

DISSERTATION FIELDWORK GRANT APPLICATION

MAY 2018

(Do not change the default format. Please limit your responses to the space provided.)

<p>1. Name of Applicant (Please give full legal name: first, middle, and SURNAME in uppercase letters): Nikki Williams Preferred Mailing Address of Applicant:</p> <p>E-mail: nikki.williams@plu.edu Telephone: Fax: N/A</p>	<p>2. Name of Supervisor, Department, & Institution: Professor Katherine Wiley Mailing Address of Supervisor:</p> <p>E-mail: wileyka@plu.edu Telephone: 253-535-7598 Fax: 253-535-8305</p>
<p>3. Applicant's Personal Information Gender: Female Date & Place of Birth: <u>12/18/1990</u> Citizenship: <u>United States</u></p>	
<p>4. Applicant's Education History Highest Academic Degree: Bachelors Year Degree Awarded: <u>2020</u> Institution Awarding Degree: <u>Pacific Lutheran University</u></p>	
<p>5. Applicant's Current Doctoral Status Are you registered for a doctoral degree? No Date you expect to receive degree: _____ Department and Institution that will award the degree: _____ What requirements for the degree (other than the dissertation/thesis) have yet to be completed, and what is their expected date of their completion?</p>	
<p>6. Title of Project (15 words or less): The New Imaginary Best Friend: Building Communities and Support Systems Through TikTok</p>	<p>7. Total requested for Dissertation Fieldwork Grant (maximum \$20,000): US\$ <u>20,000</u></p>
<p>8. Abstract of research proposal (Provide a general description of your proposal in plain English. If this proposal is successful, this abstract will be posted on the Foundation's website.) TikTok is an ever growing network and this social media platform needs to be investigated and understood to determine the kind of impact it has on its users. My project will examine how communities are formed through this platform to create a detailed understanding of how TikTok creates imagined communities and provides an alternative form of communication and connection. This research will address the impacts of Covid-19 and how online communities have been a form of support in this time. I will execute methods primarily focused on online interviews, comment and media analysis, focus groups, and surveys/questionnaires. This project aims to add to the discussion of Arjun Appadurai's theory on the social lives of things by investigating how videos are exchanged and acquire value by its viewers. It will also add to Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities by investigating how users find themselves connected to other users without ever meeting face to face.</p>	
<p>9. Start and end dates of project for which support is requested (start date must fall between January 1 and June 30, 2019): June 2020-March 2021</p>	<p>10. Location where project is to be carried out: Research Location: Social Media Sites (TikTok and Discourse) Physical Location: Steilacoom, WA</p>

11. List research permits and/or ethical approvals required for this project.

Pacific Lutheran University's Human Participants Review Board

12. What date do you expect to have all required permits/permissions in hand?

31 May 2020

13. Will you work with academic personnel (other than your supervisor) while conducting research? (Select)

(If so, please list below. See the Application Information and Procedures for instructions.)

University of Washington Sociocultural Staff: Sara Jo Breslow

14. Budget itemization: Provide a detailed budget for the requested funding (maximum \$20,000).

(See the Application Information and Instructions for budget guidelines, and include a justification for any piece of equipment that costs over \$750, childcare expenses, research and/or transcription assistance, and per diem estimates. Please also include a justification for any budget items not specifically listed as allowable expenses. Press Ctrl key + Tab to utilize pre-set tabs in application form)

Living Expenses

Per diem in Steilacoom, WA (\$65/per day x 9 months)**1	\$17, 550.00
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Supplies

Computer (Acer Chromebook)	\$291.00
Office 265 for Skype (\$8.25/month x 9 months)	\$74.25
Notebooks (pack of 6)	\$19.99
Pack of Pens	\$6.18
Voice Recorder**2	\$39.99

Other Costs

Health Insurance (\$165/month x 9 months)	\$1,485.00
Internet (\$29.99/month x 9 months)	\$269.91
Gifts for Interviewees Giving Their Time	\$250.00

Total	\$19,986.32
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1. Per Diem for Steilacoom, Washington is around \$195/day. I am requesting less at \$65/day

2. I will use a voice recorder when conducting interviews.

14. Budget Itemization continued. *(Use this page to list additional items to your project budget, if necessary.)*

15. Have you applied to other agencies for funds covered in this application? Yes (If so, please list other funding sources you have contacted to aid this project and indicate whether funds have been awarded.)

National Science Foundation: Cultural Anthropology Program- Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grants (CA-DDRIG).

16. Sources of aid received for other phases of the project:

17. Please help categorize your project by Discipline and Area or Topic:

Application Discipline	Geographic Research Area	Physical/Biological Projects Only
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Social/Cultural	Other	(Select)
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If "Other,"	If "Other," please describe	If "Other," please describe
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_____	Internet _____	_____
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Not Applicable

Not Applicable

18. Key Words (Please provide "key words" and/or phrases that best describe your research project.)

Community Formation, Social Media, TikTok, Online Communities, Imagined Communities, Social Life, Online Communication, Online Interactions

19. Have you received a Wadsworth Fellowship? No

(If so, Reporting Requirements for the Wadsworth Fellowship must be completed. Contact the Foundation for further information.)

20. Are you resubmitting an application that was unsuccessful in a prior season? No

If the current application is a resubmission of a previous unsuccessful Dissertation Fieldwork grant application, you must include a resubmission statement. This statement should describe how your application differs from your previous submission and how you have addressed reviewers' comments. Include this resubmission statement whether or not the current project is similar to your previous one. A resubmission statement is often a benefit to an applicant in demonstrating how and why his/her thinking has changed. (*Press Ctrl + Tab to use tabs.*)

21. Project Description Question 1: Describe your research question/hypothesis or research objective. That is, what will the focus of your investigation be? (*Press Ctrl + Tab to use tabs.*)

My research will examine how communities are formed through the social media network, TikTok. This will allow me to create a detailed understanding of how this platform creates imagined communities and provides alternative forms of communication and connection. The impacts of Covid-19 have been felt worldwide and I will address how the coronavirus has increased the use of online communities and how these communities provide a support system for its members. This project will investigate the following questions: Q1) How does studying communities on TikTok help us to better understand online behavior and discourse? Q2) How are users on TikTok participating, engaging, and interacting with other users to form online communities? Q3) How do online communities provide support for their members to help with issues like the coronavirus and other instances where a member might not have support elsewhere?

TikTok is a video-sharing social media network service founded in Beijing with over 500 million active monthly users. 90% of users access TikTok at least once a day with the average being around 4-5 times per day. This site is accessible nearly everywhere and is a ticket into our increasingly globalized world. Users are able to connect with other users from around the globe without ever going anywhere. The web revolution provides new pathways to empowerment and this revolution is changing how knowledge is created and controlled (Carlile 2011). TikTok is a site for short-form (up to a minute long) videos and it provides individuals with a unique platform to express themselves and reach an audience. These videos will draw you in through catchy songs or quick and clever dialogue that would only be understood by another TikTok user. Collaborating on videos is a popular trend and users “duet” and also recreate other user’s videos, continuing the conversation and feeding into an endless chain of reactions. You can fall down a rabbit hole looking for video content categories because there is something for pretty much everyone. Users regularly share their cultural practices, beliefs, customs, dress, food, and more. Content creators are trying to provide comedic relief in videos as a way to cope with the world around us. With families stuck at home, there have been more family collaborated videos such as themed family dinners, learning virtual dances, and what it is like living with an essential personnel member in their household. Users are providing a sense of community by showing that we are all in this together and are doing their best to connect with those stuck at home during this time in abusive situations and with unaccepting families.

Online communities are built around collective wants and needs and can often be adapted to the individual. On TikTok for example, your feed, called the “for you” page, is supplied with videos based on what you initially claimed as topics and themes important to you. This feed is gradually tweaked and adapted more to what you value most. An algorithm is in play, connecting you to videos based off of pages you follow and videos you like and share to other users - meaning that the opportunity for genuine personalization is immense. This algorithm essentially links you to certain groups and communities for you to follow and engage with. The internet connects us to individuals all over the world. Community building with online strangers, near and far, opens the possibility of bonds stronger than with people we meet in the outside world. In the offline world, we are less likely to talk to strangers, let alone form bonds with those we don’t know personally. This however has not been the case for online settings. In online communities, members meet and establish relationships with strangers and push the boundaries of how we look at social relationships. Strangers on TikTok are forming communities, meeting outside of the app, and there is a group of users now living together in California. TikTok also hosts annual conventions where users can meet up with other users and popular content creators.

TikTok is a newer social media site and most research previously conducted doesn’t include this platform and since Covid-19 is a current situation, there has not been the opportunity for this type of research thus far. Scholars have claimed that by understanding dialogue and communication online, one can then in turn better understand communication as a whole. This type of research is important for future generations to know how we communicated and how we coped with this pandemic. We are communicating primarily through technology and leaving digital artifacts, but for future generations to truly know what these artifacts mean, we need to leave them research that provides the answers. Social media is a continually evolving field and the research needs to stay as current as the area of study. By studying social media use and online engagement to better understand what community looks like on TikTok, and how this shapes how we communicate and build relationships, this project will add to the literature on social lives and how we successfully navigate social environments

The methods I will execute will primarily be focused on network analysis, surveys/questionnaires, online interviews, focus groups, photography, and comment analysis. These methods would allow for me to gain a deeper understanding of community building in the TikTok population. There will be ethical implications and responsibilities of conducting my research primarily online, which includes being aware of privacy and difficulties obtaining informed consent and copyright laws.

By expanding upon Arjun Appadurai’s theory of the social lives of things (Appadurai 1986), I would be exploring how TikTok has social lives and how content creators and viewers produce, consume, and exchange videos which take on different meanings and values. I would examine the movement of videos through time and space to better understand the lives of TikTok users and the communities they are invested in. This project will assist in answering how a user’s consumption, production, and/or exchange of videos helps to build a community. In online communities where people are given the choice to decide who is a part of their surroundings, common interests bring them together. By using Benedict Anderson’s theory of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983), my project aims to understand how TikTok builds and shapes communities. By understanding what community looks like online, this project will add to the literature on social lives and how we successfully navigate social environments, forming imagined communities.

22. Project Description Question 2: How does your research build on existing scholarship in anthropology and closely related disciplines? Give specific examples of this scholarship and its findings. (*Press Ctrl + Tab to use tabs.*)

Online community can be defined in many ways, but loosely it is defined as a group of people who interact with each other over the internet. The group of people will have shared values and a common interest that brings them together (Huntley 2016). With the emergence of social media sites, interactions in online communities have become a primary form of communication for many. The formation of online communities can be seen based on how members interact and engage with other members of their groups and communities. Online communities are persistent collections of people with common or complementary interests whose primary method of communication is the internet (Preece 2000). It can be said that online spaces are about social relationships, and it is important to consider a sense of place if people are to create meanings within them. Users establish an understanding of online space and form bonds with other community members even when there is no face to face contact (Jones & Ortlieb 2006). These communities provide a wide array of characteristics and serve different purposes for each individual and what they value (Wilson & Peterson 2002; 449).

There has been a lack of anthropological research done on online communities and the internet in general. It has been argued that anthropologists have viewed media as peripheral to culture rather than a central part of it (Wilson & Peterson 2002; 450). The studies that have been conducted on online communities and community engagement have primarily focused on the discourse and actions of individuals in online settings and how these settings involve an open communication and learning environment for members. Gazi Islam researched communication and stated, "as an examination of a form of discourse, this study can also improve our understanding of communication in general by providing novel ways of conceptualizing agents of discourse, discourse audiences, and environmental constraining factors" (Gazi 2017). By turning to online settings, individuals have increased their target audiences and are no longer constrained by their local surroundings. This opens up more chances for interactions and allows you to connect to virtually anyone. By researching this type of communication it could provide an alternative way of understanding how we currently communicate to show the complex patterns of relationships with others. Online dialogue opens up an audience of more thinkers and speakers than a traditional dialogue in offline settings (Liz Carlile 2011). This exploration of social media use and engagement constructed online can be used to investigate the dialogue between users in communities on TikTok. I will want to understand how users are interacting in their communities through discussions in comment sections, private messages, and any other way users communicate together. The duet style videos will allow me to research communication through videos users create by seeing what they added to the conversation. By understanding the dialogue constructed online, one can better understand communication through a different lens.

In online communities it is very unlikely that you will meet other members face to face and interactions typically occur through the digital realm. McDonald's study on a rural Chinese town documented interactions of strangers on social media and provided evidence that online stranger relations happening therein rework the existing boundaries between friends and strangers (McDonald 2019). It was suggested that online settings can provide community members with the chance to form bonds deeper than in offline settings. This study can be expanded upon by connecting it to TikTok and exploring the way connections are made through this online space. Previous research conducted on online communities suggests that member participation and retention depends on member attachment, which is cultivated by connecting members with topics of their interest and like-minded others (Preece 2000). On TikTok, community members use the algorithm provided and hashtags in order to find communities that best suit their interests. This opens up the possibility for attachment in specific communities with like-minded individuals and research can be done to understand the level of engagement in these groups as well as what attracted the individual to the group.

In times of crises, we reach out to the members of our communities to receive a support system needed to survive. In times like our current climate and dealing with the coronavirus, we have to find alternate ways of dealing with the unknown. With most of the world isolated at home to reduce the exchange of this virus, we are reliant on forms of community engagement and interaction. Many individuals have to live in households that are detrimental to their mental health due to not having a support system in their homes. They could be dealing with multitudes of hardships and not have anyone nearby to turn to. Online communities provide members with support and acceptance. Dealing with this virus is not the first account of individuals turning to online communities and social networks for support and connection. Social media networks can provide a powerful space for documenting and challenging the negative dynamics of the world around us (Akhavan 2013; Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Mustafa Ali 2019). By applying this to my overarching research of understanding community building and interactions between members online, it will assist in deriving how community members formulate discussions and share in experiences on TikTok.

23. Project Description Question 3: What evidence will you need to collect to answer your research question? How will you go about collecting and analyzing this evidence? (*Press Ctrl + Tab to use tabs.*)

My research will be primarily conducted online through the social media platform, TikTok. This project will address the exchanges and connections between TikTok users through the lens of community interaction to examine how they are connected to their group(s). My research will answer the following questions: (Q1) How does studying communities on TikTok help us to better understand online behavior and discourse?; (Q2) How are users on TikTok participating, engaging, and interacting with other users to form online communities?; (Q3) How do online communities provide support for their members to help with issues like the coronavirus and other pandemics the world faces? In order to answer these questions, I will apply the following methods: network analysis, surveys/questionnaires, online interviews, focus groups, life history analysis, photography, and comment analysis.

The research will take place between June 2020 and March 2021. I will be able to jump right into my research after completing my undergraduate degree. This will be useful for my project since Covid19 is still occurring globally and full of uncertainties. Starting my research while this is still occurring, I will be able to see its effects within online communities as it is happening in real time. Since most of my research will be conducted online, my home of residence will be my physical location for the rest of this project. Access to the internet will allow me to communicate with TikTok users, through the app and through a secondary communication app users often are on to have more discussion, called Discourse. With this research being conducted through the internet, I have made myself aware of the ethical responsibilities that comes with it, such as being aware of privacy, copyright laws, and the difficulties that come with obtaining informed consent (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 450).

The beginning of my research will start off with a full TikTok network analysis which examines relationships between others to depict the social structures that come from these interactions (Chiesi 2001). I will want to map out this platform in order to visualize communities on TikTok. By examining who members are following and engaging with and the reasons behind it, I could get a better understanding of community formation and discourse. I would want to do this to understand how they change over time and space in order to answer my research question number one.

The next step in my research will be to conduct surveys and questionnaires in order to better narrow down and determine which TikTok users I will be interviewing. The aim of these surveys is to figure out the key users that are representing multiple facets of communities (humor, education, LBGTQ+, deaf, dancing, multicultural, etc). I will also try to identify key community members by finding out the users that are communicating the most in these communities and keeping the discussion rolling with other members and this will assist in answering my second research question. With surveys/questionnaires I will be able to collect a lot of information about a large number of people which is useful for my project since there are millions of users on TikTok from all around the world. I will use the information to understand the range of ways users are active in communities and to see what users find most/least important in community engagement. I will also have additional surveys/questionnaires to identify how TikTok and online communities played a role in users' lives during the Covid-19 pandemic which will effectively answer my third research question.

The next phase of my research would be to conduct various types of interviews. I want to understand first what makes someone join a community, what draws them in and ignites the flame to start this new connection. I also then want to understand the flip side of that and will want to ask what makes someone leave a community. I will want to ask questions about particular users they follow and engage with as well as ways that online communities have played a role in their lives. It would be important to know how they used TikTok to stay supported during the coronavirus pandemic. I will be interviewing both content creators and users that don't create content, but participate in their community(s). I want to identify and understand how users play a role in their community and to understand individual levels in community building and engagement.

Along with online interviews, I will also conduct online focus groups. I will set up Zoom meetings with TikTok users identified from my first step in this research project. I will want to get a better picture of how each group of peoples play a role in community building. I will use the data to better understand what each group values and brings to the table within their community. The data will also help me understand why they do what they do to have a better understanding of online behavior. From both interviews and focus groups, I can tailor some of my questions to gather TikTok's life histories to understand the experience over time in these communities, from their beginnings until present day.

To research and understand communication within online communities, I will employ comment analysis. To do this, I will also utilize the method of photography to screen shot images of the comment section on TikTok and discussions on Discourse. By exploring communication in online communities, I can better understand community engagement.

24. Project Description Question 4: What is your training; how are you prepared to do this research? List examples of your language competence, technical skills, previous research, and any other relevant experience. Describe any work you have already done on this project, and/or how it relates to your prior research. If you are collaborating with other academic personnel describe their role/s in the project and the nature of the collaboration. (Press Ctrl + Tab to use tabs.)

Upon starting this research project, I will have completed an undergraduate degree in anthropology at Pacific Lutheran University. My undergraduated coursework provided me with an in-depth understanding of sociocultural anthropology which provides an integral backdrop for my research with TikTok communities.

My studies in anthropology coursework included classes on methods and theory which provided the understanding to effectively conduct anthropological analyses useful for understanding human behavior. The coursework I have taken has introduced me to many concepts and perspectives that will play a role in helping me succeed in the completion of my research project. I have experience conducting structured one on one interviews as well as experience producing surveys in order to gather qualitative and quantitative anthropological data from multiple courses at PLU requiring these assignments. I have experience in conducting oral history from my interviews on consumption patterns which will aid me in completing the interviews, surveys, and focus group methods for this project. My training in preparing a research plan, articulating a research worthy anthropology project, and practicing various anthropological methods will directly contribute to my ability to add to topics of community building, social media, and discourse. All of my classes combined allowed for a diverse and all encompassing view of the world around me.

Since TikTok uses vernacular and language which can be unknown to those outside of the site, my experience and time already spent using TikTok will allow me to jump right into my research. I will not need a learning curve and I am already established in some communities on this platform. My "insider" status will be an asset to completing this research and my critical anthropological lens will place me in a liminal position to provide a rich source of ethnographic material.

Prior to attending Pacific Lutheran University, I was an active duty soldier in the Army before being medically retired and discharged. I have years of experience in collecting data and interpreting results and analysis. I can communicate clearly and have experience conducting briefings and conveying information to my leaders. I have experience working in online settings and can work well under pressure as well as the ability to take instruction very well. My military experience will allow me to stay organized and on top on my research and deadlines. I will be able to effectively communicate with my research team and stay organized while I complete my research.

25. Project Description Question 5: What contribution does your project make to anthropological theory and to the discipline? Please note that the Foundation's mission is to support original and innovative research in anthropology. A successful application will emphasize the contribution its proposed research will make, not only to the specific area of research being addressed, but also to the broader field of anthropology. (*Press Ctrl + Tab to use tabs.*)

My project will contribute to the anthropological fields of online communities and social media. By seeking to understand development and practices of these online communities, my project will address the ways in which TikTok users are participating and socializing in online realms. This will allow me to continue this narrative to address how online communities play a role in the lives of the members which are connected to and a part of them. This will also assist me in understanding how and why individuals find meaning in their use of online communities and social media.

In building upon the work of Benedict Anderson, I will be researching how communities are formed on TikTok in order to discover how interactions between users play into how an imagined community is formed (Anderson 1983). By understanding what community looks like online, I can understand and add to the discussion of how we navigate in social environments. For community presence to be found on this platform, there must be a sense of belonging and connection to other members in the group (Anderson 1983). TikTok has socially constructed communities which are imagined by the people who perceive themselves as a part of their groups. Members of a community may never know other members of the community, but having similar interests and identifying as a part of a community brings users closer and in their minds, they are connected to their fellow community members. My project will add a different approach to understanding online connectiveness among users by understanding interactions with people they might not have ever known without an online community.

I will also utilize the approach of Arjun Appadurai to explore how TikTok has social lives by examining how users produce, exchange, and consume content and communicate through within their communities. Examining how content is valued and exchanged on TikTok will add to the discussion of how online communities and their members function within the whole of a society (Appadurai 1986). TikTok videos have social lives just like the users that create and exchange them. By producing and exchanging videos, users give these virtual objects a social life and their values are socially created based on the context and social perceptions of demand for these objects (Appadurai 1986). Continuing the exchange of these videos gives them value between users. TikTok provides a new way for people to exchange their own interpretation and meaning to videos. A video can be interpreted very differently from person to person depending on their background and personal values. I would examine the movement of videos through time and space to better understand the lives of TikTok users and the communities they are invested in. This project will assist in answering how a user's consumption, production, and/or exchange of videos helps to build a community.

Nikki Williams

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Nikki Williams
CURRICULUM VITAE
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Education

2020 Bachelor of Arts Degree, Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma,
Washington

Major: Anthropology

Dean's List

2012 A.A. Degree, Chipola College, Marianna, Florida

2009 Ponce de Leon High School, Ponce de Leon, Florida
High Honors

Army Experience

Geospatial Intelligence Imagery Analyst

Geospatial Mapping (ArcGIS- manipulation of vector, raster, and coordinate data)

Military Awards

Honor Graduate, 2013

Army Achievement Medal, 2015

Army Good Conduct Medal, 2016

Army Commendation Medal, 2016

Relevant Coursework

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology

Anthropology of Africa

Anthropology of East Asian Cultures

Anthropology Capstone Seminar