

Research article

Memeifying academic work precarity

Community building of female early-career scholars on TikTok

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This paper explores how academic life became memeified on TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic. For many academics, and especially early-career scholars, workloads increased during this time. Female academics, in particular, faced significant increases in household burdens. This paper focuses specifically on the uses of memes as humorous templates for expressing academic work precarity on TikTok (sometimes referred to as “Academic TikTok”), between the autumn of 2020 and the spring of 2021. Using digital ethnography, this paper attempts to understand how the precarity of academic work was expressed on TikTok, and how social media can be used for community building among early career scholars, especially during the pandemic. The analysis draws on content by 20 TikTok users working in academic institutions, including myself, as a content creator within this community.

Keywords: Academia; Work precarity; Memes; TikTok; Digital ethnography.

Denna artikel utforskar hur det akademiska livet blev memeifierat på TikTok under COVID-19-pandemin. För många akademiker och särskilt för forskare i början av karriären, ökade arbetsbelastningen under denna tid. I synnerhet kvinnliga akademiker stod inför betydande ökning av gällande arbete inom hem och familj. Denna artikel fokuserar specifikt på användningen av memes som humoristiska mallar för att uttrycka det prekära i akademiskt arbete på TikTok (ibland kallad “Academic TikTok”), mellan hösten 2020 och våren 2021. Med hjälp av digital etnografi försöker denna artikel förstå hur prekariteten i akademiskt arbete uttrycktes på TikTok och hur sociala medier kan användas för att skapa gemenskap bland forskare i början av karriären, särskilt under pandemin. Analysen bygger på innehåll från 20 TikTok-användare som arbetar inom akademiska institutioner, inklusive mig själv.

Nyckelord: Akademi; prekärt arbetsliv; memes; TikTok; digital etnografi.

February 2020:
No, I'm not gonna download that vine knock-off? Why?
Cause I'm not a 13-year-old child.

February 2021:
Scrolling the TikTok app and laughing

child-rearing. This disproportionately affected female academics (Deryugina et al. 2021).

Against this background, this paper explores how academic life became memeified on TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2016), this paper studies the TikTok community of academics (sometimes referred to as “Academic TikTok”) from the autumn of 2020 until the spring of 2021, in an attempt to understand how the precarity of academic work is expressed on TikTok, and how it can be used for community building among early career scholars. The analysis draws on content by 20 TikTok users working in academic institutions, including myself, as a content creator within this community. As such, in several ways I am both a participant and an observer in this study.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, much changed in the life of academic scholars. As work plans derailed, projects were altered, and teaching moved online, the careers of many academics, especially early-career scholars, fell behind (Levine et al. 2021). Workloads for academics, in general, increased. As the pandemic took hold and lockdowns and other restrictions were implemented, female academics – especially those with children – faced significant increases in household burdens, such as homeschooling and

Memes¹ are created on TikTok as users reuse sounds used in previous videos, creating an instantaneous memeification of video templates, which has been previously referred to as a form of “audio meme function” on TikTok (Abidin 2021). This article focuses on using memes as humorous templates for expressing work precarity. While the number of male and female scholars is gradually reaching equal levels in many countries, Australian data has shown that women are still underrepresented in the higher ranks of academia (Gilbert, O’Shea & Duffy 2021). In data from France, for example, women were less likely to be chosen when applying for promotion (Bosquet, Combes & García-Peñalosa 2018). This trend has also been identified in various international studies (cf. Jackson et al., 2014).

Predominantly female early-career researchers face specific precarity in academia. In a study of non-permanent academic workers, women deal with more teaching duties and have inferior research outputs than their male counterparts (De Angelis & Grüning 2020). The insecurity resulting from fixed-term contracts and increased competition for fewer job opportunities can be draining. In the words of van Maanen, we are all subjected to the “psychological atrocities of the tenure system” (2015: 38), and due to the over-commitment and strain, female postdocs in particular are considering a career outside of academia (Dorenkamp & Weiß 2018). In light of this, expectations to self-promote and produce top research outputs can lead many young scholars to experience the situation as unfeasible.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, “pandemic burnout” disproportionately affected women in the academy (Gewin 2021). Critics from different academic fields have stressed the importance of finding non-individual solutions in periods of crisis. Still, universities are responsible for providing their employees with organisational and community resilience, or, more bluntly put in a title by Ahn et al. (2021): “Academic Caregivers on Organizational and Community Resilience in Academia (Fuck Individual Resilience)”.

Self-promotion in the academy

In many areas of contemporary academia, the work of academics has become metricised (Burrows 2012), making inequalities in outputs thereby more visible. The prevalence of performance measures has defined academic work to the point where a “metric culture” has defined the life of academics and universities

¹ In Dawkins’ (1976) original coinage of the term “meme”, the concept specifically focused on how cultural contexts moved between individuals. Still, within internet communities, memes refer to the multimodal communicative expressions of imitation, blending “pop culture, politics, and participation in unexpected ways” (Shifman, 2014: 4). Memes are contextually bound (Denisova, 2019) and become reappropriated in order to produce new iterations and variations of broader ideas (Milner 2012). In reusing audio, these memes become reshaped by different communities on TikTok.

(Söderlind 2020). The publish-or-perish mentality has structured academics’ work alongside the neoliberal turn of academic institutions. These conditions have led to increased precariousness in our work situation, leading to the emergence of the “neurotic academic” (Loveday 2018), desperately trying to succeed within the academy.

Even though this focus on self-promotion can adversely affect academics, research has found that social media can positively impact early-career scholars’ enculturation into the academy (Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson 2018). Twitter has been a well-used platform by academics for many years. The “promote or perish” mentality, where scholars are encouraged to create their own “brand” on digital platforms, may also result in academics internalising this analytics mindset in which impact metrics and reach become the foremost measure of success (Duffy & Pooley 2017). However, in a neoliberal academy, where self-promotion as a way of climbing the academic ladder is key to finding success, these platforms risk the further sedimentation of hierarchies within academia. With their limited research output and connections, early-career scholars easily fall behind, even with an ongoing digital presence. While I have been actively attempting to build my academic “brand” online for the last seven years, working under the conditions of the pandemic has made me question myself and my legitimacy in these spaces. I was lacking connection with other academics, experiencing the stressors of the pandemic. It was during this time that I found TikTok – or, on Academic TikTok, to be precise. It may sound like a boring place, but as I experienced it, this is where the gritty parts of the academy make their way through the digital tunnels. Connecting with scholars in this way helped me feel less alone. TikTok is one of the most downloaded apps worldwide, according to Forbes (Bellan 2020). While for a long time its user base consisted mostly of teenagers, the number of adult users on the platforms has increased 5.5 times between 2018 and 2019 (Mohsin 2021).

Digital (auto)ethnography of TikTok

The analysis draws on content from 20 TikTok users working in academic institutions, and my own content. The accounts featured in this study consisted of academics from different career stages: three assistant professors; two researchers; one postdoc researcher; one adjunct professor, and 13 PhD candidates. While not all disclosed their location, many were located in Western contexts, such as the US, UK, or Australia. The individuals behind these accounts were primarily women. Because of this, it seemed to me that especially female early career-scholars felt a need to express their experiences of work precarity in these spaces.

Just like in Kumar’s autoethnographic approach to studying academic identity, these observations are

translated into “expressions of my academic identity” (2020: 1011). Through this approach, this article reflects upon the emotional journey of academic life through community building and sharing on TikTok, similar to how Jamjoom (2021) has focused on the emotional journey of presenting a conference paper in their auto-ethnography. In this study, I am both a lurker and a participant. However, as previously stated by de Seta, I am more than the “apologetic figure of an eager participant-lurker” (2020: 88). I am situated within this material as much as the research subjects that I have studied. In the active lurking practices of scrolling, seeking out content creators and audio memes, I was additionally directed to different parts of the platform, sometimes referred to by its users as different “sides of TikTok”. Because of this, I was not consciously seeking out this community for research purposes. Instead, I was merely a participant within this space as any other user. By combining my experiences with that of others, I am theorising my place within this TikTok space in hindsight, using these experiences as an autobiographical connection to the ethnographic work (Ellis et al. 2011). Denzin (2014) has argued that autoethnography has the potential to help us make sense of our fragmented lives. This way, my digital practices will be incorporated as a framework for the fragmented digital lives of early-career academics.

While different ideas and illusions of how participation works in the research field shape how we narrate our research, these narrations are simply half-truths. In the words of de Seta, they shape “which lies we use to cover the tracks leading to our decisions” (2020: 93). Because of this, I am attempting to fill in the voids by placing myself in this study. As a researcher and content creator within this TikTok community, I also share my content within this space. In this sense, I would like to create a space where the researcher can be a storyteller and where research can create a space for storytelling, as proposed by Lewis (2011: 506).

I will rely on the five key digital ethnography principles proposed by Pink and colleagues: multiplicity; non-digital-centricness; openness; reflexivity, and being unorthodox (2016: 8-14). The first principle relates to the multiplicity of digital engagements relating to digital aspects of life. For example, these include the physical and spatial characteristics of these connections, such as Wi-Fi connections, bandwidth, and social media infrastructures, essential for accessing these digital spaces.

Pink et al.’s second principle relates to how the researcher should expand the analytical gaze from the digital to a societal level. This relates to what Couldry and Hepp (2017) have called deep mediatisation, where our social worlds have become highly entangled with the digital, to the point where these spaces can no longer be understood as separate. De-centring the media, in this way, allows ethnographers to see digital media expressions as inseparable from the social worlds they relate

to, for example, the precarious work situation of academics during the pandemic. Because of this, I have situated these expressions within the TikTok users’ academic positions as PhD students, postdocs, adjuncts, researchers, or assistant professors, in order to contextualise their TikTok content. Third, the principle of openness of digital ethnography relates to the research practice as a fluid and collaborative process. It relies on being open towards other people in the form of collaborators rather than informants, in how they ultimately shape the research through their narratives, and the open-endedness of the research process itself, with no official start and endpoints.

Fourth, reflexivity is key to situating one’s position in the field, where a researcher’s relationship to the field and the material shapes the analytical gaze. Our existing experiences initially inform the study, but so does our gender identity, as well as our age, our class position, and race. Therefore, Pink urges ethnographers to interrogate in what ways our self is situated within the research (2021: 48). The last one of Pink et al.’s principles relate to how researchers are encouraged to find unorthodox modes of communication. In finding such alternative communication practices, researchers can “seek out ways of knowing about other people’s worlds that might otherwise be invisible” (2016:13). This was very much the case during this research. By finding TikTok and allowing the algorithms to shape my experiences of the platform, I have come across a community of researchers experiencing the ambiguous position of academic work that I was experiencing as a postdoc researcher at the time. The number of videos included in this analysis is difficult to gauge. Some were posted extensively during the ongoing analysis, while others were less frequent. Because of this, the analysis of this paper represents specific parts of the content from these 20 TikTok accounts as data extracts, for the purpose of illustrating material in this research (cf. Braun & Clarke 2022). I have asked all of the original creators of each quote included in the analysis to opt-in to being directly quoted, as suggested by Williams et al. (2017). However, in one case, the TikTok user had just recently shut down her account, and because of this, I have instead rephrased this quote as proposed by Markham (2012).² In this paper, I have placed my own experiences in the foreground instead of hiding them from the reader’s view, on account that I feel I owe it to others to be true about the contexts of this research, and just as the TikTok users studied in this paper, I too will be vulnerable enough to share my story in addition to theirs.

Part one: I'm having one of those moments!

One’s online academic identity is partly shaped by the culture of digital academic outreach into which we

² These ethical practices were approved by the *Swedish Ethics Review Authority* in 2020, before this research was initiated.

are socialised. TikTok helped me find a community of academics that was more random, fragmented, and at times erratic than other digital forms of academic outreach. The despair was, let me say, palpable. For me, this research started before I knew it had. I found my place on TikTok when writing another research paper with a colleague during the summer of 2020. I had no idea how the platform worked and had to figure it out as a beginner through “learning by doing”. Over time, I found ways of integrating the platform into my own life, both as a mother, millennial woman, feminist, and researcher. While many other researchers in my field hold active accounts on TikTok, these accounts do not post content on the platform. And neither would I have done if I had started my research journey on TikTok at any time other than right smack in the middle of a pandemic. TikTok is a space for imitation, in what Zulli and Zulli (2022) have called “imitation publics”, where this way of reiterating previous content is a way for its users to create a narrative for sharing their own experiences. One audio meme that facilitated a structure in which to fill with TikTok user content consisted of a male voice exclaiming despair, over and over: “I’m having one of those moments! I’m having one of those moments!”. Two different female PhD students used this meme to show their precarious work situation in graduate school, placing their context in text snippets that overlay the video while lip-syncing to the original audio. Both alluded to the fact that they constantly get the urge to drop out of graduate school to pursue different careers. Previous studies have shown that younger, primarily female, scholars are more inclined to consider non-academic career choices (Dorenkamp & Weiß 2018). Using this memeified template, these graduate students are able to present these inclinations in a playful way.

Specific videos explicitly related to how anxiety negatively impacted their academic life. In one such meme, the music was an energetic Russian tune that TikTok users had incorporated into an alternative form of dance video, something that most individuals probably associate with the platform. First, the TikTok user showed a person or item to the camera, then another person or item, before showing how these two items of individuals relate to one another. The context of the video is usually presented as text boxes layered over the video itself. The last part of this meme showed the two items or individuals dancing together, often by aggressively swinging their arms in unison. For one PhD student, this audio meme was used to show how her burnout has affected her ability to perform her work tasks (see Figure 1). First, the camera focused on herself, as the text box layered on top read “burnt-out grad student”. Then, she filmed a stack of books, used to represent her “dissertation reading”, and in the last frame, they are shown dancing together as the layered text boxes pop into the frame one by one to explain what she does instead: feeling “anxiety”, watching “criminal minds marathons”, having “trouble reading”,

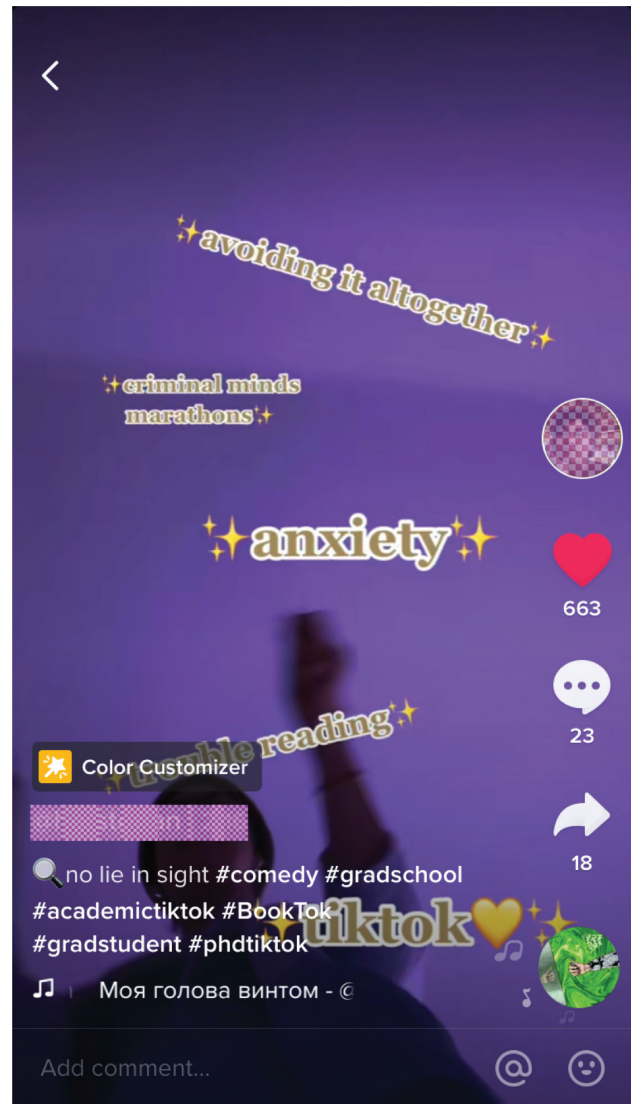


Figure 1.

and ultimately, “avoiding it altogether” – by “scrolling on TikTok instead”. These real-life glimpses of the angst of graduate life, in the form of memes and humorous audial templates, show an honest and authentic version of the life of young, female, and early-career scholars.

Part two: Sike! You’ve got no place in academia whatsoever!

I started to reflect upon my academic working conditions. At times, while in the middle of my everyday academic work, I realised that memes I had seen on TikTok could be used to explain my real-life experiences in ways I had not been able to. One of those situations was my internal critic, constantly dragging my work while idolising the work of other, more well-known or highly cited, scholars. In one of these TikTok videos, I used a meme where the sound simply consisted of a framework for showing how someone or something is interrupted by someone or something. The sound of

the meme consisted of Russian singing over a club beat, interrupted momentarily by two sections in the song where another individual sings in a high-pitched voice, “na na na na na”. Often these memes would address how the TikTok user’s brain would suggest negative things, such as suggesting they would jump off from a high ski lift or swerve into oncoming traffic while driving a car. For me, it set the stage to talk about my imposter syndrome, which functions as an intrusive thought in similar ways during my workday. I filmed myself sitting in front of my computer, “reading other scholars’ research”, but being interrupted by my inner, annoying critic, telling me, “You should leave your field of study and pursue this too”. In the next frame, I look over my shoulder, in an attempt to find the source of the interruption. This was followed by the video’s last frame, where my inner voice tells me, “Sike! You’ve got no place in academia whatsoever!” (see Figure 2).

The social isolation and loneliness that many experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic were associated

with poor life satisfaction and increased work-related stress for many (Clair et al. 2021). TikTok gave me a realm in which I could express these conditions in playful, humorous ways. My “for you page” during this time was stacked with other early-career scholars presenting these narratives, and by using this meme, I contributed to the conversation in personalised ways.

Humour has the potential to confront hegemonic power in social movements (Korkut et al. 2021) and during times of societal upheavals, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Mada & Gomoescu 2020). On social media, humour can also be used to show resilience during emergencies such as terrorist attacks (Eriksson 2018). Virtual forms of humour can create a sense of support, peer feedback and social cohesion in the shape of community building in digital spaces as a form of “cushioning glue” (Marone 2015). However, as the technologies used for creating and sharing humorous content ultimately shape how we joke (Weitz 2017), this study explores the use of TikTok memes to build a community for female early-career scholars. Academics use TikTok in different ways. While Zeng, Schäfer and Allgaier (2021) have specifically studied the use of TikTok as a platform for communicating science-related content and specific vernacular styles, this study focuses less on science communication and more on building community through mediated expressions of shared understandings.

Part three: Planned fieldwork (wee)

While not all TikTok content in this study directly referred to working conditions specific to the pandemic, most of these accounts had been created during the pandemic. On many parts of TikTok, non-generation Z³ users have been joking about their relationship with the app before the pandemic started, claiming it was something they would “never get” since they are “not 13 years old” (as previously quoted at the start of this paper). Still, during the most stressful times of the pandemic, it seems to have allowed some comic relief for the precarity experienced by many female early-career scholars.

Some videos specifically referred to the COVID-19 pandemic, and research has shown that the pandemic negatively affected the working conditions of specifically younger scholars and females (Levine et al. 2021; Deryugina et al. 2021; Gewin 2021). In such TikTok videos, these experiences were expressed in personalised and memeified ways. One audio meme, which merely consisted of the noise of a person going “wee, wee, wee...”, was most often used by TikTok users to indicate that something “went right over their heads” or possibly had gone missing from them. One female doctoral student, who, by the time of writing this paper had closed

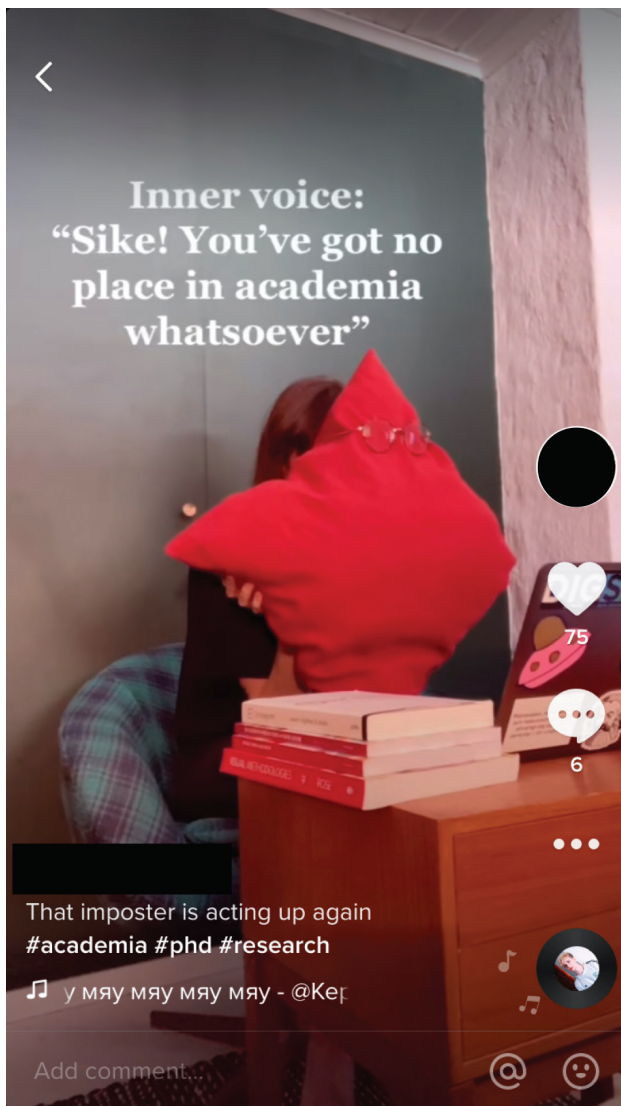


Figure 2.

³ Generation Z typically refers to those born from 1997 onward (Pew Research, 2019).

her TikTok account altogether, used this sound to express all the compromises and sacrifices she had been forced to make for her research situation during the pandemic:

- Planned fieldwork (wee)
- Travel overseas (wee)
- Library access (wee)
- Professional boundaries with supervisors (wee)
- Future job prospects (wee)

Before the pandemic hit, Bosanquet et al. (2020) showed that deferred time, i.e., delays or being in waiting, is central to PhD candidates' and early career researchers' experience of anxiety, which makes you wonder how delays caused by the pandemic may have affected these groups. Data from South Africa suggests that the pandemic negatively impacted female scholars in South Africa (Walters et al. 2022). Additionally, early-career researchers have lacked both formal and informal support from their senior peers during the pandemic, possibly affecting their future career development (Watchorn & Heckendorf 2020). What is certain is that early-career researchers have been disproportionately affected (Herman et al. 2021). Since these conditions were expressed on TikTok, as seen in this study, they help to shed light on the existence of precarious conditions during the pandemic. However, recent international data has shown that early-career researchers were found to be resilient and, at times, even prospered during the pandemic, especially once remote attendance at, for example, conferences was possible (Nicholas et al. 2022).

Part four: Adjunct teaching for poverty wages

TikTok memes offered up a humorous framework for expressing the distress I was experiencing in academia. But not all of the content of academic TikTokers had a humorous tone. As expressed by Longo, “[h]umour can be a catalyst for creating knowledge and relaying social meaning, in both hegemonic and transformative ways” (2010: 113). While TikTok is not merely used as a space for sharing humour, the memeification of personal experiences creates humorous templates for sharing and responding to others' academic precarity. In a non-digital context, humour has been explored in an ethnographic sense in the workplace as a means to relate and interpret individual work experiences in collective ways, and which can aid in maintaining organisational relationships (Pogrebin & Poole 1988). Additionally, humour in the workplace can become a positive coping strategy for managing stress (Plester 2009).

What I saw represented in these accounts was focused on the downfalls of academic work precarity, relating to what has been called the “psychological atrocities of the tenure system” (van Maanen 2015: 38) by acknowledging their difficulties in getting a permanent contract. One such TikTok video, made by a female adjunct professor who defended her PhD

thesis during the pandemic, included an audio meme used extensively on the platform as a storytelling template for a story that starts happy but becomes sadder as it progresses. She used this sound to tell the story of her academic career, which had not panned out the way she had hoped (see Figure 3). Within the framework of this meme, this adjunct professor explained her precarious working conditions within academia:

- Getting into a PhD program
- Getting a Fulbright grant
- Successfully publishing academic articles
- Defending my dissertation during the pandemic
- Realizing a tenured research position demands more than I can give
- Not having enough teaching experience for a tenured teaching job
- Adjunct teaching for poverty wages
- Researching alternate careers



Figure 3.

Feeling like I wasted 7 years of my life
 Making a TikTok about it and then doing nothing

In these ways, the audio memes used by these female early-career scholars provided a template for expressing the everyday realities of their academic work conditions, anxiety and precarity, and open up for reflections on life within academia. As a younger scholar applying for permanent positions while viewing this content, it was hard not to feel despondent. While receiving a PhD may entail the beginning of an academic career for some, this is by no means the case for all. Previous research has shown that this sentiment is shared by many early-career, predominantly female, scholars (Dorenkamp & Weiß 2018). Since the TikToker presented above held a position that was insufficiently paid, this adjunct professor had started to “research alternate careers”, not dissimilar to other academic TikTok users discussed in this paper. And yes, I started to do the same.

Concluding discussion

This study has looked specifically at how the precarity of academic work is expressed on TikTok and how it can be used for community building among early career scholars. While social media has been an important space for early-career scholars to promote work and connect with an international community of researchers, TikTok fills another function, as shown in this study. Specifically, in this study, the search for connections on TikTok were primarily related to other parts of academic life than might otherwise have been expected. Instead of communicating our scientific advances or lecturing about the subjects we know, young female scholars are turning to TikTok to showcase our personal experiences of precarity in the academic workforce. Early-career scholars can create communities of precarious workers who may otherwise feel isolated. Because of this, Anton and Zeal (2019) have appealed to academics to break the silence of their precarious working conditions. These obscure ways of being present on social media can help with this – it did for me.

By creating highly personalised content on social media, individual users shape the narratives of these experiences in new and deeply mediated ways (Couldry & Hepp 2017). As junior faculty members with precarious working situations, these content creators’ vulnerabilities, especially during the pandemic, indicated that these groups use TikTok as an outlet for expressing their lived precarity. It could be argued that these expressions of academic work precarity can become a common ground for young academics to build a socially mediated community. This platform may allow individuals experiencing similar precarity to find each other due to the inner workings of the algorithmic ranking systems on TikTok. As I have argued elsewhere (Eriksson Krutrök 2021), the TikTok algorithms that shape how communities form also aid in creating ways for individuals to share highly personal and sensitive information as part of its

vernacular in specific subcommunities on the platform. Following Seaver, I too believe that “algorithms are culture”, in the sense that these shape social norms and cultural practices on platforms (2017: 5). Humour, as expressed on TikTok through memes, can indeed become a “catalyst for creating knowledge” (Longo 2010: 113), and set the stage for community building and mutual understanding for precarious academic workers. While TikTok is just one of a myriad of platforms available to young academics, it does provide a framework for easy connection, since it structures content based on previous engagements rather than interpersonal relationships (Zulli & Zulli 2022).

I have focused here on how academic work precarity becomes incorporated into personalised expressions on social media. Still, future studies should further explore these platform-specific features as templates for expressing work precarity on social media, especially during the pandemic or other societal and personal crises.

Author biography

Moa Eriksson Krutrök no longer holds a precarious position. She is nowadays Associate Professor of Media and Communication Studies at Umeå University and affiliated researcher at the Digital Humanities Lab (Humlab). She is also editor of the *Journal of Digital Social Research (JDSR)*. Her research interests concern discourses on societal crises and the expressions of trauma, grief, and resilience on social media, primarily Twitter and TikTok.

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