TIKTOK'S 'FOX EYE' TREND AND EVERYDAY ACTIVISM: GEN Z AGENCY IN AN AUDIOVISUAL NARRATIVE CASE STUDY

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Introduction

TikTok, a Chinese video making and sharing platform, has amassed a considerable number of users across the world. A wide range of short-form videos are recorded, edited, circulated, and consumed on the platform, mostly by the younger populations like Gen Z. While the popular discourse has often considered TikTok as merely an entertaining corner of the internet, since 2020 more people have increasingly realized its potential for youth activism (Abidin, 2021). Some notable examples include the use of TikTok to support the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, spread climate change awareness, and 'sabotage' Trump's Tulsa rally. In this paper, we examine TikTok as an emerging, 'independent' activist space for Gen Z to explain how they make use of the platform affordances for everyday activism. We argue for TikTok's distinct audiovisual features in enhancing users' capacity for civic engagement and participation. Specifically, we use the 'fox eye' trend as a case study to illustrate how TikTok allows young people – Asian diasporic communities in particular – to create *audiovisual narratives* of personal experiences and stories to speak up against anti-Asian racism.

Digital activism has been a dynamic field of scholarly inquiry. In the age of social media, a substantial body of research has highlighted the innovative features of various social media platforms in supporting activist campaigns (e.g. Murthy, 2018; Sinpeng, 2021; Uldam & Askanius, 2011). Among this extensive literature, a notable stream has highlighted the potential of online activism in creating personal and collective narratives to challenge dominant discourses. Yang (2016), for example, emphasized the narrative dimension of hashtag activism. During the BLM movement, activists on Twitter shared their 'personal stories [which] are linked to the broader social issue and shared with the public through the use of hashtag' (Yang, 2016, p. 15). In this sense, hashtag activism

assumes a narrative form and thus has *narrative agency*, which refers to 'the capacity to create stories on social media by using hashtags in a way that is collective and recognized by the public' (Yang, 2016, p. 14). Similarly, hashtags are commonly used in TikTok videos. TikTok creators often assign a collated set of hashtags to link their videos with broader trending topics. That said, TikTok's narrative form is distinct from that of Twitter alike for an obvious reason: it is a video sharing platform.

In light of the above contexts, this paper asks how young people mobilize TikTok's audiovisual functions for activist purposes. We examine young Asian users' critical responses towards the fox eye trend on TikTok to understand the role of the platform's audiovisual elements in facilitating the creation of online narratives. The trend is characterized by celebrities and ordinary TikTok users posting videos and photos where they wear make-up to achieve almond-shaped eyes, often accompanied with a migraine pose (See Figure 1). Despite its popularity across social media platforms, the trend has been slammed by many for its racist connotations.
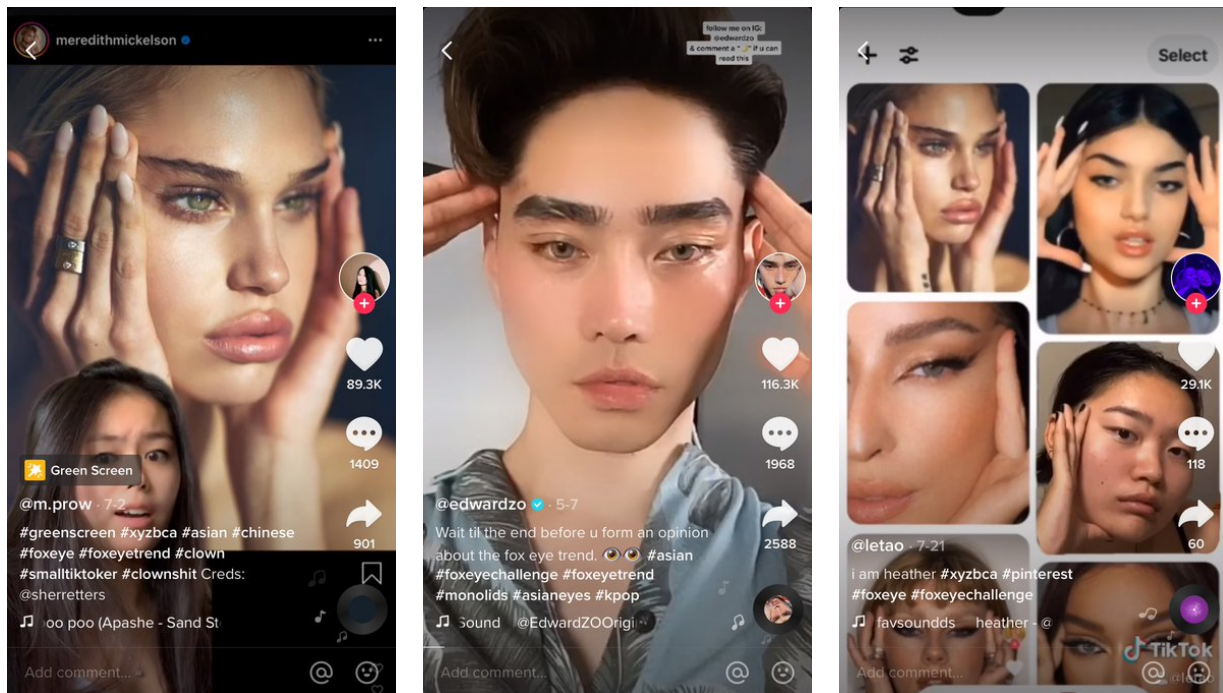

Figure 1: examples of the fox eye trend

Method

To answer the research question, we have applied a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the audiovisual narratives in TikTok videos in relation to the fox eye trend. Adopting a purposive sampling technique, data collection began with using the top three related hashtags (as of November 2020) for keyword search on TikTok. The three hashtags are #foxeye, #foxeyechallenge and #foxeyetrend. We have sampled specifically the top 10 videos under each hashtag made and uploaded by self-identifying Asian users. This small sample enabled us to concentrate our analysis on

the audiovisual complexities of TikTok posts, and was one of the three case study trends in a larger project on East Asian diaspora cultures on TikTok. These video data were then manually and inductively coded to identify emerging themes and modes of presentation. A codebook was then developed for the two researchers to maintain a consistent approach towards analyzing the data.

Findings

This paper generates three related findings.

First, young Asian users have created and uploaded TikTok videos featuring a variety of themes in relation to the fox eye trend. Some notable examples include historical popular representation of Asians, personal experiences of racism, impossible beauty standards, jokingly advocating for countertrends, among others (Figure 2). Collectively, these videos aim to emphasize the 'problems' associated with the trend – that is, it is racially insensitive and builds on cultural appropriation. In this sense, TikTok becomes an avenue for young people to challenge dominant discourses through video production.
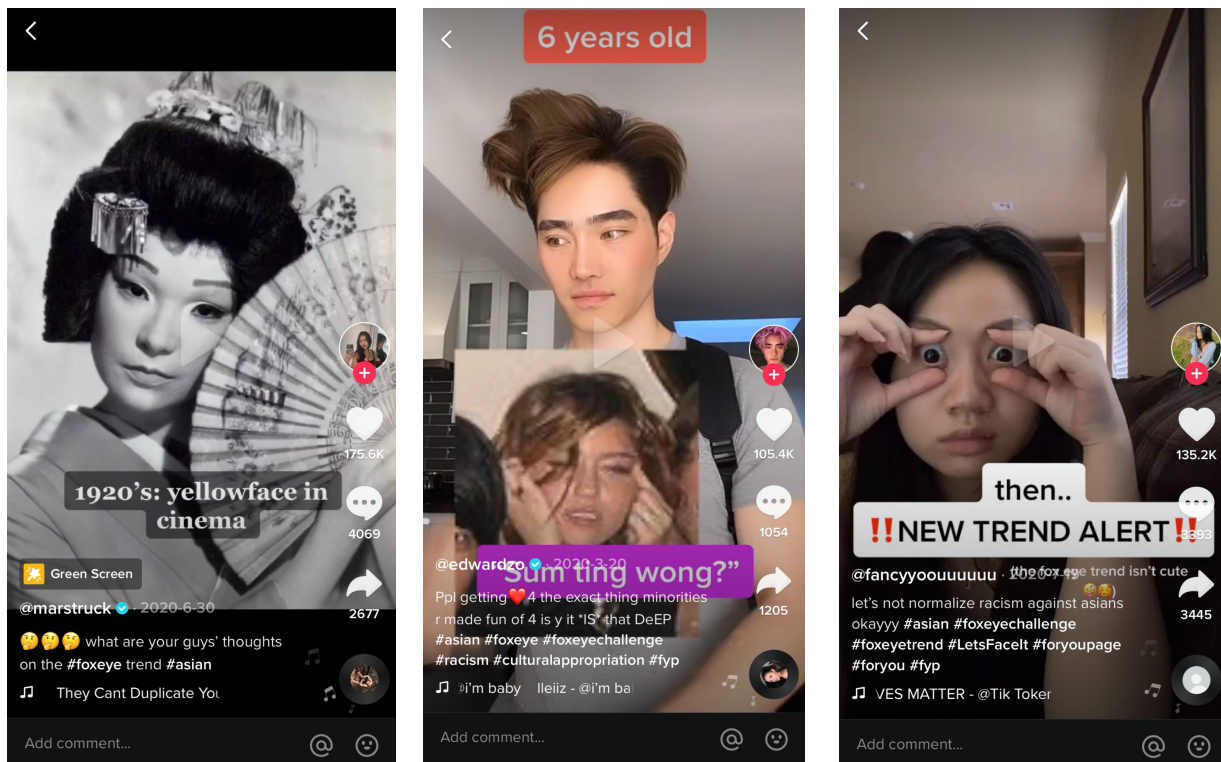

Figure 2: selected themes of TikTok posts

The second finding suggests three main types of narratives constructed through the videos. The **first** type is historical. This narrative is characterized by the verbal and (audio)visual presentation of past public representations of Asians or the creators' personal experiences of racism in childhood or the everyday. Such a narrative mostly

follows a chronological structure in organizing materials and stories to illustrate how the contemporary fox eye trend is rooted in the historical discrimination against Asians. The **second** type is educational. This narrative is featured by an intentionally conversational mode of presentation. The creators provide a first-person account of the racist nature of the trend and the migraine pose, which is often followed by an advocacy for actions such as stopping the trend or jokingly suggesting an alternative trend. The **third** type is affective. While it is common for narratives to include emotional components, this last type is characterized by explicit expression of emotions such as anger, contempt or pride. Personal stories or observations are often used to pave the way for the emotional climax at the end of the videos. It is worth noting, however, that these narratives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They tend to overlap to the extent that two or more narratives may co-exist in one single video.

Finally, we have found the important role of the audiovisual functions of the platform in creating and amplifying the narratives. That is, the narratives on TikTok are powerful not only because of the rhetorical devices used, but also due to their audiovisual elements such as visual filters, audio memes, image and video compilations and non-verbal performance. The easy-to-use editing tools and gadgets embedded in the platform firstly empower ordinary young people to become creators (Kaye et al., 2020). Moreover, they strengthen TikTok narratives to make them more appealing and convincing. Visual filters, for example, allow users to enhance the affective impacts of the videos or organize stories in innovative ways. To lip-sync audio memes, in tandem with image compilations and facial expressions, is to offer an indirect, often humorous, but powerful response to the fox eye trend. The audiovisuality of TikTok, therefore, affords users' agency to create variant but collectively powerful online narratives for everyday activism and civic participation. This discussion leads to our final explanation of and advocacy for more scholarly attention towards the 'audiovisual narrative agency' of contemporary digital activism.

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