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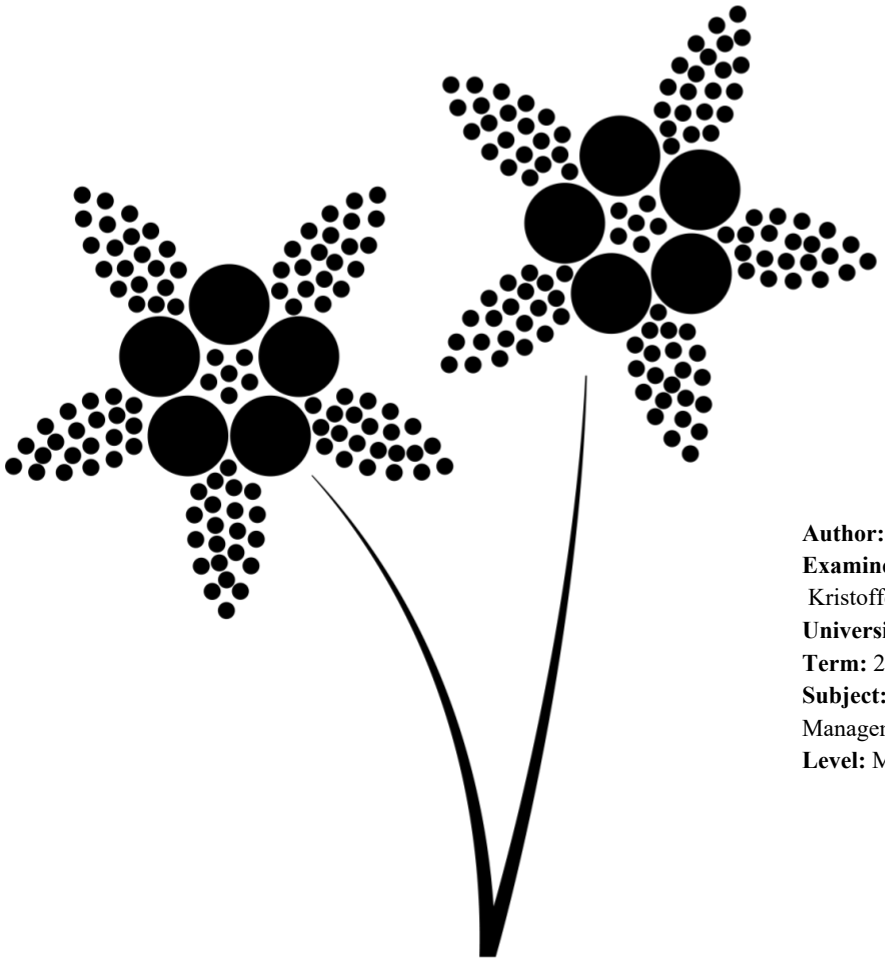
TikTok's Engagement Logic, Misogynistic Content, and the Limits of Platform Governance



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1 Introduction

TikTok has, as of 2023, achieved having one billion active monthly users. This makes it one of the most powerful forms of communication infrastructure in the world. However, behind the veneer of the "entertainment-based" design, there is a surveillance machine, a "dual accumulation model" that makes money out of the attention of the user in the form of advertisements, and algorithmically promotes content that keeps the user occupied for the longest period of time (Fuchs, 2024). Part of the content that thrives in such a situation is misogynistic content. Misogynistic content, also called manosphere content, is spreading like wildfire on TikTok, not because of the nature of the governance mechanisms of TikTok, but partly because of the incentives left behind by the governance mechanisms.

This is not a new phenomenon. There has always been a problem in the between the relationship of the content on social media platforms and the nature of the social media. Historically, the response to this phenomenon has been content moderation. However, this is fundamentally flawed approach, according to research by Hill & Shtern (2024).

This paper argues that the rise of misogynistic content on TikTok can be explained by the economic logics of engagement, in which the algorithm of TikTok rewards misogyny because of its potential to facilitate engagement. Self-regulatory governance has failed to challenge economic logics, and for the actual realization of democratic communication rights, there is a need for structural regulation of algorithmic design. To make the argument of this paper, there are four parts. First, there is an exploration of the political economy of TikTok and its implications for the algorithmic conditions of content amplification. Second, there is a discussion of the manosphere content in the context of Fuchs's (2024) theory of digital right-wing authoritarianism and the argument that misogyny in TikTok content is not new. Third, there is a critical discussion of the governance of TikTok, from self-regulatory governance to the DSA, and the argument that these governance strategies are insufficient. Fourth, there is a discussion of human rights and democratic communication theory and its implications for what the regulation of algorithms in TikTok could look like.

2 TikTok and the attention economy

The rise of TikTok is not merely a cultural phenomenon, but the result of a carefully engineered business model designed to maximize engagement and monetize user attention at scale. As a social media platform owned by ByteDance, a Chinese conglomerate, TikTok follows a dual accumulation model, as mentioned by Fuchs (2024). The platform generates revenue through two methods: selling targeted advertisements to brands and selling digital products such as filters and stickers to its users. Both of these models rely on a single condition: ensuring that the user stays on the platform for as long as possible. ByteDance leverages the digital labor of its user base, where the user generates content, watches videos, and clicks on advertisements. The user does not receive any monetary reward and instead their data is sold as a product to the advertisers. The user is not the customer; the user is the product.

TikTok gathers detailed information regarding all facets of user behavior, including what videos users watch to completion, skip, share, and like, as well as

user behavior obtained through third-party platforms outside of TikTok itself (Fuchs, 2024). This surveillance allows the algorithm to promote whatever it deems creates the most user interaction, no matter the social implications. As Fuchs (2024) states, TikTok is “a surveillance machine that treats user data as a commodity to be exploited for capital accumulation, not for democratic communication.”

The short-form nature of TikTok videos only serves to make the problem worse. TikTok videos are between a minute and a minute and a half long and represent “the acceleration and compression of culture characteristic of contemporary high-speed capitalism” (Fuchs, 2024, p.475). This format naturally lends itself to videos that are emotionally provocative, which is exactly what the manosphere creators have learned how to do so well.

This is not an isolated problem within the world of social media, although the algorithm and nature of TikTok make it significant. Puppis et al. (2024) state social media sites "shape communication in the public sphere in a profound way through the design of algorithmic systems that determine the content shown or not shown to users," and these systems are "biased" in a way that will likely "reproduce or reinforce societal inequalities" (p.8). However, the algorithm of the site is not a neutral entity but a form of governance that promotes the forms of content that are inherently provocative by nature and misogynistic content that can garner both support and opposition equally well.

TikTok’s corporate understanding of itself conceals this reality. Its mission is to “inspire creativity and bring joy.” It sees itself as a force that has a net positive effect on human connections (Fuchs, 2024, p. 476). This understanding of itself “disregards criticisms of exploitation and surveillance by wrapping its business logic in a discourse of community and creativity.”

3 Misognyny as a structural outcome

TikTok’s algorithmic approach to engagement does not happen in a vacuum. To fully grasp why misogynistic content associated with the manosphere thrives on TikTok, it’s necessary to look at it in relation to Fuchs’s (2024) understanding of right wing authoritarianism.

According to Fuchs (2024), RWA has four defining features: the leadership principle, nationalism, the friend-enemy scheme, and militant patriarchy. Militant patriarchy “encompasses the idealisation of the soldier, patriarchy, the subordination of women, war, violence, and terror as means of politics.” (p.393). The manosphere—men’s rights activists, influencers, and incels—is a direct expression of RWA’s militant patriarchy. It’s a direct expression because it represents misogyny as truth-telling, self-improvement, or countering feminism. This rhetorical packaging of misogyny is important because it enables it to exist on TikTok without being categorized as hate speech.

This is explained by Fuchs (2024): "Patriarchal and sexist influencer capitalism is an integral part of the overall problem of patriarchal and sexist capitalism." The structure of the influencer economy of platforms like TikTok is designed to perpetuate patriarchal and sexist ideologies. Advertisers on TikTok want influencers who embody "stereotypical ideals of beauty, perfection, fitness, health, youth, fame, and recognition." (p. 309). Male influencers who embody qualities of

competitiveness and confidence gain more followers and therefore more influence. The manosphere influencers have perfected this. Men like Andrew Tate created content that engaged users through a combination of aspirational masculine identity and increasingly misogynistic content, ensuring through the algorithm that users were presented with Tate's content after they had engaged in content related to it. The research by Hasl et al. (2024) shows how this content is consumed by teenage users through "affective homosocial currencies," which are peer-based engagement behaviors that are read by the algorithm as high value and therefore amplified accordingly.

This is an example of "algorithmic oppression," as described by Noble (2018) and referenced by Fuchs (2024): "when an algorithm biases information toward largely stereotypic and decontextualized results for certain groups." Noble developed this concept in reference to racial bias, but it is equally relevant for gender. The TikTok algorithm does not measure for social impact. It measures for behavioral signals. Misogynistic content is highly effective in this regard, as it is guaranteed to elicit strong emotional responses from users on both sides of the issue.

Crucially, Fuchs (2024) argues that there shouldn’t be moral panic. The argument is not that TikTok is especially problematic or that the user is a passive victim of radicalization. Rather, social media in capitalist societies is “antagonistic communication systems,” and their effects are contradictory. Instead it is the lack of governance over the profit driven algorithmic design. The manosphere existing on TikTok is not a problem, but it is a result of a platform that is designed to maximize user engagement while failing to hold engagement algorithm accountable.

4 The limits of content regulation

The response of the governance to the manosphere on TikTok, facilitated by the algorithm, can be seen to be operating on three levels. These levels are self-regulation, the influence of advertisers and the need for commercial pressure, and legislation in the form of the Digital Services Act. All three levels have seen activity. However, none of these levels has seen a response to the conditions under which the manosphere is able to thrive. This set of levels and activities can be seen to be part of the "content regulation turn," a set of patterns in the response of the governance to algorithmic problems, as described by Hill and Shtern (2024).

The first level of response is self-regulation. The community standards of TikTok prohibit content that "dehumanizes" people on the basis of gender. The company periodically announces its action against prominent creators of the "manosphere" movement. However, as van Dijck et al. (2024) show, this only leads to a "waterbed effect" in which the banned user finds a new home on some other platform, such as Telegram or BitChute, and recreates their following. More relevantly, deplatforming has no effect on the algorithm. The algorithm that got tens of millions of users looking at the deplatformed account is still in effect. The conditions under which it was able to amass its influence are unchanged.

The response of advertiser-driven governance was similarly unsuccessful. The Global Alliance for Responsible Media was formed to bring together the platforms and the advertisers to develop content suitability guidelines. However, this merely serves to "reinforce platform's apolitical and ahistorical approach to

content moderation." There is a focus on content that is illegal, but the algorithmic amplification of content that is merely harmful is not. Most manosphere content is perfectly within the brand safety floor. Advertiser-driven governance is about protecting the advertisers. It is not about protecting democracy.

The EU's Digital Services Act is the most ambitious form of formal governance. Very large online platforms are required to undertake a systemic risk assessment, provide algorithmic transparency, and remove illegal content. The European Commission initiated formal proceedings against TikTok in 2024 for risks in relation to addictive design and the protection of minors. However, the DSA is still a form of content-focused governance. Mansell (2024) argues that the DSA is "nested in a framework in which restrictions on free speech are only permitted if proportionate." This is a difficulty in dealing with content that is harmful but technically legal. Andrews (2024) argues that "regulation is overwhelmingly content-focused, oriented towards the removal of illegal content." However, it question why such content is being disseminated. Hill and Shtern (2024) argue that "the current framework chases an impossibility and fails to engage with the underlying issues that favor the incumbents." It is concerned with content, not design; outputs, not systems; individual bad actors, not the business models that make bad actors profitable.

5 Solutions for structural governance

Having established the above with regard to the existing governance structures, the present section proposes three key transformations: a move away from content and towards algorithmic governance, a move away from market values and towards human rights-based regulation, and a move towards feminist and gender transformative approaches which do not treat online misogyny as an incidental feature.

The first change proposed is the shift from content governance towards algorithmic governance. Pupis et al. (2024) propose: "The pressing need for effective algorithmic accountability in response to digital platforms...Algorithms that reconfigure content recommender systems to increase content diversity". This is because, "Algorithms...are programmed and designed to promote issues that create maximum public attention, irrespective of their social, cultural or democratic relevance" (Trappel et al., 2024), which "is a logic that is opposite to democratic communication" (Trappel et al., 2024). What should be done is imposing an independent audit of TikTok’s algorithm while ensuring that the maximization of engagement is not structurally linked to the promotion of harmful content.

The second shift is to implement regulatory requirements in human rights rather than the correction of the market. Jørgensen (2024) suggests that in regulating the commercial use of communicative life, “regulators will need to interfere in the business model of the most powerful companies of today.” Mansell (2024) reaches a similar conclusion in suggesting that effective regulation will necessitate “diminishing or abandoning the neoliberal framings of digital innovation and commercial data economies as a viable pathway towards securing public values.” In the context of TikTok, risk assessments under regimes such as the DSA will need to be evaluated in terms of democratic communication rights rather than solely in terms of the law. The relevant question will no longer be whether the content is illegal, but rather if the platform’s design is consistent with a

“communicative rationality of democratic human flourishing” as described by Gurumurthy & Chami (2024).

The third shift concerns how regulation conceptualizes harm. In a gender-transformative approach to communication regulation, harm is no longer defined by the manner in which speech regulates the law, but rather by the manner in which the platform’s design excludes women and girls from democratic life by promoting content that normalizes their subordination. Whether the platform’s design excludes women and girls from the “positive freedoms for the right to public participation for everyone, rather than only negative freedoms from undue restrictions on speech” as described by Padovani et al. (2024). A similar perspective is offered by Fuchs (2024), who suggests that the appropriate response to the regulation of social media is not censorship or laissez-faire tolerance but instead “structural intervention in the political and economic conditions that allow for the existence of dark side content.”

These three shifts combine to suggest a new governance approach that is not focused on the removal of individual pieces of problematic content but rather on changing the underlying conditions of content circulation. Andrews’ (2024) observation that “the imperfection of regulation is preferable to the absence of it” is well-taken, but it misses that an imperfection that does not challenge TikTok’s engagement maximization system is not a governance approach but a replacement of it.

6 Conclusion

This paper has argued that the proliferation of misogynistic content on TikTok is a structural issue rather than a moderation issue. Until platform governance treats platform design as seriously as it treats platform content, measuring risk in relation to democratic communication rights rather than legal harm thresholds, and grounding its approach in a framework that treats misogyny as a structural issue rather than a contingent one, the underlying conditions that make it profitable to circulate such content will not be challenged.

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