

This is a final essay written in April 2020 for my Master's level course "Digital Media Audiences." I wanted to include this to show my writing skills as well as my understanding of digital platforms and their audiences – specifically one that has blown up in a large way within the last year and a half.

Does the concept of 'media audience' have any relevance? What justifies or undermines its continued relevance? Provide examples to support your arguments.

Media audiences play a vital role in media studies, Allor (1988) mentions, as quoted in Sonia Livingstone's (2004) text *The Challenge of Changing Audiences*, that it is important in "the analysis of the social impact of mass communication in general" (p.75). Therefore, it is necessary to continue studying media audiences and how they change. For the scope of this paper I will create a discourse and discussion into how the term "media audiences" is still relevant in some cases, but needs to be revisited for the online space. No longer are spectators of media simply reacting to what they are being show, but are becoming directly involved in its creation and consumption, which is why we must think about them as users, "new media users." The main characteristic of new media users that incites a divergence from what has been theorized in the past is the user taking on the role of laborer as well as consumer. This factor which transitions an audience member from spectator to user are at play in many different forms of new media and online spaces, but it is best displayed in the Chinese short video sharing app known as TikTok.

To begin, let us think about the concept of audiences and what exactly the term entails. Audiences at a basic level of understanding can be thought of as "a collection of spectators, a group of individuals who are gathered together to attend a performance and 'receive' a message 'sent' by another" (Ang, 1991, p.27). To put it simply, in the beginning audiences were mostly thought of as a group of people in a physical place experiencing something altogether in the same place at the same time. This of course was in reference to theatre productions, sporting events or musical concerts. As time passed, we began to think of audiences differently – no longer having to be in a physical place, nor all together or at the same time. Kristyn Gorton (2009) finds multiple categories to distinguish between audiences of different types of media (p.12). This includes level of activity, space, time constraints, accessibility, interaction, proximity and concentration. For example, when sitting in a theater watching a play or even

going to the cinema to see a film, the audience member is sitting in a dark space and watching what is in front of them. However, with the television being at home, an individual is more inclined to be distracted and do other things while watching the media, perhaps looking at their phone or cooking and housework. These kinds of distinctions are very important as they tell us that depending on the kind of media that is being consumed, the characteristics and structure of the audience can vary from one another.

Another common factor thought of to be associated with audiences of media is their passiveness. Theorists Adorno and Horkheimer developed the idea of the cultural industries in which the entertainment being created is manufactured and continues to repeat itself. “No independent thinking must be expected from the audience: the product prescribes every reaction: not by its natural structure (which collapses under reflection), but by signals. Any logical connection calling for mental effort is painstakingly avoided” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979, p.137). While there are many things within Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of the cultural industries that is still relevant many decades later, the idea of the audience being passive is a bit underdeveloped for today’s audience. John Fiske (1989) greatly questions this in his work *Understanding Popular Culture*, “popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry. All the cultural industries can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formations of the people to use or reject in the on-going process of producing their popular culture” (p.24). This idea of people using or rejecting the texts produced by the cultural industry is also discussed in Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding model of television. Audience members are vastly different from one another and while you may have some who are simply passive and consume the messages being given to them, you have just as many audience members or reject the message or negotiate it. Hall believed that the audience member’s interpretation and receiving of media messages depends on a viewer or spectator’s personal background, experience and ideologies (Gorton, 2009, p.19).

With this fundamental background in audiences, it is important that the ideas and theories are not ignored when thinking about digital forms of media and spaces, but instead used as references and a foundation to be built upon. As mentioned, the type of media one is viewing greatly vital in thinking about audiences, as the characteristics associated vary from audience to audience depending on whether it is a sporting event, theater production, television program or film. That is why we cannot just assume ideas revolving the audience and television will be

completely applicable to that of users of social media platform or digital technology. We can however assume, Fiske's critique of Adorno and Horkheimer, that the audience is indeed not passive is very much relevant for those who consume digital technologies. In fact, rather than being passive or even content simply being one directional, social media is in a sense more interactive than that of television. This presents itself as flow, which Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) believe should have an individual feeling as though there is "something for him or her to do, and that he or she is capable of doing it" (p.30).

Even with such theories as that of Stuart Hall where he identifies audience members as individual based on their experiences, it still identifies as an audience member of consuming something that is being given to them rather than having an interactive flow. Social media platforms are not stagnant and do not have limitations for interaction with the content, but instead users are able to interact in real time instantly to media. "Viewing in relation to new media technologies characterized by digital forms of content, mobility of use, and increased direct interaction is now reconceived as using, interacting, and searching" (Shimpach, 2011, p.77). That is why we cannot use the term media audiences in reference to social media platforms and digital spaces, instead we can consider them "new media users," due to their interaction. "Users" signal someone who is active, just as John Fiske argues in his text and builds upon ideas from Stuart Hall that the message certain media sends is whatever the audience conceptualizes it to be.

Furthermore, we can consider Axel Bruns (2007) term as referenced in Nightingale's (2011) introductory chapter of *The Handbook of Media Audiences*, that considers the new media user to be a producer and consumer, i.e. a "prosumer" (p.2) To Bruns, within these digital spaces, there is no longer a clear line between who is making the content and who is consuming it. Producership is a relevant term that deals with the hybridity of what is now encompassing most online users. The term itself characterizes as to why we cannot use the term media audiences when thinking about social media due to past theorizing of not considering the audience to be put into multiple roles of producer and consumer. This is of course due to the growth of technology since Adorno, Horkheimer, Fiske and Hall's research. The advancement of technology and social media has promoted this role of prosumer for users and distinctly made them a more active audience than Adorno and Horkheimer could have ever imagined. Not only are those on social

media platforms simply producing content, but in a sense, they are carrying out a form of labor which is also unique to social media.

Ideas regarding labor as a commodity really began with Karl Marx's original theorizations. To Marx, labor is a commodity that is to be sold and is the activity concerned with performing goods and services, specifically this is known as labor-power. Ideas of the audience laboring has always been present, Smythe (1977) characterizes it as a kind of work that deals with the buying of commodities from programs and advertisers, "to spend their income accordingly. In short, they work to create demand for advertised goods" (p.6). While one can argue that the audience has been always performing a kind of labor by encoding messages or buying into commodities advertised on television, it has not been quite on this scale. With social media not only are the users buying commodities that are advertised to them through use of big data, but they are the ones producing the content and laboring in that regard. Rather than just consuming and purchasing, they are creating those commodities to be consumed themselves and laboring in content creation as many platforms rely on users to provide the media. This is why those using social media platforms cannot be thought of as a media audience, since they are the ones creating and laboring. Christian Fuchs (2015) has developed ideas regarding power to social media platforms, for example "that Internet usage is a new form of labour conducted beyond factory and office boundaries in a playful manner that online companies appropriate this labour and make profit out of it" (p.119). Social media platforms entice users to have the ability to have control and interactive flow within their media, allowing them to become the producers and consumers, but whether they are aware of it or not, they are commodifying everything they do online.

TikTok is a Chinese video-sharing social media platform that was originally founded in 2012 by Zhang Yiming. Yang, Zhao and Ma (2019) believe that TikTok advertises itself as "a music creative short video social software, which is a 15-second music short video community based on contemporary young people" (p.340.) It caters specifically to young people, with statistics showing that 68.97% of users are less than 24 years old (Yang, Zhao & Ma, 2019, p.341). It aims to target younger users based on taste and interest, as well as pushing them to express themselves in a creative manner (Yang, Zhao & Ma, 2019, p.341). Many videos on the platform are short form sketches, comedy bits or dance videos. These categories of types of

videos go hand in hand with the “music” function of the app where users can overlay a sound bite or popular song on top of their video.

TikTok’s content solely relies on content created by its users, with the high rate of roughly 83% of users having posted at least one video. The platform encourages users to be active with the media, directly engage and the design in itself promotes the individual to advertise themselves. TikTok prioritizes its “for you page” rather than a “following” page where undiscovered users and creators can be showcased. “TikTok opens to the For You page, so the people you’ve actually chosen to follow are secondary to the algorithm’s continuously updating recommendations” (Feldman, 2019). Therefore, it is easier and there is a larger capability for anyone to become famous on the app or be viewed by millions. TikTok will show a user’s video to different groups or people that the platform believes it will be relevant or interesting for, despite how many followers or likes they have. It becomes a kind of “grassroots” celebrity effect, which in a way sets up the user to want to be active and participate in creating their own content. This pushes the user towards laboring by creating content to fill the platform and perhaps also advertise themselves as a commodity that is valuable and an entity to be viewed. One does not see this with a television audience, which only traditionally partakes in viewing and “represents a categorical and structural position within a larger institutionalized process” (Shimpach, 2011, p.63). A television audience partakes in viewing which is localized and for the individual, but the audience is not at liberty or pushed to do work where they become the commodity.

With TikTok’s focus on the “for you page” and the factor that anyone or anything can gather visibility, it can cause certain things to go “viral.” Due to the app’s focus on music and audio files being a major part of the video creation process, it is those pieces of audio that is prioritized in becoming viral and having popularity in usage on the platform. These pieces of audio or music can become associated with a trend or style of video that becomes recreated and recirculated in creation by users over and over again. Users will create the same kind of content, to participate in “viral” trends or under audio file tags that are popular in the hopes of their video becoming more visible and, on more people’s, “for you page.” TikTok having various sound bites and music clips that are associated with a trend, immediately answers the user’s question of “what should I post?” (Herrman, 2019). They end up in Adorno and Horkheimer’s cycle of the cultural industry by repeating in creating content they know will be more than likely successful.

However, this formula does cause the user to be more likely to post and create content for TikTok as seen by the percentage of users who have posted at least one video.

Having users labor by creating videos and transitioning their leisure time into a time of work is not the only way the users of TikTok are laboring on the application. The audio, dialogue files or music that becomes associated with a viral trend is very valuable to the individual the file originally belongs to. For example, let us think about the 2019 song “Say So” by American singer and rapper Doja Cat. Doja Cat first became active as a musician in 2013 releasing less serious songs that were in a comedic tone, but soon when her track “Say So” became associated with a “TikTok dance trend,” her success grew to the mainstream market. TikToker Haley Sharpe choreographed and filmed herself dancing along to “Say So,” which many users participated in. “In retrospect ‘Say So’ was destined to be great TikTok fodder: the irresistible disco beat plus sassy lyrics which translate well into easy-to-learn dance moves” (Wang, 2019). To date the song has received 19 million videos posted under the “Say So” audio file on TikTok, users participating in the dance challenge earning Doja Cat her first song inside the top 10 on the Billboard hot 100 chart (McIntyre, 2020).

What exactly does this all mean? This is much more than the explanation of TikTok users engaging in a fun dance challenge and creating content. Instead, we have what can be best described as taking leisure time as labor time. Essentially, the impression is that the time for an individual to be creating content on a social media platform and not working or laboring would be a time of relaxation or leisure. Users may not be aware exactly of this blurring between the lines, because this form of labor does not feel exploitative, but instead it feels like authentic leisure and fun (Fuchs, 2015, p.108). As Fuchs (2015) characterizes in his text, “These transformations of society do not bring about an end of the capitalist time regime that separates leisure time and labour time, but rather signify an attempt to minimize leisure time by turning it into labour time” (p.109). TikTok and social media platforms give off the notion for users to be creative – as they are the ones producing, consuming and essentially making the platforms relevant – but they are instead participating in unpaid labor.

The users of TikTok are not just spectators who watch what is uploaded, but they are the ones who are popularizing trends or dances and causing economic growth and notoriety for artist by continuing to upload. “The songs that go viral on TikTok are refreshingly unpredictable – they aren’t a simple reflection of streambait pop or what’s big on the radio” (Cooper, 2019). It is

the users who decide what they find to be the most interesting to include in their video and make popular on the app, not what is predetermined by the masses. Doja Cat and other artist can be seen as doing work or laboring as they are the ones that created the song, but they are laboring for themselves or their label and management, here we have users laboring for TikTok to give the platform content and for the artist themselves to give them recognition and success.

“Corporate social media prosumption is a form of continuous primitive accumulation of capital that turns non-commodified leisure time into productive labour time that generates value and profit for capital” (Fuchs, 2015, p. 116). Even Marx believed that the capitalistic system would still find time for the individual to labor even if it is in an artistic or scientific way that appears to be a time for freedom (Marx, 1857, p.706).

Can we still consider and use the term media audience in today’s society? Yes, as many of the basic theorizations and ideas regarding audiences mentioned in this paper are still very much relevant. However, for new media such as social media platforms and digital spaces that rely on user involvement to thrive, greatly differ from being an audience. With other media forms, the interaction between audience member and media text was a one-way flow, so we could simply consider the viewers as an audience who are given a message and meant to interpret it. Social media platforms not only have the foundational theorizations of what an audience is, but it is two directional as those spectators have the ability to become users and producers of the media as well. This operation of performing labor for these social media platforms and its entities such as musical artists on TikTok finds academics on a stand still where we can no longer consider the term media audiences. This growth and development of media audiences will only continue as social media platforms like TikTok become even more popular and individuals want more of an interactive hand in creating the media they consume. This creative agency that comes with being a producer, however is false consciousness for the user, where they are performing a type of labor that lacks creativity. When consolidating videos associated with a dance or trend on TikTok you are presented with repetition and manufactured content from users that overall serves to the task originally sent in place by the encoders of the music file they are using and app creators. Therefore, the notion of new media audiences as users needs to continue to be studied as this interaction between producer, user, consumer and labor is not known of traditional media audiences.

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