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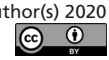

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'If the rise of the TikTok dance and e-girl aesthetic has taught us anything, it's that teenage girls rule the internet right now': TikTok celebrity, girls and the Coronavirus crisis

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Abstract

During the global lockdowns brought about by the Coronavirus crisis, TikTok saw a phenomenal rise in users and cultural visibility. This short essay argues that the media attention paid to TikTok during this time can be read as a celebration of girlhood in the face of the pandemic, and can be seen to contribute to the transformation of girls' 'bedroom culture' (McRobbie and Garber, 2006) from a space previously conceptualised as private and safe from judgement, to one of public visibility, surveillance and evaluation. Focusing on Charli D'Amelio, this essay argues that the increasing visibility of TikTok and rising celebrity of D'Amelio during the Coronavirus crisis continues and intensifies the longer history of young female celebrity culture, and obscures the dangers and impacts faced by girls around the world who are situated outside of the ideals embodied in TikTok stars like D'Amelio.

Keywords

Celebrity, Charli D'Amelio, Coronavirus, girls, TikTok

Introduction: TikTok as the 'antidote' to the Coronavirus crisis

By early April 2020, with up to half of the global population under some form of lockdown to slow the spread of Covid-19 (Sandford, 2020), opinion pieces, news stories and memes circulated in mainstream online media proclaiming that a commonly shared

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experience of staying at home during the Coronavirus crisis was that of boredom. Amid the humorous depictions of such boredom on social media, and the tips for increasing one's productivity and creativity in order to avoid boredom, were claims that – as one opinion piece in the United Kingdom's *Guardian* put it – TikTok was 'the perfect medium for the splintered attention spans of lockdown' (Haigney, 2020). The video-sharing social network began in China in 2016 and allows users to create and post short videos of between 3 and 60 seconds with accompanying music and audio-visual effects. At the time of writing, the social network has 800 million users globally (Iqbal, 2020).

Alongside daily reports of the rapidly increasing number of cases of and deaths by Covid-19, several outlets highlighted the 'monster 2020' (Newton, 2020) that TikTok has had: during the first week of lockdown in the United Kingdom downloads of the app increased by 34 percent (Kale, 2020), while in the United States the first 3 weeks of March saw an increase of 27 percent compared to the same period in February (Stassen, 2020). The consensus among these reports was that the Coronavirus lockdown was to thank for the exponential rise in TikTok's use and visibility. According to *Vice*, 'everyone' is now on TikTok (Joshi, 2020). It remains the case, however, that TikTok is predominantly a site of youth culture. The iconography, rituals, spaces and lifestyles of youth culture can be seen in TikTok's trends, most notably its dance and stunt challenges; in the mise-en-scène of its videos (so often filmed in messy teenage bedrooms); and in the demographics of some of the most-followed stars of TikTok, most of whom are under the age of 20. It is reported that 41 percent of TikTok users are aged 16–24 (Omnicore, 2020) and that children aged 4–15 spend almost as much time on TikTok as they do watching YouTube videos, one of the most popular apps among children (Perez, 2020).

Therefore, when claims are made such as that in *Stylist* (Preskey, 2020) that 'frivolous and funny videos of people dancing round their bedrooms is actually the perfect antidote to isolation right now', they can be seen to be both a celebration of youth culture and a proclamation of TikTok as a capitalist success story amid a global economic crisis. More specifically, as this essay will explore, such coverage of TikTok in recent months can be read as a celebration of *girlhood* in the face of the pandemic. The phenomenal rise in TikTok's cultural visibility during the Coronavirus crisis can be seen to contribute to the transformation of girls' 'bedroom culture' (McRobbie and Garber, 2006) from a space previously conceptualised as private and safe from judgement, to one of public visibility, surveillance and evaluation. TikTok facilitates – indeed invites and rewards, via the logic of its metrics – the viral spectacle of girls' bedroom culture.

Charli D'Amelio and the celebration of girlhood

On 25 March 2020, while increasing numbers of states around the world implemented stay-at-home orders and TikTok saw a rise in users, global news providers announced that then 15-year-old American Charli D'Amelio had become the most-followed creator on TikTok, surpassing previously most-followed star, 17-year-old Loren Gray's 41.3 million followers. The following month, it was widely covered that D'Amelio had gone on to become the first TikTok star to reach 50 million followers. At the time of writing in late June 2020, D'Amelio has an additional 16 million followers. Many of the videos posted by these girls are just a few seconds in length and play on a loop; they tend to

feature their creators (and sometimes friends or family members) dancing and lip-synching to hip hop music, direct to camera and filmed on a smart phone seemingly propped up on a surface. The videos are commonly filmed in 'mundane' locations such as the bedroom and other rooms or the garden within the family home. While the dances demonstrate the practice, skill, fitness and performance we might expect of a music video, the 'ordinary' mise-en-scène and facial expressions of the creators are key to TikTok's 'goofiness' and 'relatability', as I'll outline below.

It is significant that many of the most-followed stars of TikTok are not only young, but female, normatively feminine, white and wealthy. As *Refinery29* claims (Cortés, 2020) in its coverage of D'Amelio's TikTok stardom, 'if the rise of the TikTok dance and e-girl aesthetic has taught us anything, it's that teenage girls rule the internet right now'. The coverage of TikTok and D'Amelio during the current pandemic appears to both celebrate girlhood as an antidote to the fatal and damaging global effects of the Coronavirus crisis and to suggest that such visibility and the seeming power of the girl in mainstream digital media is a new phenomenon. However, the increasing visibility of TikTok and rising celebrity of D'Amelio during the Coronavirus crisis should be understood as first, a continuation and intensification of girl culture and the ideals of young female celebrity of the past two decades; and second, as an obscuring of the dangers and impacts faced by girls around the world who are situated outside of the ideals embodied in TikTok stars like D'Amelio.

As noted above, the bedroom is a recurring background in many TikTok videos. With so many of TikTok's creators and stars like D'Amelio in their teens and young adulthood, it is to be expected that many still live in the family home. This, combined with the conditions of lockdown during which the usual public spaces of youth culture have been closed (including schools, cafes and restaurants, retail and leisure complexes), encourages the bedroom within the family home to become a key site for video content creation. In relation to the more public spaces traditionally occupied by male youth, the bedroom has long been understood as a central organising space for the leisure, same-sex friendships, expression of sexual desire, and creative and playful production for girls in Western culture. McRobbie and Garber's (2006) feminist intervention into subcultural theory in 1975 was foundational in prompting such attention into 'bedroom culture' in girlhood studies. While there is not space here to discuss their essay in detail,[1] one important departure from that conceptualisation of the girl's bedroom in this new context of TikTok is that girls' bedroom culture can no longer be understood as 'private' or 'safe' from gendered surveillance. McRobbie and Garber (2006) suggested that, particularly in terms of girls' expressions of their emerging heterosexual desire of male pop stars in the company of their female friends: 'There are no risks involving personal humiliation or degradation, no chance of being stood up or bombed out' (p. 187). In digital spaces like TikTok, such risk of humiliation and degradation – whether in relation to the expression of sexual desire or in terms of one's self-representation – is very much present and embedded within the architecture and ethos of the platform, in the metrics of likes, visibility via shares, and in the critiques within the comments.

Of course, TikTok is not the first online platform to showcase the traditionally private space of the bedroom (and in particular, the girl's bedroom). However, in its positioning in relation to other current popular social networks, the spectacular mundanity of the

girl's bedroom is encouraged and showcased: as *The Sunday Times* (2020) claims, 'Where Instagram is glossy and filtered, TikTok is goofy and relatable'. The bedroom – and in particular the teenage girl's bedroom with mirrors, strewn with shoes and piles of clothes, and dressing tables topped with make-up and hair styling tools – becomes a signifier of this discursively constructed 'normality', TikTok's particular aesthetic of goofiness and relatability.

TikTok's construction of celebrity and femininity

Insidious political and ideological work in the construction of girlhood is carried out when claims are made that TikTok is 'a place for teens and tweens to come to be silly, unashamed, unfiltered – a tonic to the earnestness of Instagram, the stress of Snapchat, the verbal warfare of Twitter' (Lamont, 2020). Such descriptions of TikTok, combined with references to its invitations to normality and relatability, obscure the toxic nature of the judgement and harassment on TikTok and in the wider discourse surrounding the platform; TikTok is nonetheless part of what Alison Harvey (2019) calls the 'aggressive architecture' of the wider Internet. So-called silly, unashamed and unfiltered girlhood on TikTok, which is epitomised in a figure like D'Amelio is highly constructed, and its characteristics restricted to a narrow set of gendered, racialised, classed and sexualised ideals. In March 2020, *The Intercept* (Biddle et al., 2020) published leaked internal documents from the makers of TikTok instructing its moderators to algorithmically suppress posts by users deemed to appear 'abnormal', 'ugly' (indicating factors including wrinkles and obesity) and 'slummy', and to censor politically 'defamatory' and ideologically 'vulgar' content. With popularity on TikTok determined by algorithms and metrics – with the 'For You' feed upon opening the app populated with seemingly random videos, each with the potential to go viral – such suppression and censorship work to make invisible those subjects judged not to fit the ideals of young white femininity.

It should not surprise us that the most-followed TikTok star is a slim, white, normatively attractive teenage girl (with straight white teeth, long straightened hair and her feminine body frequently displayed via tight fitting crop tops). The family is conservative (it is frequently noted in interviews that D'Amelio's father recently ran as Republican Party candidate) and wealthy, signalled by D'Amelio's spacious bedroom and apparent private bathroom within the incredibly large family home which also features a swimming pool – all captured in TikTok videos. As a young female celebrity, D'Amelio's identity continues the valorised heteronormative and conventionally feminine subject of 21st-century tween popular culture that I have explored elsewhere (Kennedy, 2019). D'Amelio's short videos frequently feature her laughing, winking, sticking out her tongue, or mouth wide open, with her screwed up eyes (yet no wrinkles) a feature of her signature happy and care-free aesthetic, as are moments of D'Amelio seemingly making mistakes in dance routines, and involving her parents in the routines. 'Normality' and 'relatability' are often signalled in her choice of clothing, mixing oversized hoodies with hot pants, or joggers with crop tops reminding viewers that she is nonetheless feminine and sexually desirable. The open mouth, wide smile, laugh, tongue sticking out, and scrunched up nose are common signifiers of the 'silly normality' of TikTok, particularly among the similarly white, slim, normatively attractive feminine girl stars of the

platform. Beyond TikTok, though, this can be seen as an extension to what Natalie Coulter (2018) calls the 'esthetic of fun' of tween visual culture (p. 1), and to the adult postfeminist digital culture of spaces like Tumblr which are defined by what Akane Kanai (2019) terms an 'upbeat, resilient-but-relatable affective framework' (p. 67). Indeed, D'Amelio shares many similarities with the celebrities and protagonists of tween popular culture that I have examined (Kennedy, 2019), both in appearance and in her passion and talent for dance.

The 'other' girls

To return to *Refinery29*'s celebratory proclamation that girls now rule the Internet, it is rather a *distinctive ideal* of teenage girlhood that rules a *particular space* of the Internet right now. In an 'economy of visibility' (Banet-Weiser, 2018), the commodification of D'Amelio and the sheer scale of media attention paid to her during the Coronavirus takes the spotlight away from the damaging long-term effects that the pandemic is having on millions of girls globally. Algorithmic suppression and spectacularisation render some girlhoods hypervisible and others hidden in their shadows. Girls overshadowed in this economy of visibility are the young black women organising the Black Lives Matter marches across the United Kingdom (Mohdin, 2020) and the United States (Bellan, 2020), and the girls organising on TikTok to ensure empty seats at Trump rallies in the United States (Lorenz et al., 2020). These girls are on the Internet, but not in the spotlight shone on the likes of D'Amelio. Those not ruling the Internet right now include at least nine and a half million school-aged girls in low and lower middle-income countries who it is estimated will not to return to education following worldwide school closures (Malala Fund, 2020). Others excluded are the girls targeted in the increase in female genital mutilation (FGM) at home in Somalia during lockdown (Brown, 2020), and the estimated 2 million preventable cases of FGM likely to be undertaken worldwide in the pandemic and its aftermath (UNFPA, 2020). Those left invisible are the huge proportion of girls in India who currently have no access to free sanitary towels via school and whose families cannot afford to buy expensively priced sanitary products (Roy, 2020). Girls not ruling the Internet are those in the projected 13 million additional child marriages anticipated to take place globally in the decade following the current Coronavirus crisis (UNFPA, 2020) – including expected spikes in so-called 'honour' abuse and child marriages in countries such as the United Kingdom (Summers, 2020).

The spectacle and celebration of D'Amelio and her phenomenal rise to TikTok stardom should be understood as a continuation, and indeed intensification, of the construction of femininity and celebrity in contemporary girl culture (Kennedy, 2019). At the present moment, both the attention paid to D'Amelio and the claims that TikTok is providing us with a much-needed antidote to the Coronavirus crisis work to revive and deepen the dichotomy of the 'can do' and 'at risk' girls conceptualised by Anita Harris (2004), while obscuring and distracting from the very real and disastrous impacts that the global pandemic is having on millions of girls around the world. The can do girl must make her 'can do-ness' visible for celebration on TikTok. When claims are made that, as Sirin Kale (2020) states, 'TikTok is a curative to boredom', we must remind ourselves

that boredom is a feeling experienced by the privileged. As part of this curative, by labelling D'Amelio the 'queen' of TikTok as so much of the media coverage does (see, for example, Lamont, 2020), much like the princess of tween popular culture that I have discussed elsewhere (see, for example, Kennedy, 2019) she is valued as the ideal feminine subject of the contemporary postfeminist, neoliberal cultural context. The girls at the forefront of the Black Lives Matter marches and anti-Trump protests are not bored – they have had enough of the inequalities in the status quo and are organising and participating in political activism, taking to the streets during the pandemic. The girls who need our feminist and activist attention, those facing long-term impacts to their education, physical and mental health, social and familial relationships, and future economic and social prospects – and in some cases, potentially fatal consequences – as a result of the Coronavirus crisis, are those who do not get to experience boredom or attain the value placed on figures like D'Amelio. The curative we should be searching for is that which enables the safety, security and liberation of all girls during this crisis and its aftermath.

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Note

1. For a detailed critique of McRobbie and Garber's essay, see Mary Celeste Kearney's 2007, revisiting of it.

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