

## **Who Are We in the Presence of Social Media:**

### ***How TikTok Influences in Shaping Our Identity***

#### **Abstract**

In this generation, the emphasis in having both an online and offline identity is important in terms of maintaining connections with friends, families and in creating new networks to aid in career progresses or for new relationships. However, social media has shaped and influenced our own realities by impacting our own mental health and physical wellbeing. Creating a norm for social comparison and changing our perceptions of the term “perfection”. This paper explores how everyone’s identities, created from TikTok, alters ones self-worth and validation, consequently creating unrealistic expectations on one another.

#### **I. Introduction**

With the advancing integration of the digital world in today’s society, it has greatly influenced people’s everyday lives and lifestyles. Social media in particular has become a necessity in today’s society. With different platforms available, social media allows people on a social level to share information, connect and be entertained, whilst, on a professional level, it enhances and broadens one’s knowledge (i.e. politics or news), aiding to build professional connections and relationships (USF, n.d.). In turn, social media enables a person to create a virtual identity that can differ from their own reality. TikTok is a short-form video sharing app, allowing users to watch, create and share 15-second videos combined with music through their phones. Which grew in popularity after merging with Musical.ly in 2018, it has been recorded as of early 2021 that the app has more than 1.1 billion active users worldwide (D’Souza, 2021). In

this paper, I will discuss the filtered identities often formed via TikTok, how the platform alters someone's own self-perception of themselves and furthermore, the fake realities that were consequently created.

## **II. Creating an Identity**

Social media is a great platform to view, post and share content online. It gives the opportunity for users to stay connected with friends, family and people they know. In the digital world, there are many popular social media platforms available, in particular teenagers and young adults most commonly use Instagram and TikTok (however others also use Facebook, Snapchat etc.). Upon downloading these apps to their phones, users have to create an account, with the similar formats of a username, date of birth and bio. Instantly, creating a base for their own online identity.

Identities are formed through our interactions with others (Goffman, 1959, as quoted by Armstrong, n.d.) and the personas we make. Without the presence of social media, individual identities are formed from the way they view themselves and their social behaviors in real life (Wang, 2020). Similar to the idea given by Goffman (1959, quoted by Wang, 2020) which is the role theory of front and back stages, whereby the front stage is how we interact with people in public or professional settings, whilst the back stage occurring in one's own home environment or "true self". For example, from a back stage perspective a user who in real life is introverted and tends to keep to themselves, can be perceived as outgoing and confident online from the things they may share or how they interact/or communicate with others behind a screen, which is the front stage (Wang, 2020).

TikTok is very filtered, people are able to choose which part of their lives they want to share to their followers. From the type of content they choose to post or share, to how they edit or filter out these content. These decisions and the choices made offline influence what type of identity is being created online. Although TikTok users have these choices, as discussed by Zuo and Wang (2019) the app encourages users to create content anywhere, anytime and express their “real” personalities. Which is important to note as identities are also formed on the basis of a person’s persona. Dequan and Omar (2020) states that, a factor in which predicts a person’s behavior is through their personality trait, as it is a reflection of their own motives, needs, values and preferences.

Online identities are not always completely different, like many people who are characterized as courteous and good-natured have a higher tendency to express their real self on social media (Dequan & Omar, 2020). Hence, their persona’s online can be an exaggeration of who they are offline, as they are able to have the time to think of what they are willing to share, while others use social media to be able to share their own stories as they may be more confident sharing online than in real life. However, there are identities and profiles used that are created for malicious use, for example, a person pretending to be someone else by using their picture, as well as catfishing which is common in dating apps.

People create online identities on social media as they can freely present themselves to the way they want, but also aids in being able to explore their identity by experimenting on different personas online and some utilizes social media as a means to escape reality (Huang et al. 2021). TikTok users utilizes the content they share, the engagement and interactions from

others to help build their identities online by consolidating their self-esteem and confidence (Zuo & Wang, 2019).

### **III. How does Social Media Influence self-perception: Self-Worth and Validation**

Most young teenagers and adults have altered self-perceptions about themselves through the form of social comparison. Social comparison is a theory on why humans compare themselves between others and how it influences their self-worth (Festinger, 1954, quoted, by Reding and Kretz 2020). As mentioned by Reding and Kretz (2020), there are three types of comparison, the upward comparison, whereby a person believes they are doing worse than to someone they are comparing themselves with; The downward comparison, an individual identifies themselves as doing better than another and the lateral comparison, which is where the person who is comparing themselves to someone, perceives themselves as on the same level with the other.

Social media is a great median for social comparison and therefore can influence a person's perception about themselves and the lives they live. TikTok, openly provides exposure to the lives of influencers and celebrities as they are able to continuously share their luxurious lifestyles and are able to embody the terms of "pretty," "beautiful" and "handsome," with the content they share. Although comparison can be in any ideal forms, whether that be from wealth or status, social comparison is commonly resulted from a comparison of a person's body and appearance. (Reding & Kretz, 2020). For example, seeing someone with the perfect "hourglass" body that fits in today's beauty standards and seeing one's own self not being able to meet those standards forms an upward comparison and therefore downgrades their own self-esteem. Creating undesirable expectations towards one another and implicating such

expectations in themselves, confusing their own realities and identities that they have created in the digital world.

Likewise, social media platforms like TikTok have features such as “likes,” “followers” and “views,” enabling a form of competition to others and validation for their self-worth. For example, receiving fewer “likes” in comparison to someone else, the person may feel bad about themselves, causing them to feel worse about who they are (Gallinari, 2017). These “like” and “comment” features provide feedback and judgement on an individual’s profile. Compliments, likes, views and followers are ways people seek validation and approval on social media. Validation has been becoming an addiction to many young teens and young adults. According to Blanchar (2020), in order to achieve positive self-image, individuals establish positive social identities, therefore obtaining positive self-concepts about themselves. In other words, how others react to an individual’s social media identity (how they perceived them), can determine an evaluation of their identity.

Similarly, people turn to social media to build their self-confidence and self-esteem to build their self-worth. This is because as quoted from Batool and Iqbal (n.d.), “individuals require both ‘esteem from others’ in the form of recognitions and admiration; as well as ‘inner self-respect; such as self-love and self-confidence.” This is important as it not only shows how a person perceives themselves but it contributes in determining their passion and motivations, which help in shaping a person’s identity (Batool and Iqbal, n.d.). It is significant to note that, “self-approval and identity formation [contributes] to extended self-esteem,” (Batool and Iqbal, n.d.).

#### **IV. Fake reality: Unrealistic Beauty Standards**

With the integration of social media in our everyday lives, it is difficult to not compare ourselves with others but in turn we create idealistic expectations on ourselves. Yang (2021) addresses the ritual view of communication proposed by James W. Carey in suggesting that “users join TikTok for engagement, sharing and socializing instead of merely receiving information and content.” Whereby users engage in following certain trends and creating a desire to freely express themselves and gain recognition within the TikTok online community. (Yang, 2020). One of the most popularized TikTok trends stems from the unrealistic beauty standards of men and women. For example, as quoted by Liu (2021) from Feldman’s article states that, videos and content with the hashtag of #KarmaisaBitch and alternatively #KarmaisaBitch challenge has attracted 145 million and 4 million followers respectively. In which this videos are mainly about a change in appearance, where in the beginning a user showcases their “unattractive” appearance and then changing into a more “attractive” person with trendy makeup, fashionable style and hair (Liu, 2021). Furthermore, with behavioral changes from being soft and shy to a more confident and sexy persona.

Similarly, contents created with the hashtag #DontJudgeMeChallenge comprised of videos about the user having facial blemishes like acne, being excessively drawn on top of their makeup. As the video transitions, corresponding to the beat of the music chosen, the user transforms to reveal a clear face with no blemishes and imperfections (Liu, 2021). These popularized trends are subjected to deceptions, negative talk and stereotypes of beauty and body image. Videos created under these hashtags mentioned previously, reinforces a judgement that people project themselves to be unattractive only to change their appearance

to be more accepted in the community, to receive support and to gain attraction in the content they share (Khattab, 2019). According to Khattab (2019), such judgment is formed from binary representations of “ugly and beautiful,” clearly shown from the content created from #KarmaisaBitch and #DontJudgeMeChallenge, reflecting the need of approval that has been characterized by the user’s online self-representation as their “performance” (or the content they share) can be continuously changed depending on the type of feedback given from their audience.

The contents formed from TikTok are the exaggeration and distort version of the real-world, to create humorous and dramatic contents for others to view and engage in (Yang, 2020). For example, with the aid of beauty filters available on TikTok such as making a user’s lips more plumper and bigger, thinner nose and creating better skin complexion by blurring blemishes that are present on the face distorts certain features of a user’s face (Khattab, 2019). Which enables certain norms to form and in creating new standards of beauty, that many follow in order to be accepted. With new technologies and new apps created the online world will always cross the borders of our realities, “blurring the lines between what is authentic and what is performance.” (Joho, 2019).

## V. **Conclusion**

Majority of young teens and adults have access to creating an online identity and it’s often used in social media. Although, integrating today’s society with the digital world has created many positive impacts such as the sharing of information, having a support network that many may not have behind the screen and staying connected with friends and family, it has had many negative implications on a person’s personal reality and mental health. The

confusion of “fake” reality created by social media and the online world, has led to young teens being exposed to the expectations to be able to fit in and be accepted. Social comparison has been the reality given, constantly comparing oneself to the lives and images of others, has controlled a person’s own confidence, self-worth and turning to create personas that are validated by the society and community online. The identity we have created has become an obsession of perfection, losing our own real identity by confusing our minds to be that perfect person we see online.

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