



# Understanding the Role of TikTok's Media Affordances in Promoting Sustainable Branding Strategies

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**Abstract.** The 21st century confronts us with pressing environmental challenges, necessitating innovative approaches for promoting sustainability. As society turns to social media for awareness and change, TikTok emerges as a platform to galvanize sustainable branding strategies. This study delves into TikTok's distinctive media affordances that contribute to sustainable branding, specifically through factors such as visibility, persistence, association, and modality. Notably, TikTok appeals to a youthful demographic, with 80% of users aged between 16 and 34, and 60% belonging to Generation Z - a group often characterized by a passion for social causes. The platform's algorithmic content delivery, user interactivity, and short-form videos enhance brand visibility. These features allow sustainable brands to harness user engagement and latch onto influential trends. By exploring the role of TikTok's media affordances in sustainable branding, this research offers valuable insights that can guide efforts to foster positive environmental change, aligning brands with the values and concerns of a younger, socially-conscious audience.

**Keywords:** Sustainable branding; Media affordances; Social media; TikTok

## 1 Introduction

Living in the 21st century, society is marked by devastating environmental degradations, global warming, and ecosystem destruction. Up until May 2023 alone, the global surface temperature has been 0.97 celsius above the 20th century average of 14.8 celsius, ranking among the 10 warmest on record [8]. Nowadays, social media has become a predominantly tool for raising social awareness, addressing social issues, and calling for social change. According to Pew Research Center (2021), “around seven-in-ten Americans use social media to connect with one another, engage with news content, share information and entertain themselves”. Among these users, more specifically, 80% of TikTok users are between the ages of 16 and 34 and more than 60% of TikTok users are from Generation Z, making them the largest generation. In essence, as social media activism becomes increasingly popular through features such as hashtags, issues such as sustainability have become a heated topic amongst young adults. Relatedly, more brands are beginning to showcase

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P. Dou and K. Zhang (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2023 International Conference on Economic Management, Financial Innovation and Public Service (EMFIPS 2023)*, Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research 287,

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-441-9\\_10](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-441-9_10)

and incorporate sustainable elements within their branding. As mentioned by Grubor and Milovanov, “consumer interest in environment-friendly alternatives has risen dramatically, and...sustainable attributes are becoming increasingly important in a brand valuation” [4]. In retrospect, social media has revolutionized the way brands communicate with their target audiences, and social media influencers have emerged as powerful intermediaries in shaping consumer behavior and brand perception. As such, the present research aims to analyze exigent media strategies that promote sustainable branding.

With the means of mitigating harmful environmental impacts, many social media platforms such as TikTok, alongside companies have been gradually showcasing more sustainable alternatives and methods, such as showcasing minimalist and energy-saving designs, collaborating with programs to initiate carbon offset initiatives, and promoting eco-friendly habits. With sustainability becoming an increasingly important issue for consumers and businesses alike, there is a growing interest in understanding how social media influencers leverage the affordances of media platforms to promote sustainable branding. Specifically, sustainable branding refers to “one that has successfully integrated environmental, economic, and social issues into its business operations”. Yet, as a vast majority of brands have moved online over recent years, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019, where U.S online spendings alone surged by 55% to reach 1.7 trillion[6], appropriate and successful e-commerce marketing has become crucially important. Yet, as some brands attempt to exaggerate their environmental efforts, greenwashing appears, in which green marketing is deceptively used to convince consumers that an organization's products and aims are environmentally friendly. As popular green labels on social media can be misused, skepticism emerges amongst consumers, making them doubt the credibility of a brand's environmental initiatives and the authenticity of their eco-friendly claims. Moreover, while initiating brand promotions, issues such as online exposure, fans number, and the accessibility of an account's videos can all barricade a brand from success. Hence, brands need to ensure their messages are accurate, consistent, and promptly address any misunderstandings or rumors that may arise.

As such, specifically, TikTok, a short-video sharing social media app, has experienced explosive growth in recent years. TikTok's unique characteristics make it an excellent tool for branding and stimulating consumer behavior, in which “the short-video modality of the platform is effective in both providing information and stimulating a sense of shared emotion between the message sender and recipient” [1]. Unlike traditional marketing methods, TikTok uses algorithms to serve users with personalized content, catering to their interests and engagement behaviors. The platform's features like live streams, duets, and trending hashtags foster a high level of user interactivity and content virality, making it a potent channel for brand visibility and audience engagement. These distinctive affordances provided by TikTok have significantly altered the landscape of digital marketing, making it a compelling area to explore.

To understand how TikTok can foster sustainable branding, this research adopts a social media affordances perspective. The affordances unique to TikTok, such as its

short-form video format, algorithmic feed, and interactive features, set it apart from other social media platforms. Here, social media affordances are defined as the opportunities and constraints offered by social, technological, and contextual factors of a platform that facilitate or inhibit specific uses. Building upon the widely-accepted typology proposed by Treem and Leonardi, this study examines the role of four primary affordances on TikTok: (1) visibility, which refers to the ability to make behaviors or information visible to others; (2) persistence, i.e., the ability to store content; and (3) association, i.e., the ability to link with other content or users. (4) Additionally, while modality was not outlined by Treem and Leonardi, the short-video format of TikTok is an essential aspect of its identity. As suggested by Peng [10], the unique characteristics of short videos, such as their brevity and immediacy, can influence viewer engagement differently than long-form content. Consequently, this research includes content modality as an additional media affordance to fully capture TikTok's potential for sustainable branding.

An expanding body of literature has been exploring the role of social media in fostering branding strategies such as Rathee and Milfeld's research on sustainability advertising [12]. A number of these studies have focused primarily on the efficacy of influencer marketing [13], while others have delved into the impact of influencers on consumer behavior, particularly from a psychological perspective [3]. Despite this, there is a relative scarcity of research exploring how social media affordances might contribute to branding. This may be due to the concept of social media affordances being relatively new and subject to debate. However, the unique characteristics of TikTok in the realm of social media affordances play an undeniably significant role in promoting branding. Thus, it is crucial to comprehend how these elements interact, as this can provide insights into the underlying mechanisms that propel successful sustainability campaigns. The objective of this research is to probe how TikTok can effectively promote sustainable branding from the viewpoint of social media affordances. Specifically, by scrutinizing the specific features and functionalities of these platforms, including content formats, engagement mechanisms, and audience targeting tools, this study aims to explore how sustainable brands can leverage different affordances provided by TikTok to promote sustainable practices, products, and values. These insights will contribute to the formulation of effective and ethical strategies for brands, influencers, and social media developers to fully harness the potential of social media platforms in fostering sustainable behaviors and promoting positive environmental and social change.

## 2 Method

This study utilized an accelerated literature review methodology. The research focused on scrutinizing the existing literature pertinent to social media affordances, with special emphasis on TikTok and social media affordances, as well as social media marketing. In order to achieve this, a discriminating but comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect. The search was refined using specific

keywords such as "social media affordances," "TikTok," "social media branding," among others, to ensure that the most relevant and up-to-date studies were included.

Despite the concise scope, this focused review aimed to critically analyze the key findings from the chosen studies. This involved synthesizing central arguments, comparing outcomes, and pinpointing potential gaps or inconsistencies. The insights gleaned from this expedited literature review were instrumental in forming a basic understanding of TikTok's distinct affordances and their possible role in promoting sustainable branding. These findings will guide the subsequent discussion and conclusion of this study and provide a starting point for future research in this field.

### **3 Results**

Taking into consideration the intricate interplay between media affordances and the viral social media platform TikTok, there is a focus on the rational aspect of affordances. As proposed by Treem and Leonardi, affordances are essentially relational - they are constituted through interactions between individuals and the materiality of things they encounter. This concept highlights the dynamic interaction between users and social media platforms that facilitate certain actions and outcomes.

Social media platforms deviate from traditional communication methods through the emphasis on four key affordances: visibility, persistence, association and modality. Within the framework of TikTok, these affordances significantly aid and expedite the communication processes that advocate for sustainable brands. In the following sections (3.1-3.5), the present research will delve into the exploration of how TikTok's affordances, as previously discussed, can aid in fostering sustainable branding.

#### **3.1 Association**

Associations are referred to as established connections between individuals, contents, and groups. TikTok revolves around sharing visual and aural memes, mainly dance and comedy videos, but users can also discover diverse content through TikTok's algorithm-driven "For You" page[16]. TikTok stands out among social media platforms for its minimal content consumption interface. Upon opening the app, users encounter two content feed options: the "For You" page, offering a continuous stream of content tailored to individual viewing and creation habits, and the "Following" page, presenting a semi-chronological feed of videos from chosen accounts. Interestingly, rather than immediately going to the "Following" page, the "For You" page allows for more discourse amongst internet users and more multifaceted exposure to diverse content. The search function aids in finding users, foundational "sounds" combining audio and visual appeal, and hashtags such as "#sustainability", "#ecofriendlybrands", which creators manipulate to boost visibility. Notifications and messages are accessible through an inbox, enabling friends to share TikToks. The "Me" tab allows profile editing and TikTok management.

Compared to more saturated social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, Tiktok's algorithm's influence attracts creators aiming to be recognized, reminiscent of the subversion of mass media elitism. Small creators gain value again, with their replicable content deemed democratic. TikTok enables reusing, remixing, and appropriating others' audio, while its fleeting nature challenges the longevity of ideas. For influencers, the ease of association between individuals and content translates into increased social capital and information flow, potentially affording greater exposure opportunities for environmentally-conscious businesses.

### 3.2 Visibility

In the context of affordances, "visibility" refers to the perceptual and functional aspects of an object or environment that allow a user to easily perceive and understand how to interact with it. In other words, visibility in affordances is about how well an object or environment communicates its possible uses and interactions to the user, making it clear and intuitive for them to engage with it in a meaningful way. User activity in TikTok can be customizable and relatively transparent, allowing for demonstrated visibility. For instance, online statuses may be available between friends and "share your screen" feature can allow mutual friends to browse videos together, making it easier for exposure to a variety of content. As mentioned by Treem and Leonardi, "the open nature of social media encouraged informal collaboration in the organization and supported knowledge sharing among workers". Within specific features, hashtags serve as navigational tools within the vast social media landscape. Through careful research, creators can identify relevant hashtags that resonate with their target audience. Analyzing the practices of successful content creators provides valuable insights into hashtag selection. Aligning chosen hashtags with the creator's unique brand narrative ensures increased exposure and engagement[5].

Furthermore, music wields a profound influence on content visibility, especially within short videos and livestreams. Being an excellent way to lure consumers' attention, a prime example is a livestream synchronized with sound effects to imitate nature[7]. As the algorithm aligns with the intention of promoting "green-living", such content often gains traction, potentially going viral. By selecting music that seamlessly harmonizes with their video's theme, creators not only enhance viewer engagement but also stimulate algorithmic favor, resulting in increased visibility. Alongside this, visual effects and corresponding text and captions can help creators convey succinct messages that resonate with fleeting attention spans. By experimenting with fonts, colors, and placement, they optimize legibility and enhance viewer comprehension. Additionally, the effect becomes a signature, resonating with viewers and enhancing their perception. By thoughtfully incorporating such effects, creators cater to algorithmic preferences, which in turn contributes to heightened visibility and audience interaction[11].

### 3.3 Persistence

Persistence is a factor that influences how users perceive the duration their content can be viewed. TikTok's media platform makes it highly accessible and convenient for users to share content both through the "share with friends" feature and the option to share across applications. According to the Global Digital Report from Kepios, TikTok's advertisement reach has exceeded to approximately 21.1% of total internet users with a potential of 1.09 users (see Figure 1). In conjunction, TikTok's algorithm is designed to show content to a broader audience if it gains traction and engagement. If a brand's video manages to resonate with users and receives a high level of engagement, the platform's persistence feature ensures that it stays visible, increasing the chances of content going viral. This, in turn, amplifies the brand's message and expands its reach to a wider audience. Hence, Persistent content on TikTok ensures that brand-related videos remain accessible on users' feeds for a considerable duration. As users scroll through the app, they are likely to come across brand promotions repeatedly, reinforcing brand exposure and improving brand recall. The more users see a brand's content, the better they remember it, which can positively impact purchase decisions [3]. Moreover, TikTok's persistence measures creates an environment where "TikTok users are algorithmically, digitally, and socially encouraged to consume content conducive for imitation and for the purpose of imitation"[17]. Hence, increased user activities in conjunction with the affordances creates more purchasing power and an increase in demand for brands.

### 3.4 Content Modality

Modalities refer to the form in which media is presented in conjunction with the audience's perceptions. Within the context of social media, content modality may impose different modes and methods. In TikTok, videos are often presented in the format of short videos, which can effectively deliver a message and catch an audience's attention quickly. Especially in a fast-speed society, as people are often using social media as a source of entertainment during fragmented times, users tend to scroll through their feeds quickly. Hence, TikTok's content modality serves as an advantage for consumers' short attention spans. More specifically, within the targeted audience of young adults, trend culture has become increasingly popular. TikTok's short video modality tentatively incorporates pop culture elements such as music, dance, and social challenges to appeal to its younger consumers [9]. As short video formats become a favored marketing method within the digital era, appropriate usage helps influencers and sustainable brands to gain exposure as a source of promotion. On the psychological level, customer inspiration refers to the application of the psychological concept of "inspiration" in the context of marketing [14-15]. The concept of customer inspiration, as proposed by Böttger et al.[2], comprises two main states: the "inspired-by" and the "inspired-to" states[3]. The "inspired-by" state involves customers receiving new ideas induced by marketing and becoming aware of fresh possibilities. On the other hand, the "inspired-to" state relates to customers intrinsically pursuing new ideas and consumption-related goals. Connecting customer

inspiration with sustainability brands, it becomes easier to drive pro-environmental behaviors, increase purchasing intentions towards sustainable choices, and enhance customer satisfaction that evokes positive emotions associated with contributing to sustainable initiatives and being socially responsible.



Fig. 1. TikTok: Global Advertising sustainability Audience (Kepios, 2023)

## 4 Discussion

TikTok's unique affordances, encompassing visibility, persistence, editability, association, and modality, significantly bolster communication strategies that endorse sustainable brands. These attributes align seamlessly with a society that thrives on quick, engaging content, allowing TikTok to capture audiences' attention efficiently and potently. A salient feature to explore within this context is the potential for customer inspiration, an emotional state that can be fostered through thoughtful social media marketing. This transformational mindset encourages customers to transition from external influences to an internalized and self-driven pursuit of consumption-related aspirations. TikTok's affordance of persistence ensures that brand-centric videos are not merely fleeting moments but remain accessible, sustaining consumer engagement over time. Coupled with an algorithm that rewards captivating content with augmented visibility, TikTok creates fertile ground for sustainability messages to flourish, even achieving viral status.

Despite these insights, the present research has primarily drawn upon previous findings, leaving several avenues unexplored. The present research only included prior findings to provide insights on potential effects of TikTok. It would be beneficial to design experiments that test the effect of different media affordances, such as accessibility, visibility, and usability, on branding performance. This quantitative approach could offer further insights into how these affordances specifically contribute to brand image and customer relationships. Moreover, the effect of media affordances on branding could potentially vary across different social media platforms. These platforms, with their unique interfaces and user demographics, offer distinct opportunities and challenges for branding. For instance, the ephemeral content on Snapchat may lead to different branding outcomes compared to more permanent posts on Facebook or Instagram. Comparative studies across these platforms could illuminate how to best leverage each platform's unique media affordances for branding. In addition, the interface between business accounts and audiences can indeed vary, suggesting that the media affordances perceived by the sender could be different from those perceived by the receiver. The current research did not fully explore these dual perspectives, which could have significant implications for how brands communicate and connect with their audiences. Future research could address this gap by examining how differing perceptions of media affordances between senders and receivers impact the effectiveness of branding strategies. This could involve the use of mixed methods research, combining both qualitative and quantitative data to understand the nuances of these interactions and their effects on branding.

## 5 Conclusion

This study sought to explore the role of social media affordances in promoting sustainable branding, focusing on the fast-growing platform TikTok. While existing research has often been centered on influencers and other elements, there's been a distinct gap in understanding how specific social media affordances like visibility, association, persistence, and modality can enhance sustainability campaigns. The findings of this research bridge that gap, providing actionable insights for brands, influencers, and policymakers. By unraveling how TikTok and platforms with similar features can be harnessed to foster sustainable behaviors, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how to build a more environmentally responsible future.

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