Binge-Swiping Through Politics: TikTok's Emerging Role in American Government

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ABSTRACT

Social media has been used as a tool to spread political information since its creation, but its effectiveness has not been studied in depth. Older and wider known platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat have been the focus of several academic studies, while newer platforms such as TikTok have been ignored. The guiding question of this study is, "does the social media platform TikTok inspire teenagers and young adults (13-20) to participate in political activities such as activism, voting, and educating themselves about political issues better than other social media platforms?" I hypothesized that TikTok usage would have a very strong correlation to political involvement of any kind. To answer the question, the study employed a mixed-method approach including a survey with 16 questions and an interview with TikTok content creators with 8 questions. The survey had 100 respondents and the interview had 6 respondents. This study found that TikTok had a stronger influence on teenage engagement in online political actions, especially learning about political issues. TikTok had a very small influence on teenage involvement in politics offline. Even though my hypothesis was only partially correct and TikTok doesn't impact young people to vote as much as I expected, it still has a great value in society because it helps provide young people with the information they need to cast a well-informed ballot.

Introduction

As much as one may not want to hear their aunt's opinion on current events in a Facebook post, the link between social media and politics is here to stay. Social media has been connecting people from across the country for years, but now it may have the much greater power of influencing national and state elections. From the humble beginnings of Facebook in 2004, social media has ingrained itself in American lifestyles. In 2018, more than two-thirds of the American adult population use Facebook or Youtube on their cellphones, and approximately one-third use Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter (Smith and Anderson, 2018). Younger adults are far more likely to have social media, as more than 70% of 18-24-year-olds are reported to have Youtube, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram downloaded on their phones (Smith and Anderson, 2018). Conversely, young adults and teenagers are the least likely age groups to participate in civic duties, and adults over the age of thirty are much more likely to participate in civic duties. This idea has been reflected in every election since 1964 as 18 to 24-year-olds have the lowest voter turnout compared to every older age group (File, 2014). Soon after social media was created, the idea to spread political views emanated, and now there is a large subgroup of social media devoted to political discussion. Since mainly young people using social media, they are often the target of political content within platforms, such as advertisements from politicians and issue groups. The question that guided previous research then emerges: how does the recent prevalence of political campaigning and advertising content on social media affect teen users?

Numerous studies have attempted to answer this question, and while some strongly believe that social media does play a significant role in increasing teen (13-20) involvement in US politics, it has not been reflected in national elections, state elections, protests, or petitions. Up until recently, it was widely accepted that young people are simply less interested in US politics compared to older generations.

What has changed between the beginning of social media in the early 2010s and now? Many political events in 2020 were reported to have mass youth turnout, especially Black Lives Matter Protests, MAGA rallies, the 2020 Georgia Senate runoff, and the 2020 Presidential election. One common factor between all of these events was the role that the social media platform TikTok played in generating youth turnout. TikTok is a social media app owned by the Chinese company ByteDance and is used to film and share short videos between three and sixty seconds (Schwedel, 2018). Users on TikTok can be as young as 13 years old. The question that will guide my research paper is as follows: Does the social media platform TikTok inspire teenagers and young adults (13-20) to participate in political activities such as activism, voting, and educating themselves about political issues better than other social media platforms? I hypothesize that TikTok has sparked an increase of teen involvement in US politics that has only been seen in the last year or so. This study will attempt to analyze the extent to which that is true.

Literature Review

Many studies find a strong positive correlation between young social media users' involvement in politics online and offline. A study conducted in Sweden by Holt et al. (2013) compared political participation inspired through traditional news media (television, radio, and printed press) and participation inspired through social media platforms. Unsurprisingly, the youngest age groups gravitate more towards social media, while the oldest age groups gravitated to traditional news sources. Interestingly, there was no statistically significant difference between political participation levels outside of their respective preferred media for any age group. Social media was as effective as traditional news media in getting people to engage in political activities (Holt et al., 2013). The findings from Holt's study on offline participation are paralleled in a Chilean study surrounding the 2011 protests on education. Sebastián Valenzuela, an associate professor at Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, used trending hashtags and popular social media posts to predict the magnitude of these protests (Valenzuela, 2014). This study also analyzed the strengths and shortcomings of strong-tie social media networks (like Facebook, where the user must accept the follow request) and weak-tie social media networks (like Twitter, where users have little to no control over who follows them). Valenzuela found that strong-tie networks were far better equipped at increasing protest turnout because of the more substantial social pressure involved. In contrast, weak-tie networks were better equipped to spread information about protests, but they had little influence on users' attendance (Valenzuela, 2014). While these weak-tie social media platforms may be less motivating to users, it is easier for users to create content and allow for various voices. Rice and Moffet (2019) suggest that college students are more comfortable sharing on weak-tie social sites than strong-tie ones, as 74.5% of surveyed students have never shared a political image to Snapchat, and 46.6% have never shared a political image to Facebook. While Facebook is generally considered a strong-tie network, it does not compare to Snapchat because images shared to Facebook can be seen by all followers, while users in Snapchat decide who can view each individual post. Snapchat was developed in 2011, whereas Facebook was created in 2004, which could also explain the lack of political posting on Snapchat because it is not as ingrained in popular culture as Facebook.

Like Snapchat, smaller platforms can and have made a political splash, specifically the platform Musical.ly, which erupted with political content during and after the 2016 presidential election. Looking closely at political hashtags, specifically, #makeamericagreatagain and #notmypresident, Dr. Ioana Literat, the assistant professor of communication, media, and learning technologies design at Columbia University, analyzes the tools Musical.ly uses that are different from other platforms, such as lip-syncing over songs, speeches, and face filters (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). Musical.ly generally draws on a younger audience (13-21-year-olds) compared to other platforms, which, as described by Dr. Literat in an interview conducted by the *New York Times*, contributes to the fact that "Political dialogue on the platform is very personal, and youth will often state diverse social identities — e.g., Black, Mexican, L.G.B.T.Q., redneck, country — in direct relation to their political views" (Herrman, 2020).

The main counterargument towards social media being a tool to engage youth in political duties is that it does not target those who are not at all interested in politics. The researchers that helped guide this theory are Avril Keating

and Gabriella Melis, in their work *Social media and youth political engagement: Preaching to the converted or providing a new voice for youth?* Their findings conclude that political interest is what drives online participation, not the other way around. They describe social media as a "weapon of the strong" and only utilized by those who would engage offline regardless (Keating & Melis, 2017). Therefore, social media may not be the most influential tool to engage youth in politics.

On top of that, social media is home to negativity and cyberbullying, as seen in a study conducted on teens in the European Union. Wozniak (2018) explores the constant battle by social media users against online trolls infiltrating helpful/truthful content. She reports that negative comments created by trolls spread misinformation, and in certain instances, directly discourage people from interacting on the site (Wozniak, 2018). Because social media is set up so that anyone can post whatever they want (with few image and language restrictions), negative comments and misinformation will almost always be an issue with social media and has the possibility of turning people away entirely.

The key takeaways from both of these studies are reflected in youth voting patterns between 2000 and 2016. Voters aged 18-29 saw a 9% increase in turnout between 2000 and 2004 and a 2.1% increase in turnout from 2004 and 2008 (File, 2017). Facebook (2004), Youtube (2005), and Twitter (2006) were invented between these two elections so they could hold some accountability for increased turnout; however, there were certainly other factors, as these platforms were relatively new and not as ingrained in teenage culture. In the 2012 and 2016 elections, turnout from 18 to 29-year-olds decreased to 45% and 46.1% from 51.1% in 2008 (File, 2017). Between 2008 and 2016, the social media platforms Instagram (2010), Snapchat (2011), and Musical.ly (2014) were all introduced. Because there was a decrease in youth voter turnout in these election years, it can be inferred that social media has less to do with youth participation than one would think. The most recent election, the 2018 midterm, was inconsistent with these trends, as voters aged 18-29 turned out 16% more than the previous midterm election (Sparks, 2019). While this statistic shows promise for social media impacting youth political engagement, it is not enough of a trend to show causation, even if social media use was higher in 2018 than in any previous year.

In the existing literature, social media's oldest and most prominent platforms were included in studies, interviews, and surveys. Platforms such as Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat were discussed extensively, but smaller and newer platforms that are growing exponentially like Musical.ly, Tiktok, Twitch, Discord, and others were barely given a thought. Tiktok has become one of the most popular social media platforms since late 2018, as it is estimated to have 800 million monthly active users (Iqbal, 2020). There have been several instances where teens have used Tiktok to influence outcomes in the 2020 election, including creating thousands of fake sign-ups for President Trump's campaign rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma (O'Sullivan, 2020). Tiktok has also served as an information hub for the Black Lives Matter protests, sharing both protesting tips and videos of police brutality (Janfaza, 2020). One significant example of TikTok influencing American politics was found during the Georgia Senate runoff election, in which both Democratic candidates Raphael Warnock and John Ossoff won by slim margins. In both elections, there was a massive turnout of Gen Z voters, many of whom were drawn in by political messages from TikTok (Rosenblatt, 2021). Of all four senate candidates, John Ossoff was the only one to have his own TikTok account, and he used it extensively to push his message of voter registration and voting for Democrats. While there could be many reasons why Ossoff won this election in which he was initially projected to lose, one must consider the value of TikTok throughout his campaign. As TikTok grows, it is imperative that legitimate academic study is used to analyze how it has become the center of attention for teens and young adults looking to be involved in politics.

Methods

In order to draw conclusions regarding my research question, I am employing a mixed-method approach that utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data. My quantitative data is coming exclusively from a survey that I presented to my peers regarding their use of TikTok. Because I only surveyed people between the ages of 13 and 20, there were participants who were not yet eligible to vote; nonetheless, their data regarding other forms of political participation

such as sharing political information, letter writing, petition signing, and attending protests is still valuable to my research. Within the survey, the participants ranked the following social media platforms based on their usage: TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and Tumblr. They also reported how often they use TikTok on a weekly basis. These questions provided insight into the popularity of TikTok compared to other platforms. Additionally, they identified which platform, out of the seven, is the platform on which they view the most political content and which platform they share the most political information. The remaining questions asked the participants if TikTok has either inspired them or reminded them to participate in political activities.

The qualitative section of my research is through the interview method. Specifically, I interviewed content creators on TikTok who use their platform to post politicized videos. These videos fall into three categories: informational, satirical, or argumentative. When discussing my interviews, I mention what type of video they tend to post the most, which may provide insight into their successes or failures. Interviewees have between 5,000 and 600,000 followers, which is a large enough following to have the opportunity to make an impact. I asked each content creator the same questions to maintain uniformity and simplicity. I included questions in my interview to gauge their success in impacting their followers to partake in political activities such as, "To what extent did you promote young people to vote in the 2020 presidential election, and do you feel as if you personally made a difference?" "Have you encouraged your followers to attend political events such as rallies or protests, and how successful do you think you are in getting them to these events?" and "Has a conversation between you and a viewer resulted in one of you changing your opinion on a subject?" Since the greatest number of content creators on TikTok are between the ages of 10 and 19 (Tankovska 2021), I believe that it is important to my research to get their input on the topic since they are on the opposite end of the online interaction and may have completely different experiences compared to viewers on TikTok.

Limitations

There are some limitations to my research methods that mainly derive from who I am as a researcher. The first one is related to my surveys. Since I am a liberal teenager who surrounds myself with like-minded people, the participants in my surveys and interviews could tend to have liberal ideas as well. In the survey, participants are required to state their political affiliation, so if there are differences between conservative and liberal responses, I identified them. I also acknowledge that there may be a liberal bias in some of the questions I ask, but I believe that I kept the questions non-partisan. I received 100 responses to the survey, which I believe is enough to draw conclusions based on the networks I had available. The limitation of my interviews was the difficulty I had contacting content creators with a follower count of over 200 thousand people, since my comments and direct messages were most likely lost among the thousands of other comments and messages they got. Nonetheless, I was able to obtain six interviews with content creators between the follower count of 50 thousand and 200 thousand.

Survey Results

The survey results consisted of 100 responses, all between the ages of 13 and 20. Two-thirds of the respondents identified themselves as Democrats, while one-tenth identified as Republicans. 13% considered themselves Independents, while the other 9% identified themselves as either Socialist, Democratic Socialist, Libertarian, Progressive, or nothing at all. The participants then ranked the seven different social media apps (TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Facebook, Tumblr, and Reddit) on a scale of 0-7 based on their usage of the said app (7 meaning it is their most-used app, one meaning it is their least used app, and 0 meaning they do not have that app). Instagram was the most used app, averaging at a rating of 5.32, and TikTok was a close second, averaging at a rating of 5.01. Respondents who do not have a certain app from that list (i.e., Instagram) are not included, however, TikTok is the most used app, averaging at 5.76, while Instagram is second, averaging at 5.48. This average shows each app's relative popularity

based on only the respondents who use it. I also asked how often people used TikTok, and the vast majority of respondents indicated that they use TikTok every day.
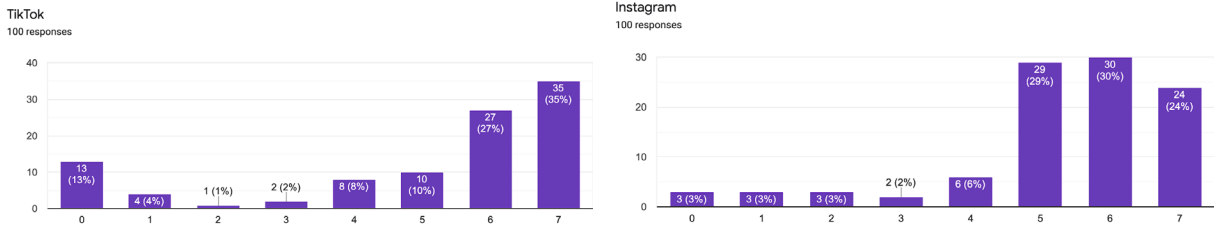

App	Average Total Ranking	Average rankings excluding zeros
Tiktok	5.01	5.76
Instagram	5.32	5.48
Twitter	2.28	3.45
Facebook	.85	2.17
Snapchat	3.79	4.62
Tumblr	.49	2.72
Reddit	.96	2.74

The next two questions asked the participants to indicate the app in which they find the most political information and the app where they post the most political information. Instagram was the favorite for both of these questions, but almost as many respondents said that they found the most political information on TikTok. The overwhelming majority said that Instagram is where they post the most political information, however.

On which app do you find the most political information?
99 responses
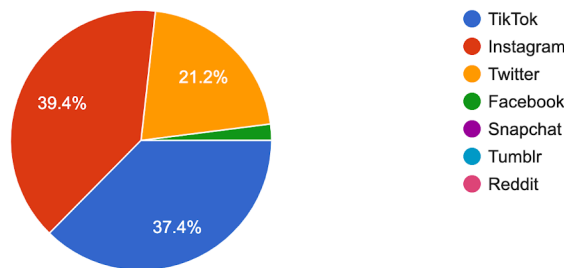
On which app do you post, repost, or share the most political information?
97 responses

- TikTok
- Instagram
- Twitter
- Facebook
- Snapchat
- Tumblr
- Reddit
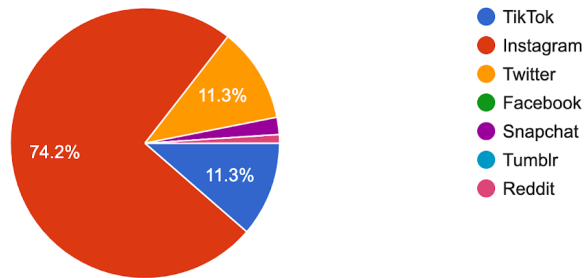
The next questions attempted to gauge how much of an impact TikTok has made on participants' individual political involvement. Based on these results, TikTok had a strong impact on people's online political involvement in politics, especially when it came to learning about social and political issues. Seventy percent of respondents either agree or strongly agree with the sentiment that they have learned more about or become aware of a political issue on TikTok.

Indicate how much you agree with the following statement. I have become aware of, or learned about, a political issue on TikTok.
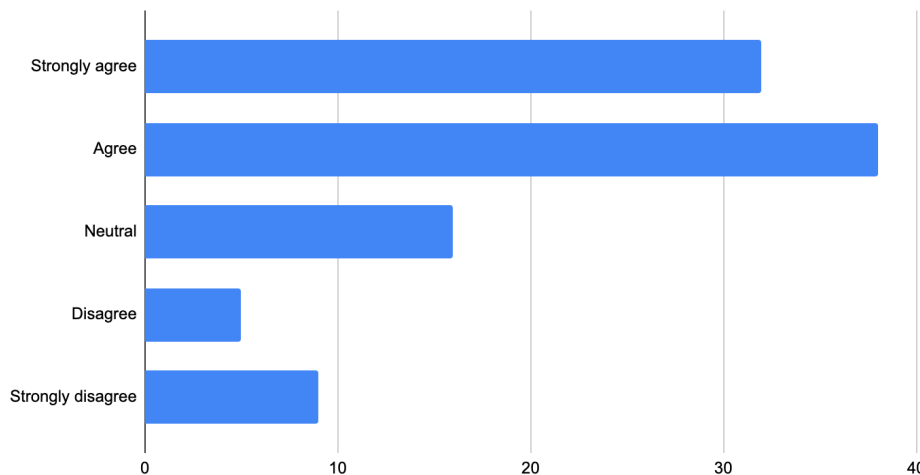

Besides learning about issues, though, TikTok does not seem to have a role in inspiring political action as 64% said they did not participate in any political TikTok trends and over 90% said they did not attend a political event due to TikTok. The effects of TikTok on voting were harder to gauge simply because only about 20% of my respondents were able to vote. Of those 20 people, however, more respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that TikTok influenced their choice to vote compared to those who agreed or strongly agreed. Forty-eight percent of the respondents said they felt neutral about this statement. The final question on the survey was designed to measure if political TikToks were more engaging or interesting than political posts on other social media apps. The majority of responses indicated that political TikToks were more interesting than other political social media posts, while only 16% said they were not.

Have you participated in a TikTok trend related to American Politics? Some trends include encouraging others to vote, signing a petition, or signing up for a political rally and not attending.
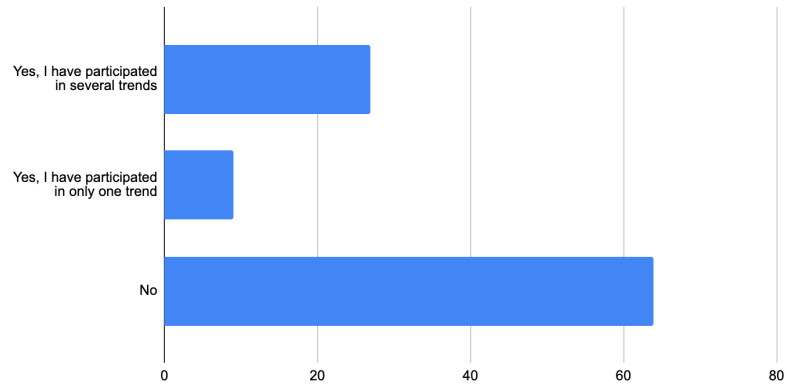
Have you attended a political protest or rally because of information you found on TikTok?
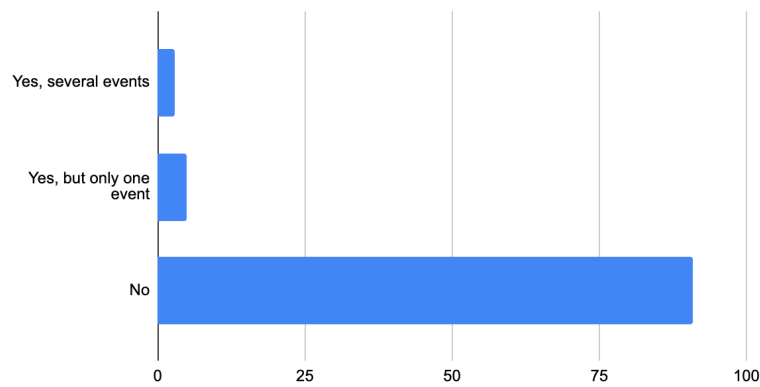
Indicate how much you agree with the following statement. I felt more inclined to register to vote and vote because of a video I saw on TikTok (do not answer if you were not old enough to vote in the 2020 election).

HIGH SCHOOL EDITION

Journal of Student Research
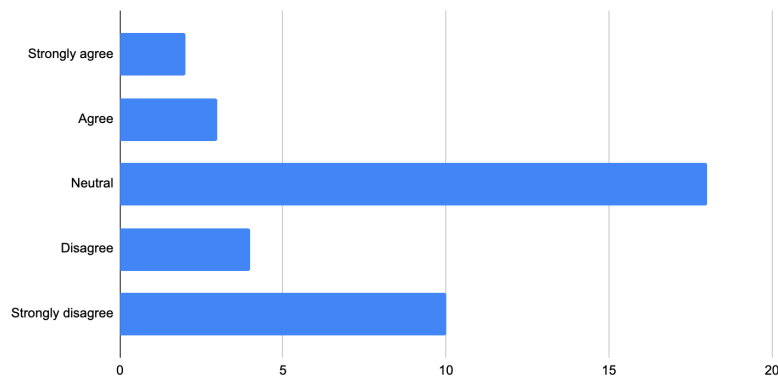
Interview Results

I was able to interview six different political content creators on TikTok. I have included their names, TikTok usernames, and follower count in the following table. Below I summarize and highlight the most interesting and important answers from the interviews, but the full transcripts are provided in the appendix.

Name	TikTok Username	Follower Count	Likes
Jennings Young	@diannefeinstein	5,957	732,300
Alan Gutierrez	@ofcalan	153,800	19,100,000
Aidan White	@aidan.not.aiden	82,000	5,400,000
Connor Stayton	@cowboyconnor	556,100	36,100,000
Seth Moody	@politicalminder	58,800	1,000,000
Askia Hillibrand	@thatrandomk02	34,100	738,500

The first question I asked each content creator was, "To what extent did you promote young people to vote in the 2020 presidential election, and do you feel as if you personally made a difference?" Alan Gutierrez said that he constantly promoted voting, and "every day [he] would post a video regarding voting registration deadlines to the relevant states and days." Connor Slayton said that he had "voting resources linked on all my social medias," and he had created "numerous videos explaining why people should vote." It was a consensus among all interviewees that they weren't genuinely able to measure how effective these strategies were due to limited personal interaction with their followers, but they were all at least somewhat confident that they influenced a fraction of their followers. I then asked if they promoted their followers attending political events and how successful they believed their efforts were. All six of the interviewees stated that they haven't, either due to the nature of their platform or the COVID-19 circumstances in their area. The next question followed the same format as the previous two but pertaining to these content creators encouraging the signing of petitions or lobbying their elected officials. Out of these first three questions, this had the most positive responses across the board. Jennings Young stated that "This is the one place where I feel like I have made a difference using my platform" and that she has "encouraged my viewers to write to their officials and call their offices to make sure their voices are heard." Connor Slayton states that he "very frequently" encourages this behavior and that he "mainly advertise[s] phone banking events and email templates for calls to action for government officials." He claims that he ran a few charity live streams as well, some raising "over $10,000 in a few hours." In responding to this question, Askia Hillibrand comments on social media's eco-conducive nature, as she explains that her main focus is to "encourage people, especially those who are younger, to speak up about the issues they are passionate about."

The next set of questions attempted to answer if, how, and why TikTok has distinguished itself from other social media platforms. The first question was, "Do you believe that your followers prefer the videos you post to more typical media outlets such as television or online newspapers?" The overwhelming response to this question was yes. Seth Moody attributed this phenomenon to TikTok's time limit of one minute, which requires "the creator to be quick and simple," which makes the videos "much more appealing to the younger mind than a long podcast." Connor Slayton agrees with the idea that his content is more appealing to viewers than traditional media, but he hopes that his "followers do not solely get their information" from him. He says that because of his relative age and style of videos,

viewers may not get the widest variety of information. This brings me to the next question: "Do you try to stay as unbiased as most media outlets, or do you take a stance on the issues you speak about?" Again, most interviewees agreed with each other, this time answering no; they do not try to stay unbiased. Aidan White explains that because he cares so much about the issues he addresses, "pretending to be unbiased would be a disservice to my audience." Jennings Young and Connor Slayton both say that they are fairly biased when making their videos, but if they reference outside sources, they make sure they are as unbiased and factual as possible. The final question that specifically recognizes the differences between TikTok and other platforms asks these content creators to compare audience involvement between different platforms if they have other accounts where they post political content. All participants either do not post political content on other social media platforms, or they do not get nearly as much follower engagement on those platforms compared to their TikTok accounts.

The last set of questions were miscellaneous and attempted to find any other value in TikTok that hasn't already been mentioned. The first of which was, "Has a conversation between you and a viewer resulted in one of you changing your opinion on a subject?" This question was the most polarizing between these six content creators. Askia Hillibrand, Seth Moody, and Alan Gutierez responded "No" without much elaboration, although it can be inferred that they either don't typically engage with the comment section, that in today's polarized politics, many aren't keen to change their minds, or they simply don't get much participation from viewers in the comment section. Jennings Young stated that comment sections are great places for new ideas and information to be shared, and she has witnessed several viewers engaging in political discourse in her comment sections. She was particularly happy about one example where a "nurse practitioner and another viewer had a conversation in the comment section, and the [nurse practitioner] shared a link to an article discussing the potential impacts of Coronavirus vs. the potential impacts of the vaccine." Aidan White also cited an example of his viewers adding new information and even recommended a book to him through his Direct Messages. The final question of my interview was, "In a hypothetical scenario where you ran for political office in the future, would you consider using TikTok and other social media sites in your campaign?" Considering all six of these kids are extremely involved in politics, I considered it fair to assume that each of them has at least considered running for political office in the future. All six members responded yes, enthusiastically. Aidan White stated that "social media is completely redefining how politicians communicate with their constituents" and that it is imperative for politicians to be able to use social media. Alan Gutierez referenced John Ossoff's recent political triumph while using social media and said that "social media is the best avenue to reach out to youth and engage them civically." The full appendix of the interview questions and answers will be attached to the end of this report.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Going into my research, I had certain assumptions and expectations that were outlined in my hypothesis. From my own observations of using social media, I believed that TikTok was by far the most used application by my peers, and the effect it had on political participation was enormous in both online and offline spheres. Both my quantitative and qualitative data proved my theories to be only partially true.

Looking first at the comparison between TikTok and other media outlets, my data found that it was used at similar rates compared to Instagram. Of the people who have TikTok, it was the more popular site, but TikTok was owned at a lesser rate than Instagram. Compared to any other social media sites or traditional news sources, however, TikTok was far more popular. Based on the interviews with TikTok content creators, it can be concluded that of the people following political TikTok accounts, TikTok is their primary way to absorb political content and the news.

For online political participation, my hypothesis was largely correct. Thirty-two percent% of surveys indicated that they strongly agreed with the notion that they learn about political issues on TikTok. Thirty-eight percent % agreed with this statement. These findings synchronized with my qualitative research, as the content creators reported that TikTok allowed political issues to be easier presented and consumed by younger audiences. A few also expressed that because of TikTok's comment feature, more information and opinions are spread through one video.

While many interact just for the sake of argument or to "troll," two content creators expressed that there has been credible and helpful information shared through the comment sections.

The only area where my findings differed from my hypothesis when it came to online participation was how TikTok compared to Instagram. Two more respondents indicated that they found the most political information on Instagram rather than on TikTok and sixty-one more respondents indicated they posted and reposted the most political information on Instagram rather than on TikTok. It is interesting to note that seven of the people who indicated that they found and posted the most political information on Instagram did not have a TikTok. In reality, the majority of those who have both TikTok and Instagram find more political information on TikTok. This correlates to my findings that those who have both Instagram and TikTok tend to use TikTok more. I believe the reason why the vast majority of respondents indicated that they post and repost the most political information on Instagram is because of the nature of the app. Instagram has a feature called "Stories," which allows users to post images and videos that only stay up for 24 hours. Stories are not posted in the main feed of Instagram; instead, they are small buttons at the top of the app. Because these posts are non-permanent and not part of the main feed, I believe that people are more likely to make a story rather than a traditional post. TikTok does not have a story feature, which means that anything a user posts is permanent and accessed in the main feed, which I believe is a reason why people post less on TikTok.

The results regarding TikTok's impact on offline participation were most surprising. The survey results revealed little to no correlation between TikTok usage and offline political participation in voting, protesting, or rallying. Even the content creators expressed that they were less oriented towards encouraging young people to attend political events. Voting was the one activity that most creators encouraged, but as seen in the survey, their efforts may have been in vain. I believe an external factor that influenced these results was the fact that we were in a pandemic for most of 2020 and 2021. Several content creators conveyed that the reason they did not advocate for their viewers to attend protests or rallies was that there were not many events taking place due to the pandemic, or the creators didn't want their viewers to contract COVID-19. I think if this study was replicated in a future election year where the threat of COVID-19 is dramatically lower, there would be different results regarding TikTok's influence on offline political participation.

Present and Future Implications

I believe that this study has helped develop an understanding of the role that TikTok played in the 2020 election. TikTok served as an excellent platform to educate young people about political issues compared to traditional news sources and other social media platforms (excluding Instagram). While TikTok did not promote the levels of offline political participation that I expected, the platform still had a key role in educating young people about the 2020 election and other political issues. I think TikTok's role in future elections will only grow, based on the content creators' responses to the question, "In a hypothetical scenario where you ran for political office in the future, would you consider using TikTok and other social media sites in your campaign?" TikTok can, and should, play a greater role in the campaigning strategy for current politicians. TikTok can serve as a new channel for politicians to communicate with Gen Z, and help mobilize them to vote, or at least provide young voters with more information to base their vote on. This would benefit both parties because politicians would be accessing a large group of voters, and Gen Z would have more influence on politics in the United States on the national and state level.

Acknowledgments

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