

## **Abstract**

Under the stream of Online Networks and Social Change, TikTok, the newly found video sharing platform, will be examined and how its popularity amongst Gen Z has effectively led to a third place for advocacy on global issues. Using a vast range of references and sources from academic journals to popular culture news articles and blog posts, the role online networks are playing in creating exposure and advocacy on global issues will be conducted and how this social media platform has allowed for global issues to garner the attention of millions overnight. From expert opinion to the users of TikTok themselves, the newly found application has the ability to create lasting social change as a knowledge community

## **Introduction**

TikTok was founded in August 2018 by internet company ByteDance, after purchasing Musical.ly, a similar video sharing app, and transforming into TikTok, a much more refined app with more advanced algorithms. Nearly three years on, TikTok has 689 million monthly users worldwide, and over 2 billion downloads total (Mohsin, 2021). Over 60% of TikTok users are considered Gen Z (Muliadi, 2020), referring to individuals born after 1996 (DiMaggio, Hudacek, 2020). "Generation Z is one of the most diverse generations yet, with high levels of education, digital nativism, social and cultural awareness and high propensity to be more expressive" (Muliadi, 2020, n.p).

This paper will be exploring how TikTok has become an extremely successful third place and knowledge community, for Generation Z in particular, to educate and share resources to advocate for global issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement.

## **TikTok: How the Social Media Giant Created a New Wave of Advocacy**

It is no secret that the presence and prevalence of social media has changed the way individuals interact with each other, and in some cases completely replaced in-person interactions. However, this doesn't mean the newly implemented role social media has taken in society, is necessarily a bad thing. Yes, whilst social media can lead to addictions, narcissism, self-esteem issues and lack of social skills (Dutot, 2020), there are upsides to the role it plays in the lives of all people in contemporary society.

The digital space that exists in our world today has allowed for a mass communication of information across a large scale of demographics all over the globe, and information is being shared like never before (Santander et al., 2020). With this, social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube have become over-saturated due to the number of users, and the desire to "blow up" on the platform and gain a large number of followers. The ability for everyday individuals to gain followings and then quite their day job to become full time "influencers" suddenly became a dream of even school aged children. Much distant from the dream job described by children ten years ago such as hairdresser, vet, teacher etc. The sudden prospect of being able to post on your favorite social media sites for a living caught the attention of those, particularly in Gen Z, to become famous, but with these existing apps already completely saturated with those of the same desires, there left no room for differentiation.

Sociologist, Ray Oldenburg proposed the idea of “third place” in which the “unrelated can relate” (Riggs, 2020, para.3) and “community is most alive, and people are most themselves” (Riggs, 2020, para.3). These third places include libraries, hospitality, parks, describing a place other than home or work. With increasing prevalence of social media in everyday life, online places can also be referred to as “third place”. This has allowed for social media applications to play a more active role in the lives of users, and thus creating a sense of community and belonging. These applications are “founded upon the norms of everyday interaction adapted to an online setting” (Markman, 2011). During the Covid-19 pandemic where people were physically distanced, social media was one of the only available connections and support systems available to the isolated (Saud et al., 2020).

Enter, TikTok. A shiny brand-new app, with barely any existing users and the ability to create a platform with little to no competition (Bucknell Bossen, Kottasz, 2020). As stated previously 60% of TikTok users are considered to be Gen Z, thus creating an unspoken exclusivity on the app, the same way My Space was reserved for mostly millennials. This is where the third place is created. If you ask anyone in Gen Z if they have TikTok, it is extremely likely they have an account and use it quite regularly. TikTok as a social networking site has well and truly overtaken any other application in terms of inter communication between a generation (Bucknell Bossen, Kottasz, 2020). The third place has been established through constant interaction between users on the app via video sharing, liking, commenting and reposting.

An online knowledge community consists of a group or community “specializing in knowledge sharing and seeking” (Liu et al, 2016., para.3). TikTok, when focused on advocacy exposure, has the ability to operate as an incredible share space for resources, links, promotions and to organize events when focused on the right issues.

In June of 2020, during the largest civil rights movement in history, CNN Politics reported the hashtag #blacklivesmatter garnered a total of 4.9 billion views (Janfaza, 2020). As of April 2021, the hashtag is now up to 25.4 billion views (TikTok, 2021), a number almost too large to comprehend. This is just one example of the large-scale advocacy ability of this app, and the role it could play in exposure of global issues as a knowledge community.

In light of the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in 2020, many creators, particular those of colour, switched to posting activism content in hopes of being able to spread a viral message and create a movement on the app, thus creating a knowledge community (Rosenblatt, 2020). This began an internet movement as information was being shared around in masses, raising awareness on the issue of police brutality in the United States. Whether if it was recounts of incidents, links to petitions, phone numbers or emails to contact organizations and authorities on behalf of the public’s concern, this was a community created on the platform that would go on to form an extremely important knowledge community as the information they shared sought to seek justice. Whilst TikTok did not start the #blacklivesmatter campaign solely, it became an incredibly powerful resource in order to advocate on these issues, as all videos on the platform have the ability to go viral and garner millions of views and likes due to algorithms. Since this, due to public outrage and

Creators with already established platforms of ten million plus, as well as everyday people began creating videos encouraging people to sign petitions, donate to victims’ families, attend sit ins and marches organized in cities. However, the app ran into criticism at the end of May

when a glitch caused the views on certain hashtags to render 0 even though they had gathered millions of views (Andrews, 2020). TikTok issued a statement to form a “creator diversity council” to promote diversity on the app and bring awareness to important issues (TikTok, 2020). Issues similar to these arise often in the social media space but despite these challenges, social media “remains the most unfiltered way someone can easily pass on a message” (Andrews, 2020., n.p).

With the momentum of these meaningful changes happening because of these platforms, June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020 was to be known as “Blackout Day” in which TikTok released a statement “standing in solidarity...as a whole against the horrendous recurrence of injustice in the long fight against inequality, racism and violence” (TikTok, 2020., n.p). The entire day was dedicated to posting helpful and meaningful content to the Black community and the posting of all other content was discouraged. The hashtag #TheShowMustBePaused has collected 46.4 million views (TikTok, 2021). This is an example of the power TikTok has as a third place as well as a knowledge community in the fight against these issues as the app gained momentum into seeking justice for victims of police brutality. Over the course of the #blacklivesmatter movement, #georgefloyd garnered 4.8 billion views (TikTok, 2021), and #breonnataylor garnered 409.5 million views (TikTok, 2021). This shows the magnitude and scale in which these issues were being brought to the attention of the users of TikTok.

This knowledge community created through TikTok has allowed for an entire new demographic to become aware of the issues occurring in the world. Teens are not commonly watching televised news or following traditional forms of media (Common Sense Media, 2019), this is where a third place and knowledge community begin to tie together and cohesively bridge that gap and bring these issues to the forefront of the minds of those, that would otherwise not be aware. A survey conducted by Common Sense Media in 2019 saw that 54% of teenagers sourced their news a “few” times a week via social media (Common Sense Media, 2019). 64% said that they prefer to consume their news in a visual format either via pictures or videos (Common Sense Media, 2019). This allows TikTok to become the perfect third place for younger audiences to be educated on current events and issues occurring in the world through the knowledge community created on TikTok.

In addition to the promotional exposure TikTok offers the chance of virality, TikTok introduced the 200-million-dollar creator fund in July 2020 to allow creators on the app to get paid per view on their videos (Way, 2021). This allows any creator with ten thousand followers or more, and a minimum of eighteen years of age to earn money for posting on the app (TikTok, 2020). This is beneficial to accounts and creators who use their account for advocacy issues as they can earn money for their posts, which can be put towards furthering their work if they wish to do so. This also creates an incentive for more people to try to build their own platform on the app, thus bringing more traffic which allows for further monetization and growth of the platform and more publicity to this new wave of advocacy.

Generation Z has firsthand experienced the role online networks and social media play in one’s life from the beginning. In the Netflix Documentary “The Social Dilemma”, Jonathan Haidt, New York University Social Psychologist states “an entire generation is more anxious, more fragile, more depressed” (Haidt, 2020, 41:25). If there were to ever be a generation that has felt the impact social media has on the world and individuals, it would be Gen Z, and this

creates a desire to flip the narrative and begin using these platforms for the benefit of society instead of viewing it as the villain in the lives of teens today.

Considering these factors, it is apparent that TikTok has effectively and cohesively being established as a third place in cohesion with knowledge communities. It has a unique ability to be able to bring people together from a vast range of demographics and variety of content to allow for social change to be brought to social media and a new form of advocacy begin. Looking at the course of history, online networking is only a newly established industry and whilst the infatuation with social media and the digital age is under constant examination, users appeal derives from the need to connect and present oneself for validation (Markman, 2011). Using these platforms online networks and their ability to create social change gives us a chance to deem something rooted in narcissism, self-absorbance and selfishness, a chance at bringing a higher purpose to fruition.

There was a point in time, where everything was done for the first time. And whilst this is a new concept, the blending of online networks and social change, I believe it too has the ability to be done for the first time, and for it to stick. Time will tell if these third places hold the ability to act as activism platforms and, whether or not they will bring about real and everlasting change. However, in my eyes, the benefits far outweigh the possibility of failure. I see TikTok as a well-established third place for resource sharing in which it holds the golden ticket to bring about social change and justice in contemporary society.

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