

## Beyond Traditional Subtitles: How Emojis and Non-Standard Typography in Subtitles Boost Engagement on TikTok

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### Abstract

The rise of social media platforms, including TikTok, has given way to new and distinct subtitle styles that significantly differ from traditional subtitling norms. However, little is known about what viewers think about these styles or how they affect engagement. This article presents the results of two studies examining the impact of subtitle style on user engagement on TikTok. Study 1, based on an online survey of 171 Polish participants, explored preferences for different subtitle styles on TikTok: traditional subtitles versus those featuring emojis and non-standard typography (i.e., lacking punctuation and capitalisation). The findings revealed a clear preference for subtitles that omit punctuation and capitalisation while including emojis. Study 2 further investigated how these stylistic features influence viewer engagement with subtitled TikTok videos by analysing metrics such as likes, shares, and comments. Videos with non-standard typography attracted higher engagement than those with traditional subtitles. These findings are discussed in the context of digital communication and contemporary subtitling practices, highlighting significant differences between social media subtitles and traditional subtitling on TV and streaming platforms.

**Key words:** Subtitling, TikTok, reception, engagement, social media.

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## Introduction

Social media has become integral to modern life, particularly for younger generations. In 2023, nearly 4.8 billion people, or 59% of the global population, were active social media users (Chaffey, 2023). The largest platforms are Facebook, with nearly 3 billion users, and YouTube, with over 2.5 billion users (Chaffey, 2023). This study focuses on TikTok, which is currently ranked fifth with approximately 1.1 billion users. TikTok's rapid growth is attributed to its global reach – available in over 150 countries – and its effective algorithm, which curates videos based on user preferences (Wu, 2021, p. 12). TikTok primarily facilitates the creation of short videos, either with background music, voice-overs, or the original sound from the recorded clip. The clips appear on other users' main page, known as the "For You page," which is "a personalised, scrollable feed of content" (Lammertink, 2022). TikTok also provides an integrated tool for creating subtitles, which have been shown to enhance user engagement with video ads by increasing the number of impressions (i.e., the number of times a video is viewed) (Dunne, 2021), and to boost the sharing of COVID-19 informational videos (Li et al., 2021). However, more research is needed to better understand the impact of subtitles and their stylistic features on viewer engagement and enjoyment in TikTok videos.

TikTok subtitles differ significantly from the traditional, professionally created subtitles found on TV, in cinemas, or on streaming platforms, which adhere to established conventions (BBC, 2019; Netflix, 2021). In the European context, where this study takes place, these conventions typically limit subtitles to a maximum of two lines, with up to 42 characters per line, displayed in blocks at the bottom of the screen (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2021). Professional subtitling is governed by style guides that regulate linguistic, typographical and technical elements, such as punctuation and capitalisation, with their omission considered a quality error (Belczyk, 2007; Netflix, 2021). In professional settings, subtitles that lack punctuation and capitalisation are generally judged as poor quality and may be withheld from viewers. These standards reflect a form of linguistic purism rooted in the prescriptive norms typical of professional subtitling across various media. In contrast, TikTok subtitles vary greatly in style, typography and placement, often disregarding punctuation, spelling, and grammar rules while incorporating diverse fonts, colours, and emojis. They operate outside the prescriptive norms that govern professional subtitling. In this article, we explore these two distinct subtitle styles: traditional vs. TikTok. We deliberately use the term "subtitle style" rather than "subtitle quality" to acknowledge the absence of formal guidelines for social media subtitles, particularly on TikTok.

This article examines the impact of subtitle style on user engagement on TikTok, focusing on two factors: non-standard typographical features such as the lack of punctuation and capitalisation, and the inclusion of emojis. With this goal in mind, we conducted two studies. Study 1, an online survey, investigated user preferences for different subtitle styles, specifically comparing subtitles with and without punctuation and capitalisation, as well as with and without emojis. Study 2 explored how these features influenced viewer engagement, measured through metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, on actual TikTok videos featuring two different subtitling styles: standard subtitles and TikTok-style subtitles. Our goal is to assess engagement, enjoyment and language attitudes towards

non-standard TikTok-style subtitles that deviate from traditional prescriptive norms, particularly in the context of light, entertaining content.

## 1. User Engagement on TikTok: Subtitles and Emojis

Given that modern media users are no longer passive observers, but prosumers, where the roles of producers, distributors and consumers are blending in different ways (Díaz Cintas, 2018; Jenkins, 2006), user engagement with social media has also evolved over the years (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). Engagement is understood as various types of actions reflecting how users interact with social media content. Meng and Leung (2021) identify three levels of TikTok engagement, ranging from lower to higher effort. The lowest level, contribution, involves passive interactions like liking, sharing, and commenting, which will be the focus of our study. Higher levels include enhancement, where users improve video quality with effects or music, and creation, where users actively produce and interact with original content. Numerous websites on the Internet claim to offer engagement rate calculators, such as ubiwiz.com or collabstr.com. Fejes (2023) proposes a formula for calculating TikTok engagement rate:  $[(\text{number of likes} + \text{number of comments} + \text{number of shares}) / \text{number of views}] \times 100\%$ , which will be used in this study.

Engagement on TikTok can be enhanced by various features of audiovisual content, including subtitles (also referred to as captions). West (2023) argues that “although it may be an extra step in the video production process, captions make your videos more accessible to viewers.” Supporting this view, Dunne (2021) reports that adding subtitles can increase impressions on the platform by 55.68%, while Li et al. (2021) found that videos with subtitles received more shares than those without subtitles. Additionally, Mixcord (2022) lists several advantages of subtitles in TikTok videos, including their ability to grab attention, boost watch time and impressions, maintain accuracy, improve accessibility, and enhance understanding for non-native speakers.

Another feature believed to enhance engagement on TikTok is the use of emojis in subtitles. Emojis can be defined as “small, colourful graphical icons that represent facial expressions, objects, actions, and symbols” (Herring, 2022, p. 5). According to Schweiger (2023, p. 334), “emoji developed out of emoticons, and emoticons out of punctuation”. The first emoticon, a blend of “emotion” and “icon”, was the rotated smiley face :-D introduced in 1982 in an online bulletin board by Scott Fahlman, a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University, to indicate a joke (Dresner & Herring, 2010). Unlike emoticons, which consist of punctuation marks, emojis are images or “digital pictograms” (Stark & Crawford, 2015, p. 1) used in electronic communication. The term “emoji” is a loanword from Japanese, combining “e” (picture) and “moji” (letter, character). The emoji equivalent of the smiling face emoticon :-D is 😊. Emojis are seen as “a light-hearted, almost comedic form of communication”, and they now “serve to smooth out the rough edges of digital life” (Stark & Crawford, 2015, p. 1). Today, it is emojis, not emoticons, that are predominantly used on TikTok.

In contemporary popular culture and social media, emojis not only aid “emotional expression and semantic comprehension” (Yang et al., 2021) but also clarify, disambiguate, or emphasise meanings, add humour, and serve as contextualisation clues. Research indicates that women tend to use emoticons more often than men (Witmer & Katzman, 1997), while men more often tend to use emoticons to express sarcasm (Wolf, 2000). Emojis “have expanded our communicative options considerably” (Schweiger, 2023, p. 326) and are now integral to modern digital culture. In 2015, the Oxford Dictionary selected the emoji 🤩, officially called the “Face with Tears of Joy”, as the word of the year, signalling a paradigm shift in human communications (Danesi, 2016). A crowd-sourcing initiative even translated Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* into *Emoji Dick*, rewriting the classic entirely with emojis (Schweiger, 2023). However, emojis have also sparked controversy due to their lack of racial diversity. A public outcry prompted Apple to collaborate with the Unicode Consortium, resulting in the 2014 proposal to include a skin tone modifier in Unicode 8.0 to better represent ethnic and racial diversity (Stark & Crawford, 2015). Given the ubiquity of emojis in various contexts, it is unsurprising that they have also made their way into subtitles.

People generally use emojis as a supplement to text (Yang et al., 2021), including text in the subtitles. According to Schweiger (2023, p. 335), emojis can also serve a punctuation function: “rather than substituting words, emoji, like punctuation and emoticons, tend to occupy the spaces between words” and can serve as “mood finals”. When placed at the end of lines, emojis can act as a humorous comment on the utterance. Hashem (2023) argues that emojis enable users to express their personality, the tone of the video, and emotions that words alone may struggle to capture:



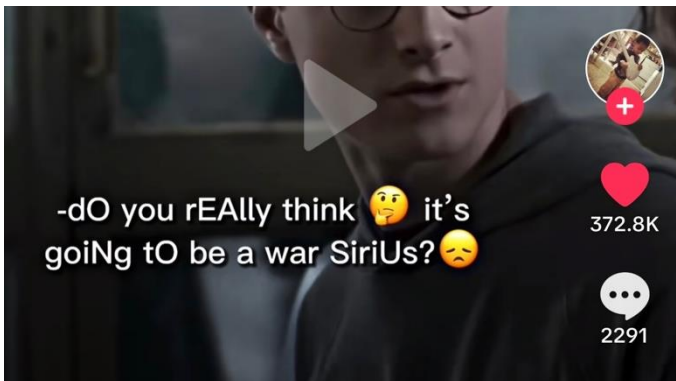
Emojis can also be used to add more context to your caption – they convey the emotion that text alone can’t properly describe. Combine the use of emojis and interesting captions to add more depth to your message and effectively boost engagement.

## 2. Subtitling Styles on TikTok

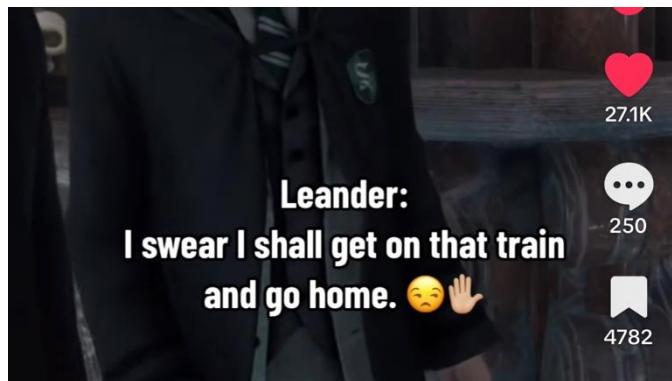
Although various subtitling standards exist for traditional media (BBC, 2019; Netflix, 2021; TED, 2017), TikTok videos follow their own set of rules – or, arguably, no rules at all. Since its launch in 2017 (Wu, 2021), there have been no official guidelines on subtitle preparation for the platform. User-published tutorials (Howes, 2023; Blanc, 2024) typically focus only on the technical aspects of adding subtitles, without addressing style or linguistic conventions. As a result, there is no single method for creating subtitles on TikTok, and each video can feature a unique subtitle style, with no quality control team to scrutinise the creator’s choices – unlike in the case of professional subtitles.

Despite this variability, users often replicate subtitle styles they encounter in other videos, leading to recurring patterns, especially for specific types of content. As a result, common subtitle styles emerge for particular types of videos despite the platform’s lack of formal guidelines. We present them in Table 1.

**Table 1***Various Subtitle Styles on TikTok*

Subtitles	Comments
	<p>Subtitles created using the TikTok built-in tool. No punctuation, capital letters or speaker identification. Use of emojis. Subtitles are located on different parts of the screen and have a black outline. No line breaks or animation effects. Subtitles do not reflect the words, but onomatopoeias.</p> <p>Link:  <a href="https://www.tiktok.com/@mugumeow/video/7220494199920004357?r=1&amp;t=8oOTb39T8zp">https://www.tiktok.com/@mugumeow/video/7220494199920004357?r=1&amp;t=8oOTb39T8zp</a> </p>
	<p>Subtitles created using the TikTok built-in tool. Standard punctuation. No speaker identification or use of emojis. Subtitles appear in a fixed position near the bottom of the screen and have a white outline. However, line breaks do not follow linguistic structures. There are no animation effects.</p> <p>Link:  <a href="https://www.tiktok.com/@goodplacewarsaw/video/7290537049327684896?r=1&amp;t=8oOSu7vom12">https://www.tiktok.com/@goodplacewarsaw/video/7290537049327684896?r=1&amp;t=8oOSu7vom12</a> </p>
	<p>Subtitles created using the TikTok built-in tool. Scarce usage of punctuation. Alternating case. No speaker identification, but there is a dash at the beginning of every subtitle. Numerous emojis appear in every subtitle. Subtitles are located on different parts of the screen and have a black outline. Line breaks do not follow linguistic structures. No animation effects.</p> <p>Link:  <a href="https://www.tiktok.com/@mnestix/video/7215227443181931781?r=1&amp;t=8oOTfyfXM49">https://www.tiktok.com/@mnestix/video/7215227443181931781?r=1&amp;t=8oOTfyfXM49</a> </p>





Subtitles created using the TikTok built-in tool. The use of punctuation and capital letters. The speaker is identified by their name at the beginning of each subtitle. Numerous emojis appear in every subtitle. Subtitles appear in a fixed position near the bottom of the screen and have a white outline. Up to four line breaks, which do not always follow the linguistic structures.

Link:

[https://www.tiktok.com/@miss\\_soapy/video/7207610934523710763?r=1&t=8oOTd\\_uWBkAK](https://www.tiktok.com/@miss_soapy/video/7207610934523710763?r=1&t=8oOTd_uWBkAK)



Subtitles created using video editing software outside of TikTok. No punctuation or lowercase; all letters are capitalised. The speaker is identified based on the colour of subtitles. No emojis. Subtitles are located on different parts of the screen. Line breaks do not follow linguistic structures. Numerous animation effects. Some words are purposefully misspelt in order to stress the poor pronunciation of the speaker.

Link:

[https://www.tiktok.com/@kubaelszefito/video/7253881850026806555?r=1&t=8oOTR\\_WMrYhs](https://www.tiktok.com/@kubaelszefito/video/7253881850026806555?r=1&t=8oOTR_WMrYhs)



Subtitles created using video editing software outside of TikTok. No punctuation. Scarce usage of capital letters. No speaker identification and no emoji. Subtitles are located at the top of the screen. One instance of red box behind a subtitle. Line breaks after two or three words. Numerous subtitle animation effects.

Link:

<https://www.tiktok.com/@jyptravels/video/7249299670130756891?r=1&t=8oOTTVCbRTs>



Subtitles created using video editing software outside of TikTok. No punctuation. All letters are capitalised. In the case of this video, the subtitles reflect the lyrics of the song playing, so there is no speaker identification. No emojis. Subtitles are located on different parts of the screen. Almost every subtitle looks distinct. Use of different colours (be it a font or a glow colour). Numerous animation effects.

Link:

[https://www.tiktok.com/@amalia\\_newitt/video/7238711419942735131?r=1&t=8oOTVwvCfkf](https://www.tiktok.com/@amalia_newitt/video/7238711419942735131?r=1&t=8oOTVwvCfkf)

Although there are countless subtitle styles on TikTok, the following main characteristics can be distinguished:

1. **Punctuation:** Optional and can be used selectively.
2. **Capitalisation:** Optional; often, every word is capitalised, and alternating cases may appear.
3. **Speaker indication:** Optional, and may be included even if the speaker's identity is evident.
4. **Emojis:** Commonly included to highlight the speaker's emotions, emphasis, mood or even punctuation.
5. **Positioning:** Subtitles can appear anywhere on the screen.
6. **Colours:** Used at the creator's discretion for both font and subtitle framing.
7. **Line breaks:** No strict rules, though they seem more frequent compared to traditional subtitles.
8. **Animation effects:** Often included within the subtitles themselves.

As can be seen, TikTok subtitles – with their flexible use of punctuation, capitalisation, emojis, positioning, colours, line breaks, and animation effects – reflect a creative and informal approach driven by content creators' preferences rather than adherence to standardised subtitling conventions.

### 3. Study 1 – A Survey on Users' Preferences for Subtitle Styles on TikTok

The goal of this study was to assess whether subtitle style impacts users' engagement and enjoyment. Engagement is understood as participants' willingness to like, share or comment on a video, whereas enjoyment captures "a pleasurable response to entertainment media" (Tamborini et al., 2010). Additionally, we sought to explore viewers' language attitudes towards subtitles with non-standard typography and emojis – features commonly seen in social media subtitles. Participants were invited

to take part in an online survey, where they viewed video clips with different subtitle styles and shared their opinions on these aspects.

### 3.1. Method

The survey began on 19 December 2023, and concluded on 15 March 2024. Participants (over 18 years of age) were recruited through social media platforms.

#### 3.1.1. Materials

The survey was conducted online using Google Forms and comprised two sections. The first section included demographics and general questions about participants' TikTok usage, including their frequency of use and engagement activities like liking, commenting, and sharing. In the second section, respondents viewed video clips with different subtitle styles, and then provided feedback on their enjoyment and engagement. Finally, participants were also asked to state their preferences for different subtitle styles and were invited to leave additional comments in an open-ended question. All materials related to this study, including the survey and the videos, are available in an open-access repository (<https://osf.io/jy8km/>).

The study followed a 2 x 2 within-subject design, where each participant viewed all subtitle styles. i.e., they watched all four clips, each with a different subtitle style combination. Given the limitations of Google Forms, the videos were not randomised or counterbalanced. The subtitles used in the study were intralingual, Polish-to-Polish. There were two independent variables: the presence of punctuation and capitalisation (present or absent) and the presence of emojis (present or absent). This resulted in four different video clips representing the following combinations of subtitles:

- **Clip 1:** Subtitles with punctuation, capitalisation and no emojis, representing standard subtitle style;
- **Clip 2:** Subtitles with punctuation and capitalisation and with emojis;
- **Clip 3:** Subtitles without punctuation and capitalisation and no emojis;
- **Clip 4:** Subtitles without punctuation and capitalisation and with emojis, representing typical TikTok subtitle style.



**Table 2***Subtitle Styles in Study 1*

Standard typography (with punctuation and capitalisation)	With emojis		Where did you disappear? Come here!
	Without emojis		How's it going, cat? Are you done sulking?
Non-standard typography (without punctuation and capitalisation)	With emojis		Here is a lot of food for you.
	Without emojis		What's up, cat? What is happening?

*Note:* English back-translation from Polish is provided under the pictures.

Each video lasted approximately 30 seconds and depicted a similar scenario: an interaction between a cat and its owner. The clips were created for the purpose of this study.

After watching each video, respondents were presented with a set of six questions, four of which were closed-ended, while the remaining two were optional and open-ended. Question 1 measured enjoyment, asking participants to rate how much they enjoyed the video on a scale ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very much"). Questions 2–4 tested engagement by asking participants to indicate

if they would like the video on social media, leave a comment under this video, or share it (“yes”/“no”). The two open-ended questions were: “If you were to comment on this video, what would your comment be?” and “Do you have any additional remarks regarding this video?” In this part, we intentionally did not ask participants specifically about the subtitles, but about the videos, as we did not want to turn their attention to the subtitles yet.

**Figure 1**

*Screenshots With Different Subtitle Styles Presented to Participants*



After evaluating their enjoyment and engagement with video clips, participants were shown four screenshots, each representing a different subtitle style (Figure 1). They were asked to choose which clip they would prefer to watch, which one they found most amusing, and which they would share with friends. Then, they were requested to choose their preferred subtitle style, and offered the option to make any additional observations if they wished. Finally, participants were asked to express their opinions regarding punctuation and capitalisation and the inclusion of emojis in subtitles. They could also provide further remarks about the subtitles in the survey clips or subtitles on TikTok in general.

### 3.1.2. Participants

A total of 171 Polish native speakers completed the survey, with ages ranging from 18 to 59 ( $M = 26.69$ ,  $SD = 9.62$ ). The gender distribution included 54 males, 111 females, 5 non-binary individuals, and one participant who preferred not to state their gender. Generation-wise, 130 participants were from Generation Z (under 26 years old), 25 were Millennials (aged 27–42), and 16 were from Generation X (aged 43–59).

Regarding educational background, two respondents had completed primary education, one had a lower secondary education, 9 had a vocational education, 86 had a secondary education, 48 had an undergraduate education, and 25 had a postgraduate education. Among those with or pursuing an academic degree, 46 were studying in language-related fields (6 in philology, such as English, 36 in

applied linguistics, and 4 in Polish philology), while 93 were in non-language-related fields (23 in STEM majors, 24 in social sciences, and 46 in other areas).

In terms of using TikTok, one-fourth of the respondents seldom or never use the platform (26.3%), while nearly half report frequent usage (42.7%), with the remaining 31% falling between these extremes. The mean frequency of TikTok usage is 3.39 on a 1–5 scale, indicating diverse usage habits. Most participants declared low engagement with TikTok content, operationalised as likes, comments or shares. The highest mean was achieved for likes (2.92,  $SD = 1.52$ ), medium for shares (2.58,  $SD = 1.45$ ) and the lowest for comments (1.44,  $SD = .86$ ). Nearly 40% of respondents like videos often or very often, while almost three-fourths rarely or never comment. Sharing content follows a similar pattern, with most participants rarely or never sharing, and only a small group sharing often.

**Table 3**

*Participants' Habits Related to Liking, Commenting and Sharing Content on TikTok*

	How often do you... videos on TikTok?		
	Like	Comment	Share
<b>1</b> (never)	29.2%	72.5%	34.5%
<b>2</b> (occasionally)	11.7%	16.4%	17.5%
<b>3</b> (sometimes)	19.9%	7.6%	18.1%
<b>4</b> (often)	16.4%	1.2%	15.2%
<b>5</b> (very often)	22.8%	2.3%	14.6%

Despite varied usage habits, our participants generally do not actively engage with TikTok content, with most rarely liking, commenting on, or sharing videos. This should be considered when interpreting the results of this survey.

### 3.2. Results

We conducted a 2 x 2 repeated measures ANOVA to examine the effects of typography (presence/absence of punctuation and capitalisation) and the presence of emojis on viewers' self-reported enjoyment. The overall enjoyment was quite low, with the means between 2 and 3 on 1–5 scale. As indicated in Table 4, participants reported the highest enjoyment for the clip with subtitles with non-standard typography and containing emojis. There was a significant main effect of typography,  $F(1, 170) = 10.576$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .059$ , indicating that clips with subtitles with non-standard typography ( $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = 0.090$ ) were significantly more enjoyable compared to those with punctuation and capitalisation ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = 0.096$ ). However, there was no significant main effect of emojis ( $M_{Emoji} = 2.28$ ,  $SD = 0.097$ , vs.  $M_{NoEmoji} = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 0.090$ ) and no interactions.

**Table 4**

*Mean Enjoyment by Subtitle Style*

Standard typography (with punctuation and capitalisation)		Non-standard typography (without punctuation and capitalisation)	
Without emojis	With emojis	Without emojis	With emojis
2.19 (1.29)	2.19 (1.23)	2.32 (1.27)	2.37 (1.37)

*Note.* Standard deviation is provided in brackets.

**Figure 2**

*Participants' Engagement: Likes / Comments / Shares*

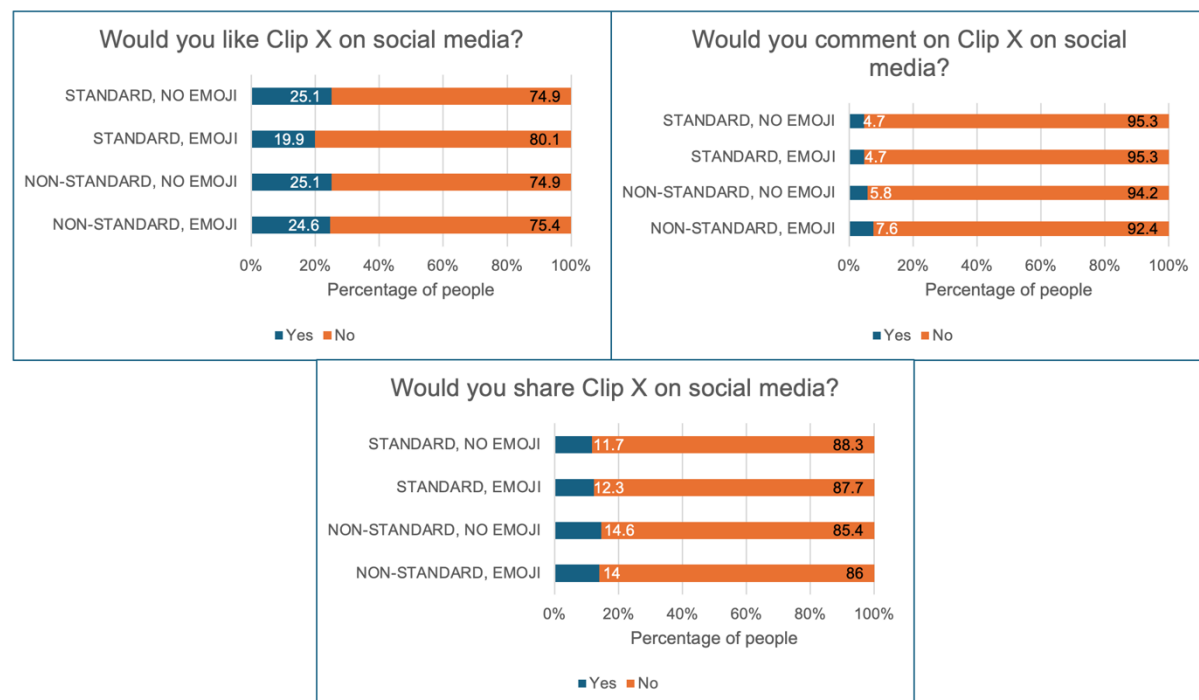
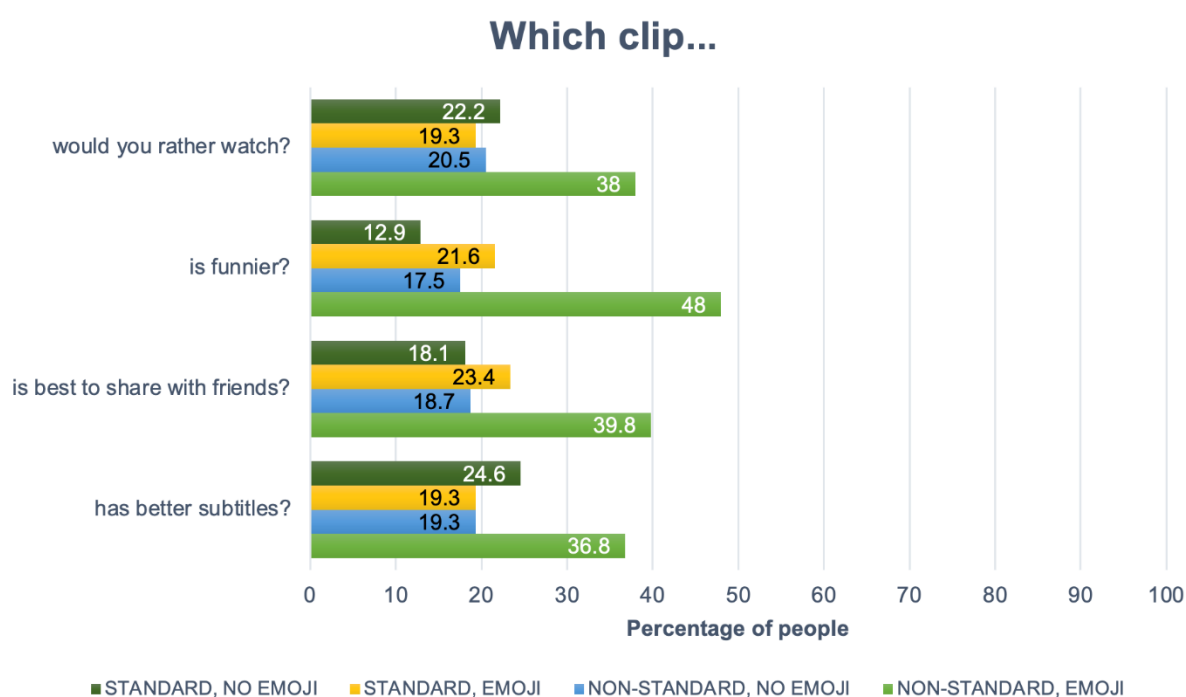


Figure 2 presents participants' responses to whether they would like, comment on, or share each clip, reflecting their engagement. The results show that participants would not engage with the clips a lot overall, with only about one in four of them willing to like the videos, one in ten willing to share them, and one in twenty to comment. In terms of likes, the clip with the lowest score (about 20% of participants willing to like it on TikTok) was the one with subtitles with standard typography and with emojis. The three remaining clips had a similar number of participants willing to like it (about 25%). Regarding comments, respondents favoured the clip with non-standard typography with emojis, which aligns with the responses to the enjoyment questions. Finally, when it comes to sharing, the least sharable clip in our participants' view is the one with standard subtitles, i.e., with standard

typography and no emojis. In contrast, subtitle styles with non-standard typography were found to be the most sharable. One participant stated in the comments: “All in all, these captions look more interesting and fun with emojis”. However, some viewers voiced their negative opinions on emojis, calling them “unnecessary”, and complaining about “too many emojis, it would be better if they replaced specific words instead of highlighting random ones” or asking: “why the emojis 😊”.

**Figure 3**

*Participants’ Preferences Regarding Different Subtitle Styles*



When asked explicitly about the subtitles rather than the videos themselves, and seeing all subtitle styles simultaneously (see Figure 1), participants generally preferred the clip with non-standard typography and with emojis. They found it the funniest, were most likely to share it with friends, and rated it the best overall. The second most preferred style for being funny and shareable was the one with punctuation and capitalisation and with emojis, suggesting that emojis positively impact engagement. Standard subtitles with punctuation and capitalisation and without emojis were found to be the least funny.

Regarding participants’ opinions on the use of emojis and the importance of punctuation and capitalisation in social media subtitles, their responses were generally neutral, with most falling in the middle of the scale, as shown in Table 5.



**Table 5**

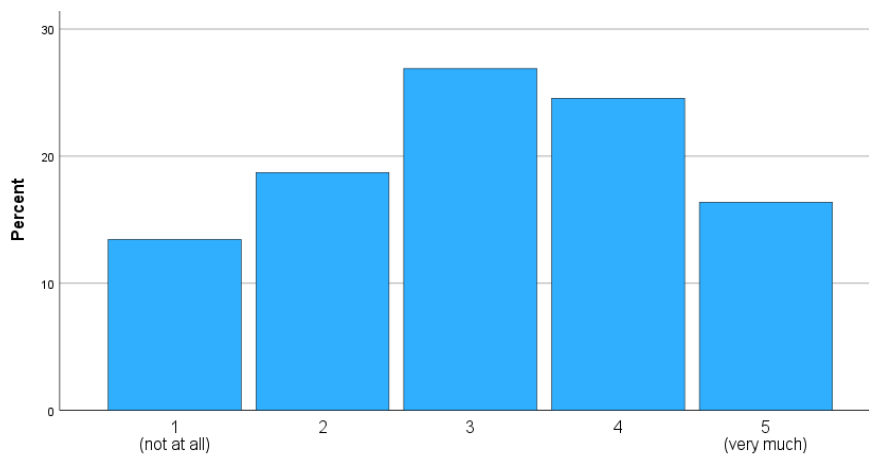
*Participants' Opinions on Punctuation, Capitalisation and Emojis in Subtitling*

How much...?	Mean	SD
Do you like the use of emojis in subtitles?	3.12	1.27
Do you pay attention to punctuation and capitalisation in subtitles on social media?	3.01	1.48

For emojis, responses were evenly distributed, with the middle option “3” being the most frequently selected (see Figure 4). The least popular choice was “1,” suggesting that few participants strongly dislike the use of emojis in subtitles.

**Figure 4**

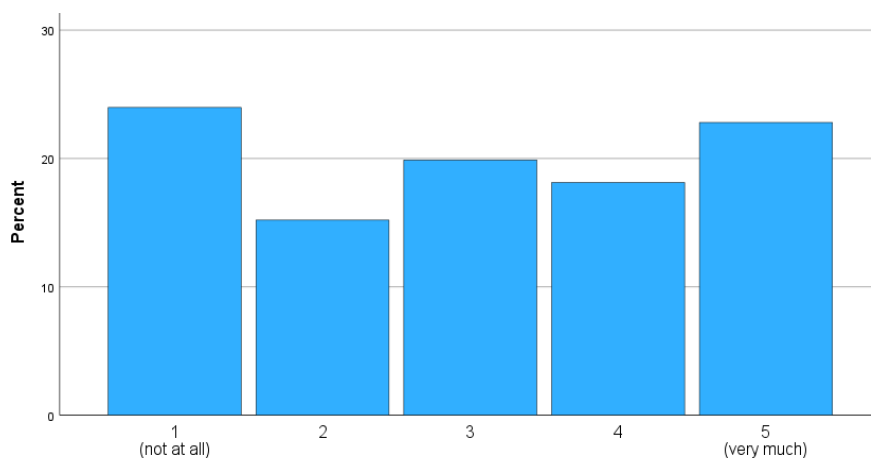
*How Much do You Like the Use of Emojis in Subtitles?*



Regarding attention to punctuation and capitalisation, the most frequently chosen options were “1” and “5”, indicating that respondents had strong opinions on this topic.

**Figure 5**

*How Much Attention do You Pay to Punctuation and Capitalisation in Subtitles on Social Media?*



We found no significant correlations between the frequency of using TikTok and attitude towards punctuation, capitalisation and the use of emojis in subtitles. There were also no significant differences in these attitudes between the genders or depending on the age of the participants.

Finally, participants were invited to provide any additional comments through an optional open-ended question about the clips they rated or subtitles on TikTok in general. Some noted that emojis can enhance certain types of content and are welcome, as long as they are not overused:

- P01: “All in all, it depends on the nature of the films and whether the emojis add anything. In films that are more informative or contain longer speeches, it is better to read the correct subtitles. In films like those in the examples, correct subtitling doesn’t really matter to me, and emojis can add humour to the message, although there are also situations where it doesn’t really matter if they are there or not”.
- P02: “I don’t mind [the emojis], those emojis were pretty cute (...)”

However, some participants did not appreciate the use of emojis, particularly due to concerns about their overuse:

- P03: “The use of emoticons in this way [at the end of each subtitle] is puzzling. They add nothing to either the content or the aesthetics of the film”.
- P04: “After this study, I began to wonder whether the usage of emojis in Polish is somehow regulated”.
- P05: “I am terribly annoyed by the non-ironic overuse of emoticons in such subtitles”.
- P06: “It irritates me when every action or emotion is illustrated with an emoji. I feel overloaded”.
- P07: “Things in lowercase are funnier. The overuse of emoticons is for Boomers (...)”

Participants also commented on the correctness of punctuation and capitalisation in subtitles, noting that their attention to these aspects varies depending on the content:

- P08: “I have a completely different view on subtitling elsewhere (e.g. on Netflix). There, I would expect a high degree of correctness. On TikTok, on the other hand, I am able to turn a blind eye to some of the rules if there is a humorous value in breaking them”.
- P09: “Correct punctuation and capitalisation should be important. Emojis should be used but in moderation, more individually than several together”.
- P10: “My expectations when it comes to subtitles depend on the content I am being presented with. If it’s a video about a cat doing something silly, I don’t pay any attention to punctuation at all, but when the video is, for example, a presentation of a medical case, I find the errors and general carelessness in the writing glaring”.

The open-ended responses revealed mixed opinions about the use of emojis and punctuation in TikTok subtitles. While some participants appreciated emojis for adding humour and enhancing certain types of content, others found their overuse irritating and unnecessary. Similarly, attitudes towards punctuation and capitalisation varied, with some participants more tolerant of informal styles in humorous contexts and others preferring correctness in more serious content.

Overall, participants reported that videos with non-standard subtitles containing emojis were the most enjoyable, engaging, and preferred. However, responses to open-ended questions indicated that this preference was context-specific; several participants noted they would prefer subtitles without emojis on other platforms, such as streaming services.

#### **4. Study 2 – Engagement on TikTok**

In this study, we examined the impact of subtitle style on user engagement on the TikTok platform. Our goal was to gather authentic data on the engagement behaviour of real TikTok users interacting with two different subtitle styles.

##### **4.1. Method**

Drawing on the results of Study 1, we selected two subtitle styles to be tested in Study 2: the most engaging style with non-standard typography, i.e., lacking punctuation and capitalisation, and with emojis, and the traditional style, featuring punctuation and capitalisation without emojis. We aimed to determine which subtitle style garnered higher engagement.

The engagement was measured using TikTok’s built-in tool and operationalised through metrics such as the number of likes, comments, and shares; total and average playtime; the percentage of viewers who watched the entire video; and traffic sources like hashtags and external shares. Additionally, we applied the engagement formula proposed by Fejes (2023).

$$\text{Engagement rate} = \left( \frac{\text{Number of Likes} + \text{Number of Comments} + \text{Number of shares}}{\text{Number of views}} \right) \times 100\%$$

Given the limitations of the TikTok platform, where it is not possible to simultaneously publish two videos, we published two pairs of videos, each with a different subtitle style, three weeks apart. We counterbalanced the subtitle style in order to avoid the confounding effect of the first video in each pair obtaining higher engagement simply because it was published first. In the first pair, the video with TikTok-style subtitles was posted first. In the second pair, the video with standard subtitles was uploaded first. The first pair was posted on Tuesday, 27 February 2024, at 11:24 AM, and the second pair on Tuesday, 19 March 2024, at 11:52 AM, ensuring consistency in online traffic patterns.

The videos were created and analysed using TikTok’s built-in tools on an actual TikTok account (username: thveu). To maximise the likelihood of the videos appearing on users’ “For You” pages, four hashtags were included in each video’s description: #fyp, #dc, #cat, and #catsoftiktok. The first two hashtags reference the “For You” page, known as “Dla Ciebie” in Poland. Additionally, the account’s profile picture was themed to match the videos, featuring the cat protagonist.

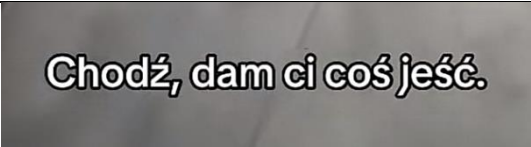
4.1.1. Materials

For this study, two short videos were produced, similar in concept to those in Study 1, featuring the owner interacting with a cat during its daily activities. The first video was 36.11 seconds long, and the second was 29.07 seconds (see the open-access repository).

Each video received two sets of subtitles using TikTok’s built-in tool: standard and TikTok-style (see Table 6). Standard subtitles included punctuation, capitalisation, and syntactically appropriate line breaks with manageable reading speed. TikTok-style subtitles omitted punctuation and capitalisation and used emojis to convey emotions or emphasise meanings. Other aspects, such as font style, screen placement, and subtitle duration, were kept as consistent as possible within the tool’s capabilities.

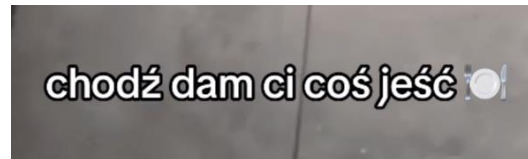
Table 6

Subtitles Used in Study 2

<b>Standard subtitles</b> (With punctuation and capitalisation without emojis)	 Come, I'll give you something to eat.
--	---

### TikTok-style subtitles

(Without punctuation and capitalisation with emojis)



#### 4.1.2. Participants Who Engaged With the Videos

Participant characteristics were derived from data available through the TikTok analytics tool. Table 7 presents the number of viewers who began watching each clip, along with the percentage representation of females and males among the viewers.

**Table 7**

*TikTok Users Engaging With Study 2 Videos by Gender*

	PAIR 1		PAIR 2	
	TikTok-style subtitles	Standard subtitles	Standard subtitles	TikTok-style subtitles
Number of viewers	953	246	841	253
Females	59%	63%	62%	58%
Males	41%	37%	38%	41%

*Note:* The order of the columns in each pair reflects the order in which the clips were posted on TikTok.

TikTok categorises viewers into five age groups: 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, and 55+. Table 8 illustrates the percentage distribution of viewers across these age groups. The majority of viewers were within the 18–24 age bracket, followed by a smaller group in the 25–34 range. Viewers from the remaining three categories combined constitute approximately 8–15%, depending on the clip. This distribution mirrors the overall TikTok user population, which is predominantly GenZ and millennials (“TikTok Statistics – Updated May 2024”, 2024).



**Table 8***TikTok Users Engaging With Study 2 Videos by Age*

Age group	Pair 1		Pair 2	
	TikTok-style subtitles	Standard subtitles	Standard subtitles	TikTok-style subtitles
18–24	71%	73%	64%	75%
25–34	21%	12%	23%	17%
35–44	3%	5%	7%	3%
45–54	2%	3%	2%	3%
55+	3%	7%	4%	2%

*Note:* The order of the columns in each pair reflects the order in which the clips were posted on TikTok.

TikTok's analytical tool allows account owners to see the countries from which viewers accessed the content. Since the clips in this study were recorded in Polish and published in Poland, most viewers were from Poland. However, some viewers were from other countries, such as Germany (around 5% for each clip), Hungary (around 3%), and the United Kingdom (around 2%). These international viewers constituted around 10% or less of the total viewership.

#### 4.2. Results

Using TikTok's proprietary built-in tool, we analysed several key engagement metrics as described in the Method section. Table 9 shows that the first video in each pair received substantially more views, confirming the necessity of counterbalancing to avoid order effects. Generally, videos with TikTok-style subtitles achieved higher engagement than their paired counterparts, even in Pair 2, where the standard version was published first.

**Table 9**

*Engagement Results by Subtitle Style and Video Pair*

	PAIR 1		PAIR 2	
	TikTok-style subtitles	Standard subtitles	Standard subtitles	TikTok-style subtitles
Views	963	290	916	281
Likes	58	14	11	8
Comments	2	0	0	1
Shares	0	0	1	3
Engagement rate	6.2%	4.8%	1.3%	4.27%

Table 10 shows engagement data by playtime. The highest total playtime was achieved by the TikTok-style subtitles in the first pair. It also had the highest percentage of people who watched the entire clip, demonstrating that this subtitle style garnered the highest engagement.

**Table 10**

*Engagement by Playtime*

	Pair 1		Pair 2	
	TikTok-style subtitles	Standard subtitles	Standard subtitles	TikTok-style subtitles
Total playtime	3:10:23	1:27:58	44:4	12:10
Average playtime	9.9 s	15.8 s	2.8 s	2.3 s
Watched whole clip	11.28%	4.79%	1.27%	1.99%

Table 11 demonstrates the traffic sources, indicating how viewers discovered the post. The “For You” page refers to TikTok’s homepage, where the algorithm suggests videos to viewers. “Personal profile” indicates that viewers first visited the account where the clip was posted and then watched the video. “Other” traffic sources include links shared by one TikTok user with another.

**Table 11***Engagement by Traffic*

	Pair 1		Pair 2	
	TikTok-style subtitles	Traditional subtitles	Traditional subtitles	TikTok-style subtitles
FY page	88.5%	81.1%	96.1%	86.1%
Account	9.3%	15.3%	3.1%	9.6%
Other	2.2%	3.6%	0.8%	4.3%

Additional insights from TikTok's analytical tool include the points at which viewers mostly stopped watching and when they liked the videos. For all clips, most viewers ceased watching after one second. However, the majority of likes occurred at 0:00, indicating that viewers liked the video immediately after seeing the first subtitle and the blurred figure of the cat, which appears on the screen from a short distance at the beginning of each clip.

## 5. General Discussion

The goal of this research was to examine the impact of subtitle style on viewers' enjoyment and engagement with TikTok videos, as well as their preferences and opinions on the use of emojis and non-standard typography, i.e., lack of punctuation and capitalisation, in TikTok subtitles. Results from both studies indicate that the subtitle style does influence user engagement. In Study 1, viewers preferred, enjoyed, and engaged more with videos featuring subtitles with non-standard typography and with emojis, compared to videos with standard subtitles without emojis. Similarly, in Study 2, videos with TikTok-style subtitles achieved the highest engagement metrics. Overall, our findings consistently show that TikTok-style subtitles enhance viewer engagement more effectively than standard subtitles.

We acknowledge that participant enjoyment and engagement with the videos in both studies were relatively low, with few participants expressing a willingness to like, comment on, or share the videos. This result may be attributed to their usual TikTok viewing habits and personalities, as many Study 1 participants admitted they rarely share or comment on TikTok videos. Additionally, the videos themselves may not have appealed to participants, as reflected in open-ended comments such as: "[the videos] are not funny and not interesting. I would have wasted my time if I watched them on TikTok" (P11). However, when participants were asked explicitly about the subtitles in Study 1, rather than the videos themselves, their feedback was more detailed. Differences between subtitle styles became clearer, with TikTok-style subtitles being the most liked and shareable. Similarly, in Study 2, subtitles with emojis and linguistic errors garnered the highest engagement metrics.

A key conclusion from this study is that viewers have different expectations for subtitles on social media compared to traditional media like films and TV shows. While traditional subtitles are designed to be “invisible” and not attract undue attention (Szarkowska et al., 2021), social media subtitles, particularly those using emojis, appear to have the opposite effect by actively attracting viewers’ attention and encouraging engagement. In this context, linguistic correctness – such as punctuation and capitalisation – becomes secondary to enhancing enjoyment, boosting engagement, and promoting interaction. Professional subtitles are governed by stringent requirements set forth in company style guides and must adhere to prescriptive linguistic rules. In contrast, TikTok subtitles operate without such constraints. As noted by Díaz Cintas (2018), traditional media subtitles are often “under official or corporate control,” whereas the internet, being more “decentralized” (p. 140), gives content creators greater freedom to experiment with subtitle presentation. Viewers seem to recognise these differing linguistic contexts and have developed varied attitudes towards them. They may expect high quality, characterised among others by the use of punctuation and capitalisation, on streaming platforms where they pay a monthly subscription fee, but do not hold similar expectations for free, short-form social media subtitles. This illustrates a key difference between professional and social media subtitles: the latter prioritises engagement over adhering to standardised conventions established for long-form content in TV, streaming platforms, or cinemas.

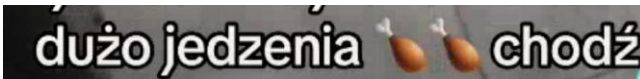
TikTok-style subtitles, with their non-standard typography and use of emojis, can be seen as a continuation of earlier unconventional and creative approaches to subtitling (see also Romero-Fresco & Chaume, 2022). Some of the earliest examples date back to the silent cinema era, where intertitles – particularly “art titles” – were often elaborately designed to reflect contemporary typographical trends in visual arts, such as futurism and expressionism (Nornes, 2007). The use of emoticons (though not emojis) in subtitling has a precedent in subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing, where emoticons were employed to enhance the descriptions of sounds and emotions (Neves, 2005). Eye-tracking experiments have also explored alternative subtitle placements to optimize the viewer experience, with subtitles positioned closer to the speaker’s mouth proving beneficial (Fox, 2018). Additionally, the so-called “free-form” subtitles, sometimes referred to as “creative” subtitles, incorporate stylistic and typographical features, such as blood-dripping red fonts, to match a video’s mood (Hostová et al., 2022). In this light, modern social media subtitles, including those on TikTok, represent an evolution rather than a complete revolution in subtitling practices.

Regarding the use of emojis, many participants in our study stated that they either like or do not mind emojis in social media subtitles, provided they add humour and are not overused. This preference may stem from different expectations and motivations associated with social media. Brandtzæg & Heim (2009) argue that one of the main motivations for using social media is seeking fun. Kowalewicz (2023) supports this by noting that emojis are “a fun and engaging way to communicate online” and “an excellent way to convey emotion and tone in text-based communication. They can help convey sarcasm, excitement and humour in a way that text alone can’t.” Thus, users seeking entertainment on TikTok may appreciate subtitles with emojis, which enhance the humour and meaning of the videos. Our study seems to indicate that emojis are a tool that is suited to specific contexts and that users recognise these contexts.

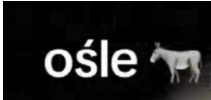
Punctuation is essential for understanding text, as even a misplaced comma can alter a sentence's meaning (Binda, 2022). In TikTok videos, where traditional punctuation is absent, emojis often take on the role typically served by punctuation marks like commas, periods, or exclamation marks. Danesi (2016) suggests that emojis can sometimes replace these traditional punctuation marks. In our study, several emojis appeared to function as “emotional punctuation” (Danesi, 2016, p. 179), substituting for traditional punctuation. For example, a waving hand emoji or the donkey emoji (the cat in the video was named “Donkey”) was used in place of an exclamation mark:

-   
[donkey]
-   
[donkey / stop]

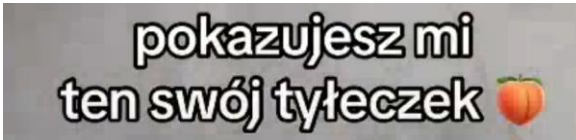
Similarly, an emoji can also simply mark a pause between two clauses:

-   
[a lot of food / come]

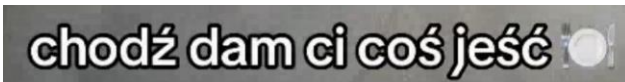
As noted by Danesi (2016, p. 105), when used at the end of clauses, emojis can provide “mood breaks” or “mood finales” in text flow. In our study, emojis also played a humorous role. For instance, the donkey emoji played on the cat's name (Donkey):

- 

Another example of a humorous mood break comes from the affective use of the peach emoji:

-   
[you're showing me your little bottom]

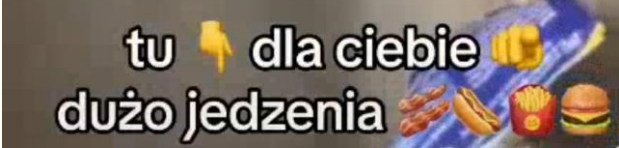

or emojis with a plate and a set of cutlery, or a chef emoji, when referring to the cat:

-   
[come, I'll give you something to eat]



-   
[we are at the consumption venue]

However, not all uses of emojis in the subtitles in our study were well-received; some viewers complained about overuse (see examples below). Participant P12 remarked, “Emojis should be used in moderation – individually, not several together”.

-   
[here / for you / a lot of food]
-   
[Cat / gets inside the house]

Our study also demonstrates that subtitling on TikTok – characterised by its omission of standard punctuation and capitalisation, alongside the use of emojis – can be viewed as part of a broader phenomenon classified under computer-mediated communication (CMC), which encompasses texting, emails, social media, chats, and similar forms of digital interaction, sometimes referred to as “Netspeak”, “chatspeak”, or “textese” (Herring, 2022). CMC diverges from the prescriptive norms of traditional written language, marked instead by its own e-grammar (Herring, 2022), which blends both standard and non-standard typographic forms, such as the absence of sentence-initial capitalisation, alternating case (e.g., alTErnAtiNg CaSE), camel case (e.g., iPhone), and omitted sentence-final punctuation. While language prescriptivists may attribute these practices to carelessness or low literacy skills, dismissing them as errors (see Thurlow, 2006), others argue that these choices are deliberate, often serving to simulate spoken language in the absence of auditory cues (Herring, 2022) or reflecting personal traits (Pennebaker, 2011). Moreover, such creative language use – such as writing “le\$bean” for “lesbian” or “ouid” and the leaf emoji 🍃 to represent “weed” – can also be a strategy employed by TikTok content creators, particularly in regions like China, to evade platform censorship (Calhoun & Fawcett, 2023). These stylistic choices also reflect a broader linguistic trend, identified in diachronic language studies, where digital communication is becoming increasingly informal and emotionally expressive (Herring, 2022). Furthermore, as social media platforms have developed their own “platform vernaculars” – distinct linguistic ecosystems shaped by the specific affordances of each platform, featuring their own “unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics” (Gibbs et al., 2014, p. 257) – TikTok is no exception. The use of emojis and the absence of traditional punctuation in TikTok subtitles reflect Danesi’s observation (2016, p. v) that “the Internet Age is making new kinds of demands on writing practices”. This integration of audio, text, and visual elements in social media content – referred to as “blended writing” or “hybrid

writing” – suggests the need for new literacy skills, which, as evidenced by this study, many users have already begun to acquire.

## 6. Limitations

The studies reported in this paper primarily involved a sample of young Polish users, which, while reflective of TikTok demographics, suggests a need to extend the research to include participants from a wider range of linguistic and geographical backgrounds. Another limitation is the relatively low enjoyment rating of the videos by our participants. Future research should prioritise the use of more engaging audiovisual material. Furthermore, the limitations of the within-subject design in Study 1 make it difficult to distinguish whether the participants found the clips themselves more likeable and shareable, rather than the subtitle style. The comparison in Study 2 was limited to only two sets of videos, which is relatively small given TikTok’s vast user base and content. Moreover, one video set may have had a more captivating beginning, potentially influencing the results. Future studies should compare a larger variety of videos with different subtitle styles and consider posting them from multiple accounts simultaneously to mitigate the impact of TikTok’s algorithm favouring videos based on their publication timing.

## 7. Conclusions

Our research examined the impact of subtitle style on viewers’ enjoyment and engagement with TikTok videos, focusing on the use of emojis and non-standard typography. The results clearly showed that subtitle style significantly influences user engagement. Viewers preferred and engaged more with videos featuring subtitles with non-standard typography that included emojis over videos with standard subtitles. These findings demonstrate that TikTok-style subtitles, which are informal and visually engaging, enhance viewer engagement more effectively than traditional subtitles.

An important conclusion from this research is that viewers have distinct expectations for subtitles on social media compared to traditional media like films and TV shows. Traditional subtitles are designed to be unobtrusive, whereas social media subtitles, especially those on TikTok, aim to capture attention and drive engagement. Emojis play a critical role in this context, serving not only as emotional punctuation but also enhancing the overall humour and meaning of the videos. This preference aligns with the motivations of social media users, who seek entertainment and fun. The dynamic and creative nature of TikTok subtitles reflects the evolving subtitling norms on social media, where creativity and engagement take precedence over traditional linguistic accuracy. Further research is needed to fully understand the broader implications of these evolving subtitling practices on viewer engagement and literacy skills in the digital age.

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