

The Indifference of Curation: How Social Media Algorithms Shape the Perception of Racial Identity in Youth

Ravi Natarajan

Abstract

Since 2016, the rise of algorithmically curated short-form content on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube has transformed how young Americans encounter racial discourse online, yet the specific role of algorithms on shaping racial identity remains underexamined. This paper investigates how algorithmically curated racism on these three platforms has contributed to the perception of racial identity among people 18 years old or younger in the United States. I draw on both a literature review as well as discourse analysis of viral short-form videos and their comment sections to exemplify the proliferation of racism on each platform. The findings reveal that algorithms curate and amplify racially-charged content as an unintended byproduct of engagement-based optimization, allowing hateful comments to surface to the top of comment sections regardless of their content, and covert, humor-coded racism to spread largely untouched. This paper introduces two theoretical frameworks to explain the resulting effects on adolescent users: engagement-indifferent amplification, which describes platforms’ structural inability to distinguish racially harmful content with any other kind, and algorithmic identity conditioning, which outlines how repeated exposure to racial content shapes adolescents’ developing racial identity. Together, these findings suggest that the commercial drivers of algorithmic curation on these platforms are not aligned with the developmental perspectives on society of their youngest users, with many significant implications for ongoing debates over social media regulation and youth online safety.

Introduction

In 2018, the TikTok For You Page introduced an algorithm that recommends content based on passive behavior, such as watch time, looping, and pausing.¹

Comment sections also became engagement-driven, so a racist comment that gained early likes would be pushed to the top for every later viewer.² This model soon became mainstream. Simultaneously, platforms’ average audiences became younger.³

For adolescents, algorithms function as interactive cycles that tell them what society thinks of their race and others' at their most developmentally vulnerable moment ¹

Methods

Literature review:

- scholarly journals, newspapers, websites, Master's theses
- covers:
 - how algorithms work and curate racism
 - their influence on children's development
 - teenagers' susceptibility to racism on social media
 - highlighted the polarizing nature of comment sections and algorithms.

Discourse analysis:

- 15 screenshots of comment sections
- three most pertinent presented in the paper itself
 - Each video had one million views and 50,000 likes to qualify as “viral.”
 - Content was gathered from brand new accounts to remove prior watching habits

Scope: people 18 or younger in the United States

- Cited literature mostly focuses on U.S. teenage audiences in U.S.-reviewed journals.
- Platforms operate under U.S. regulations - audiences are primarily teenage and pre-teen, with average ages steadily declining.

Results

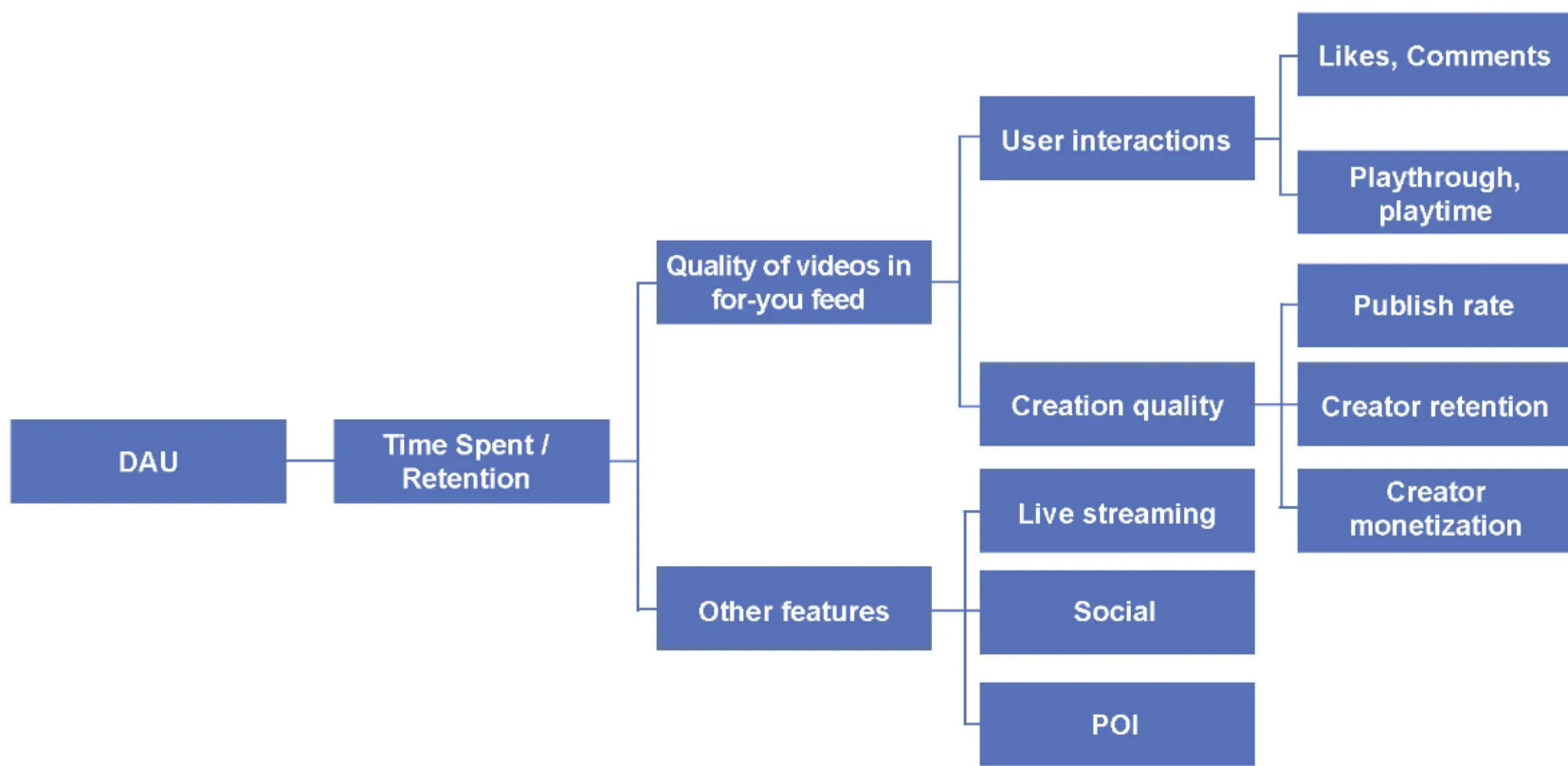
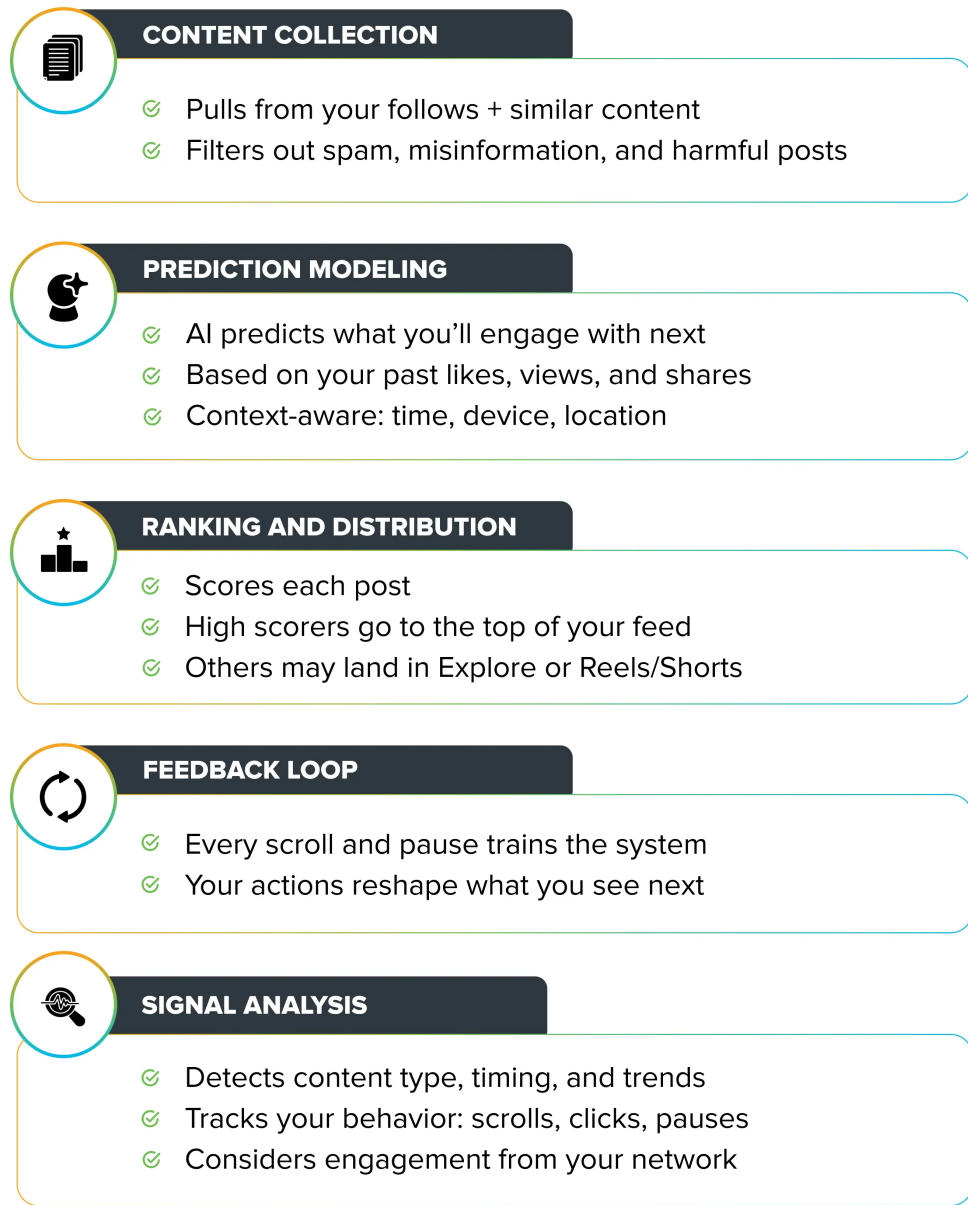
Engagement-Indifferent Amplification:

- algorithms prioritize engagement over content - provocative racial content is amplified regardless of intent.⁴
 - Content is disproportionately pushed to younger users
 - Adolescents unknowingly accelerate the spread of such content through reactions

Algorithmic Identity Conditioning:

- echo chambers preventing critical opinions + repeated exposure = racist messages perceived as more credible.⁵
- racial identity shaped by repetition of curated racism
 - Minorities develop of oppositional attitudes.⁶
- Hostile and defensive reactions to racism both treated as engagement - conflict leads to more polarization

How Social Media Algorithms Work in 2025



Discussion

Interaction w/ Prior Research

- Confirms racially-charged amplification is a structural outcome of engagement-based algorithms, not completely a moderation failure - extends Corella & Moreno (2025)
- Supports hypothesis that repetition (rather than explicit content alone) drives adolescent racial identity formation - extends mere-exposure effect from Yagi & Inoue (2018)⁷ to race
- Extends prior research by connecting engagement-based racism of algorithms with youth racial identities

Implications:

- Platform indifference - implications for ongoing debates over algorithmic regulation/youth online safety
- Implications about platforms’ ignorance of effects of social media on children - highly focused on commercial benefits

Conclusion

Answer to Research Question:

- Algorithmically curated racism is structural: platforms are indifferent to racial content, amplifying it for engagement
- Adolescents’ reinforced reactions overexpose them to online racism - leads to warped perceptions of race in society and online division

Future Directions:

- future research should pursue longitudinal studies to strengthen causal evidence of algorithms’ impact on adolescent racial identity development
- Further studies must account for evolving regulation of social media worldwide (e.g. Kids Online Safety Act, TikTok’s contested U.S. status)
 - international social media guidelines

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