

## Identity in communities and networks

### TikTok social networking site empowering youth civic engagement

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#### Abstract

Young teens are embracing the video looping mobile application TikTok as a creative way of engaging themselves and their peers in political issues and debates. Users of TikTok are using the potential power of weak ties within the social network to reach a wider audience which has the ability to promote democracy. TikTok enables teens to network and collaborate with its socio-technical features by creating a Third space for teens to negotiate and articulate their social values and subvert from hegemonic narratives regarding these values. Both impression management and identity performance support activism in both online and offline contexts provided the individual's identity aligns with their social values consistently. A study by Lane & Dal Cin (2018) found public sharing of prosocial behaviour leads to more participation in activism in both online and offline worlds. This supports the Marxian and Tonniesian sociologists' theory of a collective and cooperative collaboration in forming communities that has the potential to transcend capitalism and social hierarchies if it wasn't commodified. Whilst TikTok may appear messy and unorganised to a new user, teens are negotiating this Third space by realising how to reach a wider audience and to draw strength from those that "follow" and "like" their videos about their political views and actions in the hope that others will to.

Keywords: digital communities, impression management, weak ties, Third space, TikTok, teens, activism.

Whilst most Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have the ability to share videos on their applications (app), TikTok is a mobile app that is built on short looping videos and the sharing of these videos is its primary focus. With most smartphones having a front facing camera that allows users to self-document their lives, teens are now creating

videos that are becoming a “mainstream cultural practice” (Mascheroni, G., Vincent, J., & Jimenez, E, 2015). The TikTok app is free to download on both Apple and Android app stores, and it has easy to use video editing tools embedded in its “create” tab that will allow anyone with limited technology knowledge to create videos, making access very easy for any user to work its connection capability features. Participation can be easy too as it is socially acceptable to be an audience member; or a performer; or both, and an individual can choose how much they want to engage with other users. Lately, TikTok has gained attention in mainstream news articles on how teens are utilising the SNSs to voice their opinions on social issues that matter to teens (Bogle & Edraki, 2019; Lorenz, 2020; Price, 2019). Teens are using comedy sketches or other creative ways to be insubordinate to dominant narratives that perpetuate stereotypes and restrict young teens being heard on political issues that matter to them such as climate change, racism and human rights (Edirisinghe, Nakatsu, Widodo & Cheok, 2011, p. 124). TikTok activist users can quickly build up a large and diverse network of followers with which they can support and empower each other as the algorithms within TikTok affords users the ability to reach many weak ties, whilst young teens can experiment and receive feedback regarding their self-identity. This paper examines the “socio-technical” features of TikTok and the user engagement that support identity performance of young teens and the forming of digital communities within the app. Social networking Sites such as TikTok provide opportunities for young teenagers (13-18 years old) to engage with political issues and form activist communities.

The TikTok application utilises a variety of “socio-technical features” that enables young teens to establish and maintain a coherent network of relationships that support the formation of political activist communities (Porter, 2015, p.165). The connection capabilities within the TikTok app are varied and are quite different from other SNSs, in that, the communication is built on young teens’ similar interests performed within a video format where teens focus on creating content as a way of self-expression rather than connecting with friends or friends of friends through stories (Anderson, 2020, p.2). For example, when watching a TikTok performer’s video, there are a variety of ways to search for similar interests. When tapping on the music icon, the app displays all the videos with the same soundtrack. The hashtags displayed on each

video play a vital role in communication, as users categorise their videos with the same hashtags for better visibility within the app. (Herrman, 2019, para 6). When watching a video, the user can swipe left to see the video performer's profile and tap to follow the performer. There is also the discover tab at the bottom of the app, and when typing in "activism" or other keywords in the search bar, potentially, all the videos associated with this topic are shown to create an online space for teens to add more videos with their hashtags or to comment on each other's individual videos. Most importantly, the app uses artificial intelligence to distribute videos to its main newsfeed which is labelled the "for you" content page. These algorithms are based on which videos a user has watched often and/or "liked" with the heart icon (Jackman, 2020, para.8). These connection capabilities allow teens on TikTok to quickly gain an audience regardless of who they are following or who is following them (Anderson, 2020, p.2). For example, Tara Bellerose (@tarabellerose) who lives in rural Victoria, Australia, is taking advantage of the TikTok app and its connection capabilities to highlight her concerns and protests over the climate change debate. Bellerose's videos offers other young teen's practical ways of participating in saving waste and caring for the environment that appeals to young viewers (Bogle & Edraki, 2019). Although Bellerose lives in a remote area of Australia, with the affordances of TikTok she is able to communicate with peers beyond her physical location about her interests on climate change and find user's with similar interests on TikTok.

The social structure of TikTok can look confusing to new users because its focal point is not on displaying friendships and networks. TikTok's greatest strength is that it relies on the users' videos to be shared and watched on the app's newsfeed ("For you" page). This format is to reach as many individual nodes within the apps' network which then encourages weak ties to communicate with each other and creates a vast diverse network of users to become a digital community (Herrman, 2019, para 15; Pearson, 2009, para 25; Porter, 2015, p.164 & 165). Weak ties require less emotional engagement and intimacy than strong ties but are useful when sharing information online. Pearson (2009, para 18) states "Weak ties link us to the furthest nodes in a network (Granovetter, 1983) and are vital for broad heterogeneous network cohesion." Each TikTok user can choose their level of engagement and it is socially acceptable to be either a performer; or

an audience member of other performers; or both (Pearson, 2009, para 25). It is easier to maintain weak ties through mediated performative spaces (Pearson, 2009, para 26). The ability and function of an online space in forming vast and diverse networks is the vision that Sir Tim Berners-Lee had in mind when he invented the World Wide Web in 1989 and the teens of today are using these mediated spaces to assert their rights as digital citizens which is also stated and supported in the United Nations' convention on the rights of the child (Green, 2020, p.6). One example of this is in November 2019, a young American Muslim teen girl (@ferozaaziz) went viral in global news media for sharing a TikTok video posing as a regular make-up tutorial with a message to urge the viewers to search online on how Muslims are being mistreated in China (Wong, 2019). The video has since been viewed over three million times. TikTok users are growing rapidly, with 50 per cent in the 16-24 years old age bracket in the US, but also within other age demographics, such as 25 per cent aged 45-64 years old, and if you add to this the user growth in a wide variety of geographical places as well, India and China recorded the highest user numbers overall (Iqbal, 2020). TikTok has the potential for young teen activist to reach a very wide audience on a global scale with the use of weak ties and cooperation.

Online spaces are becoming the only space where teens are able to gather in large groups to converse with their peers without adult supervision (boyd, 2007, p.132; Hodkinson, 2017, p.276) and where teens can speak openly about the political issues that are affecting them (Green, 2020, p.14). A young teen's private bedroom is the only space—that is considered to belong to them— where they can be free and safe to express themselves (Hodkinson, 2017, p. 274). There is growing discourse surrounding the protection of children and young teens in online spaces but there are also many scholars whom argue for children and teens' advocacy in accessing SNSs and supporting their participation in these online spaces (boyd, 2007, p.137; Bers, Doyle-Lynch & Chau, 2012; Green, 2020, p. 15). Bers, Doyle-Lynch & Chau (2012, p. 130-131) argue that young teens need to be provided with a positive technological development framework that will support teens to further explore intrapersonal characteristics such as competence, confidence and character with interpersonal skills that promote caring, connection and contribution that will support their online technological skills and civic engagement.

SNSs like TikTok provide teens with a Third space in which to speak their voice and where others can “contest, negotiate and rearticulate” the social issues that are affecting them in the offline world. This Third space is both real and imagined where both online and offline communication converges and is captured (Edirisinghe, Nakatsu, Widodo & Cheok, 2011, p. 123-124). Digital communities provide young teens with a Third space to experiment with alternative forms of community, self-representation, reflection and an understanding of ethical behaviour towards other people (Green, 2020, p. 9). The reflexive process of constructing and reconstructing an online identity is how young teens learn to interact with peers online. Identity formation is not a fixed singular representation of who we are—instead we all have many facets to who we are, and how we display these parts of our identity will depend on who and where we are interacting (van der Nagel, 2015, para 10). The contextual circumstances surrounding a person is what influences how they behave, and these circumstances can often interpellate the person into a cultural stereotype without them realising (van der Nagel, 2015, para 12). Teens on TikTok are very cleverly subverting from these cultural stereotypes when presenting their videos as a satirical view of the situation. One young teen Eshia (@eshiaanderson1) from Adelaide, Australia, uses comedy to highlight the racism that she has dealt with in her offline life as an Aboriginal person and has over fifty one thousand followers as a result (Price, 2019). Cardon & Cardon (2007, p.62) argue that communication with weak ties enables better democracy online as individuals that are marginalised in the offline world can speak their voice in the Third space of SNSs. TikTok is providing young teens with a Third space to negotiate their identities whilst learning how to be reflective and advocate for their rights to a public audience.

Young teens are learning the process of “impression management” when performing their identities on TikTok. Young teens are learning to make meanings from social situations, not only in the online space, but equally in their offline lives—where teens reflect and evaluate other people’s reactions to their videos and adjust their behaviour according to the feedback received (boyd, 2007, p.128). Lane & Dal Cin (2018, p. 1526) argue “sharing social and political views online is in fact a highly delicate matter.” TikTok is a visual means of communication where the performer uses their body to convey the message and project certain information about themselves such as

‘movement, clothes, speech and facial expressions’ (boyd, 2009, p.128). TikTok users are aware that there is an invisible audience especially if their profile is set to public (Pearson, 2009, para 10) and will often perform for a particular audience as it is necessary for an effective performance (Hodkinson, 2017, p.277). One aspect of their identity performance is the curating of their profile page. Hodkinson argues (2017, p.284) the importance of a fixed customisable profile is no longer needed as users engage with a “timeline through searching, examining, reminiscing, editing and shaping.” TikTok users have very limited information on their profile pages, and instead focus on the accumulation of videos in their profile album archive as a self-reflective process (Hodkinson, 2017, p. 274). A TikTok profile page is similar to a Twitter or Instagram profile page as they all display the users’ name, handle, picture and bio. It is socially acceptable for the users to play around with their name and bio over time provided the social values of the person communicating about a social cause remain consistent (Lane & Dal Cin, 2018, p. 1526). A study conducted by Lane & Dal Cin (2018, p. 1535-1536) found that if a disengaged young person shares an initial act of observable activism online then they are more likely to participate in future acts of activism both online and offline, therefore contesting the negative views of “slacktivism”. “Impression management” requires sociality with a group of people in order for individuals to learn what is acceptable and what is not. Teens are deliberately communicating their political views as a means of connecting with a digital community through the process of impression management of their individual identity and the social causes that they support, in the hope that the offline world will change.

Teens engage with SNSs like TikTok because “it enables self-expression, enjoyment, information sharing, and relationship building” whilst helping others (Porter, 2015, p. 168) and one of the most captivating properties of TikTok for young teens is how it enables users to replicate other users’ videos within the app (boyd, 2007, p. 126). Young teens will often replicate the behaviour seen on TikTok whether it be a dance, a challenge or a comedy sketch—and if the individual has some self-awareness in whether they are being interpellated, they will relate the original video to their own issues or ideas. TikTok also has the replicating feature where a user can duet with the original video. This allows young teens to star alongside their idols in online spaces. Some teens

have used this feature as a way of conducting a political debate in online spaces. For example, in the US, young teens have been participating in virtual online political and ideological groups called hype houses on TikTok where conservatives (@conservativehypehouse) and liberal (@liberalhypehouse) supporters can make videos that highlight the pros and cons of voting for one candidate over the other in a fun and often comedic way (Lorenz, 2020). Whilst it can't be said that TikTok is a perfect example of a not-for-profit or non-commodified network due to advertisements within the app, it can still provide a space for cooperative sharing where the social hierarchies of the offline world are dissected and critiqued upon. The ownership and production of content is based on collaboration of a cooperative society similar to the views of sociologist Karl Marx and Ferdinand Tonnies whom first developed the idea of human collective cooperative production and the forming of communities to shape one another (Fuchs, 2010, p. 784). The TikTok Social Networking Site has the ability to sustain engagement with the use of its' "socio-technical features", in particular it's connection capabilities, and with users' frequent interactions centred around the replicability properties of TikTok, making it a SNS that could be around for longer than its predecessors such as Vine and Music.ly, and that potentially sustains young teens active participation in digital communities and activism (Herrman, 2019).

The social networking platform TikTok is proving to be a different way for people to communicate online and form digital communities. Its connection capabilities are strongly embedded in its use of hashtags and its replicability of content. Although it is used for mainly fun and social purposes, it does provide young teens with an online space to voice their opinions and concerns regarding issues that are normally in the adult domain, but that have an effect on a young person's life. Teens find social networking sites to be engaging and meaningful to their social lives and spend time on TikTok to learn more about their identity through the act of watching, sharing and performing their identities with other peers. The digital communities might appear messy and unorganised to a new user of TikTok, but teens are negotiating this Third space by realising how to reach wider audiences and to draw strength from those that "follow" and "like" their videos about their political views and actions. As young teens become empowered by

their audience the possibility of making changes in the offline world might just become more prominent and lead to social change.

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