#DisabilityTikTok

Jordan Foster and David Pettinicchio

"Hello beautiful people of the internet," says Lacey Richcreek to her 80.3 thousand (and counting) followers on TikTok—a web-based and mobile social media application. "Today is March 1st which is the start of cerebral palsy awareness month." Lacey continues by sharing her own experience as one of the over 17 million people with cerebral palsy (CP) around the globe (World CP Day, 2020). She is not alone. Like other young people on TikTok, Lacey creates videos about disability, sharing information and personal life stories alongside hashtags like #disabled, #disability, and #disabilitytiktok. To date, these hashtags have generated more than 1 billion views, with everyday users tuning in to share their stories, learning more online about disability than they would otherwise.

Introduced in the fall of 2017, TikTok is among the fastest growing and most widely used social media applications, with some 800 million monthly visits (Abidin, 2020; Kennedy, 2020). Like other forms of social media, including Instagram and Snapchat, TikTok is a highly visual medium, centering the user's appearance in short video clips and digital assemblages. These videos range in length from 15 seconds to 3 minutes and can be set against music, sound effects, or other audio clips (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). While videos on TikTok tend to be less edited than their counterparts on Instagram (Leaver et al., 2020), the application does include options to filter or alter users' appearances with special effects and a built-in "beauty" tool.

TikTok content like that created by Lacey stands out against a mediascape that so often ignores or erases images of disability. People with disabilities are

vastly underrepresented in mainstream media and especially in media emphasizing appearance (Foster, 2021; Ganahl & Arbuckle, 2001; Heiss, 2011; Houston, 2019; Johanssen & Garrisi, 2020). In turn, TikTok has been praised as an inclusive and egalitarian space where anyone can become famous through viral videos and short clips on the app's *For You* page (see Abidin, 2020). Platforms like Instagram and YouTube are often celebrated for these same reasons (Cunningham & Craig, 2019)—as "democratizing" a field historically guarded by elite gatekeepers, as is the case with film and television (Ellis & Merchant, 2020). On these platforms, visibility and fame are, ostensibly at least, fair game for all.

Still, questions remain surrounding whether, and to what extent, platforms like TikTok have generated new opportunities for individuals otherwise excluded and marginalized by traditional content production. A cursory look at the social media landscape suggests that visibility is not only difficult to achieve, but also unevenly distributed, with a cast of conventionally attractive, largely White creators dominating the most widely used media applications (Phạm, 2015). With this in mind, we ask: how do TikTok videos intersect with creators' race, age, disability, and gender to inform their visibility and virality online? And, do these videos and their affordances—the in-application modalities and technical tools available to users—challenge or reinforce widely shared beliefs surrounding disability?

These questions arise as TikTok insiders report that the app suppressed creators of color, queer creators, and creators with disabilities (Botella, 2019), reifying existing inequalities around who is deemed worthy of visibility online. Rebecca Jennings (2021) recently called out the media platform whose biggest stars "are the popular kids…pretty people filming themselves being pretty." This phenomenon is not unique to TikTok. Rather, it is an example of ableist structures that inherently devalue certain appearances and promote others.

In this chapter, we shed light on the democratizing potential of TikTok's viral videos especially as they pertain to disability—a status significantly underrepresented in traditional media. We argue that many of these videos and the creators who post them challenge existing beliefs about disability, giving creators an opportunity to share their stories and experiences in ways that diverge from traditionally narrow disability media tropes and ableist stereotypes. Platform-based norms, however, appear to privilege only a select few creators and creators with disabilities are seldom among them. In part, this owes to a set of pervasive appearance norms that circulate within our visual and virtual culture, and algorithmic logics that favor a select number of "attractive" stars. With this in mind, we begin with a discussion of media representations—broadly defined—and their relationship to the production and reproduction of inequality. We then narrow in on the limitations of social media's democratic and inclusive affordances. Throughout, we illustrate how contemporary social media platforms like TikTok both facilitate and constrain opportunities for diversity and inclusion online.

Media Representations of Historically Marginalized Groups

The intersection of disability studies and media studies is indeed a fast-growing area of scholarship transcending interdisciplinary boundaries (Ellis et al., 2020). The particular focus on "inclusive technologies of mediation" (Ginsburg, 2020: xxiv) has inspired social scientists to innovate theory and method to better account for how the organization of media industries shapes cultural production.

Cultural products including advertisements, film, and television shows, communicate who is worthy of our attention. To borrow from Mears (2010, p. 24), they "do work," illustrating lives and lifestyles not as they are, but as they ought to be. This has important implications for marginalized groups who have historically been underrepresented in mainstream media (Baumann, 2008; Baumann & de Laat, 2012; Ellis et al., 2020; Garrisi & Johanssen, 2020; Houston, 2019; Jeffress, 2021).

In recent years, there has been a growing movement among mainstream media organizations and brands to include more people with disabilities in advertisements and on-screen productions. While these strides forward are, no doubt, important, "newfound visibility without informed and educated planning and portrayals could potentially be more damaging than no inclusion at all" (Loebner, 2020, p. 436). Even more recent representations of diversity tend to be quite narrow (Heiss, 2011; Loebner, 2020).

(Re)Producing Inequality

Representations of the body are especially limited (Duncan, 1994), excluding those who embody physical markers of difference based on gender, sexuality, and race. Well documented by scholars, industry gatekeepers like model scouts and talent agents rely on "safe bets" to guard against market ambiguities and production risks (Godart & Mears, 2009; Hoppe, 2019, 2020; Mears, 2010; Wohl, 2021). Representations of beauty do, for example, exclude women of color (Craig, 2002; Hoppe, 2021; Hunter, 2006; McMillan, 2019; Wissinger, 2015), or posture these women in narrow, often negative ways (Baumann, 2008; Mears, 2011). Images and advertisements on television are similarly narrow, favoring thin, young, White women while excluding or underrepresenting elderly women and women of color (Baumann & de Laat, 2012; Jerslev, 2017).

Media and feminist scholars alike alert us to social, political, and economic exclusion as important vehicles through which extant inequalities are repro-

Excluding Disability

People with disabilities are often missing from cultural products closely tied to appearance (Christensen-Stryno & Eriksen, 2020). Foster and Pettinicchio's (2021) recent analysis found weak representation of visible disability in fashion advertisements and images in *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *InStyle*, as well as campaigns by Nike, Aerie, and Tommy Hilfiger between 2014 and 2019. Cultural producers such as advertisers have often postured the disabled body in negative terms crafting content with young, non-disabled consumers in mind fearing that representations of disability will not resonate with a broad consumer base (Hughes et al., 2005, p. 5; see also Houston, 2019, on "risky" representation). Advertisers worry that inclusion of people with disabilities will result in a "no-win situation" and so ultimately decide against a cast of more diverse people (Ganahl & Arbuckle, 2001, p. 6). Even with more recent evidence suggesting that consumers respond favorably to advertisements featuring disability (Shelton & Waddell, 2021), people with disabilities remain underrepresented in popular media (Dorwart, 2019). Acting as gatekeepers (Foster et al., 2011), advertisers and industry tastemakers select what are thought to be more conventional figures and faces which almost always exclude people with disabilities.

When and if people with disabilities are included in mainstream media representations like advertisements, film, or television, they tend to be postured in ways that reproduce negative stereotypes surrounding the disability community. People with disabilities are, for example, sometimes included as "a source of amusement," invoking stereotypes related to "oddness" and difference (Haller & Becker, 2014, p. 4). Alternatively, disabled people may be featured to inspire pity (Shapiro, 1994; Pettinicchio, 2019; Timke, 2019) or to warm the hearts of readers with stories related to their triumph over disablement—a familiar media trope that has been referred to as "inspiration porn" (Liddiard, 2014; Cameron et al., 2021; Shelton & Waddell, 2021). These are common among athletes with disabilities who are championed for having "overcome" the limitations of their bodies' physicality (Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Hargreaves & Hardin, 2009; Loebner, 2020). Together, these representations reinforce a narrow set of beliefs about disability, perpetuating stereotypes that limit our understanding of the range of figures and faces available for view, and the fullness of their lives.

Challenging Production Dynamics

While existing representations of disability are especially infrequent and often naïvely construed (Heiss, 2011), several advertisers, brands, and tastemakers in film and fashion have cast a greater number of disabled people in images, advertisements, and big-budget sets in recent years. Disney, for example, introduced its first princess "designed with disability in mind" (Resene, 2017, p. 2), while major fashion and beauty retailers including Tommy Hilfiger and Sephora

made efforts to include models with disabilities in their ad campaigns. Across television advertisements, representations of disability are on the rise too. Farnall and Lyons (2012), for example, reported a 200% increase in the number of disabled people when compared to advertisements a decade earlier. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation's (2020) report on representation and diversity showed a similar rise in the representation of characters with disabilities on television; the largest number of characters reported in 11 years. This is no less true online where social media applications and digital platforms increasingly provide the potential for greater representation and inclusion (Christensen-Stryno & Eriksen, 2020; Foster, 2021).

Social Media, Democratization, and Change

Social media represents a robust democratizing force that often (though not always) "disrupts traditional narratives" (Blevins et al., 2019, p. 1636) across a variety of fields by pushing past established media gatekeepers (see also Lewis, 2021; Powell et al., 2018). Indeed, social media including mobile and web-based applications have played an important role in providing users an opportunity to engage directly with industry figures, providing feedback, and making requests for greater diversity. Unlike their traditional counterparts, social media and their technical architecture offer users somewhat more autonomy to craft content and champion causes (Loebner, 2020). They allow people to be seen (Cunningham & Craig, 2019) as when, for example, social media platforms like Instagram spotlight body positive posts (Cohen et al., 2019), or champion fuller figured influencers and influencers of color (Lewis, 2021).

On TikTok, users can directly produce their own online content and share it with others. Content can quickly go viral turning young people into "stars" overnight (Grigoriadis, 2021). Among these stars, we find users with disabilities who share their personal stories aside hashtags and in-application edits—technological and platform-based affordances—that allow others to engage with and see people with disabilities in a new light.

Platform-based affordances include photo taking and sharing tools, as well as livestreaming (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021; Hurley, 2019; Meisner & Ledbetter, 2020), personal storytelling (Cirucci, 2017), and the use of hashtags (Baker & Michael, 2018; Blevins et al., 2019). These provide several democratizing and inclusive potentials for everyday users and for creators online. Livestreaming, for example, allows social media creators to connect with their audiences in real-time, blurring the boundary between creators and their fans while producing a sense of intimacy between the two (Meisner & Ledbetter, 2020). Hashtags, meanwhile, can be used to share powerful stories and personal testimonies related to social justice causes, driving important conversations around these issues.

On TikTok, hashtags like #disability can be used to sort and organize videos to reach users who are part of the disability community and beyond. For example, Lacey Richcreek went viral during CP awareness month using TikTok

specific hashtags including "fy" or "foryou." These hashtags allow users who might otherwise never be cast in mainstream media productions to gain a following and share their message online. These are just some among several "developments and trends" suggesting that social media may hold new opportunities for people with disabilities to be seen and heard (Christensen-Stryno & Eriksen, 2020, p. 37). In part, this is because TikTok's user-generated content faces fewer obstacles with respect to production and distribution than are common with traditional media. Absent a well-defined set of industry gatekeepers, social media applications like TikTok have given way to a cast of creators who challenge "the normative route through which media talent is filtered" (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 11).

The Limits of TikTok

Despite these affordances, there are limits to the democratization potential of social media. Content creation through platforms like TikTok tends to mirror mainstream cultural production more broadly. Algorithmic suppression and "shadow bans" combine to narrow the range of figures and faces featured online (Cotter, 2019; O'Meara, 2019), while talent agents and brand representatives continue to channel resources to just a handful of social media stars. Many social media applications have been criticized for rewarding individuals and groups who embody the greatest share of social privilege especially where appearances are concerned. As Pham (2015, p. 50) observed in her work on influencers and super-bloggers, the "bodies and faces" of social media's most widely followed creators "generally reflect rather than challenge Western standards of beauty (including thinness, youthfulness, and cuteness)," reproducing existing norms surrounding appearance and its significance online.

On the one hand, TikTok, like Instagram and YouTube, shares affordances that can do much to challenge norms and conventions in large part because content is not curated by gatekeepers who make decisions about who consumers should see and emulate. They provide opportunities for consumers and users of media to create content that can be far more inclusive and diverse than that produced by industry gatekeepers (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). On the other hand, these cultural opportunities so closely tied to platform affordances reflect convergence around existing norms and mimetic appearances, highlighting the pervasiveness of widely recognizable beauty ideals and the "normative" bodies they tend to celebrate.

Methodology

To assess the ways in which social media applications like TikTok might challenge or reinforce existing beliefs surrounding disability, we look to a set of widely popular videos posted online. These videos have accrued hundreds of thousands—and in some cases—millions of views. For reference, the most watched video in our sample was viewed 18 million times, while the least

watched video garnered 177,000 views. Importantly, these TikTok videos are publicly available and can be accessed on any web-browser without an account or login credentials.

To locate videos for inclusion we employed a keyword search using hashtags on TikTok. Specifically, the hashtags #disability, #disabled, #disabilitypride, #disabledtiktok, and #disabilitytiktok were used to locate relevant videos for our sample. Throughout, our search was guided by a modified version of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta—Analyses (PRISMA) and followed a multi-step selection process (Moher et al., 2009). Using TikTok's own search tools, we refined our process further, analyzing videos that were sorted as the "top" most viewed for each hashtag search. From among these top-most viewed videos, we included content that featured a creator with a visible or non-visible disability or that reflected on disability or issues related to the disability community more broadly. Our units of analysis ultimately included 100 TikTok videos from 100 TikTok creators. These videos were posted between January of 2020 and November of 2021 and provide a window into the ways in which creators framed disability for their audiences.

Once located, we analyzed creators' videos with specific attention to creators' disability type and its visibility. We did this to determine which (if any) disabilities were more likely to appear online. Consistent with our research objectives, we also recorded each creator's race and gender to better understand how these status characteristics shape opportunities for visibility online. Because observations of race and gender can vary from an individual's own self-classification (Roth, 2016), we combined elements of digital netnography (Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2015), with public searches to gather creators' self-classified race and gender where possible. Creators' disability(ies) was also verified through digital netnography. In practice, this meant searching for and viewing videos through search terms, reviewing creators' profiles and other videos, while taking notes on their public presentation and patterns of content production.

These viral creators may not always identify status characteristics like race within the actual content being analyzed. However, their virality lends itself to verifiability by locating public press stories, interviews, and other online reporting where creators often refer to their own race and gender. Additionally, press agencies like *Allure* and *Vox* have profiled multiple disabled creators including creators in our sample, providing additional details related to creators' race, gender, and disability (see also Lawson, 2021). Overall, 66% of the viral videos coded here were created by users who identify as women, and 34% by users who identify as men. Of these creators, 76% identify as having a visible disability including paraplegia, cerebral palsy, and Tourette syndrome, while 24% a non-visible disability including chronic pain. In our sample, 72% of all creators identify as White, 16% as Black, and 4% as East-Asian. Racial self-classifications were unavailable for 8% of the creators we sampled.

We examined how users framed disability for their audiences online. Drawing on a wide body of work related to media products and the representation of

disability (e.g., Heiss, 2011; Jeffress, 2021; Resene, 2017), we used an iterative process, recording major themes and patterns as they emerged across our sample of videos (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Consistent with existing studies of TikTok (Abidin, 2020), we assessed the captions creators used for their videos, as well as creators' principal activities, speech, and any added text they laid over their videos. Taken together, these elements help shape and communicate creators' messaging online.

Our analysis revealed three key frames: (1) challenging existing stereotypes related to disability, (2) personal stories and struggles among young people with disabilities, and (3) positioning people with disabilities as normatively beautiful. While these frames were not always mutually exclusive, creators did tend to emphasize one or another. As Table 1 shows, videos related to creators' personal stories and struggles were the most frequent among TikTok's viral disability content, followed by videos that challenged stereotypes related to disability, and finally, videos that focused on beauty and appearance. We describe each frame below and situate these within broader understandings of media portrayals of disability described by disability and media scholars. In line with the literature, we acknowledge that the frames we identify among TikTok users have broader significance beyond mobile applications and on-screen videos to shape how disability is generally perceived and understood.

Framing Disability

Challenging Stereotypes

TikTok provides creators an opportunity to address widely shared stereotypes related to disability. Much has been written by disability studies scholars about the prevalence of these negative attitudes and stigmas (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Oliver & Barnes, 2012). These include harmful stereotypes around mobility and athleticism (McGrail et al., 2020), sex and sexuality (Campbell, 2017), as well as dependence (Pettinicchio, 2019). Brenna Huckaby (@brennahuckaby), for example, challenges ableist notions of athleticism by documenting her physical fitness and weightlifting activities. In doing so, Brenna asserts her strength and physicality, undermining media narratives that cast people with disabilities as pitiful and necessarily dependent. Creator Hope Marie (@epohmp4) produced a similar video, challenging traditional media narratives that position disabled people as pitiful. In it, she explains to viewers that "most disabled people don't enjoy pity." Erin Novakowski (@wheelierin), a creator with spinal muscular atrophy, echoed this same sentiment, using captions to explain that she is not "inspirational," "extraordinary," or "innocent." She simply "exists."

Other creators adopt a similar approach, crafting video content that takes aim at widely shared misunderstandings and negative beliefs about disability. Toby Tremain (@Tobysmilesoffical) reminds his 875,000 followers that people with disabilities are every bit as intelligent as others around them, and that

being disabled should not invite condescending or patronizing comments. Em (@happyinhoney), a TikTok creator who is paraplegic, puts it somewhat differently, reminding her audience that it is not okay to infantilize people with disabilities. She adds that invasive questions about their medical history are also not okay. Like other creators with disabilities, Toby and Em sought to raise awareness among TikTok users by providing helpful information and useful correctives related to their own lived experiences as disabled people. In doing so, these creators cast disability as far more complex than has mainstream media to date (Ganahl & Arbuckle, 2001; Haller & Becker, 2014).

In a similar fashion, creator Marcela Marañon asks her viewers to "stop saying these things to women in wheelchairs: 'you are too pretty to be in a wheelchair'," and "'since you're in a wheelchair you can't have sex right?'" This latter comment alludes to how women with disabilities are often perceived as violating traditional norms of sexuality particularly among those who already hold rigid beliefs around gender roles (Parsons et al., 2017; Foster, 2021). TikTok provides a space, however, where people with disabilities can challenge this narrative, shedding important light on topics like sex and sexuality. This is true when, for example, creators produce videos that address dating, take questions about sex or sexuality, and when creators share details of their romantic lives. Videos in this vein invite viewers to think more deeply about the "desires" and "pleasures" that they share with creators with disabilities so often missing from mainstream media coverage (Loeser et al., 2018, p. 257).

TikTok makes it possible for creators to respond to users' comments both with words and videos in turn allowing creators with disabilities to address users' questions (and criticisms) in real-time. Interaction with users can directly address negative stereotypes as creators provide more thoughtful information on theirs and others' lives. Consider, for example, Mya or @immarollwithit, a TikTok creator whose progressive physical disability has meant that Mya uses a chair to stabilize her body. One user, surprised by the extent of Mya's mobility, commented that she "is not actually disabled." Mya responded with a video informing this user and her audience that "not all wheelchair users are paralyzed" and that many conditions may require the use of a chair including CP and spina bifida. Her video caption reinforces the point, suggesting that "disability is a spectrum and is dynamic."

Still other creators structure their videos around frequently asked questions set to trending music on the application. James Sultiff (@james_sutliff) produced one such video, explaining to his 1.1 million followers that his disability—dystonia—was caused by an injury sustained while playing rugby. Puala Carozzo (@pauuzzoo) created a similar video, replying to questions like, "what happened to you?" and "does your leg hurt?" In replying to users' questions, creators like Puala and James provide a space where negative attitudes and misperceptions of disability can be dispelled. In crafting these videos, creators with disabilities take control of (and often re-write) dominant media narratives about disability, including narratives that posture disabled people simply as

secondary to other focal persons or as "articles of adornment" used to dress-up a story (Billawalla & Wolbring, 2014).

Sharing Stories and Social Struggles

In addition to providing a space where creators can challenge disability stereotypes, TikTok allows people with disabilities to share personal stories. Creators with disabilities discuss what it is like to date, how they navigate spaces designed exclusively for non-disabled people, and moments in their lives where they felt defeated by disabling environments and social struggles.

Lucy Dawson (@ludawinthesky) produced one such viral video cued to the song, *It's The Hard Knock Life* (Charnin & Strouse, 1977). In this video, Lucy briefly captures what it is like to go "on dating apps as a young disabled woman." She motions back and forth as captions depict damaging comments men make to her like, for example, "does the stick [Lucy's cane] get involved in the bedroom." Accompanied by hashtags like #disabilityTikTok or #disabled, Lucy's video engages directly with other members of the disability community. This video and the hashtags that accompany it function as an avenue for receiving support or encouragement. At the same time, Lucy's video lends a voice to the very real experiences with persistent social and attitudinal barriers that are often ignored by mainstream media—even mainstream media that includes disabled characters and figures.

On TikTok, Chrissy (@chrissycanyouhearme) provides a somewhat different look at her day-to-day difficulties as a "profoundly deaf" young woman. In her video, Chrissy explains to viewers that others often assume she can hear because she can speak. She reminds viewers that being deaf and being mute constitute two different disabilities. In a similar style, Tatum Box (@tatumbx) reproduces a common conversation she has with those who misunderstand or doubt her disability—amplified musculoskeletal pain syndrome. As Tatum shows in her video, she is often in a position where she must justify her disability to others, some of whom tell Tatum that if they were in her shoes, "I'd kill myself." Both creators make it clear that these conversations are incredibly taxing, a feeling echoed by users in the comments that follow their videos.

In his viral video on TikTok, Louie (@notlewy) explains that being out in public is sometimes uncomfortable as young children tend to jeer and point at the visible markers of his disability. While Louie's video functions as a useful device for reminding users that this kind of behavior is not okay, it also communicates that the "disabled body" continues to be treated as "odd" or "unusual" and, in some cases, as a source for amusement (Haller & Becker, 2014). This kind of content brings the lived experiences of people with disabilities to a broad audience illustrating the dynamic relationship between disability and society and the widespread attitudinal barriers that continue to marginalize disabled people.

Hello Beautiful People: A Focus on Appearance

Some TikTok users with disabilities lean on the application's appearance norms and on broad appeals toward beauty to shape their message. When this is the case, users with disabilities stylize their content to align more closely with online trends and existing conventions shared among the application's most widely followed creators. They might, for instance, crop out visible markers of disability, pulling focus toward trending outfits, makeup, and facial features. Although these videos often overlap with others related to the stereotypes and personal stories shared above, they tend to perform especially well on TikTok, garnering hundreds of thousands, and in some cases, millions of views. Their success points to the centrality of appearance on TikTok, revealing both opportunities and obstacles for members of the disability community.

Alyssa (@alcequine_), for example, went viral by subverting beauty norms and users' expectations of appearance. At first in her video, she appears in frame wearing a black crop top and distressed denim jeans. Her blonde hair falls perfectly to the side of her face, as she lip-syncs to say, "You don't look disabled." Alyssa then steps back for the viewer, revealing that a prosthesis is supporting her right leg. In doing so, Alyssa challenges widely shared beliefs about disability, asking her viewers to understand that disability is not always visible. But Alyssa does something more too. In pulling focus to her normative good looks, Alyssa challenges users online to see her disability *as beautiful*.

Lucy (@ludawinthesky) provides a similar video for her viewers. In it, she recalls a moment in her life when a stranger assumed that she was not disabled because "she didn't look it"—presumably because Lucy embodies widely recognized norms surrounding appearance and attractiveness including light skin, and near perfect facial symmetry. She exclaims to viewers, "when will people realize that disability has no 'look' and that disability has no age." Creator Jiya Day (@bbjiya), a young woman of color with mild spastic quadriplegia cerebral palsy began her journey on TikTok with makeup and beauty videos—a popular genre of video online. Appearing for her viewers with brightly decorated eyelids and color treated hair, Jiya combines trending makeup looks with commentary on disability including videos on ableism and videos on her lived experience as a young person with cerebral palsy.

Taken together, the TikTok posts analyzed here serve as an important example of the continuing efforts of disabled people seeking to challenge beliefs that disability is incompatible with beauty and appearance norms so often touted in mainstream media. While these videos stand out in a virtual landscape that often privileges only a handful of typically White, thin, and non-disabled people, they should not be read uncritically (see Heiss, 2011 for an analogous example). Indeed, videos that emphasize the importance of beauty and attractiveness while obscuring or making-over markers of visible disability inevitably suggest that disability ought to be worked on, fashioned, and corrected if it is to connect with audiences online. What is more, not all TikTok users are able to marshal the language and conventions of beauty with much success. Rather,

creators who embody forms of privilege related to their appearance including and especially White creators with non-visible disabilities appear best positioned to accrue likes and follows in response to their videos.

Consider Paige Layle's (@paigelayle) disability-related content. Paige, a young woman with autism, has 2.6 million followers on TikTok and has created several viral videos on the application. In one such video, Paige sings, "I don't have a perfect body, but sometimes I forget, I don't have a perfect body, cause I'm autistic and my body doesn't tell me when I need something." At the time of analysis, this video had amassed more than 1.2 million likes and some 6.4 million views, making it one of the most liked and viewed videos in our sample. In calling on the body, Paige shifts focus to her appearance. A young, slender, woman with blonde hair, Paige's admission of imperfection appears earnest and sincere. Still, Paige's body is conventionally attractive, and her disability is invisible to the average user. Her audience takes notice of appearance, commenting to say that Paige is "so cute" and, "ur seriously so so pretty."

Highly visible creators like Lucy and James (discussed above) are illustrative cases too. Each embodies widely shared norms related to beauty and appearance. And these norms, as news reports so often remind us, are especially important on TikTok (Jennings, 2021). James, a White, cis-gendered and obviously muscular man, embodies a set of widely shared ideals related to appearance, calling to mind images of the normatively attractive "man's man." Importantly, his disability is all but invisible in the static thumbnails that populate his page, suggesting perhaps that only those creators with less clearly visible disabilities are well positioned to find fame online.

While TikTok affords people with disabilities an opportunity to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and create content that might otherwise not make it on a billboard or big screen, the application sees far fewer viral videos on disability than it does videos on say, dance or lip-synch content. What is more, not a single creator with a visible disability makes it among the top 100 most followed creators on the application (Social Blade, 2022), raising important questions about who is (and is not) poised for virality online. A cursory look at this list suggests that the most widely followed creators are those who reflect conventional standards of beauty. They are, as Kennedy (2020, p. 1072) explains, "restricted to a narrow set of gendered, racialized, classed and sexualised ideals" and so, ultimately reinforce and reproduce existing privileges surrounding appearance online.

Discussion

Social media applications like TikTok are often praised for their inclusive and democratic potential. Members of the press report on a cast of young people turned stars through carefully edited viral videos (Grigoriadis, 2021). Some comment on the rise of creators of color (Lorenz, 2020); others turn to important trends related to body diversity online (Yanagihara, 2021). While these press reports are not without merit, the stories that they tell are incomplete.

TikTok, like other social media applications, does indeed provide more inclusive opportunities for diverse creators. Bypassing industry gatekeepers like editors and media managers (Cunningham & Craig, 2019), these platforms present fewer obstacles to visibility and fame than more traditional media. Still, for all its democratizing potential, TikTok is not without issue. This platform, and others like it (Phạm, 2015), are dominated by a cast of uniformly attractive, largely White creators whose visibility owes in large part to the appearance-based privileges they embody (Foster & Baker, 2022).

Among these social media creators, we find a cast of young people with disabilities who have turned to TikTok to share their stories, dispel stereotypes surrounding the disability community, and educate other users online. As we have shown, TikTok provides an avenue through which creators with disabilities can craft and edit content that challenges existing beliefs and widely recognizable tropes related to disability, reaching a wide audience. TikTok also provides its creators a platform on which to share their personal struggles and stories about their lived experience with tens of thousands if not millions of followers. In this way, TikTok expands opportunities for visibility and storytelling beyond those available in the traditional media circuit and can push past narrow, often negative, stereotypes surrounding disability (Billawalla & Wolbring, 2014).

On TikTok, videos that help to dispel stereotypes or that center on the stories and struggles of young people with disabilities often intersected with content related to beauty and appearance. Videos that did so borrowed from the application's mimetic norms and conventions to center appearance and attractiveness in view. Importantly, videos that pair disability with appearance conventions and beauty ideals position disability in a new light, inviting viewers to see and understand those with disabilities as lying within conventional beauty norms. At the same time, videos emphasize users' conventionally attractive figures and faces while simultaneously obscuring markers of disability. By doing so, however subtly, they suggest that disability ought to be managed, worked-on and ultimately, sanitized for view. Like their mainstream media counterparts, these videos inadvertently reinforce "dominant beauty structures" when they erase or make over markers of disability (Heiss, 2011, p. 17).

For their part, creators with disabilities can engage more critically with discussions on beauty and appearance, and with the application's oft-cited emphasis on conventional "good looks" (Jennings, 2021). Owing to their exclusion from the traditional fashion and beauty landscape, creators with disabilities are uniquely positioned to comment on how appearance norms, broadly defined, shape our everyday experiences both online and off. Relatedly, creators with disabilities are encouraged to take aim at the algorithms, logics, and memetic trends that shape social media applications like TikTok, and narrow "content diversity" on the platform (Poell et al., 2022, p. 167). This is especially important now, as TikTok continues to grow in popularity.

Suggestions for Future Research

Moving forward, scholars should attend more closely to media applications and their democratizing and inclusive potential for diverse users online. Specifically, we need to better understand what opportunities *and* obstacles these media might hold for marginalized peoples. Research in this vein would benefit from systematically analyzing users' comments in reply to TikTok videos and assess what these comments can tell us about production and consumption dynamics in a context of democratization.

While this chapter did not explicitly analyze users' comments across the sample, we allude to how these may function as a vehicle through which people with different disabilities connect with one another, sharing knowledge and experiences to produce a sense of community. Alternatively, public comments might be read to better understand how creators deal with criticism online. Creators with disabilities often report on or show their audiences the kinds of disparaging comments they receive on TikTok, raising important questions about the limitations (and risks) this mobile application presents for people with disabilities. To borrow from Johanssen and Garrisi (2020, p. 8), "while digital media may contribute to the self-empowerment of excluded and silenced bodies, they may equally open up spaces of discrimination, threats, hatred, trolling and silencing online."

Future research should also more systematically consider the algorithmic logics that shape social media platforms. Kelley Cotter (2019) and Victoria O'Meara (2019) provide a useful starting point for research of this kind, illustrating how algorithms shape visibility online. Still, more work is needed on TikTok—a relatively new and quickly growing social media application whose algorithms may act to constrain visibility for some individuals and groups.

Conclusion

Social media applications like TikTok provide opportunities for creators to achieve unprecedented visibility and, in some cases, fame. Among these creators are young people with disabilities who turn to TikTok to share their stories, triumphs, and struggles. Their videos stand out in a mediascape that has neglected and sometimes maligned disabled people. Their content represents an important stride toward greater diversity and inclusivity online with implications extending beyond the application and even the internet. Still, the app and its content are not without issue. Creators and viewers are encouraged to think critically about their use of TikTok and about the content they see and share, as it relates to direct and indirect messaging around inclusion, exclusion, and empowerment.

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