COMMODIFICATION OF THE TIKTOK CONSUMER: A USES AND GRATIFICATIONS APPROACH TO DIGITAL CONSUMERISM IN SRI LANKA

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This study focuses on giving an insight into the TikTok consumer activism from a Sri Lankan perspective. The uses and gratifications theory is applied as the theoretical framework to assist in understanding the reasons users get involved in TikTok. The study looks at the kinds of gratifications they sought and the consequent broader implications of the platform. In Sri Lankan context, the popularity of TikTok mostly among the young generation is evident in the way it shapes how they express themselves, their choice of entertainment and lifestyle trends. The success of TikTok as a social media platform can be credited largely to its algorithm. The algorithm uses machine learning to analyse user behaviour by analysing video likes, shares, watch time, and interactions, to curate a personalized "For You" feed to cater the specific user interests. To understand the uses and gratifications of TikTok consumers in Sri Lanka, a survey was designed and administered online. The survey included both close-ended and open-ended questions to apprehend a detailed image of the TikTok consumer profile. Convenience sampling method was employed to gather responses targeting individuals aged 18 and above, ensuring representation across different age categories. The survey data finds that the majority of the respondents consume TikTok for entertainment. Further, a considerable number of respondents enjoyed online shopping on TikTok. With reference to platform algorithm and recommendation system, it can be argued that ability of the algorithm to customize and personalize the content to cater the individual user preferences and consequently enhance the user experience and satisfaction is the true success of TikTok's user attraction and retention. Hence, it can be argued that the role of the algorithm includes content discovery and engagement driven by user interactions with content through likes, comments and shares. Such interactions refine the platform recommendations and personalization, creating a loop of deeper engagement and enhancing gratifications. Hence, it can be argued that the platform reach far beyond entertainment and social interaction, serving as a powerful medium for sales and marketing of diverse range of commodities subsequently crafting market driven behavioural and attitudinal change among users.

Keywords: TikTok, uses and gratifications, digital consumerism, social media, algorithm, brand engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

TikTok is a social media platform that allows users to create, share, and discover short video clips. In general, these videos accompany a music track and cover a plethora of genres from lip-syncing, dancing, comedy to informative content and brand promotions. Since its international release in 2018, it has become a global sensation attracting both young and the old catering to various age groups and demographics. Its popularity has been attributed to its user-friendly interface, engaging content, and powerful algorithmic recommendations, consequently making it a significant player in the social media landscape (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020).

The platform is predominantly popular among the younger generation. According to a report by Statista (2021), approximately 60% of TikTok users are between the ages of 16 and 24. Auxier and Anderson (2021) articulate that its short video format, interactivity, audio-visual effects and integration of trending music have made the platform resonate well with these age groups and demographics.

According to data reports retrieved from ByteDance, Sri Lanka has 4.44 million TikTok users aged 18 and above. Further, its ad reach is reported as 36% of the local internet users (Kemp, 2024), which elaborates the potential of TikTok to influence the local public at a mass scale, crafting attitudinal and behavioral change. Consequently, the platform demonstrates its potential to affect lifestyle choices and sociocultural identities of the younger generation.

Objectives of the Study
This study aims to:
1. Understand the uses and gratifications of TikTok users in Sri Lanka.
2. Analyze the motivations behind user engagement on the platform.
3. Explore the broader implications of TikTok on lifestyle choices and sociocultural identities.
4. Assess the role of TikTok's algorithm in shaping user behavior.

This study focuses on giving an insight into TikTok consumer activism from a Sri Lankan perspective. The uses and gratifications theory is applied as the theoretical framework to assist in understanding the reasons users get involved in TikTok. The study looks at the kinds of gratifications they sought and the consequent broader implications of the platform.

TikTok Algorithm and Recommendation System
Arguably, the success of TikTok can be credited largely to its algorithm. The algorithm uses machine learning to analyze user behavior by probing into video likes, shares, watch time, and interactions, to curate a personalized "For You" feed to cater the specific user interests. This feed features an endless scroll of videos delivered by the platform to the user interface, ensuring that the content remains relevant and engaging, subsequently ensuring user gratification (Covington, Adams, & Sargin, 2016).

The recommendation strategy is designed with a two-step flow. First, it shows new videos to a small subset of users. If these users interact positively with the video, it proceeds to the second stage where it is shown to a larger audience. This iterative process helps viral content spread rapidly and ensures that users are continually exposed to new and engaging content (Silfwer, 2022). This system not only enhances user engagement but also influences user behavior and preferences by continuously presenting content that aligns with their interests and preferences.

Uses and Gratifications Theory in the Context of Social Media

The uses and gratifications theory (UGT) provides a comprehensive theoretical framework to understand the attitude and behavior of the media consumer. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), articulate that media users actively seek out specific media to satisfy particular needs or desires. Accordingly, an individual may consume media to gain various gratifications including entertainment, information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and escapism.

Even though the theory was developed during the analog era, contemporary researchers have successfully applied the theory to social media, to explore the user engagement of web 2.0 platforms in the light of Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. TikTok users may crave content for entertainment purposes by watching funny or compelling video content, or for knowledge from informative and instructional videos, and to make social connections by interacting with TikTok influences or other fellow users (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Hence, it can be argued that the theory can be utilized to understand the needs and desires that drive the TikTok consumer and at the same time potential of the platform to customize content to satisfy these individual needs.

METHODOLOGY

To understand the uses and gratifications of TikTok consumers in Sri Lanka, a survey was designed and administered online via Google Forms. The survey included both close-ended and open-ended questions to apprehend a detailed image of the TikTok consumer profile. Consequently, the survey included eight close-ended questions designed to quantify user demographics, screen time, motivation and engagement. Additionally, two open-ended questions were also included to facilitate descriptive user experiences, expectations, desires and needs, with reference to TikTok as a social media platform.

Convenience sampling method was employed to gather responses from TikTok consumers in Sri Lanka. The survey targeted individuals aged 18 and above, ensuring representation across different age categories. The survey was disseminated through various social media platforms to reach the desired purposive target group.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was open for responses for a period of three weeks. During this period 71 individuals participated and 62 of the respondents completed the survey. The data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data from the close-ended questions were quantized to facilitate descriptive statistical analysis to identify trends and patterns in TikTok consumer attitudes and behavior. Thematic analysis was employed for qualitative data from the open-ended questions.

Limitations

It is important to highlight that, there are several limitations that comes with this study. Arguably, the convenience sampling method employed by this study may not provide a comprehensive representation of the entire Sri Lankan population. Considering the exploratory nature of this study it can be argued that the sample size is adequate for this study, but it may not capture the entire spectrum of the Sri Lankan demographic diversity. Furthermore, there is potential that the respondents may provide socially acceptable responses driven by ideological elements creating social desirability bias anomalies in the data. Acknowledging these limitations, the study shows the potential to understand the uses and gratifications of the TikTok consumer from a Sri Lankan perspective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey data reveals TikTok user patterns and activism among Sri Lankan consumers. The findings were interpreted utilizing the Uses and Gratifications Theory to understand the user behavior and effect of platform algorithm on user activism and interaction.

The survey data indicates varied levels of time based engagement among the TikTok consumers. A majority of the respondents (40%) claimed that they spend one to two hours on the platform daily. 13% claim that they spend over 3 hours on the platform, which is the highest level of screen time reported from the respondents for this study and 27% spent 2 to 3 hours on the platform. The screen time data reveal how addictive the platform can become when someone engaged with it. Hence the platform show the ability to attract and retain its consumers for an extended periods of time. This can be attributed to its content form and the algorithm driven recommendation system.

Motivations, Engagement and Behavior of the TikTok User
According to survey data majority of the respondents consume TikTok for entertainment (74%), where they seek gratifications in the light of enjoyment and relaxation by indulging in its plethora of shot video content. On the other hand, 37% of the consumers claim that they were tempted to make a purchase on the platform. Further, a considerable number of respondents enjoyed online shopping on TikTok. Hence it can be argued that there are diverse genres of content as well as activities on TikTok that could satisfy diverse needs and desires of its consumer base.

The survey reveals that the TikTok consumers in general finds its content relatable and unique. They attribute these feature as the reason behind their consumption of the platform. With reference to platform algorithm and referencing system, it can be argued that the ability of the algorithm to customize and personalize the content to cater the individual user preferences and consequently enhance the user experience and satisfaction is the true success of TikTok's user attraction and retention.

The survey also highlights the role played by the platform in influencing consumer behavior and brand engagement. The study indicates that more than half the respondents follow brands on TikTok. Further, considerable number of them follow influences and celebrities on the platform. They claim that they respond to the trends and lifestyle choices presented on the platform. Arguably, this validates potential of the platform to drive consumer behavior and attitudinal changes through engaging and tailor-made targeted content.

Algorithms and Recommendations for Uses and Gratifications
It can be argued that the TikTok consumer is driven by enjoyment and relaxation that the platform provides through entertainment, lifestyle trends and related user interactions on the platform. These uses and gratifications are enhanced by the systematic recommendations delivered on to the users personalized You feed of the platform. This phenomenon has the potential to keep the consumer under the implication that the platform is a source of information, motivation and inspiration for the connected individual and it keeps him/her up-to-date with, current trends, new ideas and life choices.

The consumers identify the platform as a space for social interaction. Many users follow influencers and celebrities on the platform. Such online interactions and enjoyments with their favorite personalities and personas provide them the sense of belonging in a community otherwise far from their reach. Further, the platform also connects them with the likeminded fellow consumers creating a customized digital sphere that makes them comfortable, where they could find it easy to connect and communicate. This notion of connectedness and engagement facilitates socialization and community among the consumers. The lifestyle choices and fashion trends together with brand influence shows the potential to create the notion of uniqueness, individuality and personal identity in the consumer.

The platform algorithm contributes immensely to simulating various types of gratifications in its consumers. It demonstrates the capability of the platform to provide personality gratifications, content gratifications and social gratifications by personalizing the user experience. The personalized content delivery guarantees the continuity of tailored video feed, subsequently driving extended screen time and deeper emotional engagement. Hence, it can be argued that the role of the algorithm includes content discovery and engagement driven by interacting with content through likes, comments and shares. Such interactions subsequently further refine the platform recommendations and personalization, creating a loop of deeper engagement and enhancing gratifications. It is evident that

such consumer satisfaction could lead to positive responses to advertisements and brand engagement creating brand loyalty. Subsequently, the algorithms demonstrate the potential to influence consumer behavior towards platform driven market trends and brand promotions.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that TikTok as a social media platform exhibits its potential to influence cultural and lifestyle trends, driven by market forces creating significant sociocultural impact. Hence, it can be argued that the platform reaches far beyond entertainment and social interaction, serving as a powerful medium for sales and marketing of a diverse range of commodities. As in any commercially driven social media platform, TikTok commodifies the consumer and the consumer activism and related big data repositories to create a lucrative and active marketing platform for its stakeholders to promote and sell their goods and services. Such commodification and related market activism raise questions regarding user safety, privacy, and related ethical considerations. This study could be further extended to address these concerns related to social media practices and platform responsibilities. Subsequently, the study identifies the importance of expanding the scope of the research to explore long-term implications of TikTok consumerism and the ethical considerations related to platform algorithms and its machine learning process. Further, explorations and understanding of social media platforms will facilitate to create a healthy and sustainable digital environment.

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