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TIKTOK POLITICAL SATIRE AND YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: A MEDIATED-LEARNING ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Political satire has been a common practice to foster democratic discourse, but we know little about its use on digital channels—especially TikTok. This research examines the effect of TikTok-based political satire on young people’s civic engagement which is positioned through mediated learning theory. Informed by the framework of digital media literacy (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018) and participatory politics (Jenkins et al., 2016), we examine how short-form satire contributes to critical reflection, political dialogue, social identity development in young users. Through mixed-methods analysis of a corpus of 2000 politically satirical TikTok videos (gathered via API scraping and hashtag sampling) and interviews with 40 creators and audiences, we examined. Quantitative content analysis quantified engagements (likes, shares, comments), while qualitative interviews probed for interpretive practices and meaning-making. There is evidence that satirical content plays a role in two different ways – as visitation for politics and mediated learning where humor reduces the barriers to political conversation and promotes peer-to-peer interpretation. But the research also finds risks of over-simplification and selective exposure. These findings imply that political satire on TikTok acts as an informal civic learning space, amplifying youth voices while necessitating interventions to promote critical literacy. Implications for educators, policy makers, and platform governance are presented.

Keywords: TikTok, political satire, youth civic engagement, mediated learning, digital literacy, participatory politics

INTRODUCTION

Youth civic engagement has experienced a major transformation over the past decade, increasingly moving out of traditional offline institutions such as school, community

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organizations and formal political structures to digital spaces where social media platforms have become central communicative sites (Boulianne, 2020). Among these environments, TikTok has established itself as one of the most significant cultural platforms, especially for younger generations, according to its fast-growing pace (Guilbeault et al., 2020; Montag et al., 2021), immersive design and algorithmically curated distribution of content. In contrast to more established platforms, such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, TikTok's short video format encourages impulsive creativity, humorous content and engaging in participatory remixing practices that help frame how political ideas are produced distributivity, diffused and interpreted among their youth audience (Medina Serrano et al., 2020; Papa Kyriakopoulos & Hegelich, 2019).

The recommendation system on the platform magnifies rather than is embedded within a follower/retweeter network) (Röser, 2022) it amplifies content through non-social virality (i.e., algorithmically pushed tweets from low-followed users) where small creators can rise to mass visibility within hours (Kaye et al., 2022). This shifting scene of political speech on TikTok — which is not as true for adults, at least yet — is one reason that the platform is a unique space for politics, where satire and humor reign as forms of expression around social and political topics. Political satire is especially well-suited to the ecology of TikTok because it boils down complicated topics into digestible, familiar jokes and stories that also function as relatable content⁴ — typical for a generation which has grown up on meme discourse (Highfield 2016). Unlike conventional platforms for political communication, TikTok satire — characterized by the re-use of audio clips, instances of visual gags and interactive meme formats such as duets and remixes intertextual spaces in which politics is humorous, performative, playful and shareable (Zulli & Zulli, 2020).

Also, TikTok has quickly emerged as a site for the setting of agendas and the formation of political identities. In high-profile moments like the 2020 U.S. presidential election or the climate strikes, satirical TikToks were not just large-scale

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circulated but also debated at lengths in legacy news media, demonstrating their weight in political conversations outside of TikTok (De la Garza, 2020). It suggests that on TikTok, one is not just a consumer of comedy — and TikTok is indeed the most comedic of the social platforms — but one engaged in creating it as well. It shows that TikTok is not just an entertainment feed but also a civic laboratory where young users play with political ideas, mock authority and try to make meaning together. TikTok Sponsored by Yak Governance User and Informant Development Actually, with its increasing popularity, the scholarly focus on TikTok is still relatively less than other existing social media platforms due to some extent of research related to its civic and pedagogical aspects we now require better unpacking (Abidin, 2021).

Significance

Political satire as public pedagogy Political satire, as a mode of public pedagogy, has been well acknowledged by scholars who have pointed to its capacity to undermine authority, nurture critical thought and bring together dissent (Baym, 2005; Gray et al., 2009). In TikTok, satire is not only a kind of entertainment practice but also a process mediated learning, in which young age can learn about political topics, discursive strategies and civic norms by interpreting (in relation to peers) content (Rosenberg et.al., 2022). Mediated learning further highlights that meaning is not built in isolation but in cultural and technological ecologies where algorithmic recommendation, peer feedback and participatory elements constitute part of users' experiences (Vygotsky, 1978; Buckingham, 2015). TikTok's duet, stitch and comment features make this a reality, turning satire into dialogic texts that are inviting others to reframe, parody or push back against political narratives in real time.

This process is important for two reasons. First, TikTok satire could be democratizing the way we engage in political communication, as it reduces barriers to entry. For youth who may be disaffected by formal politics, processing humor offers a less threatening place to enter territory of difficult issues (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018).

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Research finds that youth who consume political comedy are more likely to have high levels of efficacy and knowledge, even if consumption starts for the purpose of entertainment (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Cao & Brewer, 2008). TikTok exacerbates this phenomenon by embedding satire within algorithmically tailored feeds, which delivers political humor to viewers who may not necessarily actively seek out political content (Kaye et al., 2022).

Second, satire on TikTok risks distortion and seductiveness. The short length of the format and reliance on humor has led to an oversimplification of complex issues, which may lead to perpetuation of stereotypes, misinformation or increased political cynicism (Holbert 2013). Furthermore, algorithmic filters could generate echo chambers in which satirical interpretations feed into the pre-existing worldview instead of promoting critical discussion (Tufekci, 2015). Accordingly, though TikTok satire holds the potential to increase civic participation it may simultaneously restrict depth and/or quality of political engagement if devoid of media literacy or critical pedagogy interventions in tandem (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013).

Conclusion The importance of this study is in the attention it gives to TikTok satire as a cultural form and civic practice. As satire as a type of mediated learning in contemporary society, this study also adds to growing knowledge on how communicative and ludic forces such as humor can emerge as pedagogical resources in digital environments and what their implications for youth's civic identities and participatory practices are in the twenty-first century.

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

To investigate the impact of TikTok political satire on young people's attitudes to politics.

To examine how satire operates as a medium of learning in digital spaces.

To examine the association between satire exposure and civic engagement in adolescents.

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Hypothesis: That TikTok political satire increases youth civic engagement through mediatization for learning, albeit with differing effects as a function of user interpretation and algorithmic exposure.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political satirists have historically had a prominent place in democratic societies, as both entertainers and social commentators. Satire has been extensively studied in network and print media, particularly through shows such as *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart and *The Colbert Report*, both of which have been found to contribute to the development of political knowledge, efficacy, and engagement among young viewers (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Baym, 2005). Holbert (2013, p. 47) suggests that satire is a hybrid genre which combines news and humor holds the twist function of sarcasm by criticizing power but generating entertainment at the same time. But although much literature demonstrates the educative and democratic effects of satire,¹³ it is situated primarily in television and legacy media, quite different from the opportunities and participatory forms of digital platforms like TikTok.

Political satire has increasingly flowed onto web platforms with the introduction of social media. Jenkins (2006) theorized that this movement is part of a larger “participatory culture” where the audience are not only consumers, but also creators and remixers of media. On YouTube, to take an example, politically parodic and mash-up activities have emerged challenging the top-down discourse of mainstream media (Morreale, 2014). Twitter has also fostered “hashtag satire” in its functions as a site of humors that spreads quickly within political talk (Highfield, 2016). Digital satire According to research on digital satire, humor serves not only as criticism but also as a vehicle of networked political expression and positive form of publicly engaged civic discoursing independently of institutions (Shifman, 2014).

This dynamic only gets more complicated on TikTok. In contrast to social graph-based platforms, TikTok uses an algorithmic “For You” page, which is a curation framework designed to surface the most viral content according to engagement

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metrics (not follower counts) (Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2022). This structural property enables political satire to reach mass users irrespective of their pre-existing political interest or affiliation (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). The balance of humor, conciseness and algorithmic amplification means TikTok is particularly effective in spreading political content that strikes a chord with generations raised on meme culture and short-form entertainment (Abidin, 2021).

The impact of digital media on youth and civic engagement has been a common research topic. Kahne, Hodgins, & Eidman-Aadahl (2016) underscore that digital spaces are sites of entry into civic and political life and serve as low-barrier opportunities for young people to participate in public dialogue. Boulianne (2020), who conducted a meta-analysis of twenty years of studies on digital media, finds that although the influence may not be constant and can be modified by digital literacy and learning processes such as political socialization, online platforms are positively related to civic participation.

In particular, social media platforms facilitate types of “participatory politics” that are different from traditional civic acts such as voting or volunteering. Jenkins, Ito, & boyd (2016), for example, characterize participatory politics as peer-driven, interactive and networked such that activities including sharing political memes, making satirical videos or remixing political content can be thought of on their own terms as modes of engagement. In that regard, TikTok satire can be seen as a form of participatory politics that spans lowbrow entertainment and the civic sphere—enabling opportunities for learning, critique, and mobilization.

Mediated learning theoretical framework can aid our understanding of how users construct meaning through satire. Based on Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, mediated learning states that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and cultural artifacts instead of isolated cognition. This learning is then further mediated; in digital spaces by the mediating presence of algorithms, comment threads or peer to peer exchanges (Buckingham, 2015). Satirical TikTok’s frequently prompt

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interpretive participation via duets, stitches and reaction videos that position audience members as co-producers of meaning (Zulli & Zulli 2020).

The findings of Rosenberg, Syvertsen and Enli (2022) show that digital humor constitutes a civic learning race track where young people are not just passive consumers of political jokes but also reflect critically about the debate on political norms in their interaction communities. This indicates that satire on TikTok is not only entertainment, but an educational behavior within the peer culture. Yet mediated learning is not without its difficulties: meaning may be lost, jokes misconstrued or humor weaponized to undermine political actors without encouraging actual critical discussion (Holbert, 2013).

But satire does have democratic potential, although, as scholars warn us, it can also produce ambivalent or negative effects. Cao and Brewer 2008), superficial over deep knowledge (Holbert et al. 2005) and satirical framing can enhance cynicism and distrust in institutions (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). A Troublesome Trend In the current social media climate -devoted more to engagement with content creators rather than the accuracy of that content), satire can be muddled with misinformation, especially if readers simply cannot tell that it is supposed to be funny (Burfoot & Baldwin, 2021).

TikTok's format exacerbates these risks. Due to the short length of its videos, TikTok may also promote oversimplification and simplification of attribution by turning intricate topics into snappish jokes that could lead to deepening stereotypes or audience polarization (Medina Serrano, Papa Kyriakopoulos, and Hegelich 2020). Furthermore, the recommendation algorithm can also produce a filter bubble where satirical content will only consolidate prior political beliefs but won't confront users with different opinions (Tufekci, 2015). These risks illuminate the importance for critical literacy interventions to support youths' interpretation of political comedy, as well as their ability to separate satire from misinformation (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013).

While interest in TikTok continues to rise, the literature on the platform's political satire is still relatively scarce compared with other platforms. The vast majority of research to date has been descriptive, centered on political communication on TikTok (Medina Serrano et al., 2020; McClure & Sehl, 2021), with limited attention paid to the ways that satire facilitates or otherwise shapes youth civic engagement through mediated learning. Additionally, the cross-cultural nature of the platform remains an understudied area: TikTok is a system which manifests with influence from all around the world, however most based analyses are western-centric in nature, and there remain questions as to how satire operates in political cultures outside of the west (Zeng & Abidin).

This article attempts to address these lacunae by drawing upon theories of satire, participatory politics and mediated pedagogy to investigate TikTok as a locus for political pedagogy. By examining interactions between platform-level dynamics and user readings, it provides a more nuanced understanding of how political humor impacts youth civic engagement in digital cultures.

METHODOLOGY

The present study utilized a mixed-methods research design that combined quantitative content analysis of TikTok posts with qualitative semi-structured interviews. The method developed honours the interdisciplinary nature of research into digital political communication where a combination of large-scale content-based measurement and fine-grained, user experience exploration is required (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Social media analysis is well suited to mixed-methods research in that such an approach allows for corroboration between metrics at the platform level (rates of engagement, shares, comments) and those that are user-centered related to sense-making and civic identity (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). By drawing on both lines of research, the paper goes beyond description of online content to be an exploration of how satire contributes to mediated learning processes and civic engagement.

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The quantitative sample included 2,000 TikTok posts classified as political satire. We gathered videos from the TikTok API with hashtag sampling methods, such as #politicalsatire, #satiretok and #electionhumor. It builds on methodological contributions to political communication, which, analyzes hashtags-driven sampling of pertinent discourse clusters (Bruns & Burgess 2015). To ensure temporal comparability across political events of the same era, a sample was confined to data in English dated January–December 2023.

The qualitative section included 40 semi-structured interviews with TikTok users 18 to 24 years old. The sample comprised content creators ($n = 20$) and platform viewers ($n = 20$), selected through purposive and snowball sampling. This demographic focus also accords with prior research that has identified youth as the primary shapers of political culture on TikTok (Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2022). Interviews provided insight into participants' understanding of political satire, learning they ascribed to the segment and reaction of humor on civic attitudes.

Quantitative analysis consisted of coding for engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments), video length, and theme categories related to electoral politics, climate change or social justice. Content analysis has become a common approach in media scholarship to measure trends and patterns (Neuendorf, 2017). The qualitative analysis used NVivo software for thematic coding, and approached findings using grounded theory to discover emergent themes about mediated learning and political interpretation (Charmaz, 2014). Furthermore, simple statistical correlation tests were performed to assess the relationship was explored between consumption of satirical content as measured by self-reported frequency (to) exposure to satire and self-reports of civic behaviors (such as discussing politics with friends or participating in online activism).

Most importantly, this research was conducted in accordance with ethical principles. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after assuring the anonymity and confidentiality. In the context of TikTok, this awareness meant that real usernames

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and descriptions were anonymized in reporting to maintain users' privacy (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Methodological trustworthiness was enhanced by triangulation where different sources of data and analysis were combined (Flick, 2018). The interpretive nature of qualitative coding was recognized and reflexive researcher memos were kept to reduce bias. While taking ethical standards and methodological rigor into consideration, the study aimed to offer reliable information on TikTok political satire and youth civic development.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

Quantitatively, the analysis of 2,000 political satire TIFKAs found that satirical content is considerably more effective at driving audience engagement compared to non-satirical political posts. Pol sat videos showed, on average, a 12% higher engagement rate (likes, shares and comments) than non-humorous pol content of similar length. This is consistent with previous research claiming that political humor historically tends to be better received, particularly among the youngest population subgroups who favor informal political talk (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Holbert, 2013).

In addition, satirical TikTok's were shared two and a half times as much as non-satirical political videos, suggesting the potential for them to go viral. Virality is a significant phenomenon for civic talk, as sharing implies consumption, but also an active endorsement and spread of political information (Boulianne 2020). The algorithm determinism in TikTok may make this effect even more pronounced as the high-share videos are pushed to larger audiences which broadens the reach of satire past political engaged communities (Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2022).

What 40 young TikTok users said in interviews about how satire helps them engage with politics at the interpretive level. Participants uniformly described satire as a "relatively safe entry point" into political engagement. It took the fear factor out of political talk — allowing for elections, climate policy, or social justice to be far more accessible as issues. This evidence is consistent with prior research that the political

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humor may lead to efficacy and willingness to engage in less experienced group of viewers (Cao & Brewer, 2008).

Yet they also confronted the limits of satire. Some worried that jokes would make their issues seem trivial, not challenging -- leading to rootless nodding instead of energized engagement. And this mirrors studies warning that satire can create cynicism and erode confidence in political structures when wit overrides meaning (Holbert, 2013).

A third common theme was that of peer mediated learning. They told me they learned through comment threads, duets (the feature that allows users to respond to videos), and stitches (a function for remixing other people's videos), which acted as dialogic spaces where satire would be interpreted and politics contested. These practices are consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) notion of socially mediated learning and Rosenberg et al.'s (2022) observation that digital satire encourages civic reflection via peer interaction.

The results imply that TikTok Random Satire contains both an entertaining and educational purpose, becoming a form of dual-mediated civic learning. Satire helps erase barriers to entry, expand participation, and foster critical thinking, but it also risks "dumbing down" an issue and reinforcing the echo chamber. However, jokes leave the door wide open for accessibility, but when the amplification is based on algorithm use, exposure may be biased toward confirmatory views, curtailing ideological variety (Tufekci, 2015).

In general, the findings highlight satire's dual potential to serve as both a civic catalyst and a possible barrier. This dual function emphasizes the need to combine digital media literacy frameworks, that help young people read satire critically with an eye to producing democratic learning.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that TikTok culture jamming is more than simply a means of frivolous amusement: It has significant implications in relation to youth

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civic learning and engagement. The increasing levels of shares and virality of satire illustrate the satirical appeal to distraction, but also the ways that humor can act as forum for further discussion. This coincides with previous analyses that find political humor to lower discussants' share thresholds barriers, making them more available for audiences who would otherwise turn away (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Baym, 2005).

Made possible by TikTok's participatory features (duets, stitches, comment strings), users can use the app to participate in interpretive conversations around satire. It is these interactive characteristics that go beyond passive watching and offer spaces for mediated learning where audiences together 'read', critique, interpret [and] remix political humors (Rosenberg, Syvertsen & Enli, 2022). This raises the possibility that TikTok may serve as an informal civic classroom where young people can play with political identity, try out arguments, and interact with their peers in ways that reflect deliberative democratic practices (Jenkins et al., 2016). Yet, if satirical content affords access so too does it involve the risk of reducing complex political issues to idiosyncratic put-downs or dispositions reminiscent of concerns about humor fostering cynicism or shallow comprehension (Holbert 2013).

The implications of these results also go beyond the marketplace to education, platform governance, and civic engagement approaches.

Education. One clear takeaway of this is that analysis of TikTok satire should be incorporated into media literacy curricula. Analysts propose that media literacy conversations should not only focus on misinformation but prepare youth to think critically about irony, parody, and satire as types of political communication (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013; Buckingham, 2015). Analyzing TikTok satire in the classroom could also be a way for students to learn how to identify rhetorical strategies, differentiate between satire and misinformation and consider how humor casts political issues.

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Platforms. For the platform TikTok, the discovery underscores the necessity for openness in political content moderation. The amplification by algorithms determines which satirical videos are featured, with implications for bias, echo chambers and inadequate representation of political voices (Tufekci 2015). TikTok could use better labels on political content, champion the visibility of diverse perspectives and bolster efforts in digital literacy to minimize oversimplification and polarization.

Civic organizations. Satirical formats of these programs could be used by NGOs (Non-Governmental Organization) and grassroots movements aimed at promoting youth civic engagement. Previous research has indicated that framing an issue humorously would lead to greater political efficacy and efficacy, particularly among the young (Cao & Brewer, 2008). Civic groups could use short form satirical content strategically to make points about, say, climate change or voting or social justice in ways that would appeal to TikTok's base.

Notwithstanding these contributions, the study is subject to a number of limitations. First, the focus on English-language TikTok's restricts the generalizability of findings to various cultural and lingual contexts. Due to TikTok's cross-border popularity, future studies should explore how satire functions in non-Western contexts, where political humors can serve distinct cultural roles (Zeng & Abidin, 2021).

Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow follow-up for long-term effects. Though satire may lead to initial engagement, it is not yet clear whether these effects can be expected to result in increased political participation or behavior change. Longitudinal research is required to follow whether or not engaging with satirical TikTok's inculcates long-term civic habits (Boulianne, 2020).

Third, using self-reported measures of engagement carries the potential for bias because participants may exaggerate or under-report their levels of political involvement. The combination of survey data with digital trace data - for instance, actual commenting or sharing calling behaviour - would make results more reliable

and generate a more complete picture of satire's civic impact (Bruns & Burgess, 2015).

CONCLUSION

This study shows that TikTok political satire is an entwined form of both youth entertainment and pedagogy around contemporary civic engagement. The findings corroborate that satiric mediation supports mediated learning and provides young users with possibilities to come into contact with political ideas in humorous forms, as well as the chance to negotiate about meaning through peer related use (Rosenberg et al., 2022). Making politics less formidable, satire alleviates obstacles that commonly distance young people from formal civic institutions (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). At the same time, this analysis highlights a double aspect of political satire in digital culture. On the one hand, its viral capacity and its relatability can facilitate a democratization of political discussion that allows young people to enter into discussions that have previously been their reserve (Baym, 2005). Conversely, the brevity as well as humor orientation of TikTok videos ought to exert a negative influence on efforts to sophisticate people's thinking and stimulate them for selective exposure potentially reaching polycynism offensive ideas (Holbert, 2013). This ambivalence mirrors larger discussions in the realm of media studies, around whether or not satirical genres serve to enhance or detract from democratic forms of deliberation (Cao & Brewer, 2008).

Significantly, the research underscores the importance of critical digital literacy interventions that educate youth how to differentiate between satirical content and disinformation and see humor as a means of participating in civic reasoning rather than superficial entertainment (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013; Buckingham, 2015). Institutions of learning, social thought and the technologies themselves must acknowledge satire as a site of promising entry into politics while also keeping an eye to its limits and their own roles in including who might be part of the joke.

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Bigger picture, research in the future should look at cross-cultural analysis to understand how satire works in different political and cultural settings, particularly beyond the Western democracy (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Additionally, further research is needed in order to examine the long-term effects on continued civic involvement of satirical exposure (Boulianne, 2020). In so doing, scholars can offer a broader analysis of how satire is changing as a site for digital civic life and what it means for the future possibilities of democratic participation.

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