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Taming TikTok: how BIPOC individuals perceive and interact with algorithmically generated content

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Abstract

Introduction. TikTok's recommendation algorithm plays a crucial role in shaping user experiences, raising concerns about algorithmic bias, content suppression, and misinformation, particularly for BIPOC users. This study explores how BIPOC individuals perceive and interact with TikTok's algorithm, focusing on content visibility, algorithmic manipulation, and experiences with problematic content.

Method. This pilot study utilized semi-structured interviews with 10 BIPOC TikTok users, recruited via social media. Participants discussed their experiences with the platform's recommendation system, and responses were transcribed and thematically analyzed to identify patterns in content exposure, engagement strategies, and perceptions of algorithmic bias.

Analysis. A qualitative thematic coding approach was applied to categorize responses based on key themes, including content representation, misinformation, and strategies for mitigating algorithmic harm.

Results. Findings reveal that BIPOC users frequently encounter discriminatory content, misinformation, and algorithmic suppression. Many employ strategies such as selective engagement, the "Not Interested" feature, and algorithm resets to curate their feed. However, skepticism remains regarding TikTok's data practices and fairness in content moderation.

Conclusions. BIPOC users actively shape their digital experiences to counteract algorithmic bias, highlighting systemic inequities in AI-driven platforms. Future research should expand participant diversity and investigate long-term algorithmic trends to promote inclusive digital spaces.

Introduction

A recommendation algorithm is a system, classified as artificial intelligence (AI), that has the '*ability to predict whether a particular user would prefer an item or not based on the user's profile*' (Isinkaye, pg. 262). While these algorithms are embedded across a myriad of services, and platforms, there has been increased attention from scholars, popular press, and the US government on the recommendation algorithm that drives the TikTok application. At over one billion users worldwide, TikTok has grown faster than any application before it (Ungless, 2024). TikTok's fame for gaining such a large amount of users in a short amount of time, leads to questions regarding their practices with data, surveillance, and ethics, indicating the importance of understanding how this technology impacts societal norms, systems, and culture (Montag, 2021). According to a Pew Research Center survey, 62% of U.S. adults under 30 use TikTok, with the platform becoming an increasingly important source of news and political information for this demographic (Eddy, 2024). Dissecting TikTok's popularity and high user amount, is vital to understanding the current systems of recommendations.

Although algorithms shape the usage of TikTok, users have learned how to gamify the app to manipulate their For-You-Page, which is an endless stream of videos personalized for each user (Bhandari, 2022). Algospeak, known for abbreviating, misspelling, or substituting specific words to avoid content moderation, is a practice that not only general users engage in, but marginalized users are familiar with as they deal with content review, and appeal processes where their content is being deemed as '*inappropriate*' when it is not (Steen, 2023). While there are a variety of definitions for who is considered '*marginalized*', the National Library of Medicine defines marginalized people '*as individuals who are excluded from mainstream social, economic, media or cultural life,*' (National Library Medicine). For autistic individuals, a marginalized community that is typically misrepresented, digital media has allowed them to provide counter-narratives to dehumanizing perceptions surrounding autism (Alper, 2023). However, on TikTok, it can be difficult to find informational and accurate videos as 41% of videos were classified as inaccurate when searching the '*#Autism*' hashtag (Aragon-Guevara, 2023). Content suppression undermines the inclusivity that marginalized users are fighting for in digital spaces.

Ruha Benjamin refers to this oppression as the '*New Jim Code*'. This code emphasizes how new technologies are deemed as '*progressive*' but still push forth the same social inequalities (Benjamin, 2020). While marginalized users are known to benefit uniquely from this platform, without uprooting these technical systems and questioning who benefits from them, marginalized folks will continue to experience discrimination and intolerance (Antoine, 2022). BIPOC communities are experiencing a lack of understanding of their user experiences of TikTok, where biases and stereotypes should be acknowledged. In Algorithms of Oppression, Noble talks of hiring software creating inequities within the job hiring process. Bursell et al, conducted an experiment testing AI hiring software, discovering a bias towards white middle-aged women. This showcases that recommendation algorithms are playing a role in social exclusion, inequality, and discrimination by algorithms (Bursell, 2024). By easily accepting these algorithms, individuals are allowing bias to enter digital spaces and cause harm that may go unnoticed (Timmons, 2021).

In this paper, we examine the intersection of BIPOC identity and TikTok's recommendation algorithm to better understand its impact on marginalized users' experiences and potential algorithmic harms. This short paper is dedicated to a preliminary and exploratory study that begins to fill the gaps identified in the literature review. We're piloting semi-structured interviews focusing on identity, experiences with TikTok, and strategies for handling harmful content. Through thematic analysis of interview transcripts, our findings reveal insights into how these BIPOC users navigate TikTok's algorithm-driven environment, including methods for managing exposure to harmful content and adapting to problematic algorithmic behaviours. Our research provides valuable perspectives on the challenges faced by marginalized users in algorithm-centric

platforms, offering insights into creating equitable and inclusive digital spaces in an increasingly AI-mediated social landscape.

Literature review

Our literature review builds upon a systematic review conducted in our previous poster paper, which examined research trends at the intersection of BIPOC identity and recommendation algorithms in HCI. We extend this work by exploring algorithmic literacy, marginalized users' experiences, and BIPOC user experiences specifically on TikTok.

Algorithmic literacy

Algorithmic literacy is the term used to describe the capacity and opportunity to be aware of both the presence and impact of algorithmically driven systems (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2023). Personalization can be defined as mechanisms to customize information and content to users (Perugini). Within personalization, building community is a key concept of TikTok's aims to create permeable communities - communities one can weave in and out of - that allows users to discover not only their identities but others (Milton). This has its disadvantages as unregulated discoverability can showcase harmful content to users. However, personalization showcases an advantage to those who understand how to use the application, as they grasp the effects of curating their own experience, rather than just letting the algorithm adapt. Aside from algorithmic literacy, the curation element of TikTok is a reflection of navigation as the user has agency in what is presented to them - to an extent. With recommendation algorithms being based off of a user's interaction such as search, should the For-You-Page reflect those searches is a question raised by Milton et al about the '*feed*' of TikTok. There are concerns about whether or not searches are a reliable source of information about a user.

Marginalized users and experiences with recommendation algorithms

For marginalized users, content review and moderation is a large element of what their algorithmic experiences are. Shadow banning is a practice of removing videos without a user's knowledge, which disproportionately impacts marginalized users (DelMonaco). Rong et al discusses how this tactic impacts blind users often suppressing their content to a more mainstream audience, and how they find themselves by trying to immerse themselves as much into staying in their desired communities (Smith, 2023).

To combat content suppression and mitigation there are a number of techniques that marginalized users partake in. A common method is avoiding hashtags as that spreads the material far out of the creators' typical interactions and communities (DelMonaco). Another method is sticking to trending topics as there is a large saturation of material, so the content does not always spread as much.

BIPOC users and experiences with recommendation algorithms

BIPOC users are becoming more of a voice in bringing awareness to the harms of TikTok, both technically and socially. Williams conducted a study where Black creators shared content mitigation approaches to their interaction within the application. There is limited research on the nature of content BIPOC users encounter and how they interact with potentially problematic content. Some studies have examined specific content types such as when Hung et al (2023) conducted content analysis on videos tagged '*#racialtrauma*'. The team found a frequent theme of '*questioning and challenging oppression, denial and privilege*', where creators drew comparisons of their own experience against other creators (Hung, 2021). This theme reflects on the experience of BIPOC individuals on TikTok, where they question and discuss their own experiences surrounding racism. Existing research has concentrated on content creators, particularly how BIPOC creators deal with content suppression and algorithmic bias. Although the data from this study was not discussed in the context of mental health or feelings surrounding content by BIPOC

creators, it is important to note how BIPOC creators focus on education and advocacy through their content, to fight algorithmic bias.

Gaps in the literature

Throughout all the literature discovered, there has yet to be a focus of BIPOC user experiences. There's limited research on the nature of content BIPOC users encounter, especially on how they perceive and interact with potentially problematic content. While some studies have examined specific content types (e.g., Hung et al.'s study on '*#racialtrauma*' videos), there's a gap in understanding the broader content landscape for BIPOC users. A majority of the existing research has concentrated on content creators' experiences, particularly how BIPOC creators deal with content suppression. There's less information about the experiences of BIPOC individuals who primarily consume content on TikTok. Improving the TikTok experience is vital to creating an inclusive platform, as the neglect to amplify voices that should be seen reflects a failure to listen to those who deserve to be heard (Antoine, 2022).

Methodology

This pilot study utilizes semi-structured interviews to explore the nuanced experiences of BIPOC TikTok users, allowing us to capture the complexity of their perspectives. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study, providing their informed consent before participating. Measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality of participants' data, including anonymizing transcripts and securely storing recordings.

Research questions:

1. What is the nature of content BIPOC users encounter on their For You Page (FYP)?
2. How do BIPOC users perceive and interact with problematic content on TikTok?
3. What are BIPOC users' perceptions and understanding of TikTok's recommendation algorithm?
4. In what ways do BIPOC users attempt to influence the TikTok algorithm to curate their content experience?

Recruitment

The participants for the pilot study were selected based on specific inclusion criteria to ensure a diverse and relevant sample. We conducted recruitment by publishing a flyer, in the i3 Instagram and Slack, with the criteria titled '*Research Opportunity: We Want to Hear About your TikTok Experience*'. In the flyer we briefly explained the purpose of our study, inviting readers to join us in centring the voices of BIPOC users of TikTok. Eligibility criteria included:

1. BIPOC individual
2. Age between 18 and 40
3. A TikTok user
4. English speaker

The flier included a link to a Google form for potential participants to provide their contact information and confirm their eligibility. Emails were scheduled by giving each participant a few options for time slots. However, as we expand the number of participants, we will be using Calendly to make it easier for them to schedule time slots that work for our schedule as researchers. This flyer was available on i3's Instagram and Slack channels.

Data collection

Interviews were scheduled conveniently for participants and interviewers and conducted on Zoom. Upon conducting 10 semi-structured interviews, we transcribed the interviewers' answers and put them in a Google Sheet File, split by question. Each interview lasted between 20 and 40

minutes. All the interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.

Data analysis

We transcribed the interviewers' answers into an organized Google Sheet file, split by question. We fixed the transcription errors and only kept the complete answers from the participants, noting our follow-up questions. Then, each of us conducted qualitative coding, starting by writing out the initial themes for answers from all 10 participants. We included quotes that stood out to us in their answers, including a list of recurring themes. Then, we summarized those into focused codes - themes we've seen across multiple answers to the same question. Then, those focused codes were combined between answers to summarize findings for each question from the interview pool. For every response, we noticed similarities and themes across the questions to combine the topics and restructure the interviews. As is shown in Table 1, the age range of our participants varied between 19 and 27 instead of including adults in their 30s. This affected the scope of our study and only made the results applicable to the age group interviewed.

Participant #	Gender	Race	Participant Age
1	Female	Latino	24
2	Female	Latino	21
3	Female	Asian	21
4	Female	Asian	21
5	Female	Latino	27
6	Male	Black	22
7	Male	Latino	20
8	Female	Latino	20
9	Male	Latino	21
10	Female	Black	19

Table 1. Demographic information of interview participants

Results

Nature of content BIPOC users encounter on their for You Page (FYP)(RQ1)

We examined the types of content BIPOC users encounter on their TikTok FYP (Table 2). The most frequently encountered content type was BIPOC Representation, followed by Humor and Entertainment, and Cultural Relevance. While this diversity suggests a broad range of content, the relative scarcity of educational or critical discourse content may indicate an algorithmic preference for entertainment over information.

Types of Content	# of Participants
BIPOC Representation	9
Humor and Entertainment	8
Cultural Relevance	7
Educational Content	4
Content From Friends/Acquaintances	3

Table 2. Types of content encountered on FYP

BIPOC users' perceptions and interactions with problematic content (RQ2)

Participants identified problematic content, including misinformation, discriminatory material, and unintentional stereotypes. Their responses included disengagement, algorithm manipulation, and information-seeking. However, the effectiveness of these responses remains uncertain.

Misinformation

Half of the participants (5 out of 10) reported encountering misinformation, particularly regarding health. Participant 4 noted:

> *I have seen a lot of misinformation, especially health on TikTok. I've seen a lot of people saying 'Oh, do this, and you'll lose 50 pounds', or 'take this pill, and this will happen to you'* (Participant 4).

This underscores the prevalence of misleading health advice, which is particularly concerning for BIPOC users facing healthcare disparities.

Discriminatory content

A majority (6 out of 10) encountered discriminatory or stereotypical content. Participant 10 shared frustration: '*There are pages that are full of it. It's just like, that's a lot. You need to take a breather*' (Participant 10). This suggests that such content is pervasive enough to significantly impact user experience.

Unintentionally harmful content

Four participants noted content that, while not overtly discriminatory, perpetuated stereotypes. Participant 2 observed: '*I definitely don't think it's intentional. I think there's just a lot of stereotypes*' (Participant 2). This highlights the challenge of addressing unintentional bias in content creation.

Responses to problematic content

Participants employed various strategies:

1. Disengagement: the most common response (8 out of 10 participants) was to disengage from problematic content. Participant 6 explained:

> *I try to understand maybe they're just doing it for views for content. They're trying to get a reaction so I just kind of just be like, 'well it's not really my cup of tea, so I'll just skip to the next video* (Participant 6).

2. Reporting: a minority of participants (3 out of 10) mentioned actively reporting content they found problematic.

3. Algorithm manipulation: many participants (7 out of 10) used features like "Not Interested" to influence their algorithm. Participant 10 shared: '*I love to press 'not interested'. And also, just swiping away. I don't like, don't say, don't comment, don't favourite*' (Participant 10).

4. Information seeking: some participants (2 out of 10) engaged further by reading comments or seeking more information. Participant 3 noted:

> *I'll just interact with them, anyway. I definitely have commented on videos like that before just giving my personal opinion. But what I'll mostly do is look for more information.* (Participant 10).

These findings suggest that BIPOC users actively curate their experience and employ various strategies to mitigate exposure to problematic material.

BIPOC users' perceptions and understanding of TikTok's recommendation algorithm (RQ3)

Participants demonstrated an understanding of TikTok's algorithm, emphasizing engagement-based recommendations, data collection, and cross-platform influence. While most accepted this as inherent to social media, concerns over privacy and content manipulation were evident.

Engagement-based understanding

Nearly all participants (9 out of 10) believed that user engagement drives recommendations. Participant 9 explained:

> *I imagine a system behind the scenes that looks into how long you look at a certain type of video, what videos you like, what videos you bookmark and gives you recommended videos based on those stats* (Participant 9).

This indicates a sophisticated grasp of how modern recommendation systems operate.

Data collection awareness

Many (7 out of 10) were aware of TikTok's extensive data collection. Participant 5 remarked:

> *I don't convince myself that there's any resemblance of data privacy or security anymore. I know that whatever powers that be that control the things in my phone are stealing my data, and there's very little I can do about it* (Participant 5).

This reflects a resigned attitude towards data privacy.

Cross-platform influence

Half (5 out of 10) suspected TikTok recommendations were influenced by activities on other platforms. Participant 4 noted: '*I do have some suspicions that it also has access to other information. Maybe, like what I'm searching for on other platforms*' (Participant 4).

Location-based content

Some (4 out of 10) observed location-based content recommendations. Participant 7 explained: '*It definitely was based on my location at first, so I feel like just to get a basis on people*' (Participant 7).

Content manipulation beliefs

A minority (3 out of 10) believed TikTok manipulates content visibility. Participant 10 shared:

> *I think that specifically it shows, the most on the for you pages also when, like your analytics in terms of content, creators how their videos say things like shadow banned or the video within a for you page is pushed by what you as a like user and interact with the most* (Participant 10).

BIPOC Users' attempts to influence the TikTok algorithm (RQ4)

BIPOC users actively curate their content by engaging with preferred material, avoiding unwanted content, and periodically resetting the algorithm. However, these strategies suggest a reactive rather than an empowered approach.

Active engagement

Most participants (8 out of 10) engaged with desired content to shape their feed. Participant 2 noted:

> *I usually just, once I get to a video, I like or bookmark it. I have tried it to see if my theory is sometimes right. So, I just either keep liking videos, or commenting, or engaging with them for a long time* (Participant 10).

Searching for desired content

Many (6 out of 10) used search functions to refine their FYP. Participant 9 shared:

> *So, there's a show. I watch and I wanna see more content about it since I get it all on twitter. So, I started looking it up on Instagram or on TikTok. And I, my feed did get populated with more of those videos and memes around the show* (Participant 9).

Disengagement from unwanted content

Almost all participants (9 out of 10) actively disengaged from undesired content, often using the '*Not Interested*' feature.

Periodic algorithm reset

A few (2 out of 10) intentionally reset their algorithm. Participant 3 described: '*so, I actually tried to refresh my algorithm one day because I was just curious. And I just kept scrolling one video after the other*' (Participant 3).

Cross-platform manipulation

Some (3 out of 10) attempted to influence their TikTok feed through other platforms. Participant 5 noted: '*If I just Google things on my phone, my ads on TikTok will eventually change*' (Participant 5). These findings demonstrate that BIPOC users are not passive consumers but active participants in shaping their digital experience, using various strategies to curate their FYP and tailor their TikTok experience to their preferences.

Discussion

Content curation and representation

The high prevalence of entertaining (8/10 participants) and culturally relevant content (7/10 participants) on BIPOC users' FYPs demonstrates TikTok's effectiveness in curating personalized content, aligning with research on social media algorithms' ability to create tailored content ecosystems (Eg et al., 2023). The significant presence of BIPOC-centered content (9/10 participants) suggests success in promoting diversity and addressing historical underrepresentation in mainstream media (Titanji et al., 2022). However, the emphasis on entertainment over education (4/10 participants) raises questions about meaningful knowledge dissemination.

Navigating problematic content

All participants reported encountering problematic content, with a preference for disengagement (8/10) and overactive reporting (3/10). This behavior aligns with research on digital resilience strategies among marginalized communities (Du et al., 2020) and highlights ongoing content moderation challenges. However, this may not be effective in reducing exposure over time. Future studies could examine whether TikTok's algorithm adjusts based on disengagement, or if problematic content persists despite user efforts.

User agency and algorithm awareness

BIPOC users demonstrate high algorithm awareness and actively attempt to influence their content recommendations, challenging notions of algorithmic determinism and emphasizing user agency in shaping digital experiences. The findings highlight an ongoing tension between personalization and control. While users employ strategies to influence content recommendations, they also express scepticism about TikTok's neutrality. Theories of algorithmic bias (Noble, 2018) could provide a useful lens to further analyze these concerns.

Limitations and future work

Expanding participant diversity

This study included 10 participants, offering in-depth but limited perspectives. Future research should aim for a more diverse sample of BIPOC users, considering intersectional factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic background, and specific ethnic identities. This approach would provide a richer understanding of how different BIPOC subgroups interact with and perceive TikTok's algorithm, acknowledging the complexity of intersecting identities and experiences

Conclusion

User experiences with social media are vital as applications such as TikTok are an essential part of culture now. As we navigate '*Living in an AI-algorithmic World*,' understanding how BIPOC users interact with and are influenced by algorithm-driven platforms like TikTok becomes increasingly crucial. HCI scholars have been increasing scholarly material on the impact of this technology, but little is known about the user experiences of BIPOC individuals. In this paper, we present an interview study of 10 BIPOC TikTok users. We find that content mitigation is crucial to navigating online experiences and that users tend to stick to their communities while acting accordingly when dealing with permeable communities. We also discuss the findings with the literature on relevant topics and talk about how our findings can be used to consider overall TikTok user experiences. These insights contribute to our understanding of how diverse user groups engage with AI-driven content ecosystems, reflecting the broader implications of living in a world shaped by algorithmic processes and generative AI technologies. This research directly addresses the iConference 2024 theme of '*Living in an AI-algorithmic world*' by examining how BIPOC individuals navigate TikTok's AI-driven recommendation system. By centring BIPOC perspectives, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to create more equitable and inclusive AI-driven platforms, ensuring diverse user needs are prioritized as we continue to navigate our AI-algorithmic reality.

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