

Research Proposal

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Investigating (Implicit) Racial Bias and Social Stigma in TikTok Scrolling Behaviour: An Experimental Study

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Introduction

This proposed study aims to test whether racial bias and social stigma can be observed and tested among TikTok users. The study's objective is to test the influence of racial signals on users' scrolling behaviour on the popular social media platform TikTok. With the increasing prevalence of social media in our daily lives, it is crucial to understand how these platforms might perpetuate or reflect biases, such as racial bias. By employing experimental methods, we can gain insights into individuals' subconscious preferences and behaviours related to race-based content consumption.

Theory

The Social Identity Theory (SIT), proposed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979, suggests that individuals derive part of their identity from the social groups they belong to (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1981). In the context of TikTok scrolling behaviour, users' identification with specific racial or ethnic groups can influence their preferences and engagement with content. Users may be more inclined to interact with content that aligns with their social identity and exhibit a tendency to engage less with content created by individuals outside of their identified groups. This behaviour can be attributed to the psychological need for social belonging and the reinforcement of in-group identification.

According to Goffman's (1963) social stigma theory, a stigma refers to a characteristic, action, or reputation that leads to social disapproval in a specific manner. The theory suggests that certain groups in society experience rejection based on characteristics that are devalued within a specific social context. Within the context of TikTok or other online platforms, this theory suggests that individuals from stigmatized racial or ethnic groups may face reduced engagement with their content. The devalued characteristics associated with their group may lead to biases or prejudices, causing users to exhibit lower levels

of interaction or interest in the content created by members of these stigmatized groups. This behaviour can perpetuate social inequalities and contribute to the marginalization of these individuals within the digital space.

The Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995; Greenwald et al., 1998), a well-tested and applied method in experimental psychology, explores the concept of unconscious biases individuals may hold towards specific racial or ethnic groups. This test aims to shed light on how these biases can manifest in people's behaviour, and within this study's context, their TikTok scrolling behaviour. It is possible for users to unknowingly exhibit a preference for certain types of content based on race or ethnicity, without consciously realising it. The IAT approach could serve as a tool to uncover and explore these implicit biases in the setting of TikTok use.

Research Question

Do TikTok users demonstrate biased scrolling behaviour and differential content engagement influenced by the racial signals present in the TikTok videos, and to what extent are these behaviours indicative of implicit racial bias and social stigma?

Objective

The primary objective of this study is to investigate whether users demonstrate biased scrolling behaviour based on racial signals present in TikTok videos. By analysing users' choices to skip or select videos, we aim to uncover potential patterns of racial bias and discern how it influences content engagement on the platform. Potential racial signals that could be considered in the study may include the following:

1. Explicit Mentioning of Ethnicity or Race: Videos that explicitly mention or discuss ethnic or racial backgrounds, identities, or experiences. Either in audio or captions.
2. Representation of Diverse Content Creators: Videos created by individuals from different racial or ethnic backgrounds.
3. Stereotypical Depictions: Videos that perpetuate racial stereotypes or rely on caricatures of specific racial or ethnic groups.
4. Cultural References: Videos featuring cultural references, symbols, or practices associated with particular racial or ethnic groups.
5. Implicit Bias: Videos that may not explicitly mention race but contain subtle visual or auditory cues that imply or allude to racial or ethnic identities.

Method

1. Designing Stimuli: A series of TikTok accounts will be created, each featuring a curated selection of videos that contain varying degrees of racial signals. These signals may include explicit mentions of race, implicit cues, or diverse content creators.

2. **Experimental Task:** Study participants will be given access to the TikTok accounts and instructed to scroll through the videos while their interactions are monitored. They will be informed that their scrolling behaviour is being recorded but will not be explicitly informed about the study's focus on racial signals.
3. **Data Collection:** Various metrics will be collected, including the total time spent on each video, the decision to skip or select videos, and any additional user engagement (e.g., likes, comments). We will also need to screen-record the device in order to analyse the visual and audio content of watched videos and content.
4. **Data Analysis:** The collected data will be analysed using content coding of watched videos and statistical analysis of behavioural and meta data to identify any significant patterns in scrolling behaviour related to the presence of racial signals. Sociodemographic data of participants will be used for controls.

Ethical Considerations

1. **Informed Consent:** Participants will be provided with clear information about the study and they will have the opportunity to give informed consent before participating.
2. **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** All data collected will be treated with strict confidentiality. Participant identities will be protected, and data will be anonymised during analysis and reporting.
3. **Debriefing and Ethical Guidelines:** After completing the experiment, participants will be fully debriefed about the study's purpose and any potential implications. They will be provided with resources and contact information for support or further discussions.
4. **Issue of content selection:** How can we ensure ethical selection of content? what video to show and how to select accounts and videos?

Conclusion

This study aims to shed light on the relationship between racial signals and scrolling behaviour of TikTok users. The findings will contribute to the understanding of conscious and unconscious racial bias and social stigma of social media users to understand social media content consumption. By uncovering potential racial biases in content consumption, this research may inform future efforts to mitigate bias and promote a more inclusive online environment. The study hopes to contribute valuable insights to the field, fostering awareness and promoting a more inclusive and equitable social media landscape.

Variation

Building upon the proposed study's framework, I propose an additional variation/alternative that would focus on gender stigma and biases in TikTok content consumption. This investigation would seek to explore whether users' scrolling behaviours and content preferences

are influenced by the gender of the individuals featured in the TikTok videos. Specifically, the study would aim to assess if there is a predisposition among users to consume instructional or informative content presented by men, while viewing content featuring women as primarily for entertainment. The study would utilise similar methodology to the racial bias study, with gender signals being evaluated instead of racial signals. This could include the explicit gender of the content creator, stereotypical gender representations, gendered cultural references, and subtle cues that imply gender. This study would contribute to our understanding of gender-based content consumption and could provide valuable insights into perpetuated gender biases in the digital space, potentially informing future efforts to mitigate gender bias and promote gender equity in online environments.

References

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