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TIKTOK ‘DOGSHOWS’ AND THE AMPLIFICATION OF ONLINE INCIVILITY AMONG GEN Z INFLUENCERS IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the origins, phenomena, and implications of ‘dogshows’ on TikTok, especially as they play out as forms of online incivility that are amplified by, and even applied to, Gen Z (11 to 26-years-old) and young children (under 10-years-old) on TikTok. We historicise and explore TikTok dogshows in the context of the Philippines, beginning with setting the local context, reviewing relevant scholarship on TikTok and online incivility, and considering how our study contributes to age-based and culturally-specific developments of emergent TikTok cultures. We close with some insights on how platforms can be more proactive and reflexive in their content moderation.

TikTok Dogshows in the Philippines

In the Philippines, dogshows are a staple in contemporary digital culture. On Urban Dictionary, the online user-generated dictionary of contemporary slang and vernacular, the definition of dogshows is corroborated as “satirically mocking a celebrity or any other famous person through memes or jokes” (gloria’s talking neckbrace, 2022). Furthermore, this entry stated that dogshows do not intend to cause actual harm to a person, and are usually provoked by enthusiastic fan bases of celebrity figures.

As such, while the literal meaning and translation of dogshows refer to events where people judge the overall performance of dogs according to a specific standard, in the

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context of slang in the Philippines, dogshows on social media are when individuals are placed in the spotlight, evaluated through a mass of commentators who usually deploy derogatory humour and provocative memes in their discourse, thus inviting other spectators to join in to throw jabs at and tease the individual “on display”.

These commentators, who are mainly Gen Z and younger people including children, may engage in text-based conversations, or use social media pop cultures like reaction GIFs, emoji, and pictures in their jabs. Many of these commentators and videos would say that this is a ‘Gen Z’ type of humor as dogshows are commonly found among younger people’s content, since they are often the ones participating in the dogshows or are the subject of the dogshows.

Framework and RQs

We engage with digital media scholars Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández et al.’s (2023: 5) framing of “legal but harmful humour”, which refers to “any humorous communication that targets historically marginalised individuals and groups in a way that undermines their assurance as to equal status in the community”. In studies of incivility on TikTok, we see how harmful videos maneuvered around TikTok’s community guidelines even though the app also consists of a large user base of Gen Z and young children. Scholars on trolling, online hate, and networked harassment such as Rebecca Lewis (2018) and Whitney Phillips (2018) have explored how social media platforms can be responsible for multiplying negative effects such as hate through its features and affordances.

In the Philippine context, there are available studies on harmful humour such as how TikTok was seeded with political messaging directed to youths (Ong et al., 2022). Yet, studies on Filipino Gen Z and young children are less explored. Given these, we ask the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do influencers deploy dogshows to negotiate and capitalise on incivility for online fame?

RQ 2: How do Gen Z and young child audiences respond to influencers who engage in such forms of incivility?

Methodology

This paper adopts purposive sampling, online observation, and case study analysis to understand the phenomenon of dogshows on TikTok. We identified 10 Gen Z TikTokers aged 18 and above who have at least 10,000 followers as the threshold for who constitutes a public figure (c.f. Marwick, 2015). We checked whether the term ‘dogshow’

is mentioned by the influencer in the video, or by followers in the comments sections. We were able to find 220 videos that are considered viral videos (averaging between 100k and 1M views). We analyzed these videos inductively via grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and our fieldnotes included details of the dogshow post by the TikToker, screenshots of the top comments, and engagement metrics such as the number of 'likes', 'comments', 'saves', and 'shares' on the video. As an ethical practice, we followed Markham's (2012) practice of fabrication by providing pseudonyms of the influencers and we will not quote any comments to minimise traceability.

Concepts

We highlight the affordances of audiencing, or how images and their meanings are renegotiated and even rejected (Fiske, 1994 in Rose, 2016); and silosociality, or how increased visibility of content is communal (Tiidenberg et al, 2021; Abidin, 2021).

Through *audiencing*, TikTok creators and audiences, including Gen Z and young children, can engage with various contents presented to them and creatively deploy them to reflect their opinions, interject with resistance or criticism, or simply amplify the sentiment by re-platforming the content through the extended exposure warranted by duets, stitches, and parodies.

On the other hand, *silosociality* allows the phenomenon of dogshows to be cultivated by Gen Z and young children who adapt the practice in the vein of their vernacular registers, and invite other users from their cohort to participate within their silos. Thus, if a minor or child enters the space, there is a very low likelihood of external intervention, the possibility of a voice of reason from outside the silo, or general moderation to guide or caution them against the more harmful values and consequences surrounding dogshows.

Sample case study

An example is Gen Z creator Francine with over 2.6 million followers. Francine used a trendy TikTok randomizer filter 'What kind of Barbie you are'. When Francine was offered the response 'oversized Barbie', she sarcastically thanks TikTok, released a string of curse words, then comforted herself by exclaiming that "at least she was still a Barbie", albeit a "Barbie-cue" [a homonym for 'barbecue']. Gen Z and young children TikTokers will often add to this self-inflicting dogshows, as evidenced from our corpus of comments where underaged TikTokers were chiming in with more pig-related puns, such as 'Barbie-ik' [a homonym for 'biik' or 'piglet']. This kind of humor, while strategic in this case, can evoke similar humor on body image that can be harmful to children and teenagers (Pryde and Prichard, 2022).

Summary of findings

We found two types of dogshow content: (1) *Egging on dogshows*, where the influencer provokes or promotes the dogshow, and thus invites the audience to contribute to the flaming; and (2) *Self-inflicting dogshows*, where the influencer willingly places themselves as the victim in the dogshow.

While these may appear as instances of mere frivolity and humour, we found that Gen Z and children feature heavily in the incivility of dogshows on TikTok, by: (1) *Piling on* and further encouraging dogshows; or (2) *Cautioning* users to cease the dogshow. We note that when Gen Z and young children became the objects and purveyors of dogshows, or even start inflicting dogshows upon themselves, they become more prone to the legal-but-harmful humour (Matamoros-Fernández et al., 2023) from other users.

We conclude with recommendations of how TikTok can explore more conversations and deliberations with different community groups, especially if they hail from at-risk or marginalized demographics such as Gen Z and young children to bring more specific sensibilities and reflexivity in content moderation strategies.

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