

# From Feed to Flow: Watching Television on TikTok

Television & New Media  
2025, Vol. 26(7) 818–834

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DOI: 10.1177/15274764251334576

journals.sagepub.com/home/tvn



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## Abstract

This paper investigates how users engage with content on TikTok that was originally produced for television. Based on interviews with participants in Costa Rica, we argue that watching television content on TikTok provides valuable insights into the future trajectories of both television and new media. To this end, we first demonstrate that TikTok's television flow (in Raymond Williams' sense) is "co-programmed" through user interaction with algorithms, rather than being universally predetermined. We then posit the notion of "uncommitted attention" to argue that watching television on TikTok involves active engagement with content and text-to-material conditions that make this experience fleeting and unstable. Finally, we examine how users establish cross-platform flows between TikTok and their broader media environments. In this way, we offer insights into how ontologically ambivalent platforms such as TikTok reconfigure traditional television watching.

## Keywords

agency, algorithms, flow, Latin America, reception, TikTok

## Introduction

TikTok has recently emerged as a preferred platform for users to watch series and movies, offering a new mode of engagement with televisual content. Primarily known for its user-generated short videos, the app is now also brimming with brief clips featuring scenes from various shows and films. Thus, to commemorate "Mean Girls Day" in 2023 (October 3rd), Paramount uploaded the entire movie to TikTok in twenty-three parts. Similarly, according to news reports, 7 million people watched the pilot episode

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of *Killing It*, which Peacock uploaded in five parts to TikTok to promote the launch of its second season (Blancaflor 2023). And, according to *Rolling Stone* magazine, it was TikTok that “brought back ‘*Ugly Betty*’” in 2023 (Jones 2023).

Simultaneously, TikTok has actively promoted itself as an ideal place to watch television. Its “business insights” page asserted that viewing user-generated content about shows and movies was statistically more effective in recalling their titles than watching only trailers (TikTok 2024). Additionally, according to the same page, nearly half of its European users had discovered or been inspired to learn more about films on the platform. TikTok has thus consistently insisted that its relationship with television is natural, inevitable, and economically beneficial to the industry.

Notwithstanding this proclaimed naturalness and inevitability, the study of television and TikTok has largely evolved independently. With a few exceptions, research has overlooked the intersections between TikTok and television (Faltese et al. 2023; Kendall 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2021). Yet, as these interconnections continue to grow and expand across a broader range of platforms (including Instagram and YouTube), this knowledge gap could significantly impact our understanding of the immediate future of both television and new media, and how to study them. Moreover, examining these intersections offers an opportunity to move beyond the traditional focus of TikTok literature, which is often centered on content creators, and the dominance of streaming in television studies. The study of this theme could also reinvigorate audience studies by addressing the nuanced and complex viewing practices that emerge at the crossroads of TikTok and television. Echoing Gray and Lotz (2019), there is a pressing need for more empirical audience research to broaden our understanding of how television is consumed in an era of profound technological changes.

This paper explores the practices and experiences of Costa Ricans who engage with content on TikTok that was originally produced for television. We specifically ask: What does watching television on TikTok mean? How does this practice typically unfold? What does it reveal about the relationship between technology and culture? Williams’ (1975) analysis of television flow offers a valuable theoretical lens for responding to these questions, highlighting the evolving intersections between media, culture, and audience practices. The study of flow, as Uricchio (2013, 66) puts it, is “a barometer of change” that modulates “to keep pace with shifting distribution and viewing practices.” Williams’ primary contribution thus extended beyond a critique of television technology to allow a profound analysis of culture.

Inspired by this approach, we first examine how TikTok’s television flow is “co-programmed,” shaped by how users follow algorithmic content recommendations while actively seeking to guide these algorithms to follow their preferences. We then argue that watching television on TikTok involves a distinct reception experience characterized by “uncommitted attention,” which highlights both the active, emotionally rewarding engagement with certain kinds of content and the symbolic and technological (or texto-material) conditions that render it fleeting and unstable. Finally, we analyze how watching television on TikTok is linked to a broader media ecology, marked by continuous outflows between the app and a diverse range of devices and platforms.

As he envisioned “the future of a medium once known as television,” Uricchio (2009) used the rise of YouTube to present some provocations about the convergence of television and Internet-related technologies. Drawing on Jorge Luis Borges’ short essay “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” Uricchio (2009) anticipated the central role of “ontological ambivalence” in shaping this convergence, describing it as “a significant cross-media outlet, and a site where content familiar from other media forms is repackaged” (p. 28). Much like Borges’ fictional taxonomy described in his essay, ontological ambivalent media are characterized by how different forms, genres, and themes become so intertwined that it is difficult to delineate their precise boundaries.

TikTok’s ontological ambiguity is evident in the multitude of definitions circulating in both academic literature and public discourse, where it is typically described as a “platform,” a “social network,” a “user-generated media,” and a combination of all these. This paper argues that TikTok should *also* be examined in relation to television. As TikTok’s communicative possibilities expand, its intersections with television offer insights into the reconfiguration of both television and ontologically ambivalent technologies. The conclusion discusses how ontologically ambivalent platforms such as TikTok reconfigure traditional television watching.

## Flow in Three Dimensions

Williams’ concept of flow is among the most influential in television studies. Accordingly, as Uricchio (2004) notes, “the concept has gone on to support very different arguments” (p. 164). Given its myriad applications, we first clarify how we define flow before examining the case of TikTok. We explore flow through three related dimensions: (a) who decides what to watch (flow as agency configurations between programmers and audiences); (b) how the content is experienced (flow as a mode of reception); and (c) what media and devices are used to watch the content (flow as a form of engaging with specific media technologies).

The first dimension emphasizes shifting agency configurations between users and content programmers that determine the organization and sequence of media texts that audiences will watch (Gray and Lotz 2019). Williams (1975, 87) originally defined flow as a “series of differently related units in which the timing, though real, is undeclared, and in which the real internal organization is something other than the declared organization.” This definition emphasized a producer-centric perspective, highlighting the power of programmers to shape the flow and the audience’s limited possibility to alter this process (Uricchio 2009).

The emergence of new media shifted this balance toward what Uricchio (2009) terms “viewer-centered” or “user-controlled” flow. Uricchio (2004) argues that various technologies significantly altered Williams’ original approach to flow by revealing that “viewers had the ability to disrupt program flow and thus the economic flow so central to commercial television” (p. 171). This evolution redefined flow from a default condition to a product that required active user participation. Some scholars envision the emergence of streaming platforms as part of this “user-controlled”

trajectory (Lüders and Sundet 2022). For example, Cox (2018) argues that streaming technologies rely on indispensable interactive forms of flow control that were previously beyond the reach of audiences.

According to Uricchio (2009), another phase in these agency configurations began in the early 2000s with the rise of platforms that rely on metadata protocols, search and filter engines, and algorithms. These platforms introduced a more complex relationship between users and technology companies, where neither producers nor users fully control the content flow. Instead, flow is the product of “mutual domestication” relationships (Siles 2023, 2) or a “pas de deux” between intermediaries (Uricchio 2004, 177). Other scholars have noted that, despite the appearances of equivalence, these dynamics are ultimately unequal, as people’s capacities often reinforce the platform economy’s economic and technological logics. In the case of streaming platforms, Cox (2018) argues that flow also operates through technological functions hidden from users that ultimately serve the industrial interests of the companies behind them. Similarly, Faltese et al. (2023) contend that it is more accurate to describe TikTok as television, as it represents “the form of television that is not an on-demand feature film, but the cultural and technical form of flow media over which you do not have full control” (p. 11).

A second dimension centers on Williams’ (1975) notion of flow as the “central television *experience*” (p. 89, emphasis added). Williams conceptualized flow as a sequenced stream of content within which audiences could fully immerse themselves. In this perspective, flow also represents a mode of content reception—a way of experiencing, interpreting, and attributing meaning to media texts.

This approach to flow has significantly shaped the study of how users experience content on algorithmic platforms. Social media platforms generate an algorithmic flow “that immerses us in a tuned sequence of [content] designed to optimize our attention, shape our moods, and extract taps on buy buttons” (Brown et al. 2024, 1). Lupinacci (2024) described this as an “algo-rhythm” characterized by “flows composed of different paces, sequences, frequencies, and intensities” (pp. 4086–7). “Algo-rhythms” are designed to mediate human behavior by creating repetitive content flows that orchestrate people’s social relationships, all directed toward achieving economic objectives (Carmi 2020). Building on another concept from Williams, Coleman (2018) theorized flow on these platforms as an “infrastructure of feeling” to highlight how it affectively shapes a specific temporality.

A third dimension of flow focuses on how the sequence of programed content maintained audiences “glued” to television for extended periods. This material perspective underpinned the notion that flow was what “kept viewers in a fixed position between work time and bed time for the productive (male) subject and helped to integrate television into the circuits and routines of (female) domestic reproduction” (Oswald and Packer 2013, 279). According to Williams (1975), flow facilitated such spatial and temporal orientations around television through sequences between words and images, within and between programs, and within viewing sessions.

Scholars have revised this particular flow dimension to reflect the profound changes in media ecologies and how people engage with media nowadays. Media ecologies

have transitioned from the fixed nature of broadcast media to the fluidity of digital platforms (Oswald and Packer 2013). To be sure, technology companies are driven by the same desire to keep users “glued” to platforms for as long as possible, delivering a continuous flow of content and prompting further interactions (Brown et al. 2024). However, flows have proliferated as people now experience life across an increasing number of platforms, screens, and devices. Oswald and Packer (2013) thus conclude that the prominence of mobile media in people’s lives necessitates new models that acknowledge how individuals are not only tasked with managing flow but are also empowered within the media environments they navigate.

The concept of flow, as theorized by Williams and updated in television and new media studies, thus provides a framework for understanding TikTok’s emergence as a platform for watching television, particularly around aspects such as who holds the agency to control programing, how content is experienced, and which media are required to watch it. Our research design aimed to translate these concerns into an empirical investigation.

## Research Design

In the past five years, TikTok has become increasingly popular throughout Latin America. Our research zeroed in on Costa Rica, where TikTok usage is among the highest in the region. Recent survey findings indicate that 45 percent of Costa Ricans aged 18 and older use TikTok regularly (Brenes Peralta et al. 2024). This figure could be significantly higher if we factor in users under 18, as the data implies that younger people with some formal education form the core of TikTok’s user base in the country.

Another important cultural aspect for this study is the cultural relationship Costa Ricans have with the US. Unlike other Latin American countries, Costa Rica is characterized by a high appropriation of American cultural products as a central trait of its cultural identity (Muñoz-González 2025). This historical tendency creates ideal conditions for consuming American series and films across media ecologies (including TikTok), as Costa Ricans see them as opportunities to feel closer to the symbolic world associated with the United States (Siles 2023).

We recruited participants via our university’s social media channels. We selected twenty-seven individuals from the respondents for interviews, prioritizing age and educational diversity (given the importance of these two variables according to the aforementioned surveys.) Our sample included participants aged 19 to 57, representing both urban and coastal regions of Costa Rica. Twenty of the informants were under thirty, while seven were older. Most participants had attained some formal education, ranging from university students and professionals to recent retirees. Of the participants, eighteen identified as women and nine as men.

After assembling a relatively diverse sample, we conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant between November 2023 and June 2024. With approval from our university’s Institutional Review Board, the interviews focused on participants’ practices of consuming audiovisual content across traditional and digital media,

particularly TikTok. The interviews, averaging forty-six minutes, were conducted in Spanish (translations are our own.) We transcribed the interviews fully for their analysis. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to protect participants' privacy.

Our data analysis followed a predominantly abductive approach (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Initially, we individually examined the data to identify how participants described their engagement with television content on TikTok. In the second coding round, we collectively refined these findings by grouping them into three main themes: the co-programming of TikTok content by users and algorithms; the dynamics of content reception; and the interconnection of platforms for viewing content recommended on TikTok. We situated these themes within the existing literature on television and new media, underscoring the concept of flow. The final coding round focused on developing the analytical properties of these main themes by relating them to the three dimensions of flow presented above.

## **Co-Programming the Flow**

The first dimension of flow focuses on agency configurations between users and media programmers. In the case of TikTok, we define these configurations as “co-programming.” This term captures the computational programming delegated to algorithms for content selection and sequencing, which are also central to the traditional concept of television programming. “Co-programming” on TikTok involves two processes: on the one hand, “going with the flow” by allowing algorithms to influence specific content selections, and on the other, generating a flow that directs algorithms toward the users' desired outcomes.

### *Going With the Algorithmic Flow*

Watching television held a significant place in the lives of all our interviewees. They all dedicated regular time to streaming platforms, social media, and even cable television. However, most of our interviewees claimed they did not actively search for television content on TikTok. “It's not like I directly search for movies on TikTok,” explained Valentina (nineteen years old, student). Instead, television clips appeared incidentally (Siles et al. 2024b). Jose (21, student) described how he started watching this type of content: “On TikTok, it was just because it [television content] came up in my recommendations. I simply had to follow people who were posting it and then a lot more of it started appearing.” The words of Valentina and Jose express a fundamental belief in how TikTok operates: algorithms are in charge of regulating the flow. Accordingly, Jose framed his practices as a direct reaction to the initiative of TikTok's algorithms: he “simply” had to respond to algorithms to get a flow going.

In contrast to the flow of traditional television and streaming platforms, which centers on sequence and continuity, users envisioned flow on TikTok as a matter of virality. Consequently, watching television on TikTok was shaped not by narrative order or progression, but by algorithmic mechanisms aimed at capturing attention. Our participants attributed several capabilities to TikTok's algorithms in creating this viral flow,

the first of which was precision. Many of our interviewees appreciated TikTok's algorithmic ability to suggest unexpected yet very appealing fragments of series or films. Jose elaborated on this aspect: "It recommends what I want to watch. I mean, I don't know how it knows what I want to watch, but it hooks me. And then I just stay there." For Jose, it wasn't necessary to understand all the mechanisms through which TikTok programed the flow. He just knew that it worked to his satisfaction.

Another aspect that users valued about TikTok's algo-rhythmic flow was the capacity to learn *when* to reiterate a recommendation. For our interviewees, TikTok did not offer isolated recommendations but recursive content patterns. Users often referred to the periods during which TikTok recommended specific television content as "eras," which could last several weeks. Kiara (24, student) described how these "eras" allowed her to anticipate what to expect from the app: "You can trust the algorithm. If I don't want to watch an episode, I just skip it, but I'll probably see something I like later. It's not a big deal [to skip something] because it'll come up again afterward." Repetition was not without risks: the balance between enthusiasm and frustration from seeing the same recommendations varied from person to person, as captured by Joshua's (19, student) experience: "Parts of [Disney's] *Cars* kept showing up all the time. I've watched it several times already [ . . . ] It got to a point where I felt overwhelmed and bored." What begins as algorithmically driven interests can quickly turn into annoyances for users, confirming the operation of an "infrastructure of feeling" (Coleman 2018).

It was thus common for our interviewees to perceive that TikTok's algorithms were taking control of content programing or even "making decisions" on their behalf. Carlos (21, student) compared TikTok with streaming platforms, highlighting a difference in their flow (as agency configurations): "On Netflix, I'd be thinking, 'What the hell should I watch?' [TikTok] eliminates that decision for me. It takes away the hours of indecision spent looking for something. It just delivers it to me." For Carlos, TikTok was television in Faltesek et al.'s (2023) sense, meaning that the closest comparison to TikTok was the producer-centric flow of traditional television, with its limited self-scheduling opportunities.

### **Feeding the Flow**

However, it would be misleading to suggest that users' agency disappeared while algorithms acted. On the contrary, our interlocutors were convinced they needed to actively participate in shaping TikTok's algorithmic flow to watch television. Although algorithms were "too smart" at deciding what and when to show television content, as Bryan (20, student) put it, users considered this intelligence to be subject to their actions. In short, users thought they needed to steer TikTok's algorithmic precision and pattern creation capacities in specific directions.

According to our interviewees, various theories explained how this algorithmic steering could be achieved on TikTok (Cole 2024; Siles et al. 2020). For example, many were convinced that spending time watching certain videos, "liking" them, following specific user profiles, conducting searches within the app, saving videos and

comments, and creating playlists accounted for the recommendations they received. While some of these practices are common to other algorithmic platforms, including streaming services, TikTok's unique combination of features sets it apart. Additionally, our interviewees perceived TikTok's algorithmic capabilities as superior to those of most other platforms they used, which encouraged them to remain more attentive to "co-programming" dynamics (Siles et al. 2024b; Siles and Meléndez-Moran 2021).

Once users formulated these theories about TikTok's algorithmic behavior, they normalized them and acted based on their certainty. This tendency is reflected in Miguel's (23, public relations specialist) explanation of how he began watching television on TikTok: "I started seeing clips of series and movies without any context, but very interesting clips. So, I would go to the [user] profile to keep watching clips. And then, inevitably, the algorithm kept showing me more clips from that same series." Like many others, Miguel took specific actions to direct TikTok's content flow, leveraging the capabilities attributed to its algorithms, which he explicitly named ("the algorithm"). His use of the adverb "inevitably" highlights his confidence in predicting TikTok's behavior and using it to co-program the flow to his benefit.

Users also recognized the centrality of content uploaders as intermediaries in shaping TikTok's television flow. Gina (26, teacher) hailed the work of these intermediaries as a political act that made it possible to democratize content not always easily accessible: "The person responsible for uploading content for these platforms seems to be circumventing the capitalist system, where not everyone has access. Most, I believe, gain nothing from sharing it. TikTok doesn't even monetize these videos." Although Gina's comment stems from a limited knowledge of TikTok's economic model (where financial incentives drive many intermediaries), it also underscores a critical perspective on who holds the economic and political power to make content accessible to others. At the same time, our interviewees had expectations of content uploaders, rooted in their comprehension of the traditional broadcasting flow and the respective professional obligations of intermediaries in the television industry (such as the pressure to regularly provide new content). Accordingly, they blamed content uploaders for not having the next parts of movies or episodes that TikTok users wanted to watch.

## Uncommitted Attention to Television on TikTok

The second dimension of flow focuses on how it materializes a specific reception experience. To explore this experience further, we propose the concept of "uncommitted attention." This notion highlights how users' relationship with television content on the app is both an active, emotionally rewarding experience and one that is secondary, fleeting, and unstable. The platform's text-to-material conditions—the interplay between its technological features and content consumption practices—shape this specific form of attention by rendering it uncommitted.

Our interviewees recognized watching television on TikTok as "its own thing": not entirely separate from other practices, yet not easily reducible to how people relate to other media and platforms. This ambiguity stems from the platform's inherent ambivalence: it *both* mirrors traditional television *and* diverges from it in fundamental ways.

For Carlos, the closest precedent to this experience was watching television: “It’s literally like watching TV; you’re just scrolling, and suddenly a movie shows up—a movie I would probably never have chosen to watch on my own.” Carlos thus highlighted again the connection between TikTok and the traditional TV experience as a producer-controlled flow. This resemblance to television made TikTok’s flow feel immediate: “Everything is already there,” said Paulina (21, student).

Based on this expectation, some users preferred to watch the fragments of a series or movie on TikTok in their intended order. Taking specific actions to ensure this continuous flow on TikTok, as is the case with television, led to frustration for some individuals. These frustrations arose from issues such as content fragmentation into numerous parts, poor video quality, or video alterations to circumvent copyright restrictions.

However, the comparison between TikTok and traditional television fell short in other respects, highlighting the centrality of ambivalence in their relationship with TikTok. Paulina made some differences explicit:

I divide [the content I watch] into three categories. There’s my content, which I want to pay attention to and watch [such as her favorite TV shows]. Then there’s an intermediate type that I like, but I know I don’t need to give 100% of my attention to, it can just be playing in the background of my life. And then there’s TikTok. That’s a completely different category for me.

The main criterion for differentiating these viewing experiences was not who programmed the flow, but rather the kind of attention it required. For Paulina, TikTok can seamlessly integrate into her surroundings, much like television has historically operated as part of the “ambient” in domestic and public spaces (McCarthy 2001). However, she also recognizes that engaging with TikTok requires a higher level of active participation. The emotional payoff of this engagement was proportionally higher (Coleman 2018). Accordingly, our interviewees described watching TikTok as a deeply rewarding affective experience: “I can’t describe it; I’m just hooked!,” said Miguel. Bryan articulated this sentiment eloquently: “I dive right in, get lost. I don’t understand how I get so absorbed watching these kinds of videos, series, and movies. I lose track of everything happening around me.” Bryan thus described his experience as an engrossing flow that made him lose awareness of his surroundings, in contrast to how ambient television subtly brings the environment to the forefront (McCarthy 2001).

For some users, the app’s design enhanced this experience. According to Carolina (21, consultant assistant), “The fact that the screen is vertical helps me, at least, to have a more immersive experience compared to if the screen were horizontal.” TikTok’s flow became immersive for Carolina as watching the phone made it difficult to engage in other tasks simultaneously.

Despite being immersive and rewarding, the attention given to television content on the app is consistently uncommitted. It is partial, temporary, and always unstable. Television content plays a secondary role on the app compared to the vast array of other available content. Although our interviewees generally appreciated algorithmic

recommendations for series and movies, their primary interest lay in the app itself—the wide variety of content recommended to them and the broader experience of spending time engaging with diverse material.

The main motivation for using TikTok among our interviewees was not to watch a series but rather to find a source of distraction (Schellewald 2024). For most users, discovering series and films was valuable but not essential. Miguel articulated this sentiment clearly: “When I’m on TikTok, I’m usually just passing the time. So I don’t feel like I’m dedicating time to watching a series.” Miguel’s interest was in TikTok for its own sake, not for any particular type of recommendation. In his view, TikTok isn’t designed for the focused attention he would dedicate to a series on a streaming platform or a bigger screen, where the content is specifically available for that purpose. Under these conditions, giving full attention to a series or movie requires “extra effort,” as Nadia (26, graduate student) described it.

Users’ attention to series and film clips is also limited by the fragility of how most content is experienced on TikTok. Any recommendation on the app, including series and films, “has to really capture your attention,” noted Paulina. Otherwise, it vanishes with the swipe of a finger. Paulina was quick to highlight another limitation of television reception on TikTok: “I feel like the attention it captures isn’t that strong. At any moment, something else can happen, and I would just turn off my phone and focus on whatever’s going on.” Paulina thus pointed to the unstable nature of TikTok’s immersive algo-rhythmic flow, which she interprets as intrinsically prone to fragility. The cellphone is thus an ambivalent medium: it affords mobility, expanding opportunities to watch television in settings and on devices where it was traditionally less accessible, yet it also introduces greater distractions and the ease of disengagement with a single click.

### *Textomaterial Configurations*

TikTok’s uncommitted attention fundamentally relies on specific textomaterial configurations, that is, the interconnectedness of content interpretation practices and the technologies used to watch that content (Siles and Boczkowski 2012). This notion highlights the interdependence of both the symbolic (content) and material (artifacts) dimensions in shaping practices such as watching television.

Regarding the textual component, watching television on TikTok involved engaging with content characterized by the relative simplicity of its plots. Sergio (22, student) further clarified the nature of the television he typically watches on TikTok: “[I watch] things that don’t require as much attention as sitting down to watch a series where I need to follow the dialog and all that. On TikTok, I’d say I watch things that don’t require using my brain.” Sergio thus suggested that watching television on TikTok did not demand all of his interpretive and cognitive abilities (his “brain”). Among the content mentioned by our interviewees were English-language series such as *Family Guy*, *Friends*, *Futurama*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Rick and Morty*, *The Simpsons*, *Shark Tank*, and *Young Sheldon*, as well as Latin American *telenovelas*, K-dramas, and Turkish dramas.

TikTok's textual television experience also hinged on the systematic integration of paratexts—videos created to explain and provide context for series and movies (Gray 2010). Unlike other media, both paratexts and texts on TikTok share the same format (videos of relatively similar length), are delivered through the same device (without needing to switch platforms to watch them), and are governed by the same algorithmic distribution mechanisms (which allows texts and paratexts to be encountered with almost equal likelihood.) These factors make paratexts an integral aspect of the experience rather than a secondary or alternative element. Sergio, who often watches clips of *The Simpsons* on TikTok, values two types of paratextual videos: those offering explained summaries of “the best moments of the series” and those analyzing the scientific accuracy of its most iconic scenes. He frequently shares these videos with his girlfriend rather than the series itself. For Ericka (34, publicist), paratextual videos are an additional criterion for deciding whether to follow an algorithmic recommendation to watch a film. Once she decides to watch it, she alternates between watching paratexts and segments of the film on the app.

These textual preferences are closely intertwined with TikTok's technological configuration. Unlike streaming platforms, where flow is based on a separation between its textual dimensions (discrete programs) and its material dimensions (navigation and recommendation mechanisms; Lüders and Sundet 2022), watching television content on TikTok depends on a strong text-to-material integration that reshapes the conditions for experiencing flow. Many interviewees emphasized TikTok's affordances for seamlessly integrating paratextual content. Carolina, for example, was impressed by “how easily I can quickly search for a keyword or something very specific related to the series, even a character's name. It provides all the videos related to that! This is different from my experience with YouTube.”

Interviewees also emphasized the role of comments within the app, which provided information about the content, such as names of actors or series, technical details, and plot elements. Monica (20, student) explained how she navigated comments on TikTok: “When you don't know the name of the movie, you hover over the comment and save it to your favorites. So, you're not just saving the video; you're also saving the name of the movie.” Comments turned watching television on TikTok into a social experience. In the comment section, our participants found a window into others' opinions on series and films, often expressed through jokes and “fun facts.” This gave TikTok a role in fostering a sense of companionship and conversation, which has been an essential aspect of the television-watching experience over time (Silverstone 1994).

The centrality of materiality in shaping TikTok's flow reception experience is also demonstrated in the use of split screens while watching content. Our interviewees had mixed reactions to viewing content on TikTok alongside mobile game videos on split screens. Paulina, one of the most outspoken critics, said: “There's always something else happening on the screen alongside the series. But when I want to watch a series, I don't want to see it vertically on my phone, split with a video of someone squeezing slime at the top.” For users like Paulina, the main frustration was dividing their already fragile attention across multiple activities at once.

In contrast, other users have become accustomed to watching series and games on split screens simultaneously. Their habit stems from TikTok's seamless integration of paratextual and textual elements, blending them more fluidly than in other media. This creates an ambivalent experience, where the sensation of watching, interacting, and playing with the content coexists. Watching television in these ambivalent conditions has become so ingrained that when using streaming platforms or cable, Sergio said he now finds it strange not to have to split his attention between the show and a game on the same screen.

## Outflows Across Platforms

The third dimension of flow focuses on how watching television on TikTok involves ways of engaging with a broader ecology of devices, media, and platforms. In his study of broadcasting, as previously discussed, Williams envisioned flow as a force that kept viewers anchored in front of the TV for extended periods. In contrast, TikTok is marked by continuous outflows between the app and a varied media environment. To be sure, using other media to discuss content—ranging from interpersonal communication to online forums and social media—has long been a central aspect of the television-watching experience (Jenkins 2006). The case of TikTok illustrates how these dynamics have intensified and become a constitutive part of the flow in relation to broader media ecologies.

The seamless integration of paratexts into the TikTok reception experience drives outflows toward other platforms. Catalina (42, entrepreneur) described this practice as follows: “Many movies that I end up watching are because I saw a short review of the movie or series, and I thought, ‘Oh, I’ll go look for it to watch.’” Similarly, it was through a paratextual video on TikTok that interviewees such as Nadia reported to have learned how they could use Telegram to access television content that wasn’t even available on streaming platforms.

Many sought other platforms because the intrigue generated by the paratext could not be properly resolved on TikTok, mostly because of limitations in content availability and technical quality. Our interlocutors also established flows between TikTok and other platforms where they could engage with content beyond uncommitted attention. In this sense, the segments of series or films on TikTok operated as a paratext for the longer version of those texts. Ericka made this paratextual use of film clips on TikTok explicit by stating: “[I use them as] spoilers to decide whether it’s worth going [to the cinema] or not.” Similarly, Gabriela (31, executive assistant) noted: “I get [recommendations of] short clips of movies or series, and sometimes I think, ‘How interesting! What series is that?’ So, I end up searching for it and find it on Telegram, or I download it via torrents, or I find it on Netflix.” Moving to movie theaters, torrent applications, streaming platforms, or YouTube allows users to better control the viewing experience in that they can watch on larger screens, in the desired order, and schedule their watching sessions.

Paulina’s account of her outflow from TikTok to Disney+ is illustrative: “I was convinced to watch *Boy Meets World* because I came across snippets on TikTok. It got

stuck in my mind, it left a small seed. But it's much harder to keep following it [on TikTok]." Watching clips from the series on TikTok became a paratext that encouraged Paulina to watch the series in order. TikTok generated the initial intrigue (the "small seed") and also helped her assess which series was worth her time and attention. Yet, the experience of watching content on TikTok made it difficult for her to engage with the series in the way she desired, prompting her to switch to a streaming platform.

The uncommitted nature of TikTok reception also creates conditions for the multiplication of flows between media. These flows are shaped by the possibilities each platform affords within the specific conditions of everyday life. Monica described her process of connecting TikTok and the multiplayer video game VRChat: "TikTok is for the daytime, and VRChat is for the evening. I watch a movie on TikTok and think, 'I want to see the whole thing, but not here.' So I switch to VRChat at night when I get home." The flow between the two platforms allowed Monica to take advantage of their distinct features: discovering movies on TikTok and watching and discussing them with others on VRChat. Switching to another platform doesn't invalidate but rather complements and reinforces the importance of browsing TikTok during the day to learn which series or movies are being recommended.

Managing these proliferating outflows was not always easy for our interviewees. To describe this experience, many used terms that revealed the difficulties they faced: "It's hard for me to choose [what to watch]," noted Jose; "There's too much variety. I get lost!" complained Gabriela. Ericka vividly described how she lives amid constant active flows: "It's very chaotic because I have my computer on, maybe another phone beside me, or something else. I'm doing many things at once. But my main focus is watching TikTok." Against these challenges, our interlocutors embrace the virtues of uncommitted attention and typically choose not to follow up on all the recommendations that TikTok presents to them. Their strategic ignorance then fuels the cycle of co-programming: people are left waiting to see when a suggestion they ignored will return as part of a new "era" of recommendations, an algorithmic pattern that invites them to pay more attention, even if uncommitted.

## Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have argued that examining TikTok in relation to television provides valuable insights into the reconfigurations of television and new media. Drawing on three dimensions of the concept of flow derived from Raymond Williams' work, we have made various arguments that broaden our understanding of these reconfigurations.

First, we argued that the case of TikTok contributes to a deeper understanding of how the interplay of agency between content programmers and audiences takes shape nowadays. To further explore this process, we proposed the concept of "co-programming," which involves both going along with the algorithmic flow and feeding it through specific practices. We showed that any analytical consideration of flow on ambivalent platforms such as TikTok must move beyond viewing agency in either/or terms and instead recognize the complex and evolving ways in which

people engage with algorithms in their everyday lives today to carry out practices such as watching television (Siles et al. 2024a, 2024c).

Our notion of “co-programming” the flow offers a nuanced perspective of the specific relational dynamics between programmers and audiences. On the one hand, we identified how people participate in this relationship as subjects who rely on algorithms that create precise and suggestive recommendation patterns (or “eras”). On the other, we showed how users also shape this process according to their interests through actions that go beyond the typical appropriation of streaming platforms, such as “liking,” commenting, sharing, watching, dwelling on, and saving content, as well as connecting the experience of this content with multiple other media. Furthermore, our analysis contributed to the existing literature by highlighting the reflective nature of this process in comparison to flow in other media, including traditional television and streaming platforms. People experience the “co-programming” of flow on TikTok as a process that *requires* active and ongoing reflexivity on both the actions of algorithms and their practices, as well as the reciprocal consequences of each (Cole 2024; Siles et al. 2024b).

Second, our analysis outlined the main characteristics of a specific way of engaging with television content—immersing oneself in TikTok’s algo-rhythmic flow. This analysis complements the dominant focus in the literature on platforms, which has largely centered on considerations of temporality. We theorized this form of reception as “uncommitted attention” to suggest that watching television on TikTok is a fragile, unstable, and fleeting practice, endowed with its own dynamics and emotional rewards. The experience of flow on TikTok also depends on a much smoother integration of paratexts and texts, in contrast to other platforms and media. Watching television on TikTok is thus consistent with the text-material nature of this app—it relates to long-standing practices in television history but cannot be fully reduced to them. Uncommitted attention represents an ambivalent mode of reception for an equally ambivalent medium.

Finally, we argued for the need to consider the multiple flows that characterize people’s relationship with television content on TikTok, situated within a broader media ecology. A common tendency in academic literature has been to conceptualize flow as a singular and unilateral force that binds individuals to a specific medium. Our study demonstrated how a constant set of flows and outflows connects television content on TikTok to multiple media, platforms, and devices. Whereas previous literature has emphasized the importance of conversations about television across various media for shaping identity and culture (Jenkins 2006; Silverstone 1994), our approach revealed that outflows between platforms are constitutive of the flow experience itself. Moreover, we showed that these flows are both plural and simultaneous, creating complex conditions that require significant effort to manage within a complicated media ecosystem.

By focusing on reception issues, our study is relatively limited in understanding the broader consequences of this phenomenon for the television industry. Further research could examine how the platform economy and the television industry intersect with the processes identified in this paper, shaping issues such as television

genres, scriptwriting approaches, and marketing strategies, due to how TikTok's ambivalent nature could help blur content categories and narrative structures. Studies could also analyze the role of intermediaries, including content uploaders, in sustaining TikTok's televisual flow. Additionally, new research could investigate how different actors and industry sectors manage shifting modes of audience engagement in platforms like TikTok. Finally, as our study reflects the continued relevance of Raymond Williams' work, researchers could delve deeper into other concepts derived from his oeuvre that, like flow and (infra)structures of feeling, can shed light on the tensions in the transition from broadcasting to the more distinctive features of a cultural and technological era defined by ontological ambivalence.

### Acknowledgments

We thank Rodrigo Muñoz-González for his thoughtful feedback on a previous version of this manuscript. Andreas Schellewald helped us delve deeper into this topic and its implications while we were organizing a panel on TikTok and television for the annual meeting of the International Communication Association. We also acknowledge the valuable contributions of the journal's reviewers and Editor.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Vicerrectoría de Investigación, Universidad de Costa Rica, (Project No. C3347).

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