This Coca-Cola, by the way, guys.

C2: Oh, you're not drinking?

C1: It's for TikTok, mate for TikTok.

C2: Health and safety. Health and safety. Not exactly that. So is this where I'm coming to be ring girl then? Is this where you're having yours?

C1: No, the venue's changing.

C2: I literally, I'll kick off if you don't win, if you if you lose, I'll beat the guy up.

C1: Oh, exactly. Do not embarrassed me like that on TikTok mate.

C2: What do you mean? No, I'm just saying.

C1: I'm going in anyway.

C2: What about if we all turn up to the fight with rainbow T-shirts and his face on? ... I think it just be fighting now. Ah they drop the mist; they drop the mist. Bip up Mimy, Chantal. MVP Mimy, in the chat, thank you so much Mimy. Vodka, KD, Chantal, fam in the chat. Have a good night be safe.

C1: *shows someone*

C2: Who is that? I don't recognize.

C1: None of your business, none of your fucking business. I gotta go, I gotta go.

C2: Be safe.

C1 ends his live

Chat:

Special stickers

Asking personal questions: what trousers you got on?

Advises: pay someone to drop you a pair, go asda and get cheap pair, If you need anything in Colchester wolf I got friends living there who will help you out.

Laughing emojis

Talking about other creators: does anyone know if Georgia Marie has fought yet?, Chloe is a actual ring girl, Chloe is ring girl

Viewers talking to each other

Match 5

12,555 points

- 4 players match: 2 teams of 2
- Red team (C1, C2) winning with 12,280 points
- Not really talking to each other, all talking to the chat, hard to understand what they are saying
- Not really active in the chat

Transcription:

C3: Go to sleep.

C4: We just spamming it.

C2: Just spamming it for no reason. *Speaking indistinctly.*

C4: Kenny, you gotta glove by chance?

C2: Go chat, go chat.

C3: Chat.

C2: Chat tap my screen.

C4: Tap my face chat.
 C1: I'm sick of people begging.
 C4: Tap my face. Lock and get to 800 K, damn it, you need a double chat. You need a double chat.
 C3: Oh yeah. Yeah.
 C4: I had a target time. *All speaking at the same time.* Chat double tap.
 C2: Everybody tap my screen, let's go. Chat doubles.
 C1: Chat 6 gifts in one minute.
 C4: On the doubles we play, everyone together chat. We got Hanna, Ebag. Chat 6 roses. Everyone drop rose.
 C3: Erine.
 C4: Kena, thank you Kena. Everyone drops a rose, chat we gotta lock in. On the doubles we go big. On the doubles we play chat.
 C2: All right, doubles chat.
 C4 & C2: Doubles, go big on the doubles chat.
 C4: We gotta use the speed.
 C1: Let's go Denny.
 C4: Doubles chat. Use it. Oh, crap. Chat use the fucking speed, doubles, doubles.
 C2: Thank you chat, doubles. Double. Double.
 C3: This is so ass. *Talking about the hammer.*
 C2: Tarsha, yeah Tarsha my number one. That is Tarsha yes. Guys Tarsha is my interstellar queen.
 C4: She never sent you interstellar. We have K9 over here.
 C2: Yeah, she did send me interstellar. Oh, Beida, Beida is interstellar number two. Beida! She just sent an interstellar the other day. She loves interstellar.
 C4: She never sent you an interstellar, I promise you. Tarsha can never afford an interstellar.
 C2: She sends me almost every day, bro. She comes in and sends me an Interstellar and then leaves bro. Literally.
 C4: No, she doesn't, she has never been able to afford one of those (...)
 C1: I am in the bed still gaining coins and shit.
 C3: I am logging off dude. (...) These are the people I fucking love when they see somebody down bad as fuck, like fuck it let me just help this guy out, you know? Fucking love you. *Content creator name*, she'll shit on your whole fucking team. She'll sell it and she'll fucking spit on it. Start twerking for that gift you just got, dude.
 C2: Chat, let's go. Chat let's go. You're lucky Tarsha is not sending interstellar right now. Parker, you're so lucky because she would fry you and embarrass you.
 C4: Oh my god. She's so lucky she is not sending an interstellar, bro.
 C3: She's not sending you shit. Especially not a fucking Interstellar. I will fucking send an interstellar lust so I could just throw it just like that (...)
 C2: She just started gifting big recently.
 C3: Sending one interstellar that is not big dude.
 C4: That was wild, chat 20 seconds.
 C3: I fucking love you, thank you.
 C2: Let's go chat.
 C3: They are so shit.
 C2: MVP bae thank you so much. Seriously.
 C1: I love you, everyone put crowds on the chat. Thank you.
 C3: I have to go

Chat:

Reacting to C1 practically sleeping in his bed: go to sleep, he sleepy for sure

Showing support: love dev

Reacting: I do like the hammer fun

Reacting to creators when they talked badly about another creator: The mouth on him whoa, soap to the mouth.