International Journal of Social and Humanities Sciences Research
JSHSR
Uluslararası Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Araştırma Dergisi
Uluslararası Hakemli Dergi- International Refereed Journal
ISSN: 2459-1149

Received-Makale Geliş Tarihi 12.08.2026 *Research Article /Araştırma Makalesi*
Published-Yayınlanma Tarihi 29.10.2026 **10.5281/zenodo.23776663**
Volume-Cilt (Issue-Sayı), ss/pp 13 (136),1818-1829

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Algorithmic Editoriality in TikTok Search: Visibility and Query Suggestions

TikTok Aramasında Algoritmik Editoryallik: Görünürlük ve Sorgu Önerileri

ABSTRACT

TikTok's growing use as an information-search environment raises questions about which content and query options become visible to users. This study examines algorithmic mediation in TikTok search through the concept of algorithmic editoriality, focusing descriptively on search-result visibility and autocomplete suggestions. Using 20 initial queries drawn from four domains—economy, health, education, and migration—in Türkiye with Turkish-language queries, the first ten video results displayed under the "Top" tab and the first five autocomplete suggestions were recorded. The dataset consists of 200 search-result observations and 100 autocomplete suggestions. The findings show that the composition of visible accounts and content varies across domains. Expert/professional accounts and informational/explanatory content were more prominent in health searches, while individual users and personal-experience content were more prominent in education. In economy searches, individual and media/news accounts were equally visible, whereas migration searches produced a more heterogeneous mix of actors. Autocomplete suggestions also varied across domains; most notably, the high level of direct semantic alignment observed in migration search results was lower among autocomplete suggestions. The study uses algorithmic editoriality not as a claim about platform intent or internal technical mechanisms, but as a limited analytical framework for examining functions of selection, ranking, and visibility. The findings suggest that search-result visibility and possible query options can be examined together as two observable outputs of platform mediation.
Keywords: TikTok, algorithmic editoriality, visibility, autocomplete, platform audit

ÖZET

TikTok'un kısa video ve algoritmik öneri platformu olmanın ötesinde bilgi arama amacıyla kullanılması, kullanıcıya hangi içeriklerin ve sorgu seçeneklerinin görünür hâle geldiği sorusunu gündeme getirmektedir. Bu çalışma, TikTok aramasındaki algoritmik aracılığı algoritmik editoryallik kavramı çerçevesinde, arama sonucu görünürlüğü ve otomatik tamamlama önerileri üzerinden betimsel olarak incelemektedir. Türkiye'de Türkçe sorgular kullanılarak ekonomi, sağlık, eğitim ve göç alanlarından seçilen 20 başlangıç sorgusu için "En İyi" sekmesindeki ilk 10 video sonucu ile ilk beş otomatik tamamlama önerisi kaydedilmiş; toplam 200 arama sonucu ve 100 öneri analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, görünür hesap ve içerik bileşimlerinin konu alanlarına göre farklılaştığını göstermektedir. Sağlıkta uzman/profesyonel hesaplar ve bilgi/açıklama içerikleri, eğitimde bireysel kullanıcılar ve kişisel deneyimler öne çıkarken; ekonomide bireysel ve medya/haber hesapları eşit oranlarda görünür olmuş, göçte ise daha karma bir aktör bileşimi ortaya çıkmıştır. Otomatik tamamlama önerileri de alanlara göre farklılaşmış; özellikle göç alanında arama sonuçlarında yüksek olan doğrudan anlamsal uyumun önerilerde daha düşük olduğu görülmüştür. Çalışma algoritmik editoryalliği platformun niyetine veya teknik iç işleyişine ilişkin bir iddia olarak değil, seçme, sıralama ve görünür kılma işlevlerini incelemeye yönelik sınırlı bir analitik çerçeve olarak kullanmaktadır. Bulgular, arama sonuçlarındaki görünürlük ile kullanıcıya sunulan olası sorguların platform aracılığının iki gözlenebilir çıktısı olarak birlikte incelenebileceğine işaret etmektedir.
Anahtar Kelimeler: TikTok, algoritmik editoryallik, görünürlük, otomatik tamamlama, platform denetimi

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms are becoming environments in which users not only share content but also search for, encounter, and formulate information needs. This transformation is particularly noteworthy in the case of TikTok, which, although commonly associated with short-form video and an algorithmic recommendation feed, is increasingly used directly for information seeking (Almoqbel et al., 2025; Diep & Tran, 2025; O'Brien et al., 2025).

TikTok's growing importance as an information-search environment also raises the question of which information becomes visible on the platform. Even when users initiate a query themselves, the accounts and content displayed near the top of the results appear within a field of visibility structured by the platform. The role of algorithmic systems in determining what is treated as "relevant" and made visible has long been discussed in the literature on *algorithmic relevance*, gatekeeping, curation, and editorial judgment (Gillespie, 2014; Napoli, 2014; Riedl, 2022). This perspective makes it possible to view platform search not merely as a technical information-retrieval service, but as a sociotechnical process of mediation in which information options are selected and ranked.

Algorithmic mediation in TikTok search is not limited to the ranking of results. Autocomplete suggestions displayed in the search box make particular possible queries visible before the user has completed a search. Studies of TikTok's interface and suggested-search features indicate that these mechanisms warrant separate examination in relation to content discovery (Annabell et al., 2025; Entrena-Serrano, 2025). The broader literature on autocomplete likewise suggests that such suggestions can be understood not merely as a technical convenience that facilitates typing, but as algorithmic outputs that make particular options visible among a wider set of possible queries (Graham, 2023; Jhaver, 2025; Rogers, 2023).

The existing literature includes, on the one hand, studies examining why and how users employ TikTok as a search environment and how they evaluate information on the platform, and, on the other, research addressing TikTok's algorithmic interface and suggested-search features. By contrast, fewer studies examine within the same empirical design both which actor and content types become visible in response to a given initial query and which possible queries are suggested to users during that same search process. This study addresses this gap by examining the visibility structure of search results together with autocomplete suggestions within a common analytical framework. For this purpose, algorithmic mediation in TikTok search is evaluated through the concept of algorithmic editoriality. The concept does not imply that the platform is an editor in the conventional sense; rather, it refers to its functional mediating role in selecting, ranking, and making information options visible. The study examines this mediation through two observable platform outputs: visibility in search results and query suggestions presented through autocomplete. It does not assume that users consume visible content or select suggested queries; it focuses only on the outputs presented by the platform under specified standardized conditions.

The study is based on 20 initial queries selected from the domains of economy, health, education, and migration using Turkish-language queries in Türkiye. For each query, the first ten video results under TikTok's "Top" tab and the first five autocomplete suggestions were recorded, producing a total of 200 search-result observations and 100 autocomplete suggestions. Within this framework, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. Which account and content types are more visible in TikTok search results?

RQ2. How do visibility patterns in search results differ across the economy, health, education, and migration domains?

RQ3. How are TikTok's autocomplete suggestions functionally and semantically related to the initial queries?

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Algorithmic Visibility, Gatekeeping, and Editorial Function

Access to information on digital platforms is related not only to which content is available, but also to which content becomes visible to users. Algorithms used in search engines, social media platforms, and recommendation systems perform a consequential mediating function in determining which items, among numerous available options, are treated as relevant, selected, and ranked (Gillespie, 2014). Algorithms are therefore understood not merely as technical computational tools, but as sociotechnical structures that participate in the organization of information visibility.

This transformation has led to the extension of the concept of gatekeeping to digital platforms and algorithmic information environments. Recent literature on algorithmic gatekeeping shows that visibility is no longer concerned only with whether content is published, but also with which items among available content are promoted, demoted, or made more likely to be encountered by users (Potnis et al., 2025). Bucher (2018) treats visibility as a central dimension of platform power, while Gillespie (2022) notes that content can be made less visible through ranking without being removed. Platform mediation can therefore be examined through degrees of visibility as well as the mere presence of content.

The selection and ranking functions performed by algorithmic systems in media environments have also been linked to debates on editorial decision-making. Napoli (2014) argues that some selection and organizational functions previously associated with human actors and media institutions are increasingly performed by algorithmic systems. Riedl (2022) further shows that social media platforms can perform functions analogous to editorial judgment insofar as they select among available options and present them at different levels of visibility. This functional similarity, however, does not imply that algorithmic systems possess journalistic norms, editorial autonomy, or conscious editorial intent.

Similarly, Bonini and Gandini (2019) use the concept of "algo-torial power" to describe platform curation as a structure in which human editorial selection and algorithmic computation are intertwined, drawing attention to the ways in which visibility can be organized at the intersection of human and algorithmic decision processes. The comparison of ranking decisions by search engines and platforms with conventional editorial selection has also been discussed in legal scholarship through the "editorial analogy"; however, information-ranking functions alone should not be equated with traditional editorial judgment (Whitney, 2018).

In this study, the concept of algorithmic editoriality is used to bring these functions of selection, ranking, and visibility within a common analytical framework. Rather than proposing a new editorial model as an alternative to the literatures on algorithmic gatekeeping or curation, the concept enables platform mediation in information-search environments such as TikTok search to be examined through different observable outputs. Accordingly, instead of inferring the algorithm's internal decision rules or intent, the study focuses on which options become visible to users under standardized query conditions.

Search results constitute the first observable output of this mediation. Examining which accounts and content types appear near the top for a given query makes it possible to empirically assess the visibility structure presented to users by the platform. Bandy and Diakopoulos's (2020) analysis of algorithmic curation through source diversity, concentration, and content composition likewise demonstrates that algorithmic mediation can be evaluated not only in terms of the presence of content but also in terms of the extent to which different actors become visible.

2.2. TikTok Search and Query Suggestions

Although research on TikTok long concentrated on the platform's algorithmic recommendation feed and the "For You Page," recent studies show that the platform is also used for active information seeking. Users may turn to TikTok with specific information needs and use the platform as a search-engine-like environment for obtaining information (Almoqbel et al., 2025; Diep & Tran, 2025). O'Brien et al. (2025), reviewing research on TikTok and information behavior, likewise show that information seeking, discovery, evaluation and sharing are closely connected to the platform's algorithmic recommendation system and interface features.

Although active search on TikTok is initiated by the user, it is not a fully user-controlled process. In addition to which content appears near the top of search results, the autocomplete suggestions displayed in the search box form part of the information environment encountered by users. Entrena-Serrano (2025) shows that recommendation mechanisms embedded in TikTok's interface create a discovery structure capable of directing users toward different content pathways. Annabell et al. (2025), meanwhile, treat TikTok's provision of pre-formulated search options as a feature that warrants separate examination in relation to content discovery and platform governance.

The autocomplete feature examined in this study is not technically identical to the suggested searches displayed on videos. The output examined here consists of possible queries that become visible while a user is typing an initial query into the search box. Nevertheless, both features point to a common analytical problem: the platform not only provides results for completed queries but also makes other possible searches visible to users.

Examining autocomplete systems from this perspective is not unique to TikTok. Studies of Google Autocomplete show that such suggestions can be understood not merely as a technical feature that facilitates typing, but as algorithmic outputs that make particular options visible among possible queries. Graham (2023) discusses autocomplete in relation to the reframing of queries and user agency; Rogers (2023) examines these outputs through algorithmic probing; and Jhaver (2025) focuses on users' perceptions of how suggestions are produced.

Drawing on this literature, the study examines algorithmic mediation in TikTok search through two observable platform outputs. The first is search-result visibility, which indicates which account and content types become visible in response to a completed query. The second is autocomplete suggestions, which indicate which alternative or complementary queries are presented as visible options while the user formulates the initial query. This distinction does not imply the existence of two separate algorithmic systems; it merely analytically separates two different platform outputs presented to the user. Likewise, the visibility of content does not mean that it will be consumed, just as the suggestion of a query does not mean that it will be selected by the user.

Although studies have examined the use of TikTok as an information and news environment in the context of Türkiye, empirical research focusing specifically on the search function remains more limited. The differences observed by Çetinkaya and Dondurucu (2023) between the TikTok practices of news organizations in Türkiye and the United States underscore the importance of examining platform practices contextually. By providing empirical evidence on the observable outputs of TikTok search through Turkish-language queries in Türkiye, this study aims to contribute to this limited literature.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Sample

This study adopts a platform audit approach to examine which actor and content types become visible in TikTok search and which possible queries are presented through autocomplete suggestions. Platform audits enable the systematic observation of platform outputs generated under standardized conditions without direct access to the technical code or ranking parameters of algorithmic systems (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020; Metaxa et al., 2021). The object of analysis is therefore not the algorithm's internal operating logic or user perceptions, but the observable outputs presented to users under specified query conditions.

The study is based on two units of analysis: (i) video results displayed under TikTok's "Top" tab and (ii) autocomplete suggestions displayed in the search box. Four information domains—economy, health, education, and migration—were selected with consideration given to their relevance to everyday information seeking, public importance, and inclusion of differing structures of expertise and actors. Five queries were identified for each domain, yielding a sample of 20 initial queries.

Google Trends was used in selecting the queries in order to limit the extent to which TikTok's own recommendation system shaped the sampling process. Google Trends was not treated as a direct measure of search demand on TikTok; rather, it was used as a platform-independent indicator for comparing the current level of interest in candidate queries. Comparisons were conducted for Türkiye over the period 1 August 2025–31 July 2026, across all categories, using Google Web Search settings; "search term" rather than "topic" was selected. In addition to current search interest, semantic clarity, neutrality, and within-domain conceptual diversity were considered in selecting the final queries.

Table 1. Initial queries used in the study

Domain	Queries
Economy	enflasyon; faiz; işsizlik; dolar kuru; asgari ücret
Health	bel ağrısı; demir eksikliği; migren; insülin direnci; kolesterol
Education	yüksek lisans; burs başvurusu; açıköğretim; LGS; YKS
Migration	göçmenler; göç; ikamet izni; beyin göçü; mülteciler

Source: Prepared for the study.

Before the main data collection, a limited pilot was conducted to assess the semantic clarity and topical validity of the queries. At this stage, the initially considered queries "burs" and "Suriyeliler" were replaced with "burs başvurusu" and "mülteciler," respectively. These changes were made not to shift the pattern of results in a particular direction, but to improve the semantic clarity and topical validity of the queries. The changes were made before the main data collection, and neither the pilot queries nor the outputs obtained during the pilot stage were included in the main dataset. Autocomplete deviations observed after the main data collection began were not used as grounds for replacing queries.

3.2. Data Collection Procedure and Ethical Approach

The main data collection was conducted on 11 August 2026. To limit personalization effects as much as possible, a new TikTok account with no prior interaction history was created for the study. All queries were conducted using the same account, device, browser, Turkish-language interface, and Türkiye location settings; no interactions such as liking videos, commenting, sharing, or following accounts were performed during data collection. To reduce possible order effects arising from sequential searches of topic clusters, the order in which the 20 queries were entered was randomized before data collection. Although these measures were intended to limit personalization effects, the possibility of cumulative effects from sequential searches conducted through a single account cannot be assumed to have been fully eliminated.

For each query, the first five autocomplete suggestions displayed in the search box were recorded first, followed by the first ten standard video cards shown under TikTok's default "Top" tab after the search was submitted. This procedure yielded 100 autocomplete suggestions and 200 search-result observations in total.

Because a separate "related searches" module was not displayed consistently across all queries, it was excluded from the analysis. Likewise, separate platform modules such as "CANLI Yayın" (LIVE) and "Kullanıcılar" (Users), which appeared among the results, were not counted among the first ten standard video results; when such modules intervened, they were skipped and the sequence was completed using standard video cards.

When the same video appeared for different queries, each appearance was treated as a separate search-result observation. Similarly, repeated appearances of the same account within a single query were recorded separately and used to assess account concentration at the query level.

The study was conducted exclusively on TikTok search outputs openly displayed to the research account. There was no direct interaction with users, no interviews or surveys were conducted, and no experimental intervention involving platform users was undertaken.

Usernames were recorded solely to preserve data integrity and identify repeated appearances of the same account; in presenting the findings, care was taken not to make the identities of individual users unnecessarily visible.

3.3. Coding and Intercoder Reliability

Only information directly visible on the screen at the time of data collection was used in coding the search results. Usernames, video descriptions, on-screen text, and visible visual indicators were evaluated together; no assumptions were made about information not displayed on the screen.

Search results were coded across five variables: account type (individual user; expert/professional; media/news; public/institutional; commercial/brand/consulting; other/uncertain), content function (information/explanation; news/current developments; opinion/commentary; personal experience; entertainment/humor; promotion/service; other/uncertain), commercial orientation (present; absent; uncertain), visible source/citation/evidence (present; absent; uncertain), and semantic alignment with the query (directly related; partially related; unrelated; uncertain).

The "visible source/citation/evidence" variable does not measure the accuracy or scientific validity of the content. It indicates only whether the video card contains a named expert or speaker, an explicit source or institutional name, a document, an official results screen, a data table, or a similar visible form of support. Accordingly, a code of "absent" is not synonymous with inaccurate or unreliable content. Classification of an account as expert/professional was not, by itself, considered sufficient for coding visible source/citation/evidence as "present."

A conservative approach was adopted in classifying account type; where no clear professional, institutional, or commercial identity was visible, accounts were not assigned to these categories on the basis of inference. The 56 observations initially coded as "other/uncertain" were reviewed again using only the original screenshots captured during data collection. Thirty-six observations for which visual indicators provided sufficient support for an account-type classification were recoded, while 20 observations remained in the uncertain category. No additional data were subsequently collected by visiting account profiles.

Autocomplete suggestions were classified into eight functional categories according to how they extended the initial query: repetition/formal variant, definition/information, how-to/solution, current/forecast,

evaluation/normative, transaction/application/service, experience/platform culture, and other. In addition, the semantic relationship of each suggestion to the initial query was coded as directly related, partially related, unrelated/semantic drift, or uncertain.

All 200 search results were coded by the first coder. To assess intercoder reliability, a randomly selected sample of 40 observations (20%) was independently evaluated by a second coder. The second coder was not shown the first coder's decisions; instead, the coding categories and the original screenshots captured during data collection were provided. Three observations for which visual material was initially incomplete were independently reassessed by the second coder after the original screenshots were obtained, without reference to the prior codes, and the final reliability analysis for all 40 observations was therefore based on visual material.

Intercoder reliability was assessed for nominal variables using percentage agreement and Krippendorff's alpha (α) (Krippendorff, 2018). Because category distributions were markedly imbalanced for some variables, Gwet's AC1 was also calculated as a complementary measure that is more robust to prevalence effects (Gwet, 2008).

Table 2. Intercoder reliability results (n = 40)

Variable	Percentage agreement	**Krippendorff α**	**Gwet AC1**
Account type	77.5%	0.683	0.727
Content function	92.5%	0.894	0.913
Commercial orientation	85.0%	0.540	0.821
Visible source/citation/evidence	92.5%	0.368	0.915
Search result–query semantic alignment	87.5%	0.245	0.864

Source: Compiled from the study data.

For content function, both Krippendorff's alpha and Gwet's AC1 indicate a high level of agreement. The coefficients obtained for account type indicate a more limited but acceptable level of intercoder agreement compared with content function. For commercial orientation, visible source/citation/evidence, and search result–query semantic alignment, the lower alpha values despite high raw agreement were considered together with the marked imbalance in category prevalence. Gwet's AC1 was therefore not used in place of alpha, but was reported as a complementary reliability measure.

After independent coding and reliability calculations were completed, disagreements were reviewed and consensus codes were established for the final analytical dataset. Reliability coefficients were not recalculated after consensus coding. The functional and semantic classification of autocomplete suggestions was performed by the first coder and these variables were not included in the second-coder reliability sample.

3.4. Data Analysis

The study adopts a descriptive quantitative approach. This approach is based on presenting distributions in the observed platform outputs through frequencies and percentages and comparatively evaluating patterns across topic areas. Accordingly, frequencies and percentages were calculated for account type, content function, commercial orientation, visible source/citation/evidence, and semantic alignment, and the distributions were compared across the economy, health, education, and migration domains. In addition, the number of unique accounts among the first ten results for each query and repeated appearances of the same account were examined. These indicators were used to assess account diversity and account concentration at the query level.

For autocomplete suggestions, frequencies and percentages were calculated for the functional categories and for semantic alignment with the initial query, and distributions were compared across the four topic areas. Specific queries were used only as examples to illustrate the descriptive findings; no independent qualitative analysis was conducted. Because the queries were not selected through probability sampling and the observations consist of ranked outputs generated by the platform, inferential significance tests were not applied and no statistical generalization to all searches on TikTok was intended.

4. FINDINGS

For the 20 initial queries, the study examined the first ten standard video results under TikTok's "Top" tab and the first five autocomplete suggestions. The analysis therefore comprises 200 search-result observations and 100 autocomplete suggestions. The findings are presented in terms of the overall visibility structure, differences across topic areas, account concentration, and autocomplete suggestions.

4.1. Overall Visibility Structure of Search Results

The most common account type in the search results was individual users (n = 101; 50.5%). This was followed by media/news accounts (18.0%), expert/professional accounts (13.5%), and commercial/brand/consulting accounts (8.0%). Twenty observations (10.0%) were retained in the other/uncertain category because sufficient visible information was unavailable, and no account in the examined results was coded as public/institutional.

Table 3. Distribution of search results by account type

Account type	**n**	**%**
Individual user	101	50.5
Media/news	36	18.0
Expert/professional	27	13.5
Commercial/brand/consulting	16	8.0
Other/uncertain	20	10.0
Public/institutional	0	0.0
Total	200	100.0

Source: Compiled from the study data.

In terms of content function, information/explanation constituted the largest category (n = 73; 36.5%), while personal-experience content accounted for 26.0% of the results. Opinion/commentary and news/current-developments content accounted for 12.5% and 10.5%, respectively.

Table 4. Distribution of search results by content function

Content function	**n**	**%**
Information/explanation	73	36.5
Personal experience	52	26.0
Opinion/commentary	25	12.5
News/current developments	21	10.5
Entertainment/humor	17	8.5
Promotion/service	6	3.0
Other/uncertain	6	3.0
Total	200	100.0

Source: Compiled from the study data.

The semantic relationship between search results and the initial queries was generally strong. Overall, 95.5% of the results were coded as directly related. By contrast, visible source/citation/evidence was observed in only 17 results (8.5%), while explicit commercial orientation was identified in nine results (4.5%). The visible source/citation/evidence rate is an indicator of source or supporting elements directly visible on the video card, not of content accuracy.

4.2. Visibility Patterns by Topic Area and Query

Account types and content functions displayed different distributions across the economy, health, education, and migration domains. In terms of account type, expert/professional accounts were particularly prominent in health (50.0%), while individual users predominated in education (94.0%). In economy searches, individual users and media/news accounts had equal shares (36.0% each), whereas migration searches showed a more fragmented composition combining individual users (38.0%), media/news accounts (30.0%), and commercial/brand/consulting accounts (20.0%).

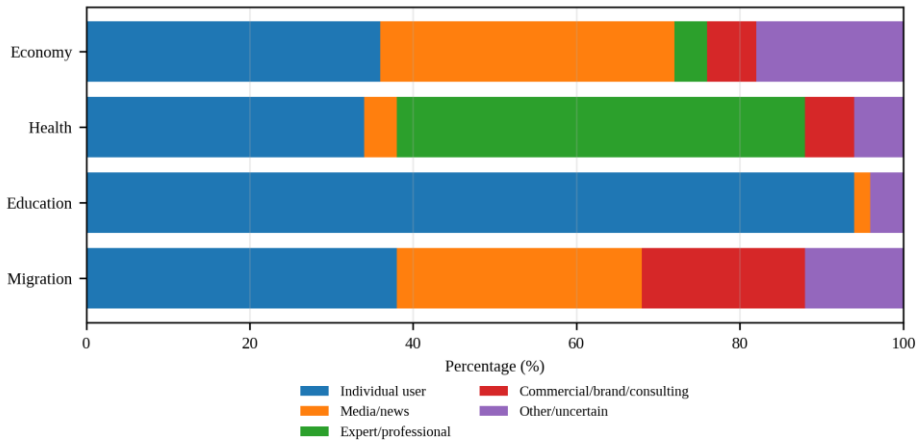

Figure 1. Distribution of visible account types by topic area (%)
***Note**: Each topic area includes n = 50 search results.*
Source: Compiled from the study data.

Content functions likewise varied across domains. Information/explanation accounted for 72.0% of health results, whereas 56.0% of education results consisted of personal-experience content. In economy searches, the largest category was opinion/commentary (30.0%); in migration searches, information/explanation (26.0%), personal experience (24.0%), and news/current developments (22.0%) appeared at relatively similar levels.

Table 5. Distribution of content function by topic area

Content function	Economy n (%)	Health n (%)	Education n (%)	Migration n (%)
Information/explanation	12 (24.0)	36 (72.0)	12 (24.0)	13 (26.0)
Personal experience	5 (10.0)	7 (14.0)	28 (56.0)	12 (24.0)
Opinion/commentary	15 (30.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (8.0)	6 (12.0)
News/current developments	9 (18.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (2.0)	11 (22.0)
Entertainment/humor	7 (14.0)	6 (12.0)	2 (4.0)	2 (4.0)
Promotion/service	0 (0.0)	1 (2.0)	0 (0.0)	5 (10.0)
Other/uncertain	2 (4.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (6.0)	1 (2.0)
Total	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)

Source: Compiled from the study data.

Commercial-account visibility in the migration domain was concentrated particularly in the query “ikamet izni.” All of the first ten results for this query came from commercial/brand/consulting accounts, and explicit commercial orientation was identified in eight results. Direct semantic alignment between search results and the initial queries was high across all topic areas. The rate was 100% in health, 98% in education, 94% in migration, and 90% in economy.

In addition to differences at the topic-area level, account diversity and concentration were examined at the query level. Account repetition did not form a pattern extending across all queries. In 14 of the 20 queries, all of the first ten results came from different accounts. The highest account concentration was observed for “burs başvurusu,” where the first ten results contained six unique accounts and the same account appeared five times. For “enflasyon” and “ikamet izni,” the first ten results contained seven unique accounts each. These findings indicate that account concentration is not a general feature, but rather a visibility pattern that becomes pronounced for particular queries.

4.3. Functional and Semantic Structure of Autocomplete Suggestions

The functional structure of the 100 autocomplete suggestions varied across topic areas. In the full sample, repetition/formal variant (n = 20), how-to/solution (n = 19), and definition/information (n = 15) were the most frequent categories. In health, how-to/solution suggestions accounted for 11 of 25 suggestions (44.0%), while in education the experience/platform-culture category was most prominent, with six suggestions (24.0%). In economy, repetition/formal variant, current/forecast, and transaction/application/service suggestions were comparatively prominent. In migration, eight suggestions (32.0%) fell into the “other” category. The relatively high share of this category indicates that migration-related suggestions fit the existing functional classification less readily.

Table 6. Distribution of autocomplete functions by topic area

Suggestion function	Economy	Health	Education	Migration	Total
Repetition/formal variant	6	5	5	4	20
Definition/information	3	7	3	2	15
How-to/solution	3	11	3	2	19
Current/forecast	5	0	4	3	12
Evaluation/normative	1	0	1	2	4
Transaction/application/service	5	0	3	1	9
Experience/platform culture	1	2	6	3	12
Other	1	0	0	8	9
Total	25	25	25	25	100

Source: Compiled from the study data.

Semantic alignment between autocomplete suggestions and the initial queries was high in economy, health, and education, but lower in migration.

Table 7. Semantic alignment of autocomplete suggestions with the initial query

Domain	Directly related	Partially related	Unrelated/semantic drift	Uncertain
Economy	24 (96%)	1 (4%)	0	0
Health	25 (100%)	0	0	0
Education	25 (100%)	0	0	0
Migration	16 (64%)	3 (12%)	4 (16%)	2 (8%)
Total	90 (90%)	4 (4%)	4 (4%)	2 (2%)

Source: Compiled from the study data.

All suggestions in the health and education domains were coded as directly related to the initial query, while the corresponding rate was 96% in economy. In migration, direct alignment fell to 64%. The fact that direct semantic alignment in search results for the same domain was 94% indicates that completed search results and autocomplete suggestions can produce different visibility patterns.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings show that the actor and content types made visible in TikTok search vary across topic areas and that autocomplete suggestions constitute a distinct observable platform output from search results. These patterns do not explain the algorithm's internal decision rules or its effects on user behavior; rather, they reveal the visibility structure presented to users under specified standardized query conditions.

The differing actor and content compositions observed across economy, health, education, and migration indicate that TikTok search does not produce a uniform visibility structure. This result is consistent with discussions of the role of algorithmic relevance in organizing information visibility (Gillespie, 2014). At the same time, the current design does not show that these differences are attributable to platform ranking alone. The observed visibility patterns should instead be understood as outputs jointly produced by the supply of content within each domain, the characteristics of the initial queries, and the platform's selection and ranking mechanisms.

The education findings provide a clear example of topic-dependent variation. The fact that 94% of education results came from individual users and 56% consisted of personal-experience content indicates that individual and experience-based content achieved strong visibility in education-related searches under the conditions examined. This finding, however, cannot be interpreted as evidence that TikTok consciously assigns greater value to individual experience.

Health searches displayed a different visibility composition. Half of the results came from expert/professional accounts and 72% consisted of information/explanation content, indicating greater visibility for professional identity and explanatory content in health-related queries. Users are known to draw on various platform-internal cues when evaluating information on TikTok (Diep & Tran, 2025). However, because the present study did not measure user evaluations, it cannot conclude that expert/professional identity is perceived as more credible by users. The findings show only that this identity achieved substantial visibility in health searches.

The health results also show why professional-account visibility should be distinguished from visible sourcing. Although expert/professional accounts represented 50% of the results and information/explanation content 72%, visible source/citation/evidence was coded in only one result (2%). Across the full sample, such visible supporting elements appeared in only 8.5% of results. This finding does not imply that the content was inaccurate, unscientific, or unreliable; it indicates only that sources, documents, data, institutional names, or similar forms of support directly visible on video cards were limited. The literature emphasizing the need to consider platform design together with users' information-

evaluation practices when assessing TikTok as an information environment likewise underscores the importance of this distinction (O'Brien et al., 2025).

It is also noteworthy that none of the 200 search results examined was coded as public/institutional. This finding does not show that public institutions are absent from TikTok or that the platform systematically demotes them; it shows only that they were not visible among the first ten "Top" results for the 20 queries examined. Particularly for queries related to health, education, and official procedures, this absence suggests that the visibility of institutional actors in TikTok search warrants further examination through broader and comparative research.

Search results did not exhibit general concentration in terms of account diversity. The fact that all of the first ten results came from different accounts for 14 of the 20 queries does not support the conclusion that a small number of accounts held a systematic visibility advantage across all queries under the conditions examined. At the same time, increased repetition for particular queries such as "burs başvurusu," "enflasyon," and "ikamet izni" shows that concentration can vary by query. In particular, the fact that all of the first ten results for "ikamet izni" came from commercial/brand/consulting accounts indicates query-specific concentration not only in the number of accounts but also in the type of visible actor.

These results can be related to studies examining algorithmic curation through visibility and concentration (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020). However, because the present study does not include an alternative ranking system or a comparative universe of available content, no causal inference can be made that the observed account concentration resulted from algorithmic ranking. The more limited conclusion supported by the study is that account diversity and actor composition can vary measurably across different queries.

The autocomplete findings show that mediation in TikTok search is not limited to completed search results. The functional structure of suggestions varied across topic areas: how-to/solution-oriented options were more visible in health, experience/platform-culture options in education, and current/forecast and transaction-oriented options in economy. These findings show that different types of possible information needs can be presented to users as visible options alongside the initial query.

The migration domain makes the distinction between search results and autocomplete suggestions particularly clear. While 94% of migration search results were directly related to the initial query, direct semantic alignment fell to 64% among autocomplete suggestions. Thus, under the same initial queries, completed search results remained largely tied to the topic, whereas the possible queries presented to users opened onto a broader semantic field. This result, however, does not show that users selected these suggestions or that the suggestions altered search behavior.

The presentation of pre-formulated search options to users within the TikTok interface has also been treated in previous research as a distinct form of platform mediation and a separate object of study (Annabell et al., 2025; Entrena-Serrano, 2025). The autocomplete feature examined here is not technically identical to those mechanisms; nevertheless, it points to a similar analytical problem insofar as possible queries are made visible to users.

At this point, the function of algorithmic editoriality in the study can be defined more narrowly. The concept does not claim that TikTok is an editor in the conventional sense or that two separate editorial systems exist. Rather, it enables two observable outputs of platform mediation in the search environment to be evaluated within the same analytical framework: which actors and content become visible in response to completed queries, and which possible searches are presented as visible options while a query is being formulated. The study's analytical contribution is limited to demonstrating that these two types of output can be examined together.

6. CONCLUSION

Taken together, the findings indicate that TikTok search does not exhibit a single, uniform structure of actor, content, or query visibility; rather, visibility patterns can vary across topic areas and particular queries. The differing actor and content compositions observed in health and education, the account concentration found for specific queries, and the semantic divergence between search results and autocomplete suggestions in migration show that platform mediation cannot be understood through a single output alone. Within this framework, the study offers a descriptive platform audit that examines the observable outputs of TikTok search together without making inferences about user behavior or the algorithm's internal intent.

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, data were collected on 11 August 2026 in Türkiye, using a Turkish-language interface, a single research account, and the same device and browser environment. The results therefore do not represent outputs the platform might produce at different times, in other countries or languages, or for different user profiles. Although avoiding interactions and randomizing query order were intended to limit possible personalization effects, cumulative effects from sequential searches conducted through the same account cannot be fully ruled out. Because the same queries were not repeated, the short-term stability of search results and autocomplete suggestions could not be assessed.

Second, the study is limited to 20 initial queries not selected from a probability-based universe, the first ten "Top" video results for each query, and the first five autocomplete suggestions. Separate platform modules such as "CANLI Yayın" (LIVE), "Kullanıcılar" (Users), and similar features were excluded from the analysis. The findings therefore cannot be statistically generalized to all searches on TikTok or to all content available on the platform.

Third, the study does not have access to the platform's technical ranking models or the internal decision rules of the autocomplete system. It therefore cannot make causal inferences about why particular actors or content became visible. Likewise, coding was based only on information directly visible at the time of data collection; the accuracy, scientific quality, misinformation status, and ideological orientation of the content were not assessed. The presence of visible source/citation/evidence does not guarantee content accuracy, just as the absence of such an element does not mean that the content is inaccurate. The study also does not measure whether users select autocomplete suggestions or how those suggestions affect actual search behavior.

Finally, although independent second-coder reliability was assessed for a randomly selected 20% subsample of the search-result coding, the functional and semantic classification of autocomplete suggestions was conducted by a single coder. Findings concerning query suggestions should therefore be interpreted with this methodological limitation in mind.

Future research could repeat the same queries across different accounts, user profiles, countries, languages, and time points to compare the stability of search outputs. Combining platform audits with user experiments or observational behavioral data could also make it possible to assess how query options made visible by the platform relate to users' actual information-search behavior.

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