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## **Forging Connections: Nonprofits, TikTok, and Authentic Engagement – A Mixed-Methods Study**

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TikTok, a social media platform designed for sharing short videos (“microvlogs”), provides an opportunity to learn how nonprofits adapt and implement social media strategies. Similarly, exploring nonprofits’ behavior on TikTok is useful for analyzing the impact that strategy has on the content nonprofits produce and user engagement. Using a mixed-methods design, this study analyzed data from 29 interviews and 575 microvlogs to answer three questions. First, how are nonprofits incorporating microvlogging into their social media strategy? Second, applying the hierarchy of engagement framework, do nonprofits produce social media content aligned with their expressed strategy? Finally, does alignment between strategy and output affect user engagement? The findings indicate that, unlike Facebook and Twitter/X, nonprofits on TikTok harness community-building content to facilitate information sharing and action. Strategy-output alignment significantly increases user engagement, but only for community-building content. Thus, social media strategy may be less important than authenticity on TikTok.

Keywords: nonprofits; social media; microvlogs; TikTok

Nonprofits’ adoption and use of social media are informed by a number of factors, including the organization’s mission, strategy, and capacity (Seo & Vu, 2020; Xie, 2021; Nah & Saxton, 2013) as well as a desire to raise community awareness (Campbell et al., 2014) and engage stakeholders (Campbell & Lambright, 2020). Such influences on adoption and utilization have been explored throughout the nonprofit literature. Yet, questions remain regarding the extent to which nonprofits are using social media strategically, whether nonprofits’ social media behavior indeed aligns with their strategy, and the ways in which strategy impacts user engagement.

The majority of nonprofit social media research to date has focused exclusively on microblogging platforms such as Facebook and Twitter/X<sup>1</sup>, leaving to question not only how nonprofits adapt

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<sup>1</sup> Though X is currently the name of the social media platform formerly known as Twitter, when this research (as well as the research cited) was conducted, it was known as Twitter. Therefore, we referred to it as Twitter/X for consistency.

their social media strategy across platforms but also the effectiveness of such strategies on emerging platforms. These are important questions given that user engagement depends upon individualizing one's approach to each social media website (Campbell & Lambright, 2020; Wiley, et al., 2023) and because of the ways new platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram provide users with innovative ways to engage. Nonprofit subsectors behave differently from each other on social media (Campbell et al., 2014; Figenschou & Fredheim, 2020); however, few studies have compared a cross-section of nonprofit subsectors to determine how the sector as a whole engages on social media (Campbell & Lambright, 2020; Guo & Saxton, 2018). Examining a cross-section of nonprofits as they join a new social media platform could explain (1) how strategy develops and (2) the relationship between strategy, content produced, and user engagement.

The emergence of TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram provides an opportunity for nonprofits to rethink their social media strategy. These platforms require users to create short videos including audio and text, which the authors have termed "microvlogs," allowing nonprofits to open new lines of communication with stakeholders. TikTok and Snapchat are especially helpful for targeting younger generations like Generation Z and Generation Alpha (Gottfried, 2024). Over 50% of nonprofits in the U.S. and Canada have Instagram accounts ((Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2019). This indicates nonprofits see value in emerging microvlogging sites and will soon branch out to newer platforms such as Twitch and Patreon, which have yet to fully capture the nonprofit community's attention.

Created in 2016, TikTok has over 150 million users in the United States. (TikTok newsroom, 2023) and is one of the fastest-growing social networks of all time. A recent study by Wiley et al. (2023) located nonprofits across seven subsectors that used the platform, suggesting a wide acceptance of TikTok among nonprofits. Kim et al. (2023) found that 11% of environmental NGOs had TikTok accounts. Despite a thorough search, the authors could not identify how many nonprofits currently have a TikTok account, but, given the rapid growth in the number of TikTok users, the authors suspect it will not be long before most nonprofits on social media will have a TikTok presence as well. As such, TikTok provides a strong platform for learning how and when nonprofits effectively execute social media strategies and engage users.

The authors ask three research questions: How are nonprofits incorporating microvlogs (TikTok posts) into their social media strategy? Do nonprofits produce TikTok content aligned with their expressed social media strategy? Does TikTok strategy and output alignment affect user engagement? The mixed-methods research design was conducted in three stages. First, the authors analyzed 29 nonprofit TikTok accounts by qualitatively coding the on-screen activity of individual microvlogs employing guidance from Wiley and Evans (2022) and Lybecker et al. (2015). Second, the authors interviewed the accounts' social media coordinators about their strategy for the platform. This allowed the authors to pair the expressed social media strategy with their observed output and then assess the alignment of the two. Finally, the authors conducted an exploratory analysis to examine whether strategy-output alignment affected user engagement. The dataset included a cross-section of seven nonprofit subsectors, including arts, culture, and humanities; education; environment and animals; health; human services; international and foreign affairs; and public, societal benefit.<sup>2</sup> The findings indicate that most nonprofits join TikTok to reach Generation Z. Nonprofits deployed strategies that sharply distinguished this microvlogging platform from microblogging platforms. The exploratory analysis comparing nonprofits' expressed strategy to the social media behavior (output) observed showed that two-

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<sup>2</sup> Nonprofits were grouped by their U.S. Internal Revenue Service National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities code.

thirds of the accounts were in strategy-output alignment. Surprisingly, alignment significantly increased engagement but only for certain types of content. Otherwise, alignment did not necessarily affect user engagement.

These findings contribute to the evolving research on nonprofits' use of social media and makes three main contributions to the literature. First, methodologically, the authors developed an original data set from a cross-section of seven aforementioned nonprofit subsectors. Using a combination of qualitative data collected from interviews with 29 nonprofits, further analysis of their social media accounts, and corresponding social media analytics, this mixed-methods study goes beyond observing social media behavior to understand the strategies driving the content nonprofits are making on TikTok. By including an exploratory component with the purpose of better understanding how nonprofit social media strategy may influence important outcomes such as user engagement, the study provides an opportunity to delve into largely unexplored questions about nonprofits' social media strategy. To date, the literature has largely focused on observable outputs such as social media behavior while neglecting to examine the process driving those outputs, creating a gap in understanding the theoretical mechanisms driving the relationship between inputs (strategy) and outputs (content). Therefore, another important contribution of this research is its ability to begin to empirically explore the relationship among nonprofits' social media strategy, observable outputs, and potential links to engagement. This development lays the groundwork for further theory-driven research that can help to identify salient mechanisms at play. After all, user engagement is the currency nonprofits seek on social media (Campbell et al., 2014; Guo & Saxton, 2018), so understanding potential theoretical drivers of social media inputs and outputs is an important avenue of future research for scholars.

Last, this study provides a number of practical strategies for nonprofits. TikTok poses unique challenges that differentiate its adoption from the adoption of Facebook and Twitter/X. In contrast with other platforms, TikTok's video length, messaging popularity, and user engagement metrics determine who sees which posts so users are presented with a stream of content not limited to the accounts they follow. Therefore, authenticity and incorporation of the platform's current trends place TikTok content on the social media feeds of other users with similar interests (Geyser, 2024). The complexity of engagement on TikTok means nonprofits cannot simply repeat messaging from other platforms; thus, content specifically for TikTok is more effective at engaging stakeholders (Li et al., 2021; Wiley et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2019). Furthermore, the findings suggest that social media strategy may actually be less important than authenticity on TikTok, encouraging nonprofits to embrace the community building power of the platform. Isolating these effective uses of social media not only broadens an organization's digital reach but impacts its bottom line in terms of dollars raised, people engaged, and beneficiaries served. As such, the authors expect the findings of this research to be useful for nonprofits, especially those looking to make the most out of new and emerging microvlogging platforms.

## Literature Review

### *Social Media Outputs and Outcomes*

Social media activity can be analyzed by (1) the content created and posted, or its *output*, and (2) what the posts produce in terms of social capital, resources, and goal fulfillment, or its *outcome*. Measuring outputs and outcomes on microblogging platforms is less dynamic than microvlogging platforms (Zhu et al., 2019; Wiley et al., 2023), making the evaluation of nonprofit activity on Facebook and Twitter/X more straightforward than on TikTok and Snapchat. Nonprofit social media outputs and outcomes have most often been assessed on Facebook and Twitter/X (microblogging platforms) than on microvlogging sites like TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram (Campbell & Lambright, 2020). Scholars have analyzed longer-form videos (e.g., YouTube) to interpret policy narratives (Lybecker et al., 2015; McBeth et al., 2012) and used YouTube videos

to make sense of a nonprofit's social media strategy. McBeth et al.'s (2012) work supports our argument that what nonprofits produce on social media—in terms of outputs and outcomes—can be just as important as a nonprofit's intentionality behind the posts.

According to the social media hierarchy of engagement framework, nonprofits produce three types of microblog outputs or functions: information sharing; community building; and mobilizing stakeholders through action (Campbell & Lambright, 2020; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). On Twitter/X and Facebook, nonprofits produce mostly information-sharing and action-driving microblogs (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). The microblog type that garners the most attention on Facebook (measured through likes, comments, and shares) is information-sharing. Action-oriented microblogs gain the least attention despite being the most commonly posted type (Klafke et al., 2021). However, action-oriented messaging is more productive for larger interest groups (Figenschou & Fredheim, 2020). Social media makes information-sharing and community-building more efficient for nonprofits and are effective strategies regardless of the nonprofit's size. While each type of social media output is important, different platform styles require individualized strategies for content creation (Campbell & Lambright, 2020). For instance, Wiley et al. (2023) found that microvlogs exhibiting community building were more common and gained the most user engagement on TikTok (measured through a combination of views and likes. Li et al. (2021) and Zhu et al. (2019) found similar engagement results in governmental public health messaging on TikTok.

Nonprofit social media outcomes are often assessed through engagement measures, funds raised, and policy goals achieved. Attention on Twitter/X (measured through retweets and favorites) is also associated with a nonprofit's network, posting frequency, and the number of conversations it joins or engages in (Guo & Saxton, 2018). Action-oriented social media behavior can help interest groups drive public attention and overcome limits in membership recruitment. Attention to this messaging is more valuable than the number of individuals engaged in the interest group (Kanol & Nat, 2021). On the other hand, the strength and size of an organization's network on Twitter/X and posting frequency are positively associated with donations during a fundraising campaign (McKeever, 2017). Larger interest groups can use social media to mobilize stakeholders due to larger resources (i.e., budget, staff, credibility, and political connections) (Figenschou & Fredheim, 2020; Schwoerer, 2019; Schwoerer, 2023).

### *Social Media Strategy*

#### *Presence of Social Media Strategy*

A comprehensive social media strategy includes stated goals with measurable outcome indicators, designated staff with outlined job duties for social media tasks, and formal policy (Campbell et al., 2014; Choi & Theoni, 2016; Linke & Zerkass, 2012; Xie, 2021). However, scholarship indicates that nonprofits often lack a comprehensive social media strategy. Most organizations, including nonprofits, do not have indicators to measure the performance of their social media activities (Linke & Zerkass, 2012). Social media objectives are often unclear and do not align well with the organization's overall marketing objectives (Choi & Theoni, 2016). In general, social media strategies can be difficult for organizations because they require regulation and flexibility (Linke & Zerkass, 2012). Top and middle management likely do not understand or strongly support social media marketing strategies or new platform adoption (Choi & Theoni, 2016). This absence of vision and strategy serves as a barrier to the use of social media (Campbell et al., 2014) and can mean that outputs and outcomes of nonprofit social media activity will likely be unfocused as organizations master a new social media strategy or platform.

### Developing a Social Media Strategy

Guo and Saxton (2020) propose three levels of outcomes for social media use: (1) building social media capital; (2) leveraging social capital to build tangible and intangible organizational resources; and (3) using these resources toward fulfilling their mission, meeting fundraising goals, and the realization of policy efforts. Nonprofits should closely integrate social media communication into organizational public relations and branding communications (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). However, if nonprofits focus simply on building social media capital, organizations will struggle to fulfill their mission through social media (Plowman & Wilson, 2018). Specialists argue that, without an intentional strategy, there is little point in using social media (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Thus, success depends on leveraging social media capital into resources (Guo & Saxton, 2020).

Given that all nonprofit resources should be devoted to mission fulfillment, nonprofits' activity on social media is of particular interest. Management of a comprehensive strategy is resource-heavy in pecuniary costs such as staffing and technology. Mission-fulfillment activity on social media tends to be indirect and more incorporated into resource development to support the mission rather than actual service provision (Saxton & Wang, 2014). For example, Campbell et al. (2014) found three key reasons human service nonprofits engage on Twitter/X and Facebook: marketing organizational activities; remaining relevant to key constituencies; and raising community awareness. Similarly, organizations join Snapchat to generate awareness of their interests and attract a younger audience (Wilson et al., 2020). Likewise, the opportunity to capture the attention of a significantly younger audience on TikTok in order to engage more young people in their mission was the primary motivation behind the American Red Cross' adoption and continued use of TikTok (Correll & Buckholtz, 2023). These findings suggest that mission fulfillment via social media is a multistep process.

For instance, mission relevance to messaging can be categorized as strategic or supportive. Guo and Saxton (2014) found that Twitter/X messaging by advocacy nonprofits is predominantly supportive. Whereas interest groups translate social media capital into resources to fulfill policy goals, which is much more strategic (Figenschou & Fredheim, 2020). Previous studies reveal that social media strategies of human service nonprofits are not always well-developed to promote or fulfill organizational goals (Campbell et al., 2014).

To date, the literature distinguishes social media strategy from social media outputs and outcomes, with virtually no research that examines the relationship among strategy, outputs, and outcomes. However, determining how and when nonprofit social media strategy aligns with social media outputs and outcomes can help to define success on microblogging and microvlogging platforms, especially as new platforms emerge. Therefore, the authors aim to learn more about how nonprofits' social media strategy aligns with social media outputs and outcomes. Such findings are necessary for later determining how nonprofits across the sector intend to use social media to fulfill their missions.

### Managing the Nonprofit Social Media Account

The presence of a designated social media manager or team might indicate that an organization is strategic in its social media activity. This is because the employment of a social media manager would be helpful in the nonprofits' ability to translate followers and user engagement into resources and then mission fulfillment. Additionally, it symbolizes an organization's investment in social media to fulfill a goal or purpose. Unfortunately, many nonprofits lack a designated social media manager. Smaller human services nonprofits, for example, are unlikely to have a staff position dedicated to social media management (Young, 2017). Similarly, charities typically lean on internal staffing for social media management, with a majority (69%) of social media managers

in IT departments and 40% in marketing or public relations departments (Barnes, 2014). Sometimes, it is unclear who manages social media presence and platform accounts. A small minority of organizations (13%) outsource social media management (Barnes, 2014). On the other hand, well-resourced interest groups are more likely to have staff that manage their social media presence and strategy (Figenschou & Fredheim, 2020). Well-resourced organizations will likely have an advantage in the social media space by employing a social media manager and team (Figenschou & Fredheim, 2020). Designated, skilled social media coordinators can help ensure that social media strategy aligns with social media output and outcomes.

To summarize, the conditions determining success for nonprofits on social media are the nonprofits' mission area, the amount of time a nonprofit has been active on the social media platform, and the presence of a designated social media coordinator. Additionally, mission area and platform type (microblogging or microvlogging) are associated with specific social media activities (Campbell & Lambright, 2020; Wiley et al., 2023). However, as the literature suggests, if nonprofits' success on social media is indeed dependent on the presence of a mission-driven strategy and a designated social media manager, nonprofits are in trouble. Studying the intentionality behind nonprofits' social media activity is an important step in building conceptual knowledge about nonprofits' use of new and emerging social media platforms as well as guiding best practices for how nonprofits can use them successfully.

## **Methods**

Using Lovejoy and Saxton's (2012) hierarchy of engagement social media framework, the authors assessed the alignment between social media strategy and the actual social media content of 29 nonprofits by (1) studying their TikTok accounts and (2) interviewing their social media coordinators. The authors textually analyzed microvlogs and content analyzed interview transcripts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Wiley & Evans, 2022). The research was completed in multiple stages. First, the team collected, coded, and analyzed the social media activity using a deductive approach and a theory-driven coding schema. Then, the team interviewed the social media coordinators and determined their social media strategy according to the framework. Finally, alignment was determined and tested for its effect on user engagement. The authors anticipated that social media input (expressed strategy) would drive output (social media content) and result in the intended outcome (higher levels of user engagement).

### *Stage 1: Identifying, Coding, and Analyzing TikTok Accounts*

#### **TikTok Data Set**

As part of a larger study on microvlogs, the team identified active nonprofit TikTok accounts in the United States (Wiley et al., 2023). Because TikTok was new and few nonprofits had TikTok accounts during data collection (July 2020–March 2021), a random sample was not possible. The team initially identified 147 TikTok accounts by searching the platform using variations of hashtags such as #nonprofit, #fundraising, #charity, or #donate. They also identified accounts or nonprofit names with which they were already familiar. The authors purged inactive accounts, accounts based outside of the United States, and accounts without 501(c)3, 501(c)4, or 501(c)6 status. This dropped the sample to 78 TikTok accounts.

#### **Textual Analysis of Microvlogs**

Approximately 20 microvlogs from each account were coded using a theoretically guided codebook (Saldaña, 2015).<sup>3</sup> A sampling schema ensured an even distribution of the coded microvlogs from July 2020 to March 2021. This period occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic

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<sup>3</sup> In two cases, 18 microvlogs were coded. In six cases, 19 were coded. In 19 cases, 20 were coded. In one case 21 were coded. In one case, 24 were coded.

and included a presidential threat to shut down the platform, the 2020 Election, the winter holiday season, and the January 6th Insurrection. Spreading the analysis across this period was essential for capturing variations over time and avoiding short periods where national and international events heavily influenced social media behavior. For instance, many nonprofits emphasize fundraising during the holiday season, which may not reflect their broader social media strategy. Additionally, the authors assumed nonprofits would be hesitant to devote resources to building a TikTok presence when the platform was at risk of disappearing in the United States during early fall of 2020 (Swanson et al., 2020). Coders gathered account-level and post-level attributes before theoretical coding.

Coders used textual analysis to make sense of on-screen activities, which are of higher value to this analysis than simply the words spoken or typed (Wiley & Evans, 2022; Wiley et al., 2023). The authors evaluated the on-screen activity through visual, text, and audio observations, the interactions between the three, and the use of TikTok's unique collaborative features (also see Li et al., 2021 and Zhu et al., 2019). Combining these observations was valuable because teasing out if a post was information sharing, community building, or mobilizing action required a thorough review of these components (see Wiley et al., 2023). Positive wording may be spoken with sarcastic or sad vocal tones and pacing, which changes the meaning of the information shared. Memes, or shared cultural jokes or understandings, in dances or actions, may exclude spoken word or text on screen, leaving traditional content analysis irrelevant (Lybecker et al., 2015). Table 1 categorizes the on-screen observations.

**Table 1.** Components of Textual Analysis of Microvlogs

<b>Visual observations</b>	<b>Audio observations</b>	<b>On Screen Text</b>	<b>Collaborative TikTok Features</b>
Behavior of person or animal	Music	Captions	Duetting (split screen of multiple users)
Interactions	Vocal Tone	Transcripts	Stitching (following another user's video with a video response)
Attire	Speech pacing	Words on-screen	Trending audio over new video
Choreography	Number of speakers	Signage in foreground or background	Memes in the form of quotes or staged interactions
Structured absences	Silence or lack of speech	Emojis or semiosis	
Proximity of people, animals, and objects	Voiceovers	Comments shared on screen from another user	
Lighting, focus	Robotic voice		
Camera zoom, quality	Mic quality		
Mismatch between voice, tone, words, or individual on the screen			

Each account was coded by one team member, who then drafted a brief memo on the primary social media function according to the framework (Saldaña, 2015). The team stopped at 58 accounts when saturation was reached, totaling 1160 microvlogs for the overall project. Saturation was determined by running descriptive statistics of the coding weekly and observing the balance between coding patterns (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The team ceased coding when the patterns or descriptive statistics remained consistent for three coding sessions. Wiley et al. (2023)

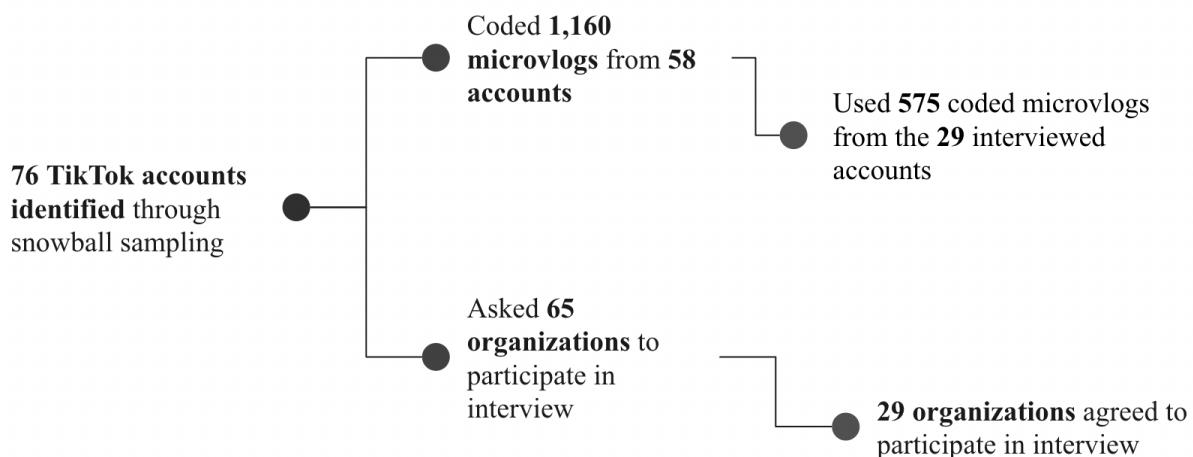
analyzed the full set of 1160 microvlogs and provided additional data collection and analysis description.

### *Stage 2: Interviewing Social Media Coordinators*

#### **Interview Data Collection**

After completing the microvlog data collection and analysis, the authors invited the accounts' social media coordinators to participate in an interview. Accounts were pulled from the initial data set, representing a cross-section of seven nonprofit subsectors. First, the authors invited 52 coded accounts to participate in an interview. As accounts responded to participate or decline, the authors noticed an imbalance in the mission area of the accounts agreeing to an interview. The authors expanded their recruitment list to 65 to include more organizations from the environment and animals and arts, culture, and humanities subsectors. The team achieved a strong response rate of 45% (29 participants). The final data set included 29 interviews and 575 microvlogs (approximately 20 microvlogs per account). Figure 1 provides a flow chart of data collection.

**Figure 1.** Three Stages of Data Set Development



Prior to an interview, the interviewer studied the account, the organization's website, and its recent IRS Form 990. This allowed the interview to focus on TikTok strategy and microvlog production rather than organizational details. The interview instrument is provided in Appendix A. The assigned team member then conducted a semi-structured, 30–45-minute phone interview. In one case, the interview was conducted via Zoom because a team of six social media coordinators and creators wanted to participate. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

#### **Content Analysis of Interviews**

A three-person coding team used qualitative directed content analysis to code the interview transcript within NVivo qualitative analysis software (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The team developed a theoretical-guided codebook and tested it on three transcripts (Saldaña, 2015). The codebook was slightly adjusted to better fit the flow of the interview instrument and patterns of conversation. The authors added or expanded codes as new concepts arose or developed in the data. Ten interviews were team-coded to corroborate the codebook (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The remaining 19 interviews were coded independently and debriefed as a team. An abbreviated codebook is available in Appendix B.

Table 2 provides three examples of the coding approach. Following the interview transcript coding, the team used qualitative analysis software query tools to interpret patterns and themes.

How the interviewee described their social media strategy in the context of the framework was assessed by the number of mentions and depth of discussion. The primary and secondary social media strategies were identified for each case by comparing the number of mentions and the interviewee's emphasis on the strategy.

**Table 2.** Examples of Coding Strategy

Organization	Interview Utterance*	Social Media Framework
@theceoofcats	<i>I also really, really love making <b>educational videos</b>. I like <b>teaching</b> people about cats and <b>things that they might not know</b> and how they can take care of their cats better or better food or things like that.</i>	Information-Sharing
@embrace	<i>If you have diabetes or anything else that you're dealing with, you look up to others and try to do the same things. So I feel like, as for diabetes, my thinking for them is to feel motivated, to take care of themselves as best as they can, and also <b>to know that there is someone they can reach out to so they are not alone</b>.</i>	Community-Building
@rainn	<i>We hope to encourage young people to <b>create change</b> and <b>support survivors</b> by <b>utilizing the donation button</b>.</i>	Action

#### Ensuring Credibility in the Qualitative Analyses

Several steps were taken to ensure the credibility of the qualitative analyses. *First*, microvlogs were coded prior to the interviews to *avoid confirmation bias* in the microvlog coding process. Coders practiced coding a set of the same microvlogs to ensure a shared understanding of the codebook and coding strategy using a form of interrater-reliability testing (Wiley & Evans, 2022). The team discussed discrepancies in coding and modified the microvlog codebook where necessary. *Second*, *member-checking* was used to test the coding of microvlogs during the interview. Before the interview, the interviewer reviewed the account, coding, and memo to draw conclusions about possible strategies for the account. The authors based these conclusions on theory and behavioral observation. Late in the interview, the interviewer shared the assessment with the interviewee and asked if they agreed with it and would add or remove anything from the description provided. This form of member-checking gauged the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations of the nonprofits' microvlogs and accounts (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The authors did not use these member-checking results for their evaluation of alignment.

*Third*, the *shared codebook for the interviews* included clear definitions and was reviewed as a team prior to coding and multiple times throughout the coding process. If a new concept emerged during the interviews, a code was added to the shared codebook. Previously coded data were revisited (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Last, the team used matrices produced by the qualitative analysis software for *theory-checking* (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). When a finding was drawn from the analysis, the team reviewed the data to identify examples of the finding within the data. The matrix tools allowed the team to cross codes and identify all examples of overlapping codes. For instance, the team concluded that nonprofit social media coordinators of smaller organizations were less able to articulate a strategy for their accounts. When the team looked for evidence of this finding, they could not find examples. The team realized *illusory correlation* (when one meaningful or powerful case influences the researcher's perception of the whole

dataset) guided the interpretation of the data (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The data were then reviewed again to identify the true similarities in coding. These five credibility checks supported credibility in the textual and content analyses.

### *Stage 3: Merging TikTok and Interview Data and Analyses*

#### *Evaluating Alignment*

The team then compared coding at the case level. The primary and secondary (where relevant) coding of the interviews and micrologs were classified as (1) alignment between expressed strategy and account output or (2) misalignment between expressed strategy and account output. For example, the @apexwolves interviewee mentioned prioritizing activities related to information-sharing the most (ten times) compared with those related to community-building (five times) and action (once). Thus, @apexwolves's *expressed strategy was coded as information sharing*. However, all of @apexwolves's posts were coded as community-building, so their *primary output was coded as community-building*. This suggested misalignment between the expressed strategy and the actual content posted by the account and was subsequently coded as misaligned. This process was repeated for all cases to determine the alignment of the entire data set. For cases with secondary coding, the team compared the primary and secondary to evaluate for alignment.

#### *Quantitative Analysis of TikTok Metadata*

Whether the goal is to share information or encourage a specific action, organizations of all types typically use social media to engage or interact with their audience in some way. While approaches may vary according to the organization's specific mission, function, and goals, nonprofits can nonetheless use social media more strategically by developing content that is engaging and effectively captures the attention of their target audience.

But developing strategies can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, especially for smaller nonprofits. Social media often requires organizations to experiment with different strategies, especially at first, in order to understand what resonates with their target audience. Experimentation is a necessary part of the process; however, it can be costly in terms of financial and human resources. Engaging stakeholders on different platforms may take many iterations before determining what "works." In this process of trial and error, organizations frequently look to data points such as views, likes, shares, and comments to measure how effective their posts are. Similarly, when assessing the impact of social media, the nonprofit literature tends to focus on levels of user engagement as the main outcome of interest (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Saxton & Waters, 2014). However, little is known about how nonprofits leverage their online platforms to reach larger audiences. The authors wanted to know whether a particular social media strategy leads to greater engagement and whether nonprofits that align the content they post with their strategy receive higher levels of engagement. To address these questions, the authors conducted an exploratory analysis by combining the qualitative data discussed above with quantitative data points on each microlog to explore the relationship between alignment and levels of engagement.

The quantitative data were collected from the publicly available TikTok profiles using the TikTok API, an open-source application in the Python programming language. Of specific interest to this study was the number of likes, comments, shares, and plays that each TikTok received to date (December 2021). By appending these quantitative measures with each TikTok's respective qualitative analysis, the authors created a new data set consisting of 575 total observations, each representing one individual TikTok. The combined data set allowed the authors to explore the relationship among the social media strategies indicated by the interviewees, the content they produced, and the audience engagement they received on those posts.

The number of likes, comments, and shares a post receives are useful measures of user engagement since these user behaviors capture various real-time digital interactions between an account (e.g., nonprofit) and users on a social media platform. Although not perfect, such measures can help organizations understand what type of content resonates most with their audience (Campbell et al., 2014; Guo & Saxton, 2018) and whether messaging has been effective in reaching the audience (Chen et al., 2021). For example, the number of likes is typically considered an indication of a user's support of a message (Klafke et al., 2021). Likewise, the number of comments and shares measures a more active interaction among a user, the organization, and its message (Chen et al., 2021; Klafke et al., 2021).

Although, mostly due to limitations of the data available to researchers, measuring engagement simply as the number of likes, comments, and shares on a post is insufficient for accurately and consistently measuring engagement in this context. Without including additional data on the total number of times the message was viewed by users, it is difficult to know whether a high number of likes is indeed a measure of high engagement or an indication of the message's reach. In other words, did more users actually like the post, or did more users just see the post compared with others? Instead, when the data permits, engagement can be measured as a ratio of the number of likes a post receives to the number of total views the post receives, providing a more precise and standardized measure of engagement (Wiley et al., 2023).

Therefore, the authors create a new measure of engagement using the ratio of likes a microvlog received to its number of plays. On TikTok, a play is counted every time a microvlog is viewed, regardless of how long a user views it or whether they watched it previously. This allows the authors to measure engagement as the number of times users "liked" a microvlog out of all the times users actually saw the microvlog. For example, if a microvlog received 11,000 likes out of 100,000 total plays, that microvlog will have an engagement measure of 0.11. In other words, for every 100 times a microvlog was played, it received 11 likes, resulting in an 11% engagement rate. This allows the authors to see the rate at which people interact with the microvlog in the context of its total reach.

## Results

The nonprofit interview sample consisted of 29 organizations from seven different mission areas. Reported revenue ranged from roughly \$23,000 to \$500 million or otherwise not publicly available. The organizations' earliest year of incorporation is 1937 and most recently 2020. All but three organizations adopted TikTok in 2020. See Appendix C for a further breakdown of the organizations interviewed.

### *TikTok's Function in Nonprofit Strategy*

Addressing the first research question, interviewees identified two primary reasons for adopting TikTok in their social media strategy. First, TikTok occupies a distinct space separate from other social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter/X, and Instagram. Nonprofits join in order to access features and audiences unavailable elsewhere. Second, nonprofits report adopting TikTok to support their existing organizational management capacities, such as fundraising and brand awareness.

Nonprofits identified distinctive features of TikTok, such as its short-form style and personable tone, as evidence of how the platform creates a lane of its own for stakeholder engagement. The most frequently mentioned characteristic of TikTok is the demographic to which it caters. Whereas Instagram draws primarily millennial audiences and Facebook is occupied by "the older crowd," TikTok is overwhelmingly identified as the platform for and by Gen Z. Nonprofits can access a concentrated number of young people on TikTok in ways they cannot on other platforms.

Nonprofits identified the solely video-based platform as a medium that allowed for easy connection or engagement with audiences compared to other platforms as this social media manager explained:

It's fun to try a new platform and it's so different from Instagram and Facebook with being very video focused and it's easier to build community or connect with people than it is on other channels. @dancemarathon

Nonprofits mentioned instances of engagement, such as younger teens commenting “first comment” on videos immediately after being posted to connect with an account. Interviewees also identified the ‘For You’ page, TikTok’s homepage, which is a curated feed of videos for the viewer, as a unique mechanism to promote engagement. The For You Page allows a nonprofit to connect to new audiences that are likely to consume their content.

Tone and function were motivations for joining TikTok. The tone of TikTok was reported as casual, comfortable, and personal, whereas Facebook was described as “combative.” TikTok’s video and short-form nature also drew a sharp contrast to Facebook and Instagram’s long-form, blog-like style.

The nonprofits compared how they took advantage of each platform to fulfill different needs. Facebook was repeatedly identified as the platform used for fundraising and advocacy; Instagram for education and imagery; and Twitter/X for humor and information sharing. Nonprofits largely identified TikTok as a space for entertainment and community-building. These identified features, tone, and function offer evidence that TikTok occupies a distinct space within nonprofit strategy and is leveraged differently than other platforms.

*TikTok promotes existing nonprofit operational capacities*

Nonprofits primarily spoke of TikTok’s role in supporting existing organizational management capacities, namely fundraising, marketing, and programming. Fundraising was mentioned the most at 75 times in 25 of the 29 interviews. Overwhelmingly, nonprofits indicated that their first priority on TikTok was education and awareness, hoping that money may come later when Gen Z enters the workforce and is more engaged in philanthropy. There is little expectation that this demographic will be generating substantial revenue at this time.

We’re really committed to educating that younger audience about why they should care and then as they grow older, we hope to remain in their minds ... and maybe one day they’ll become a donor. @bestfriendsanimalsociety

Though, evidence indicates that Gen Z philanthropy is strategic and on the rise (Laramore, 2024).

Marketing was the second-most mentioned nonprofit management capacity at 41 mentions in 18 interviews. In the context of marketing, interviewees focused on brand awareness, brand promotion, and “positive marketing.” Nonprofits viewed TikTok as a source of free advertising to gain recognition and familiarity among the younger generation. Last, programming (e.g., service provision) was mentioned in 12 interviews. Nonprofits largely spoke about why programming and recruitment efforts shifted online and how that ultimately has allowed them to expand and reach larger audiences.

COVID hit, and the authors couldn’t do anything in person. And so a lot, I would say like 70 to 80% of our recruitment efforts transferred to social media. @bethematch

Organizations like @bethematch recruit volunteers to donate bone marrow or blood cells to patients with life-threatening blood cancers. Before COVID-19, recruitment efforts concentrated on in-person donor and registration events.

### *Strategy and Output Alignment*

The second research question concerned the alignment between nonprofits' strategy and output. Alignment between social media strategy and social media output was determined by comparing the interviewees' expressed strategy and the observed output produced by the nonprofit's microvlogs. Expressed strategy refers to the interview data capturing what nonprofits said they intended to produce on their account. Observed output refers to the microvlog data analyzed showing what they actually did produce. Alignment refers to whether nonprofits' strategy and output are in agreement in terms of the social media framework. In essence, did the nonprofits make the content they intended to make?

The alignment data show that, while much of the sample was aligned, a considerable portion was not. The authors explored this difference by employing a member-checking methodological credibility test where the researcher asks the study participants if the researcher's conclusions are correct. In this case, the authors used the test to confirm whether the organization agreed with their output evaluation. Only one nonprofit disagreed with their assessment of their content. In this instance, the interviewer misspoke when articulating the evaluation. This finding is interesting because when the nonprofit's description of its social media strategy was coded using the hierarchy of engagement framework, the expressed strategy was misaligned with its output. However, when the interviewer used the framework to describe their behavior, nearly all agreed with the author's assessment.<sup>4</sup> Since the focus of the analysis is on the nonprofit's intention behind its social media activity, the authors used their expressed strategy rather than their description of their content output for the remainder of the analysis.

For half of the 10 organizations that have an executive director or CEO responsible for managing the TikTok account,<sup>5</sup> their stated strategy did not align with what they posted on TikTok. Of the 17 organizations that have a designated employee for social media coordination, 12 were aligned, suggesting that organizations with a social media employee have a higher rate of strategy and output alignment. Alignment across the seven mission area subsectors in the data set had no meaningful differences. The only exception is the human services subsector, where seven of eight nonprofit organizations' strategy and output aligned. These accounts prioritized information sharing and community building content, as did their expressed strategies.

When the authors considered the microvlog and interview data used to determine alignment, they recalled a coding difficulty in both analyses worth exploring. Coders struggled to code for just one component of the social media framework (community building, information sharing, action). For example, in a UNICEF microvlog, young people are depicted doing a trending dance while text related to the COVID-19 vaccine appears on the screen. In this instance, it was difficult to choose between community-building and information-sharing. Rather than force the coder to

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<sup>4</sup> One nonprofit agreed with the author's assessment for the time period the authors analyzed but noted that they only posted fundraising content for TikTok's #givingszn campaign, which they would not typically do other times of the year.

<sup>5</sup> The interviewees held the following roles within their organization: social media manager/coordinator (13); executive director/CEO (10); communications or public relations director (6); direct service program staff (5); operations staff (3); volunteer or event coordinator (1). The total number of interviewees is larger than the total number of nonprofits because some interviews included multiple staff members.

choose one component, the coders included the primary and secondary strategies. Community-building was most observed in the single-function microvlogs and as the primary coding in the two-function microvlogs. No clear pattern in secondary coding was observed, demonstrating that nonprofits primarily focused on fostering community on the platform while often simultaneously engaging in other social media functions.

The authors also take into consideration the interview data where interviewees mentioned a similar sentiment of a multifaceted strategy:

... everything that we do is kind of filtered through that [mission] lens of how we are talking about mental health in an authentic way, creating space for other people to join that conversation, and then making sure that they are walking away with some sense of hope or a tangible resource. @twloha

This idea of dual-purpose microvlogs is a theme seen throughout the interview data, and primarily, community-building is the component consistently present and is paired with information-sharing or action. When looking at the frequency of mentions across interviews, the data shows that information-sharing (132) is mentioned the most, followed closely by community-building (122) and then action (57). While it would appear that information-sharing is a greater focus of nonprofits' strategies, organizations expressed that their priority with content creation is to achieve facets of their mission while simultaneously building community. All interviewees described elements of community-building, with all but one account posting community-building content.

#### *Strategy and Output Alignment and User Engagement*

Comparing the nonprofits' expressed strategy to the output observed in the analysis is helpful for understanding the motivations and intentions behind nonprofits' use of TikTok. Additionally, evaluating the alignment between nonprofits' strategy and output is important for assessing whether the nonprofit is indeed achieving what it intends to achieve by adopting and using TikTok. In this way, alignment is normatively good, as it can be an indicator that nonprofits are making content that aligns with their goals and, seemingly, with their mission. However, does alignment between strategy and output actually drive user engagement? Previous studies indicate that certain nonprofit social media behaviors drive higher levels of engagement on Facebook (Nah & Saxton, 2013; Waters et al., 2009), Twitter/X (Campbell et al., 2014; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012), and even TikTok (Li et al., 2021).

However, empirical explorations of whether these observed behaviors (outputs) are intentional and the subsequent impact on user engagement are lacking. To date, there is little to no empirical insight, let alone theoretical insight, into the expected relationships among nonprofit social media strategy, output, and the degree to which stakeholders engage with nonprofits' content on social media. Therefore, the third and final research question is exploratory in nature and concerned with how strategy-output alignment actually influences levels of user engagement. To answer this, the authors first examined descriptive data on the levels of user engagement by expressed strategy, output, and alignment and then, where applicable, used further statistical analysis (i.e., t-tests and ANOVA) to test whether mean engagement differs by nonprofits' expressed strategy, the outputs observed, and alignment. Due to space limits, only significant results for t-tests and ANOVA were reported.

Nonprofits focused primarily on how they were using TikTok to build community and share information. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the mean likes, plays, and level of engagement by each strategy, respectively. In simple descriptive terms, Table 3 indicates notable

differences in likes, plays, and raw engagement scores with those nonprofits with strategies focused on promoting community building generating noticeably higher levels of engagement ( $M = .1463$ ;  $SD = .08957$ ) compared with those focused on information-sharing ( $M = .1333$ ;  $SD = .0716$ ).

**Table 3.** User Engagement Summary Statistics by Nonprofits' Expressed Strategy

	Mean	S.D.	Minimum	Maximum
<b>Strategy: Information Sharing (N = 16)</b>				
Likes	7648.56	28741.63	5	247000
Plays	71749.27	429674.1	30	7100000
Engagement	.13331	.0716	.01974	.387
<b>Strategy: Community Building (N = 13)</b>				
Likes	4752.71	26447.83	4	398900
Plays	21637.46	105308.1	18	1600000
Engagement	.1463	.08957	.00684	.4864

Table 4 reports the user engagement summary statistics by observed output. In other words, Table 4 presents the TikTok-level data on the breakdown of likes, plays, and engagement scores according to the observed social media behavior coded in the qualitative analysis. Here, the authors see a similar descriptive pattern with community-building microvlogs, again, generating much higher levels of engagement ( $M = .1496$ ;  $SD = .0829$ ) compared with information-sharing ( $M = .1179$ ;  $SD = .0675$ ) and action ( $M = .11056$ ;  $SD = .0751$ ). To better understand whether the levels of mean engagement differ statistically across the three groups, a one-way ANOVA was performed and revealed statistically significant differences in mean engagement ( $F(df = 2, 572) = 11.30$ ;  $p = .0000$ ).

Table 4 also reports the user engagement statistics for the microvlogs that were *aligned* with the nonprofits' strategy as well as those that were *misaligned*. Here, the authors see that mean engagement is actually higher for those microvlogs that were not aligned with the nonprofits' strategy ( $M = .1414$ ;  $SD = .0727$ ) compared with those that were aligned ( $M = .1375$ ;  $SD = .0848$ ). However, a t-test showed that the differences in means between the two groups, aligned or misaligned, were not statistically significant ( $p = .5746$ ).

While this was an exploratory analysis and no specific hypothesis was tested, the finding seems rather counterintuitive. For strategy to be salient, the authors would expect to see a statistically significant increase in mean engagement for those microvlogs that were aligned with the nonprofits' strategy. However, given the significant variation between mean engagement according to the output (Table 4), it could be that the specific type of strategic alignment matters more. In other words, alignment in and of itself may not be as powerful as alignment between a particular strategy and its respective outputs. To parse out this unexpected finding further, the authors used a two-way ANOVA. The results ( $F(df = 4, 570) = 5.80$ ;  $p = 0.0001$ ) indeed show significantly higher levels of engagement when there is alignment between a community-building strategy and community building outputs ( $M = .1482$ ;  $SD = .0898$ ) than for information-sharing alignment ( $M = .1160$ ;  $SD = .0691$ ).

**Table 4.** User Engagement Summary Statistics by Output (Microvlogs)

	Mean	S.D.	Minimum	Maximum
<b>Output: Information Sharing (N = 138)</b>				
Likes	3531.85	11764.75	5	100700
Plays	19917.72	55401.99	66	411600
Engagement	.1179	.0675	.0202	.387
<b>Output: Community Building (N = 393)</b>				
Likes	7834.84	32625.45	4	398900
Plays	64285.21	394405	18	7100000
Engagement	.1496	.0829	.0068	.486
<b>Output: Action (N = 44)</b>				
Likes	1981.84	8506.95	6	55600
Plays	8280.97	30800.41	31	199800
Engagement	.1106	.0751	.0118	.395
<b>Output Aligned with Strategy (N = 355)</b>				
Likes	4579	23986.98	4	398900
Plays	21989.72	97209.7	18	1600000
Engagement	.1375	.0848	.0068	.486
<b>Output Misaligned with Strategy (N = 220)</b>				
Likes	9218.83	32793.92	6	247000
Plays	93503.38	513207.1	30	7100000
Engagement	.1414	.0727	.0118	.3953
<b>Output Aligned with Strategy-Community-Building (N = 237)</b>				
Likes	5058.62	28004.97	4	398900
Plays	22796.43	111648.9	18	1600000
Engagement	.1482	.0898	.0068	.4864
<b>Output Aligned with Strategy-Information Sharing (N = 118)</b>				
Likes	3615.69	12550.44	5	100700
Plays	20369.48	58680.92	66	411600
Engagement	.1160	.0691	.022	.3869

## Discussion

It is no surprise that nonprofits joined TikTok for its distinctive features and access to new audiences. However, TikTok's function in an organizational management capacity and adaptation is also noteworthy. Most interestingly, interviewees talked about how TikTok provided a space to transition and expand existing programming from in-person to online, a necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, interviewees discussed fundraising and marketing as reasons for joining TikTok, expanding on Campbell et al.'s study (2024), which found that human services organizations join Facebook and Twitter/X for the same reasons. However, these were not always the driving factors. For example, in terms of fundraising, nonprofits viewed donations on TikTok

not as a priority, but as a perk of their presence on the platform. Similarly, marketing on TikTok was used to supplement the organization's universal goal of promoting itself.

These findings suggest that TikTok, like other social media platforms, is not establishing an entirely new framework for nonprofit management. Rather, it appears to serve as an extension of, or added resource, to functions already in place. What remains novel, however, are the ways that TikTok seems to be redefining the type of content nonprofits are producing and how nonprofits are engaging stakeholders, as a result. Similar to the findings of (Wiley et al., 2023), the results of this study support the assertion that microblogging platforms such as TikTok are creating a new hierarchy of engagement led by community building. This is contrary to previous research that finds that nonprofits on microblogging platforms prioritize information-sharing over community-building and action. Instead, the authors find that it is through community-building that nonprofits are then promoting information-sharing and action on TikTok. This lends itself to a multifaceted strategy that, when guided by community-building, is highly effective for engagement.

The complex nature of multipurpose microvlogs provides insight into why one-third of the sample is misaligned. In principle, alignment might indicate a focused social media strategy that, in return, generates higher levels of engagement with users. However, this finding suggests that alignment is more complex than simply aligned or not aligned for dual-process microvlogs and the multifaceted strategies that guide them. The type of alignment matters; more specifically, alignment between a community-building strategy and community-building content appears to matter most. Users engaged more with community-building content, particularly, when it was aligned with the content creator's intent. Thus, the current framework may be too static to adequately tease apart the multipurpose function of a single microvlog or the account strategy as a whole. For example, while the authors did not find that nonprofits talked about community-building notably more than information-sharing and action, nonprofits did see community-building as a key component of TikTok as evidenced by interviewees' assertion that they incorporated community-building in some way to all their posts to maximize engagement. When nonprofits aimed to build a community online, TikTok users engaged.

Greater alignment among organizations with a designated social media coordinator points to the importance of having someone with the time, skills, and capacity to devote to TikTok account management. The misalignment observed with organizations whose leader managed the account may be because leaders have a multitude of responsibilities to the organization that takes priority over social media strategy. Literature echoes this sentiment that top-level leadership often does not understand or support social media platform adoption (Choi & Theoni, 2016). Further, this finding is supported by the notion that larger, better-resourced organizations have staff dedicated to social media, which yields returns such as donations (Figenschou & Fredheim, 2020; McKeever, 2017).

The assessment of strategy alignment and the mission area yielded no meaningful relationship between the two. TikTok is an equal opportunity platform and allows all types of organizations to be successful regardless of mission area and strategy alignment. This was reflected in the descriptive analysis that showed no meaningful relationship between mission area and alignment. Nonetheless, future research should further examine similarities and differences in strategy, output, and outcomes across the subsectors. Messaging on social media can be categorized as strategic or supportive with differences in messaging according to mission relevancy. For instance, Guo and Saxton (2014) found that Twitter/X messaging by advocacy nonprofits is predominantly supportive. Whereas interest groups translate social media capital into resources to fulfill policy goals, which is much more strategic (Figenschou & Fredheim, 2020). Previous

studies reveal that social media strategies of human service nonprofits are not always well-developed to promote or fulfill organizational goals (Campbell et al., 2014). Closely examining the subsectors in this way, including the role of mission relevancy, was outside the scope of this particular analysis but remains an area of important future research, especially for advancing understanding of salient theoretical mechanisms.

This study is one of the few that bridge the intentionality behind social media posts and the actual posts (Guo & Saxton, 2014). As such, the authors offer three methodological contributions to nonprofit social media research. First, the multifaceted nature of a nonprofit's expressed strategy and TikTok's platform itself required both uniformity and flexibility in the analysis. The authors created a somewhat uniform coding process by using the hierarchy of engagement framework to code the interview data and the social media data. Second, the textual analysis provided the necessary flexibility. Textual analysis is a more effective tool for analyzing microvlogs than manual or automated content analysis. Textual analysis goes beyond spoken or written words to capture on-screen interaction and nuance. Third, analyzing the output before conducting the interviews allowed the authors to match the scholarly operationalization of the framework with the day-to-day nonprofit language more efficiently than conducting the interviews first. From a nonprofit researcher's perspective, the operationalization of community-building, information-sharing, and action is intuitive. However, social media coordinators linked their strategies to nonprofit management capacities like fundraising or marketing. Thus, for human subject data collection purposes, what social media content creators said about their social media strategy did not neatly match the framework terminology. Because the interviewers already knew what the nonprofits had posted, they could mentally link the operationalized variables to the nonprofit vernacular and the actual posts in real time, which enhanced communication during the interview.

## **Conclusion**

TikTok's inherent bend toward community-building content is perhaps its greatest distinction compared to other social media venues. The platform's structure and established norms elevate microvlogs that participate in trends and possess a raw, unedited quality. Most recently, TikTok has attracted attention for its ability to capture users' attention in ways that other platforms do not, with many attributing that ability to the algorithm (Hern, 2022). However, computer science researchers with unique knowledge about the algorithm argue that it is not TikTok's algorithm but its user interface that succeeds in keeping users engaged by quickly delivering content that feels as if it was made for them (Narayanan, 2022). Users do not have to spend time searching for similar content since the vertical interface serves to deliver like microvlogs, one after another, with a simple swipe up. This suggests that nonprofits have an opportunity to leverage the unique affordances of the TikTok interface to engage stakeholders in ways that are not possible on other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X, and Instagram. At the same time, it also necessitates a new type of strategy on social media aimed at delivering users' attention-catching content, right off the bat, lending itself to more experimentation and authenticity.

This study provides a unique contribution to nonprofit social media scholarship by further developing the hierarchy of engagement framework and directly linking social media strategy and intentionality with output. The study also provides practical guidelines for nonprofits interested in adopting micrologging platforms or developing a social media strategy. Most notably, TikTok does not require an exhaustive social media strategy or have any set formula for success. Nonprofits should prioritize quick, relevant, and original content that builds community and leverages the unique features of TikTok.

## Limitations

Three primary limitations are notable in this study. First, the time period chosen for building the microvlog sample, July 2020–March 2021, likely influenced the microvlog and interview data. As noted in the research design, this period included a presidential threat to the platform, a heated national election, and a “giving season” during the holidays. Nonprofits’ social media behavior was more likely affected than not. The authors extended the data collection period to account for these influences in recognition of this limitation. However, the interviewees’ descriptions of their strategies from that period may have also been influenced. The second limitation is that the interview data are nonrandom samples. Participants were identified through convenience sampling and opted-in to the interview portion of the study. The authors provide a representative sample of the nonprofit sector rather than a random sample representative of all nonprofit TikTok activity. Third, this study aims to go beyond measuring engagement according to likes, shares, and comments by measuring engagement as the number of likes over plays but even this measure of engagement has its limitations. Principally, TikTok’s automatic looping feature causes a TikTok to automatically replay after it ends unless a user immediately continues scrolling. This could skew the total number of plays and affect the engagement ratio. It is also important to acknowledge that user engagement is more complex than a singular quantitative data point. Nonetheless, this measure still captures a message’s reach and, when combined with the number of likes, provides insight into how effective a microvlog is at capturing attention long enough to elicit a like, providing a novel opportunity to test what TikTok-level features and organizational-level attributes affect user engagement. Despite these limitations, this study provides a unique contribution to nonprofit social media scholarship, as it further develops the hierarchy of engagement framework and directly links social media intentionality with output.

## Disclosures

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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## Author Biographies

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## **Appendices**

### *Appendix A: Abridged Interview Instrument*

1. Can you tell me about a particular {NONPROFIT} TikTok that stands out to you – could be one that makes you laugh or got the most views?
2. What role do you play in social media strategy, creation, and engagement as it relates to TikTok?
3. We see {NONPROFIT} joined TikTok in {YEAR}, can you tell me what led to your decision to join?
4. How would you describe {NONPROFIT}'s social media strategy for TikTok?
5. Walk us through your day-to-day management of {NONPROFIT}'s TikTok account.
6. What does {NONPROFIT} hope to get out of being on the TikTok platform?
7. What role does TikTok play in mission fulfillment for {NONPROFIT}?
8. We reviewed your TikTok postings from last fall and early this year. Our assessment was that you focus your efforts on [ex: sharing information and building community] in the TikTok space. What do you think of this assessment?
9. In the TikToks we reviewed, we saw that you mentioned {COVID-19, BLM MOVEMENT, and/or THE ELECTION}. Can you tell me how those/that current event(s) affected your social media strategy?
10. What advice would you give to another nonprofit on how to be successful on TikTok?
11. Those are all of my questions for you. Is there anything I did not ask that I should have asked? Is there anything else you'd like to share about your TikTok account or your experience using this platform?

*Appendix B: Abridged interview theoretical codebook*

<b>Parent Codes</b>	<b>Definition and Child Codes</b>
Account Management	Employees and professional relationships involved in maintaining the TikTok account (formality of support provided, team size, outsourced support; position responsible for content)
Social media post attributes	Characteristics of microvlog on TikTok (accessibility, audio, donation sticker, duet, stitch, filter, hashtags, original content, reshared content, reused content, serialized content, trends)
Account management complexities	Decision to adopt; barriers (obstacles in the way of success such as staffing, support, resources, reach); day-to-day tasks (specific, routine activities for account maintenance such as community maintenance, external research, internal research); Relationship with other platforms
Nonprofit Management Capacities	Core capacities of nonprofit management, such as fundraising and marketing; mission fulfillment (overt or observable description of the relationship between social media behavior and fulfillment of the organization's mission)
Hierarchy of Engagement Framework (action, community building, information sharing)	Messages from the organization that try to convince followers to act; instances when the organization interacts, shares, and converses with stakeholders in a way that creates an "online community"; the exchange of information from the organization

Appendix C: Organizations included in the study

Organization	TikTok Handle	NTEE Mission Area <sup>1</sup>	Revenue <sup>2</sup>	Year of Formation	Date of TikTok Adoption	Alignment Status
Apex Protection Project	@apexwolves	Environment and Animals	\$242,476	2015	03/16/20	Misaligned
Art Sphere Inc	@artsphereinc	Arts, Culture, and Humanities	\$63,721	1998	07/08/20	Misaligned
Battle 22	@officialbattle22	Health	--	2019	03/12/20	Misaligned
Battle Buddy Response Team	@battlebuddyresponseteam	Health	--	2020	02/04/20	Misaligned
Be The Match Foundation	@bethematch	Health	\$18,274,388	1992	02/04/20	Aligned
Best Friends Animal Society	@bestfriendsanimalsociety	Environment and Animals	\$261,081	1984	12/13/18	Aligned
Blanchet House of Hospitality	@blanchethouse	Health	\$2,230,189	1952	09/21/20	Aligned
Catskill Animal Sanctuary Inc	@catskillanimalsanctuary	Environment and Animals	\$2,872,879	2001	04/29/20	Aligned
Comfort Cases Inc	@comfort_cases	Human Services	\$2,190,700	2013	05/01/20	Aligned
Dance Marathon Inc	@dancemarathon	Arts, Culture, and Humanities	\$49,459,637	2000	07/07/20	Misaligned
Dion's Chicago Dream	@dionschicagodream	Human Services	--	2020	10/26/20	Aligned
The Embrace Foundation	@embrac3	Health	--	2017	07/27/20	Misaligned
The Foster Closet Corp	@fostercloset	Human Services	\$613,557	2009	05/18/20	Aligned
Guardian Angels Medical Service Dogs Inc	@guardianangelsmsd	Public, Societal Benefit	\$2,409,683	2010	06/11/20	Misaligned
Habitat for Humanity of Taos Inc	@taoshabitat	Human Services	\$880,940	1993	07/06/20	Aligned
Hallie Strong	@halliestrongfoundation	Human Services	--	2019	04/28/20	Misaligned
Hip-Hope Inc	@hiphopeinc	Human Services	\$62,533 <sup>3</sup>	2016	07/08/20	Aligned
It Gets Better Project	@itgetsbetter	Public, Societal Benefit	\$2,215,523	2008	02/12/20	Aligned
The Jordan Porco Foundation	@jordanporcofoundation	Public, Societal Benefit	\$676,694	2011	09/04/20	Aligned
One Tree Planted Inc	@onetreeplanted	Environment and Animals	\$5,944,371	2013	04/01/20	Aligned
Papayago Rescue House Inc.	@papayago_rescue_house	Environment and Animals	\$77,893	2015	04/29/20	Aligned
Pet Angel Adoption and Rescue Inc	@aceengel	Environment and Animals	\$116,701 <sup>3</sup>	2004	02/28/20	Aligned
Plan International USA, Inc.	@plan.international	International, Foreign Affairs	\$65,586,361	1937	02/20/20	Aligned
Princess Program Foundation	@princessprogramofficial <sup>4</sup>	Health	--	2020	07/28/20	Aligned
Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN)	@rainn	Human Services	\$15,833,865	1994	10/16/20	Aligned
Tabby Tails Cat Rescue	@theceoofcats	Environment and Animals	--	2020	04/20/19	Misaligned
Tiny Hooves Rescue and Petting Zoo	@tinyhoovesrescuetexas	Environment and Animals	--	2018	09/06/20	Aligned
TWLOHA Inc	@twloha	Health	\$2,921,683	2007	11/16/20	Misaligned
UNICEF USA	@unicef	International, Foreign Affairs	\$538,517,959	1947	12/20/19	Misaligned

<sup>1</sup> If no 990 form filed, mission area was determined based on publicly available organization information

<sup>2</sup> Revenue from 2019 990 form

<sup>3</sup> Revenue from 2018 990 form

<sup>4</sup> At the time of data collection, account handle was @theprincessprogram