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Social Implications of Adolescents Engaging with Racist Trends on TikTok

Helen Liu

York University, Faculty of Education, Toronto, Canada
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5999-1967

Abstract

This article examines a racist TikTok trend titled "How's My Form" in order to understand the possible motivations behind adolescent users and their engagement with the social networking platform, TikTok. Guided by uses and gratifications theory, the social implications of adolescent engagement with such trends are explored alongside notions of accountability. In doing so, the efficacy of current media literacy education is questioned in order to determine whether standards are keeping pace with technologically driven social changes. The role progressions of recent adolescent generations from passive consumers to active producers on social media will also be considered.

Keywords: social media; TikTok; adolescents; media literacy; racist trends
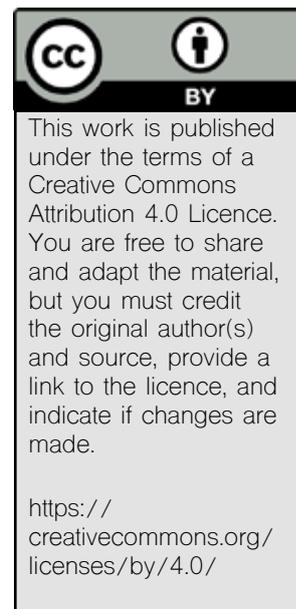
Introduction

The prevalence and widespread engagement of social networking sites has given rise to new and heavily relied upon modes of socialization and communication. Over the past decade, increased opportunities for individuals to experience social engagement at any time or location have promoted the convergence of social platforms and entertainment centers. Rather than engagement focused on simple "social" activities and tools for communication alone, social media users are now involved in more purposeful activities, with particular focus on content creation beyond passive consumption (GlobalWebIndex, 2019). With the emergence of new social media applications being generated at increasing rates and many applications adopting a more transient and image-centered objective, including platforms such as SnapChat or

Instagram, it is no wonder that engagement with social media is at an all-time high. Digital consumers are now spending an average of two hours per day on social networks and messaging applications on a global scale, with contemporary young people being more connected than any other generation (GlobalWebIndex, 2020). Approximately 93% of individuals aged 15 to 30 are engaging with some form of social networking site (Statistics Canada, 2019). This fast-paced and ephemeral engagement that is becoming increasingly gripping has given rise to studies of mobile video prototypes that ultimately suggest that forms of entertainment viewed on mobile devices should be short in order to sustain the attention of viewers. This discovery has led to the development of TikTok, known as *Douyin* in China, established in 2016 by a Beijing-based company Bytedance (Omar & DeQuan, 2020).

TikTok is a social networking application that allows users to generate and share videos that span up to 15 seconds, equipping users with a variety of filters they can apply to their videos, background music, and lip-syncing templates to produce for a public community of viewers in this online space (Omar & Dequan, 2020). TikTok has escalated in popularity over the past two years, becoming one of the most downloaded applications in the 2010s. The application has also successfully entered the North American market and currently holds a position as one of the world's most-used social platforms (Iqbal, 2020). TikTok has reached 500 million users across the globe, with an estimated 46 million TikTok downloads from the United States in 2019 (Iqbal, 2020). One of the defining characteristics of TikTok is that it encourages individuals to share user-generated content through a multimedia form of communication that affords users the opportunity to engage further with the content they create and audiences they reach, in addition to establishing their own networks. As a result of the increasing opportunities for individuals to become self-publishing users, conventional barriers between consumers and producers have become distorted. Creating and sharing user-generated content is the foundation of TikTok, where content is being created and recreated by a multitude of users instead of being controlled and limited by a specific number of media producers (Omar & Dequan, 2020).

These videos that users create have contributed to the phenomenon of viral videos, which are videos that gain immense traction online and are viewed and shared by thousands of individuals (Broxton et al., 2013). The viral videos of TikTok have attracted millions of views from both users and non-users through the shared content on various social media platforms, therefore promoting further appeal and engagement from individuals (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Many of these viral videos result in other users duplicating or reimagining similar content based on the original video, leading to the growth and perpetuation of extremely popular trends that are intriguing and exciting, often benefitting from further boons through the 'Trending' tab within the TikTok application itself.

Trending videos are often fun and creative, allowing users to be introduced to new music, dance compositions, and tutorials on various activities such as origami, food recipes, and everyday life tips (Wang et al., 2019). However, despite the positive videos that are popular among TikTok, there is also an increasing amount of problematic content that continues to be shared daily on the platform, with many adolescent users engaging with, consuming, and creating their own harmful content for viewers (Magsino, 2020). As TikTok is a relatively new social media platform, the potential issues associated with TikTok and adolescent development have not yet been thoroughly scrutinised. Much of the literature investigating the platform TikTok often involves an analysis of users' motivations, and the creative practices users engage in, rather than examining the problematic trends many adolescents are involved in (Omar & Dequan, 2020; Wang et al., 2019; Ye et al., 2019). What are the motivations behind adolescents' use of TikTok? What are the social implications for adolescents engaging with racist trends on TikTok, for example? Are the standards of current media education sufficient for adolescents living in an era where many are leading social media producers?

Guided by the uses and gratification theory (UGT) as the theoretical framework, this paper attempts to answer these questions through an examination of a specific TikTok trend titled "How's My Form" in order to understand the motivations behind adolescent users and their engagement with TikTok. The research starts with a detailed description of the "How's My Form" TikTok trend, along with an examination of an apology statement issued from an adolescent user who participated in this specific racist trend. This examination will lead into a discourse on the possible motivations behind social media use, and a discussion on the social implications of adolescent engagement with such trends by analyzing past literature. In doing so, the article will explore notions of accountability and question whether current media literacy education is falling behind in relation to the rapid changes experienced by the current generation of adolescents, who are no longer limited to the role of passive consumers but are active producers on social media.

The "How's My Form" Trend

The "How's My Form" trend refers to a series of TikToks that emerged and garnered popularity in April of 2020. This particular trend begins with the TikTok user attempting to appeal to and entice a certain demographic to view the video with a stereotypical comment. After a few seconds where the TikTok user acknowledges that the targeted demographic is now present, the video proceeds to display an image of themselves performing a stereotypical action relating to that demographic and asking, "How's my form?" to the audience. The image is presented as a deep-fried image, which is an over-saturated image that

appears to have been compressed and re-uploaded numerous times for comedic effect, as though to imply that the belief is widely shared already (Matsakis, 2017). The last part of the video also typically plays the song "Yoga" by American rapper 645AR as background music. What began as TikTok's gearing towards relationships, innocuously targeting certain YouTubers or influencers with non-harmful content, soon began to pivot towards a viral trend fueled by racist content.
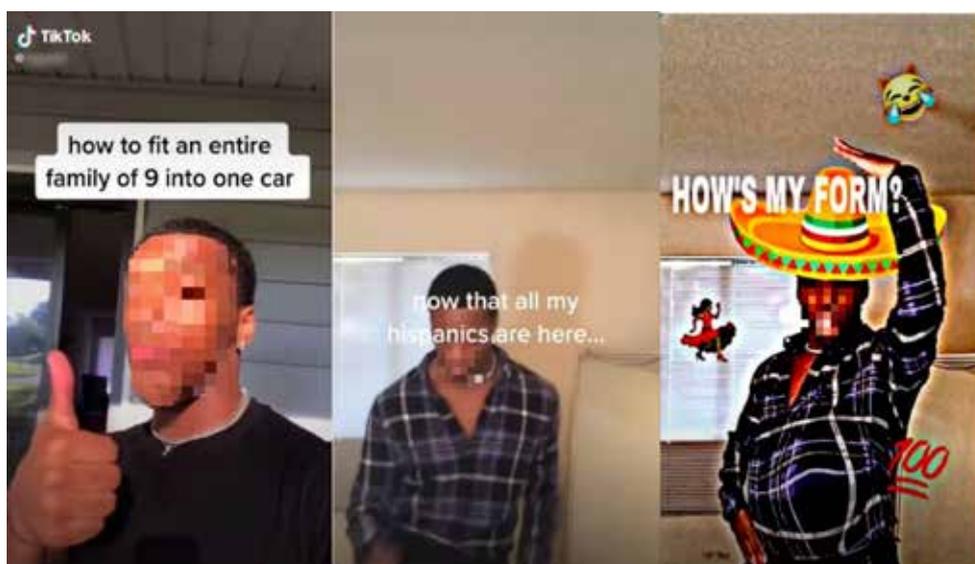
Figure 1. Series of screenshots of a TikTok user engaging in the "How's My Form" trend with racist content that currently has 837.5 thousand likes.

This can be seen in the example provided in Figure 1, where the user utilizes various racist stereotypes to participate in this trend. The first image showcases the user attempting to attract a certain demographic by feigning to offer a form of instruction to help 'fit an entire family of 9 into one car.' In the next image, it becomes clear that the demographic that the user was targeting were people of Hispanic descent, invoking the stereotype of large Hispanic families. The final image displays the user with the deep-fried effect, and what appears to be their depiction of a stereotypical Mexican individual. The user is posed with an edited sombrero and expanded gut, asking his audience "How's my form?". While this question may be intended to come across as comedic, or with the user potentially seeking validation for their 'joke' from their audience, this trend appropriates the phrase in a sarcastic fashion to a harmful extent.

The question "How's my form?" typically coincides with an honest intention to improve, learn, and ensure that one is doing something in the proper form or acting in an acceptable manner. However, in this

instance, the question can be interpreted as little more than mocking and malicious, with the producer belittling an entire culture as they depict stereotypical representations of a cultural subset. The consumer, in turn, plays a role in the growth of the trend by consuming and potentially cascading the content. Furthermore, those who engage positively with the trend by praising, liking and sharing these TikToks only continue to normalize racist content on these platforms.

As the racist variations of "How's My Form" TikToks began to escalate in popularity and become viral, many young TikTok users began to follow these trends and utilize racist stereotypes to generate more esteem on the platform. Many of these racist TikToks target a variety of minority groups, with a heightened amount of content targeting the African American and Asian communities. In many instances, teenagers have posted content that mocked slavery in relation to the African American community, while numerous other creators have utilized the COVID-19 epidemic to target Asian communities referencing the consumption of bats (Wright, 2020). A major issue with these racist "How's My Form" TikToks was that they showcased high levels of engagement in the form of views and likes, which may further entice adolescents to engage with this racist content. Furthermore, many of these teenagers who are creating and sharing these videos that contain racist stereotypes have thousands of followers, which could influence viewers and their perspectives on "Internet humor", dismissing hurtful messaging as no more than a viral trend.

A teenager with over 184,000 followers on TikTok posted a "How's My Form" video that targeted Chinese individuals referencing COVID-19 and only apologised after receiving backlash from online communities (Payne, 2020). Another teenager who created a "How's My Form" TikTok mocked African American individuals with reference to the Three-fifths Compromise, which was a compromise that gave disparate representation for slave states in Congress prior to the Civil War. This TikTok was viewed more than four million times before the user removed it due to the online pressure (Mendez, 2020). As a result, the teenager was forced by her father to apologise to users online and proceeded to share an apology video on the platform. In the video that showed her father sitting next to her, the teenager tearfully explained that she, "Genuinely did not think that this video would blow up like that and I didn't mean for it to come off as racist even though, considering the context of it…I didn't mean it like that." The teenager further emphasized that she "was just doing a TikTok trend, and my actions aren't OK" (Cole, 2020).

Uses and Gratification Theory and Adolescent Motivations for TikTok

The apology that was issued by the teenager showcased how many young users on TikTok often create and share videos based on the

perceived popularity of trends without reflecting on the long-term consequences of their actions on the platform. This brings into question the motivations behind many adolescents use of the platform TikTok, and how important it is becoming to examine the growing hazard of connected adolescents that fail to perceive the potential consequences of their actions beyond "just doing a TikTok trend". UGT will be utilized in order to guide the exploration of the motivations behind adolescents use of the platform TikTok, as it investigates how individuals communicate on a daily basis using a variety of communication outlets (Korhan & Erosy, 2016). This theory conceptualizes media use as a means to gratify a particular need and highlights that users are often goal-directed in their behaviour and engagement with media (Zolkepli & Kamarulzaman, 2011). Later research using this theoretical framework has revealed that desire also predicts media consumption, as individuals use media to satisfy their desires (Rui & Stefanone, 2016).

Though UGT was often first applied to television to examine user's media consumption and motivations, the theory has since been applied to multiple new media platforms related to mass communication technology (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). The increasing rate of development and engagement with social networking sites has become an important topic, as these platforms have become a fundamental aspect of communication where behaviours and engagement levels with these media outlets need to be analyzed (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016). In the past few years, numerous studies have utilized UGT with various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in order to understand the motivations behind adolescents use of these particular platforms. Due to the platform TikTok being a relatively new social media platform that has only rapidly increased in popularity within the past two years, there is a lack of research exploring the motivations and potential issues associated with TikTok and adolescent development. As a result, much of the literature that will be used to discuss adolescent motivations behind TikTok will be founded on research that was conducted on different social media platforms. Despite this, TikTok actually shares similar functions with the social media platform Instagram, as these two user-generated forms of media allow access to short videos and provide opportunities for social interaction and engagement via messaging, comments, and likes with on user generated content and between users directly (Omar & Dequan, 2020).

In examining the research studies conducted on adolescent motivations behind social media use, data has revealed that adolescents utilize these platforms to fulfill a variety of needs, often broadly classified under the headings of information or news, entertainment, social interaction, and self-expression (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). In particular, a research study conducted by Omar and Dequan (2020) that examined motivations behind TikTok

users revealed that many users who produce videos on the platform originate from the desire to fulfill their self-expression and archiving. Many content creators utilize various techniques in order to present themselves and attract attention from other individuals to foster connections, in addition to archiving their videos to remember special occasions and experiences. However, a specific motivation that is becoming increasingly common in the past few years is adolescents' intense desire to become popular and viral with the goal of attaining fame (Greenwood, 2013; Uhls & Greenfield, 2011; Uhls et al., 2014).

Social networking sites are providing opportunities for ordinary individuals to attract diverse audiences and pursue widespread attention in contemporary society. Historically, outstanding qualities were required in order to achieve a level of fame and become a celebrity. However, since the emergence of new media with various social media platforms, anyone who is able to attract wide public attention can be recognized as a celebrity. These social media platforms have profoundly altered the role of ordinary individuals from media consumers to media producers (Rui & Stefanone, 2016). Any user with access to the internet has the opportunity to create and share content with other users across the globe. By creating and sharing this media content to such immense audiences and with heightened exposure, ordinary individuals are actively competing for public attention (Rui & Stefanone, 2016). As a result, many adolescents are motivated to use social networking sites like TikTok in order to satisfy their desire for fame. A recent survey conducted in 2019 by LEGO Group that aimed to inspire the next generation of space explorers revealed that being a Youtube star was a more sought-after profession than being an astronaut among 3000 young people in the US and United Kingdom (Leskin, 2019). Research conducted on the social media platform Instagram by Sherman et al. (2016) also discovered the power of the like feature in adolescence, where viewing images with many likes was related to greater activity in neural regions associated with reward processing, imitation, and attention. Adolescents were also more likely to like images that showcased a high level of likes than photos with little. These findings demonstrated the power that virtual endorsement possesses and its effect on popularity. With the functional similarities between TikTok and Instagram, specifically pertaining to likes, it is not surprising how easily adolescents may be motivated to follow popular trends in order to seek the instant gratification that coincides with rapid growth and virality on the platform.

Many adolescents have already achieved high levels of fame on TikTok, with the most followed individual on the platform being a 16-year-old teenager by the username charlidamelio who has 60.9 million followers at the time of writing and has accumulated 4.2 billion likes on her videos. Not only has the teenager been signed by a talent agency, she has been given opportunities to expand her career

through brand deals, sponsorships, and business collaborations to accumulate even more success and fame (Perelli, 2020; Whateley, 2020). Similar to Charli, there are countless TikTok users who are achieving high levels of fame, with many adolescent TikTok users collaborating with each other and utilizing various techniques in order to sustain a stream of TikTok videos and maintain their fame. One of these techniques is utilizing a content collective, where influencers can collaborate and create content together that will promote mutual growth and more diverse viewership (Grant, 2020). An example of this on TikTok is the creation of The Hype House, which is the name of a collective of content from around 19 adolescent TikTok members with 15.9 million followers. These teenagers involved in The Hype House are not only coming together to create content, but they have rented a Spanish-style mansion in Los Angeles to do so (Lorenz, 2020). The influence these young TikTok stars possess and the glamorized lifestyle they showcase online has the power to inspire many other adolescents viewing their content to achieve the same level of fame. Many of these famous young TikTok users garner immense admiration and likes on their videos, often creating or popularizing trends on the platform. This could potentially influence other adolescents to participate in harmful trends, like the racist "How's My Form" trend, in order to imitate their actions and behaviours online without fully considering or reflecting about the consequences of their content.

Another major potential motivation for adolescents to engage with TikTok and its many trends, including the racist "How's My Form" trend, can be due to social relations. Research has shown that many individuals utilize social media in order to interact with others, gain a sense of belonging, keep up with their friends or meet new friends, and feel connected with a community (Dolan et al., 2016; Whiting & Williams, 2013). For adolescents in particular, many of the emotional and social interactions and processes that are commonly associated with adolescence and occur in real life, are also occurring simultaneously in online spaces, including peer influence. Peers can influence one another to engage in both positive and negative behaviours, with an overwhelming amount of data demonstrating how adolescence and young adulthood is more commonly associated with increased risk-taking behaviour, such as alcohol and drug use, violent behaviour, and engaging in unsafe sexual acts (Andrews et al., 2020; Sherman et al., 2018; Vannucci et al., 2020).

However, the increased risky behaviour of adolescents cannot be solely based on poor judgement or decision-making processes that can be attributed to their stage of development. Adolescents are more likely to engage with risk-taking behaviour in the presence of peers, including their presence and influence within the online domain. For example, the chances of adolescents posting sexual content online are increased if their peers are also engaging in such behaviour (Andrews et al., 2020). The adolescent brain processes that influence behaviour

and cognition are more sensitive to reward and pleasure, including social rewards. Peer content that may have high engagement in the form of likes or positive social feedback can lead to the increased pursuit and engagement from adolescents to engage in similar content and behaviour in order to seek and achieve such rewards (Sherman et al., 2018; Vannucci et al., 2020). Furthermore, with the rapid changes brought on by the Internet and social media, the extent to which information and content can be produced, made readily available, and spread rapidly to a wide range of audiences across the globe can amplify peer influence (Keum & Miller, 2018; Vannucci et al., 2020).

Interactions among peers and their social networks can impact on individual perceptions and constructs of what adolescents consider to be or what is represented as normative behaviour and engagement. The type of communities that adolescents share and participate in can potentially shape the types of risks, behaviours, and content that they react to or re-enact. This is especially prominent if they perceive these behaviours as being desirable and rewarded through measurable reinforcements, like the amount of "likes," comments, and shares (Vannucci et al., 2020). As such, the types of communities and users that adolescents connect and interact with can lead to the formation and imitation of what is perceived as normative social behaviour, such as participating in racist trends on TikTok. Adolescents who may be exposed to peers or communities that like, share, and engage with racist content like the "How's My Form" TikToks can result in participation in such content in order to be part of their social community and receive similar acknowledgement and rewards as their peers.

Social Implications of Engaging with Harmful Content on TikTok

The motivations behind adolescents who create and share harmful racist trends also highlights the issue of accountability and understanding for many young users who engage with public social media platforms. The apology statement discussed prior from the teenager who emphasized that she, "didn't mean for it to come off as racist" highlights the lack of understanding and underdeveloped emotional intelligences teenagers may possess in regard to the ways they may be perpetuating prejudices in their engagement with racist trends on TikTok. A possible reason for this could be the implicit biases that adolescents may possess. Implicit bias is categorized as automatic associations, which individuals may not be fully aware of, that are challenging to control, and may in reality, conflict with professed beliefs and values of individuals. The most problematic forms of implicit biases are those that target social groups, which can perpetuate stereotypes or reproduce prejudicial systematic hierarchies (Holroyd et al., 2016). Notwithstanding the best efforts and sincerest belief of an individual's own unprejudiced agency, nuanced signals of implicit bias can still influence beliefs and attitudes, contributing to patterns of discriminatory behaviour and action (Toribio,

2018). Thus, many teenagers who engage with these trends may not recognize how their complicity with and imitation of these racist TikToks are harmful, as they are unconscious of the attitudes and beliefs they possess, which may accrue in a mostly dormant state. These implicit attitudes may also be the effect of frequent exposure to media delivered stereotypes on platforms like TikTok, resulting in cognitive associations secured around social categories such as race (Payne et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the method these racist stereotypes and attitudes are framed within these TikTok videos, such as with filters that provide a comedic atmosphere and catchy music playing in the background, may result in many adolescents viewing them as Internet humor or a joke. Internet humor is defined as "any type of humorous interaction or performance that is manifest on the Internet" (Shifman, 2014, p. 390) and has diversified in online environments. One of the prominent shifts in Internet humor is that it is no longer just verbalized, but rather, can be greatly constructed upon visual formats that can be quickly and easily understood across global audiences. However, as a result of the humorous Internet content being reproduced with popular culture and other comedic imageries, much of the content involving racism could be understood by individuals as racial joke-telling, based on the assumption that the humor should not be perceived as genuinely racist or considered a serious issue (Yoon, 2016). Platforms such as TikTok are digital tools that can stimulate more interaction amongst users across the globe, thus humorous Internet content can be utilized to foster dialogue online and share social justice values. However, it can also continue to perpetuate racist stereotypes and prejudice hidden under notions of a joke and can often be displayed with unfiltered comments and thoughts, shared without censorship (Yoon, 2016). Adolescents need to critically evaluate the content they are exposed to and engage with in order to understand the dehumanizing aspects of these racist trends.

The teenager's apology statement also revealed that she was "just doing a TikTok trend" and that she did not think her "video would blow up like that." These aspects in her statement, along with other users who have posted apologies and taken down their racist TikToks, all appear to have only done so as a result of the backlash they received online. This behaviour showcases issues of accountability from these teenagers, as these users are demonstrating a lack of responsibility for the content they create and share with others. In addition, the display of accountability in the form of an apology for the actions of these adolescents is seen as only a forced response as a result of the extreme negative feedback they received from audiences on different social networking platforms, rather than sincere contrition. Adolescents need to understand that the actions and behaviours they engage with on social media platforms, such as TikTok, can possess consequences and can perpetuate stereotypes and racism to other young consumers across the globe.

Moreover, it is common for many apology videos and statements following a controversy to not be given the same level of attention than the original harmful content users posted. The apology statement that the teenager posted in response to her viral "How's My Form" TikTok that gained approximately four million views received less than half the views of the original post before her deletion of her account. For famous Youtubers or social media influencers who may amass huge followings, they have a greater opportunity to humanize themselves to the public as they will continue to have audiences engage and pay attention to content before and following a problematic or controversial issue. However, many individuals who have gained immense attention from one harmful viral video or post do not have the luxury of keeping the attention of the public on the positive actions that the user engages in following the incident. It is essential that adolescents recognize the consequences of their actions in creating and following potentially harmful trends. Adolescents need to understand that the disproportionate views in the original viral content in comparison with the following apology post can easily lead to their identity being reduced to their one bad judgement or choice.

Media Literacy Education

The disconnectedness and lack of responsibility adolescents possess in regard to their engagement with harmful trends, like the racist "How's My Form" trend, highlights the need to understand the power of representation, the development of cultural identities, the meanings of visual narratives, and the significance of critically analyzing and reflecting upon technological artifacts (Yoon, 2016). Within this context, media literacy education is essential in in shaping these media experiences and forms of communication into learning opportunities. As developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2006), media literacy education is understood as the practices of conveying messages or artistic expression through diverse modes of media. This is achieved by studying popular media and culture to identify benefits, risk, and overall influence across primarily digital media forms. Media literacy education can play a major role in the development of students' awareness of and sensitivity to mass media, to mitigate the power media has to negatively manipulate cultural cornerstones. This allows students to grasp how and why media texts are fabricated, and to question the various representations within. There is no doubt that media literacy education is fundamental and applicable to adolescents across the globe who are consistently exposed to media messages and representations. However, a question that emerges is whether the current standard of media education is sufficient and relevant for adolescents living the era when so many have the power to be producers contributing to widely consumed media. Is it necessary for standards in Ontario to be revised in order to ensure that the experiences and engagement adolescents have with media are socially responsible and constructive in this new context?

In order to evaluate these standards, the Ontario Curriculum documents were examined in order to understand how media literacy education is defined and the expectations that were involved. Media literacy was defined in the 2006 revised Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8: Language as "the study of the art and messaging of various forms of media texts…Media literacy explores the impact and influence of mass media and popular culture by examining texts such as films, songs, video games…and websites" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 13). For secondary students, media literacy education is conducted under Media Studies in the Ontario Curriculum Grades 9-10: English and "focuses on the art, meaning, and messaging of various forms of media texts… Media studies focuses on the construction of meaning through the combination of several media "languages" – images, sounds, graphics, and words" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007a, p. 18). These standards are also reflected within the Ontario English curriculum for grades 11-12 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007b, p.18). Upon analyzing these standards, a consistent theme begins to emerge where the focal expectation for students engaging with media literacy education is the act of studying, examining, and analyzing media texts. Many of the expectations within the curriculum require students to interpret and evaluate digital messages in order to identify overt and implied messages, critically reflect and identify the biases within media texts, and explain the purpose of these texts and the audience (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007a; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007b).

Though these are important skills that enable adolescents to evaluate the credibility of sources and understand media texts responsibly and intelligently, these expectations are all delivered with the assumption that the student is solely a consumer of media. The issue with media literacy education curriculum in Ontario is that it often is excessively concentrated on deconstructing messages in the media, resulting in missed opportunities to foster understanding in students regarding their roles in the media as active citizens in society. A possible explanation for this may be the fact that the curriculum documents were last revised in 2006 and 2007, when social networking sites were just beginning to emerge, and did not have the same immense peer influences or impact of launching ordinary individuals to celebrity status with immense fame and success. In current society, media is no longer exclusively produced and controlled by major corporations featuring traditional celebrities, and adolescents are no longer mere consumers of these media texts. Rather, adolescents are now taking on the role of producers, constantly creating and sharing content starting at a young age.

Several scholars have also argued that media literacy education efforts should go beyond analyzing and interpreting media messages and introduce students to the significance of the contextual factors involved in the creation and circulation of media (Sekarasih et al., 2016). In particular, Mihailidis (2018) argues for the necessity of

media literacy pedagogies and practices to be re-structured for "civic intentionality" (p. 152) in order to combat the increasing detrimental content that individuals are engaging with in popular media. Regardless of what content or engagement one interacts with, it is difficult to maintain an online presence that is entirely impartial or free from being perceived as aligning with a particular political perspective (Carpentier, 2011). Social media is constructed from digital algorithms that tailor content for each individual based on their personal habits, interests, and engagement (Mason et al., 2018).

For adolescents who may have formed social networks or are interacting with content from their peers or influencers that align with racist contents on social media, these interactions are significant as they not only perpetuate racist stereotypes to mass audiences but can become indirect educational exchanges. Racist "How's My Form" TikToks can inadvertently become a way for adolescents to cultivate a sense of understanding or perception of a culture or group of people that they may not have interactions or form relationships with in real life. For other adolescents who may already retain these notions and stereotypes, these forms of engagement only strengthen their existing beliefs. This type of engagement can potentially lead to individuals enclosing themselves in 'echo chambers' – environments where individuals are exposed to people, opinions, and content that reflect and reinforce their existing knowledge, beliefs, and values (Dutton et al., 2017; Mihailidis, 2018).

Echo chambers have the potential to pose real-life consequences and risks to its consumers and society, particularly in shaping adolescents' decisions on public health, political engagement, and their increased vulnerability to radicalization from White supremacist or other extremist groups (Andrews et al., 2020; Cherney et al., 2020; Kahne et al., 2016). This could potentially perpetuate the normalization of racist content on social media platforms with many experiencing confirmation biases in their enclosed spaces, as individuals are not exposed to diverse information, perspectives, and content, and their beliefs remain unchallenged (Dutton et al., 2017; Kümpel, 2020; Laybats & Tredinnick, 2016). As such, the "How's My Form" trend on TikTok and other similar racist content are in direct conflict with one of the overarching goals of media literacy education, which is to empower individuals to be "critical thinkers and makers, effective communicators and active citizens" (NAMLE, n.d. as cited in Mihailidis, 2018, p. 154).

Adolescence is a critical period of development for establishing the foundation for political motivation, socialization, and action (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018). It is essential that opportunities are created in order to nurture political engagement during adolescence and young adulthood, as these forms of civic participation can empower youth and reinforce future forms of political behaviour and action (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018). Furthermore, there needs to be formal changes im-

plemented with standardizing media literacy education to ensure that adolescents are receiving equal opportunities to learn and develop the necessary literacy skills in the classroom from educators to be able to effectively navigate online spaces. Students need access to media literacy education that accounts for the types of misinformation and influences they may encounter online. Learning about how the content they engage with is increasingly curated based on data collected from their digital behaviour and engagement, such as algorithms and filter bubbles, can help students understand the ways in which their beliefs and values can be manipulated as a result of echo chambers and confirmation bias, which in turn, can impact on their individual and collective decision-making (Chinn et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2018). This also includes being able to evaluate the accuracy of online claims and fact-checking, in order to decrease potential knowledge gaps that leave them susceptible to the malleable digital landscapes.

Mihailidis (2018) highlights how media literacy education needs to foster opportunities for people to collaborate and work as a collective to solve social issues and redesign spaces where individuals can cultivate a sense of agency regarding their own social position. Students need opportunities to develop these participatory skills, which bridge the relationship between actions online and the contributions they make in real life. Focus on "creation, dissemination, and reception of individual expression" (p. 1618), such as the types of posts that they may be liking, sharing, and creating on social media, can support individual self-reflection on how their voice and action can ultimately reach beyond their social networks to impact the "civic dialog" (p. 1618) of the social collective. Mihailidis and Thevenin (2013) emphasize the importance of fostering these participatory skills in order to empower individuals to become engaged citizens. For instances like the "How's My Form" TikToks where adolescents view and imitate these racist trends, there need to be connections made between the actions of users in the online domain and how this may in turn contribute to real-life consequences, establishing meaning for these types of interactions. This will ultimately allow adolescents to understand the responsibility they possess and foster better understanding regarding the societal implications of their media use and engagement. Media literacy education must grow to include more opportunities that allow young media users to examine and reflect upon the political, social, and economic contexts of media construction and distribution, facilitating opportunities for media advocacy and positive social change in society (Sekarasih et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The racist "How's My Form" trend on TikTok demonstrates how adolescents are motivated by peer influence or their desire for fame to imitate and follow popular trends in order to become a viral Internet sensation. However, the issue with adolescents reducing the significance of their ac-

tions to "just doing a TikTok trend" is that many adolescents do not understand or recognize the ways they may be perpetuating prejudices online through their engagement with harmful content and trends on TikTok.

Many adolescents may possess implicit attitudes that may influence automatic cognitive associations, which they may not be fully aware of, and can conflict with the professed beliefs and values of the individual (Toribio, 2018). Furthermore, these viral TikTok videos are frequently showcased through comedic or catchy musical filters that may lead to harmful content being interpreted simply as Internet humor or a joke. This can lead to the perpetuation of racist stereotypes and prejudices to be hidden under notions of a joke that lead to adolescents not recognizing the real harmful intent beneath these racist contents. Moreover, for the adolescents who attempt to share apology videos in order to provide their narrative and perspective in the controversial practice they engaged in, the level of attention for these are nowhere equivalent to the level of attention given to the original harmful content.

Thus, adolescents need to reflect on and understand the consequences of their actions, as one bad choice or judgement may result in it being the defining feature for their identity. This disconnectedness and lack of responsibility adolescents retain with their engagement in harmful racist trends highlights the necessity of media literacy education to support adolescents in understanding the external factors that are entailed with their social media use. There need to be equal and standardized opportunities across classrooms for adolescents to reflect on their social position, power, and deconstruct the types of content they engage with. Students also need to recognize the consequences of such interactions in order to understand how social media can influence their political and social decision-making, and their roles as active citizens and producers of media. This will allow adolescents to understand the responsibility they have for their behaviours and actions online, and to facilitate critical reflection regarding the societal implications that are associated with their media use and engagement (Sekarasih et al., 2016).

The examination of viral racist trends on TikTok like "How's My Form" also highlights issues of regulation, responsibility, and a call for greater accountability from the platform itself. Despite TikTok regularly updating community guidelines to ensure that the platform is active in removing hazardous content, such as violent extremism, hateful behaviour, illegal activities, and graphic content, racist content can continue to be posted from users, attract immense attention, and quickly spread throughout the platform. Even if TikTok eventually removes the content from their own application as a result of reporting, these videos can continue to spread on other social media platforms, like YouTube or Twitter, which may actually elicit even more attention and curiosity as a result of the forced removal and continue to expose mass audiences to harmful content. Future research could explore

the various methods of enhancing existing measures, or introducing further protections to minimize the opportunity of such dangerous content and behaviours from being promulgated in order to promote safe and positive global communities and environments for users.

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