

Algorithmic Gaze and the Feedback Loop of Othering: The Case for Africa

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Abstract: *Several studies have examined the concept of algorithmic gaze in the ways that algorithms are trained to 'see' the 'other' particularly nonwestern countries and demonstrating how these views projected by algorithms usually have roots in historical biases and colonial narratives. However, few research has discussed beyond this unidirectional gaze of algorithms, particularly in the African context. In extending the historical contexts of colonialism and neo-colonialism in algorithms, This study brings to the fore how TikTok's algorithmic behavior in content portrayal, and user engagement patterns not only reinforces stereotypes about Africa but also demonstrates that a feedback loop exists, wherein users who create content are influenced by algorithmically curated content and further contribute to this cycle of othering by creating content and interacting in ways that further inform algorithmic processes. This thus reinforces these narratives deeply rooted in colonial perspectives. These findings emphasize the importance of promoting algorithmic transparency, digital literacy, and fair representation to challenge long-standing stereotypes and promote a more accurate understanding of Africa on digital platforms. Through recommendations aimed at diversifying data, and promoting cross-cultural digital literacy, this research contributes to the broader discourse on digital representation, algorithmic fairness, and the decolonization of digital spaces.*

Keywords: algorithmic Gaze, decolonization of digital spaces,

INTRODUCTION

Media platforms have constantly evolved from traditional to digital and now to social, what has, however, remained constant is the power of media to frame our perceptions. McLuhan (1964) perfectly captures this in his stance on the media being an expansion of human functionalities and capabilities. Through the lens of media, we not only see ourselves but also gain an appreciation of the inner workings of the broader world, and they constantly change. The media has long played an important role in shaping our perceptions, beliefs, and understanding of the world. Whether it is a headline in a newspaper, a trending hashtag on Twitter, or a viral video on TikTok, the media dictates what we see, how we see it, and, to an extent, how we feel about it. In the traditional forms

of media for instance, the newspapers, radio, and television were the primary sources of information for the audience, providing a window into global events, cultural happenings, and societal shifts. They participated in constructing the narratives, deciding what stories were told, how they were presented, and to whom (McCombs & Shaw, 1977), acting acts as a mirror that reflects societal values, norms, and narratives, while also influencing them in return. When we talk about the power of the media, it is easy to envision it as an autonomous entity, operating in isolation, molding minds, and dictating narratives. This perspective, while acknowledging the influence of the media, can unintentionally overshadow the human element, the very core of the existence and function of the media (Bozdog, 2013). Within the media environment, there exist fundamental and institutional powers that play active roles and make decisions in determining what is highlighted and how it is presented (Bruns, 2018). The media is a human creation. It is deeply intertwined with human agency – in endeavor, creativity, choices, and biases. When stories are told, when narratives are crafted, and when news is disseminated, there are human hands, minds, and voices behind them.

With the emergence of digital platforms, which has altered the mechanics of information dissemination, and brought about a significant redistribution of power, deviating away from the usual purview of established traditional gatekeepers (Bruns, 2018). The line between media producers and consumers has become increasingly blurred. Now, platform users have the potential to shape and share their narratives. Many studies have demonstrated how this democratized information dissemination produced a space for participatory audiences who are no longer passive consumers, but active participants, contributors, and even creators of content (Deuze, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2018). This democratization of media suggests a paradigm shift where the responsibility for shaping perceptions has shifted away from the traditional media and is now dispersed within the audience itself. Yet, the most profound change in recent times in the rise of social media is with their algorithms - the mediator of our digital experiences (Gillespie, 2014; Eubanks, 2018; Burgess et al. 2022, Coleman, 2023), which also have the power to shape and reinforce specific narratives. These algorithms do not operate in a vacuum. Much like the traditional media, they serve as conduits through which biases are not only conveyed but also solidified (Couldry and Hepp, 2018; Noble, 2018). Through automation, they curate and present content, shaping what we ‘see’ (Kitchin, 2014), and, in the process, create echo chambers that reinforce existing biases. The question then becomes- If these digital spaces have created participatory digital spaces, how then are these biases, and beliefs crafted and woven into the fabric of our collective consciousness? How do these algorithms come to reflect such biases?

This study intends to examine the idea of algorithmic Othering, specifically on the TikTok platform, in order to uncover the feedback loops that perpetuate Africa's misrepresentation. By examining the relationship between historical narratives, media portrayal, algorithmic othering, and user engagement, this study will shed light on the mechanisms through which digital platforms can either challenge or reinforce long-standing stereotypes and what this implies for the portrayal

and understanding of Africa, and contribute to the broader discourse on media representation, digital equity, and the decolonization of digital spaces.

Africa in the Media: Pre-Digital Era to Present

The portrayal of Africa across various media platforms has evolved (Lynda Fork Kintz, 2007), yet the remnants of colonial narratives and legacies persist, which reflects a continuity from colonial discourses to contemporary digital media practices (Tsikata, 2014). From early print media to broadcast television, the portrayal of Africa and its varied cultures was often portrayed from a reductionist narrative and a certain otherness that differentiates it from the Western world. Africa in the media is usually portrayed as a location that needs saving, marked by conflict, poverty, disease, underdevelopment, primitivism, or political instability while sidelining the rich cultural, historical, and socio-political landscape of the continent (Wallace, 2005; Steeves, 2008). Such portrayals reinforce legacy binaries of colonizer-colonized (Coleman, 2023), and the colonialist ideology of a superior We -West and an inferior Other – Africa, which usually sets the tone for the Western perception of Africa in ways that justified colonial conquest, exploitation, domination, and rule. Thus, Africa has historically been a subject of marginalization, and misrepresentation through various media with recurring themes as savage, primitive, or in need of civilization. Scholars like Harth (2012) have documented the stereotypical depiction of Africa in Western media, highlighting how such portrayals contribute to a distorted understanding of the continent. These narratives, rooted in a history of colonization and exploitation, have found their way into modern-day representations across various media channels, including digital platforms, and are now often referred to as neo-colonialism. Neocolonialism denotes a new form of control, largely economic and cultural, exercised through global institutions, multinational corporations (Nkrumah, 1965), and sometimes, the media. As highlighted by Wallace (2005), Africa's portrayal in international media often continues to echo colonial narratives, focusing on conflict, poverty, or wild landscapes, sidelining the continent's progress, diversity, and innovation.

With the advent of digital platforms and social media which has democratized content creation, allowing for multiple voices and narratives (Bruns, 2018). Digital platforms, which serve as key channels for information dissemination, social interaction, and cultural exchange have brought to the fore the critical role of algorithms in shaping societal narratives and individual perceptions. Given the importance of digital platforms in shaping our understanding of the world, the algorithms, which act as the mechanisms that filter, prioritize, and recommend content, have become mediators of digital experiences (Couldry and Hepp, 2018; Noble, 2018), and thus playing a critical role in shaping societal narratives and individual perceptions (Gillespie 2014; Karakayali et al. 2018). Many studies have discussed how algorithms are far from being neutral, carrying with them the biases of their creators, as well as biases contained in the data on which they are trained (Bozdog, 2013; Noble, 2018; Broussard, 2023). Couldry & Mejias (2019) extended this idea to discuss the concept of data colonialism, drawing parallels between the extraction of data from individuals and territories and the extraction of resources during the colonial era. This extraction

is often rooted in the belief that data, much like natural resources, can be seized, controlled, and exploited for economic gain and dominance (Coleman, 2023). This is also evident in the dominance of Western perspectives in global digital platforms, which influences the algorithmic curation of content related to Africa. As such, the digital representation of Africa may continue to be skewed towards colonial-era narratives.

One of the prominent Online Viewing Platforms (OVP) that emerged in recent times is TikTok. TikTok, like other social media platforms, has become popular among users in disseminating information and shaping perceptions on issues across regions of the world. TikTok, as a platform, is not immune to these dynamics, thus making it a space where historical stereotypes can be perpetuated, reshaped, or even amplified. When users search for or engage with content related to Africa, the algorithmic processes might lean towards promoting content that aligns with established stereotypes - the wild, untamed landscapes, animals, or scenes of poverty. Conversely, content portraying Africa's urban landscapes, technological advancements, and rich cultural diversity might find less algorithmic favor, given the prevailing narrative frameworks.

Algorithmic Gaze and Othering

The concept of gaze relates to a framework initially developed within cultural studies and visual culture by Mulvey (1975) in the field of film theory. In film theory, visual culture, and media studies, Mulvey (1975) conveys the idea of the male gaze in how the camera's perspective often aligns with heterosexual male viewpoints, objectifying and controlling the portrayal of female characters, thus reinforcing gender power imbalances. The notion of the gaze extends beyond visual observation and includes complex dynamics of power, perception, and representation in various contexts.

In sociology and anthropology, the concept of the gaze is rooted in the dynamics of surveillance, social control, and the impact of being observed or studied within various social contexts (Hillier, 1996; de Lint, 2001; Ventres & Crowder, 2017). Theorists have expanded the gaze conceptually to include different modalities such as the colonial gaze, examining power dynamics in colonial encounters (Said, 1978/1978), or the medical gaze, which involves the authority and perspective of medical practitioners in observing and diagnosing patients (Foucault, 1963/2017), Fredrick (2002) applied the concept of gaze to how the Roman culture has an influence on Western culture. Johnson (1997) further dug into the gendered politics of the gaze, emphasizing the power differential at play - which is centered on the act of looking or viewing, particularly in representations of gender, race, and societal norms, and how it shapes social relationships, power structures, and identity formation. It is centered on who is looking, who is being looked at – not as a neutral act– and the power dynamics embedded within these acts of observation.

On this premise, algorithmic gaze, therefore, refers to the perspective or viewpoint established by algorithms as they curate and prioritize content on digital platforms. It represents the lens through

which digital information is filtered, selected, and presented to users, often influenced by inherent biases within the algorithmic design or the data on which it is trained. The algorithmic gaze, like the algorithm itself, plays a critical role in shaping the narratives and representations that users encounter in digital spaces.

Similarly, the concept of Othering as highlighted by Staszak (2008) is the inherent dichotomy between the self, denoted as the collective ‘us,’ and the Other, represented as the distant “they.” This conceptualization, rooted in identity and cultural studies, underlines how this dichotomous narrative perpetuates a divisive ‘us versus them’ dynamic within societal structures and often carries significant socio-political implications that perpetuate binary distinctions that reinforce exclusion and marginalization (Staszak, 2008, p. 2). In this dichotomy, one group embodies the norm and whose identity is valued, and another is defined by its flaws, devalued, and susceptible to discrimination, allowing only dominant groups (such as the West in this instance) to be in a position to impose their models on the Other (Jervis, 1999). In colonial studies, according to (Said, 1978/1978) it perpetuates a cultural hierarchy that positions the West as the messianic savior, bestowing the gift of civility upon the so-called ‘natives.’ In this construction, the ‘us versus them’ dynamic serves as a justification for the historical extraction and control of resources by the self over the Other, perpetuating a legacy of colonialism and domination (Staszak, 2008). By stigmatizing them as Others, Barbarians, Savages, or People of Color, they relegate the people that they could dominate or exterminate to the margin of humanity (Said, 1978/1978). On top of that, the otherness of these peoples has notably been based on their spatial marginality or territorial constructions (Staszak, 2008; Duncan & Ley, 2013), allowing the opposition between the Self and the Other to be maintained or accentuated. One could argue that it seems that the Other is sometimes valued, but as with exoticism as underscored by (Mason, 1998), it is done in a stereotypical, reassuring way that serves to comfort the Self in its feeling of superiority. Consequently, global power imbalances and inequalities persist, perpetuating socio-economic disparities and geopolitical tensions, all rooted in the dichotomous “us versus them” framework.

At this juncture, algorithmic othering on digital platforms can thus be seen as the way certain groups or individuals are portrayed as fundamentally different or alien, often in a negative or inferior light. Algorithmic othering occurs when digital platforms, influenced by biases, perpetuate, or reinforce the marginalization or misrepresentation of specific groups, often reflecting and amplifying societal prejudices and stereotypes. I will argue that it is a form of digital colonialism, where algorithms perpetuate the marginalization and misrepresentation of Africa. Digital colonialism as underscored by Couldry and Mejias (2019) looks at how digital platforms, often controlled by entities outside of Africa, can perpetuate neocolonial dynamics. Case in point—a significant portion of news coverage about Africa in Western media often revolves around themes of poverty, disease, corruption, or conflict (Steeves, 2008). This selective representation, while rooted in real issues, often lacks context, and paints an oversimplified image of the continent, which demonstrates that media portrayals are sometimes not a reflection of reality but are also

shaped by power dynamics, cultural contexts, and political agendas, because the data that feeds these algorithms often come imbued with historical biases.

Both the algorithmic gaze and algorithmic othering revolve around the role of algorithms in shaping digital representations and perceptions. The algorithmic gaze determines the perspective through which digital content is filtered and presented, often reflecting underlying biases in the algorithm's design and data. This perspective then contributes to the process of othering, where certain groups or individuals are depicted as inherently different or inferior, perpetuating discriminatory practices and reinforcing societal divisions. Thus, the algorithmic gaze serves as a mechanism through which algorithmic othering is perpetuated within digital spaces, impacting the way users perceive and engage with different groups and communities.

Theoretical frameworks

According to McLuhan's Media Ecology Analysis, the structure and dynamics of media platforms contribute significantly to the construction and dissemination of cultural narratives (McLuhan, 1964). Contemporary media environments are characterized by user-generated content, algorithmic curation, and interactive interfaces, which facilitate the reproduction of cultural narratives across varied societal contexts (Burgess et al., 2022). This ecosystem not only facilitates the exchange of cultural knowledge and experiences but also enables the reinforcement and reshaping of existing narratives (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). In essence, the media serves as a conduit that gives significance and interpretation to narratives. In particular, the emergence of digital media ushered in a new era of interactivity, which transformed how platform users communicate and disseminate information (Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2018). Jenkins (2006) and Bruns (2018) further underscored how the interactive nature of these platforms creates a symbiotic relationship between content producers and consumers, promoting a participatory culture where cultural narratives are co-constructed and co-authored. This interactive exchange not only shapes the trajectory of cultural discourse but also influences the societal perception and interpretation of cultural identities, norms, and values. Further, the accessibility and ubiquity of modern media platforms as demonstrated by (Jenkins, 2006) have amplified the reach and influence of these narratives, allowing them to transcend geographical boundaries.

In applying Media Ecology Analysis to the digital landscape, Postman (1986) emphasized the relationship between media technologies, cultural production, and societal structures. This, thus, draws attention to the reciprocal relationship between user-generated content and algorithmic curation. As observed in the Media Ecology Analysis, the participatory nature of digital spaces, when coupled with algorithmic processes, influences the production and curation of user-generated content (Andrejevic, 2013). As such, the feedback loop between user-generated content and algorithmic preferences, as outlined by Gillespie (2014), contributes to the perpetuation of specific narratives and biases within digital platforms. The impact of colonial legacies on the digital representation of Africa thus becomes evident, underscoring the persistence of historical power

dynamics within contemporary media spaces (Wallace, 2005; Tsikata, 2014), and how historical interactions make their way into digital narratives. Thus, the Media Ecology Analysis framework provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the relationship between media technologies, cultural production, and societal structures, it allows for a deeper look into how the algorithmic architecture of digital platforms, such as TikTok, function as a space that facilitates and shape not only the production and consumption of content, but also the construction of narratives as they relate to Africa.

Research Questions

1. How are biases, and beliefs crafted and woven into the fabric of our collective consciousness in digital spaces?
2. How do algorithms reflect these biases?

METHOD

Content Analysis is a research technique used to make reliable and valid conclusions through systemic interpretation and coding textual material (Neuendorf, 2017; Krippendorff, 2018). This method involves a systematic examination of various forms of texts, including documents, oral communication, and visual representations (Neuendorf, 2017). This method is suitable for this study because it will allow for the comprehensive identification of patterns, trends, and underlying themes within the collected data.

Moreover, the ability of Content Analysis to impose a structured framework on the data, as highlighted by Krippendorff (2018) ensures that the process of interpretation and coding is systematic and consistent, thus significantly contributing to the replicability and reliability of research findings. By applying a standardized framework, this method helps establish a clear and replicable process, allowing for the validation and verification of results by other researchers, thus contributing to the credibility of the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The sample set for this study revolves around specific keywords that illustrate the essence of travel across various continents. According to Deutsch & Goulias (2009), it is through traveling that individuals perceive and understand a location, whether by providing insights into the daily lives, customs, and perspectives of people from different backgrounds. Keywords such as “Africa tour,” “Places to visit in Africa,” and equivalent terms representative of other continents form the basis for the sample collection process. These keywords serve as entry points into the travel-related content niche available across the TikTok platform. By using such targeted keywords, the study aims to gather a comprehensive sample set that includes different travel-related videos, posts, and recommendations specific to each continent. Similarly, for other continents, relevant keywords

tailored to specific regions or countries serve as a yardstick, guiding the selection process of data sources.

To get different viewpoints from around the world, we used smartphones from people in Africa, Asia, North America, Europe, Australia, and South America for this study. This is a deliberate approach, firstly, aimed at mirroring the global audience's varied engagement patterns. It will represent the cultural, geographical, and socio-economic influences on digital behavior or algorithmic recommendation. Secondly, this approach will expand the data and create a detailed dataset that includes a wide range of user interactions, preferences, and engagement trends with the selected travel-related keywords from different continents.

Once the initial data regarding the keywords "Africa tour," and "Places to visit in Africa" was collected from TikTok, the next step was identifying patterns or trends within this data as underscored by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The aim here was to see how specific content themes, such as safaris, forests, slums, and animals, are spread across continents on TikTok using the keyword search results from "[Continent] tour," and "Places to visit in [Continent]."

Validity and Reliability of Study

To ensure the reliability of these observations, I implemented a strategy for inter-coder reliability assessment. This involves having two independent coders analyze and categorize the results obtained from the analysis without any influence from other coders' assessments (Hallgren, 2012). Subsequently, I then compare these independent coding results to ensure consistency among the coders. This rigorous process aims to validate the reliability of the identified patterns and trends in content association.

Upon establishing the reliability of the observed patterns, I then began looking into understanding the underlying reasons behind why such patterns and associations exist. Some of the potential factors considered to be contributing to these patterns, were user engagement metrics, deliberate cultural production strategies adopted by content creators, or inherent biases embedded within the algorithm as highlighted by existing literature.

Presentation of Findings

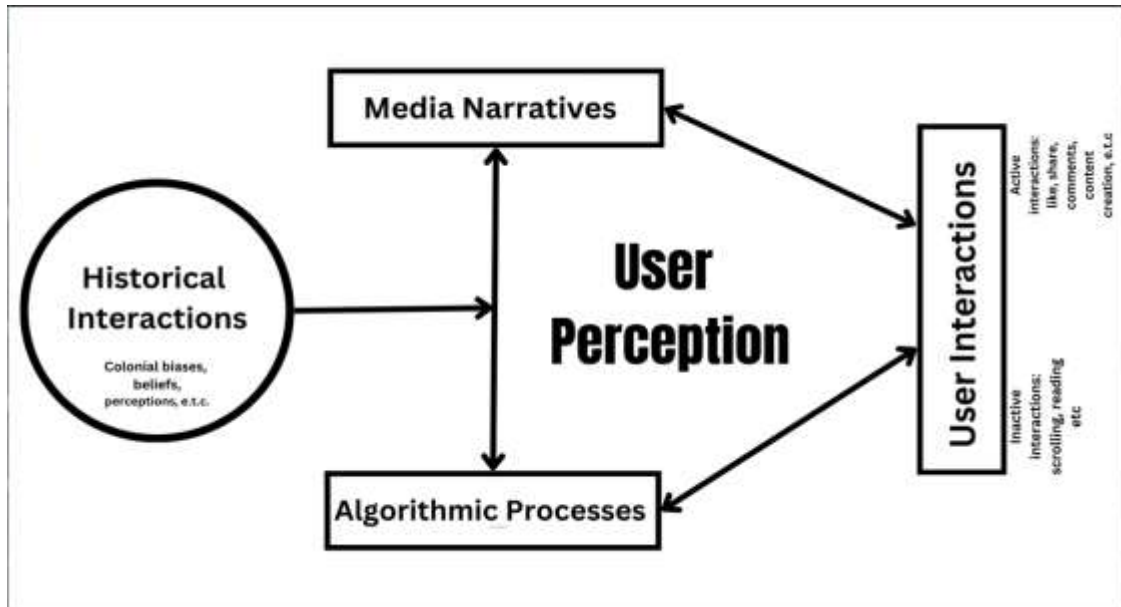
The findings derived from this study will be presented using a visual aid, primarily flowcharts to illustrate the observed patterns and trends. Flowcharts as highlighted by (Chapin, 1974) will offer a clear and structured representation of the associations between how biases are digitized, embedded, and reinforced on platforms like TikTok and manifest the identified patterns. These findings will be critically discussed and contextualized within user behavior, algorithmic mechanisms, and cultural influences shaping biased content creation on TikTok.

The discussion section will examine the implications of these findings, considering their relevance to user engagement, media representation, and digital portrayal of Africa on the TikTok platform. Through a thorough examination and interpretation of the results, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of the interconnected dynamics between algorithmic bias, user engagement, and media portrayal, specifically impacting the understanding of Africa within the digital sphere.

FINDINGS

Using content analysis to look at the portrayal of continents on TikTok and focusing on the keyword search results for “[Continent] tour,” and “Places to visit in [Continent].” Observations from the data (See Fig 1) indicate discernible patterns in content portrayal and representation of Africa compared to other continents. Specifically, searches related to the “Africa tour” and “Places to visit in Africa” predominantly yielded content themed around safaris, wildlife, and vast landscapes, painting a picture of a continent untouched by urbanization. In contrast, equivalent searches for other regions like Asia, Europe, North America, Australia, or South America, are portrayed through a more urban-centric lens, emphasizing the modernity of bustling cities, technological advancements, and modern lifestyles. It is important to point out that South America, and to some extent, Asia share certain parallels with Africa in terms of biased representations, albeit with distinct themes beyond the wildlife and safaris commonly associated with Africa. These portrayals often depict South America and Asia as lacking in technological advancements and infrastructural development. Such disparities in representation bring about Algorithmic Othering, where algorithms, based on pre-existing data and biases, perpetuate certain narratives while sidelining others. In the case of Africa’s othering, the continent is often portrayed as a wild, exotic land, devoid of the complexities and diversities that characterize its cities, cultures, and people.

Another observation indicates that the content appearing first in keyword searches tends to be those with high levels of social or user interactions. This includes actions such as likes, shares, or comments. This prioritization by algorithms means that content generating significant engagement from users is more likely to be given higher visibility and reach or prominently featured at the top of search results. As a result, the content users find most often within searches would likely be the one with the most significant social activity and, therefore, most commonly discussed. It is in this respect that hashtags are most vital in sorting content for users and making them more accessible for topics of interest. The system makes sure that the most engaging content, often accompanied by trending hashtags, surfaces to the top, influencing what users see and interact with daily. To put plainly, these platforms have designed algorithms that are supposed to help differentiate and reward content that grips and engages people’s attention—creating a literal feedback loop in which already-popular content becomes more visible and hence receives even more interaction.



These findings suggest first, a potential perpetuation of skewed or stereotypical representation, potentially perpetuating long-standing stereotypes of Africa as primarily wilderness-centric, while sidelining its urban and cultural landscapes. This digital portrayal, in turn, shapes the perceptions of tourists and foreigners, who then view Africa through a narrow lens. When these foreigners visit the continent, their experiences, influenced by these preconceived notions, further create content that reinforces the existing stereotypes, giving rise to a feedback loop of othering.

On top of that, the results show how user engagement determines which content gains prominence on various platforms. It emphasizes the significant role of user behavior, interactions, and the use of hashtags in shaping content on digital platforms. This makes it clear that engagement metrics and effective hashtag use by users are crucial for content visibility and success in this era.

Such skewed representations not only perpetuate outdated and often erroneous beliefs but also impact tourism, investments, and cultural exchanges. While a safari in the Serengeti or a trek in the Congo rainforest are undoubtedly part of the African experience, they are just a fraction of what the continent offers. Modern cities, resources, talents, tech hubs, etc. across Africa, are often overshadowed by these prevailing stereotypes.

These beliefs, perceptions, and stories—regardless of the label we assign them—are but spontaneous creations of the present, nor are they isolated occurrences. Instead, they are resonant echoes of historical interactions rooted in colonialism, reverberating through time, and finding their voice in contemporary media and our algorithmic reality. Within this cycle, these participatory audiences also engage or create content that informs algorithmic learning. This study

further highlights the need for a broader understanding of algorithmic biases and the cultural implications they carry, urging platforms like TikTok to promote a holistic and representative digital media ecosphere. Such portrayals, though subtle, contribute to shaping viewers' perceptions and reinforce biased global views of Africa.

DISCUSSION

As these algorithms nestle into people's daily lives to show or suggest to the user what to see (Kitchin, 2014), new forms of power and control over the information individuals consume are birthed. This inherently contradicts the so-called democratic nature of digital platforms, where users are in the oblivion of this power differential and are deprived of individual digital autonomy; they unconsciously shape and rearticulate the algorithms they encounter. These algorithms thus condition how people search for information, how they imagine and think through the contours of knowledge, and how they understand themselves in and through public discourse. What is really showcased here is the interplay between algorithmic processes and dual human agency, or a reciprocal relationship between the algorithms, the individual who creates them, and the individuals or communities they influence. Essentially, what we see is a continuous loop of bias, reinforced, and perpetuated by the creators, recycled by algorithms, and reinforced by users. The stories that we consume and the digital interactions that we engage in are not a feature but part of a system in which historical narratives and modern algorithms converge, shaping and reshaping our perceptions in a never-ending cycle.

Therefore, it becomes essential to be aware and develop approaches that allow for critical engagement in our media and digital interactions. By doing so, we can cultivate an environment that promotes inclusive views. This means recognizing and valuing the varied nature of human experiences and genuine intercultural dialogue and understanding.

Implications

To comprehensively analyze their impact, I will therefore engage them from three perspectives - the economic, the sociocultural, and the political. It is important to note that while these implications may be mutually exclusive, they may also interlace and influence each other, contributing to the perpetuation and reinforcement of this overarching narrative.

Economically, the skewed representation of Africa in digital media wield a considerable influence on global perceptions of the continent's economic viability. They have the potential to cripple Africa's overall economic development, especially as they play an important role in shaping investors' evaluation of political stability, market dynamics, and regulatory frameworks, and, hence, the perception of risks and opportunities associated with engaging in the economic space of the continent. Negative stereotypes and misrepresentations may ward off or deter potential

investors, and lead to a decline in foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows, and thus limiting opportunities for sustainable economic growth and development of the continent.

More importantly, the perception of this investment potential in Africa can influence the development of strategic engagement and sustainable partnership, either offering a facilitative place to realize collaborative and inclusive investment practices or creating an environment of disengagement with seedlings of doubt and skepticism. Further, distorted stories of this nature could undermine trade negotiations and arrangements with international markets: unequal terms of trade, limited access to market space, and under-participation in global value chains have a way of affecting the capacity of the continent to use trade to drive economic development and diversification forward.

From a sociocultural standpoint, these portrayals affect the cultural identity, self-perception, and social cohesion of African communities both within the continent and in the diaspora. The perpetuation of stereotypes and biases can lead to the actual internalization of negative self-perceptions, cultural misrepresentations, and even a skewed understanding of African societies, potentially amplifying social tensions and hindering efforts toward cultural appreciation and understanding.

Through a political lens, I argue that these portrayals influence international relations, diplomatic interactions, and policymaking concerning African nations, and have the ability to shape the diplomatic discourse, inform foreign policy decisions, and impact the geopolitical positioning of African countries within the global sphere.

Recommendation

Firstly, the call for transparency by Rader et al., (2018) stems from the recognition of the significant influence that algorithmic recommendations have on user perceptions, societal narratives, and the perpetuation of stereotypes within digital spaces. Platforms, notably TikTok, must prioritize disclosing their algorithmic processes. According to Rader et al. (2018), this entails uncovering the mechanisms that govern content curation and dissemination to provide users with an understanding of how their feeds are curated, while also establishing a structure for regular algorithmic auditing assessments to ensure alignment with fair representation and cultural sensitivity. Such transparency not only promotes user trust but also enables critical evaluation and understanding of the biases, filters, and underlying criteria guiding algorithmic recommendations, thus also setting a precedent for responsible algorithmic practices across the digital platform. Additionally, it is imperative to set up ways to identify and counteract biased content dissemination, especially content that spreads outdated colonial views or stereotypes. This can be done by creating easy-to-use feedback systems and reporting tools, so users can flag biased or misleading content on digital platforms. These systems should ensure quick review and resolution

of reported content to maintain a safer and more inclusive online space. Also, it is important to keep users informed about the status of their reports and the actions taken.

Furthermore, collaborating with scholars, cultural experts, and advocacy groups dedicated to examining African representation in media and digital platforms is essential to drive meaningful change. Collaboration with scholars will lead to rigorous research methodologies, theoretical frameworks, empirical evidence, and critical analysis that give a deeper understanding of algorithmic biases. Their work is essential for developing evidence-based policies and guidelines governing responsible content creation and algorithmic moderation in digital spaces. This will allow for a better understanding of how digital portrayals influence viewer behaviors, attitudes, and societal perceptions. Also, cultural experts play a fundamental role by providing contextual understanding and perspectives regarding the portrayal of Africa in the media. They help highlight Africa's diverse cultures, histories, and identities, challenging oversimplified stories and pushing for more accurate and inclusive representations. Working with advocacy groups is equally important, as they bring grassroots perspectives or with communities affected by biased representations, understand their impact firsthand, and push for policy changes to ensure responsible content creation and algorithmic moderation.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study was the geographical location of the participants from whom the data was collected. The study's findings reflect a combination of diasporic and local media engagement patterns. While individuals who owned these mobile phones hailed from different regions across all six continents, about three were residing in the United States, and three others were residing in their home countries. This introduced a layer of complexity in the data because their media engagement might have been influenced by their diasporic status. As stated by (cite) people living in the diaspora often engage with media from their home countries to stay connected with their culture, events, and identity. This means that there may be a potential divergence in the algorithmic experiences between individuals living in the diaspora and those residing in their home countries. The US-centric digital environment may expose diasporic individuals to different content, possibly skewing the representation and algorithmic portrayal of their home regions. For instance, TikTok's algorithm may tailor content based on the popular trends or cultural norms prevalent in the US, which might differ significantly from the trends and norms in the participants' home countries. This geographical bias could, in turn, affect the accuracy and generalizability of the findings regarding the algorithmic "Othering" and geographical representation, particularly in the context of Africa. As a result, the algorithmic exposure and the media content they interacted with may have been shaped not only by their personal preferences but also by their location and cultural context in the US.

The data, therefore, while including mobile phones of users from different continents, may miss some details that could be gained from people living in their home countries. Those on-ground

experiences could provide a more accurate view of how algorithms work and potential algorithmic biases on platforms like TikTok. Future research could address this gap by either focusing on home-country backgrounds, or diasporic backgrounds or comparing experiences across different locations, to gain a deeper understanding of algorithmic Othering and geographical representation. Such analysis could also reveal how cross-cultural and transnational algorithmic interactions shape, reinforce, or challenge the geographical and cultural narratives portrayed in digital media platforms.

The exclusion of the psychological perspective on the implications of algorithmic Othering on the TikTok platform was due to the inherent complexity of the psychological scope and the need for extensive qualitative analysis, which could potentially detract from the study's coherence and feasibility in examining the structural and systemic influences that contribute to the perpetuation of biased narratives and misrepresentations of Africa in digital media. Future research could look at how audiences interpret and internalize the portrayals of Africa in digital media, shedding light on the psychological processes and subconscious influences at play in the reception and assimilation of biased digital content related to Africa, thus uncovering the emotional and cognitive responses evoked by these representations.

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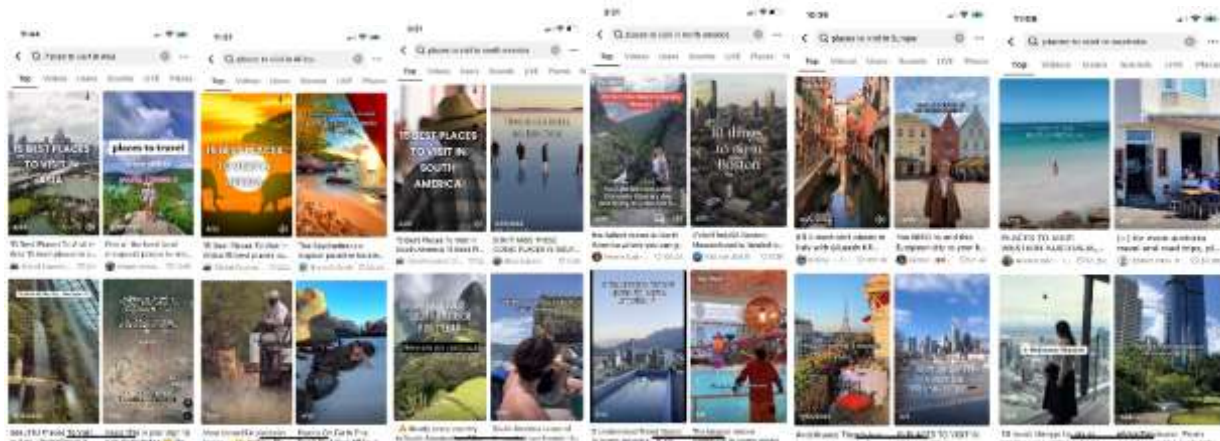
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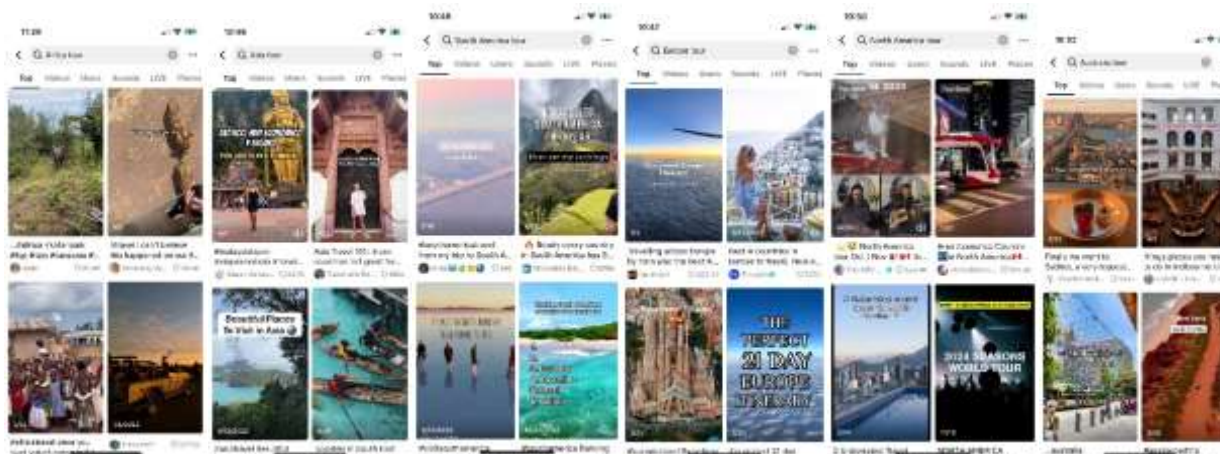
Appendix

**Fig 1 (Results for Places to visit in [continent])
Phone AF**



**Phone AS
Phone NA
Phone SA
Phone EU
Phone AU**

**Fig 2 (Results for [continent] tour)
Phone AF**



**Phone AS
Phone NA
Phone SA
Phone EU
Phone AU**