‘Margins as Methods’- TikTok as a tool to implement its users into research for the stake of their own representation

**Abstract**

Clark-Parsons and Lingel introduce the approach of ‘margins as research’, arguing for scholars to include marginalized groups more into their research to avoid power imbalances of researchers and the researched. It will be argued that the platform TikTok suggests for a suitable way to incorporate these voices due to its affordance of sharing and interacting with social and political issues relevant to the youth.

Keywords: agency, representation, margins, alternative media, ethics, consensus, methodology

When doing research, the issue of ethics has gained more and more recognition in the academic field over the past years. In their text “Margins as Methods, Margins as Ethics: A Feminist Framework for Studying Online Alterity”, Clark-Parsons and Lingel discuss the importance of reflexivity in research when working with and analyzing marginalized groups and communities online. Rooted in feminist reflexivity, which recognizes and draws attention to the exercise of power throughout doing research they introduce the methodological approach of ‘margins as methods’ for studying media and alterity. Their approach focuses on the methodological challenge and risk of researchers further disempowering or silencing marginalized groups and communities online with their work through misrepresentation and oversimplifying complex power relations (Clark-Parsons & Lingel 5). It will be argued that the affordance of TikTok allows marginalized groups to address critical issues, which makes the platform ideal for the margins as methods approach in terms of researchers being able to work with the user’s own experience. According to feminist standpoint theory, “all forms of knowledge are socially, politically, and historically situated” which causes marginalized groups to be situated in positions that are dominated by the views of society and its power relations (Clark-Parsons & Lingel 7). Moreover, with the affordances of media, scholars can research anything on the internet, which raises the question of consent from internet users and thereby demonstrates their lack of agency over their involvement and representation in research projects (Clark-Parsons & Lingel 5). This becomes crucial when considering that it is the researchers who have the control over how their participants and researched communities are portrayed, especially when it comes to “marginalized and activist internet communities, who are already embattled in struggles over agency, representation, and surveillance” (Clark-Parsons & Lingel 5). Consequently, Clark-Parsons and Lingel argue for the need to involve the participants in the research process to avoid further disempowerment of the margins and to afford for ethical and thoughtful representations of them in their research (Clark-Parsons & Lingel 6). Thus, ‘margins as methods’ acknowledges the issue of consent and suggests research should afford “opportunities to check in with participants about preliminary findings and developing inclusive data collection practices” (Clark-Parsons & Lingel 7). It is known that social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook have been utilized for numerous acts of online activism (Le Compte & Klug 2). However, only in the past two years, researchers have started to study the platform TikTok in regards to its affordance of social activist purposes (Burns-Stanning 2). As emphasized by Burns-Stanning, young teenagers on TikTok are using creative approaches “to engage with political issues and form activist communities” (Burns-Stanning 2). Moreover, she also underlines how different from other media platforms, the TikTok format allows activist users to quickly build up a large and diverse network of followers with which they can support and empower each other as the algorithms within TikTok affords to reach as many individual nodes within the app’s network (Kelly Burns-Stanning 3). For instance, Cohen argues that “queer women on TikTok use the affordance of the app to fight against sexual objectification by employing three strategies of queer activism: calling out problematic phenomena and behavior, connecting with the community to create queer spaces, and producing representation through self-expression” (Cohen 1). This form of engagement and interaction occurs through participants calling out other user’s problematic videos or replying to them to provide additional, important information through Stitches, Duets, Comments, or by creating an entirely new TikTok (Le Compte & Klug 5). This allows people of marginalized groups to address critical issues, and provides them the opportunity, in case of misinformation or ignorant videos, to explain their point of view and thereby take back agency over their representation. This form of action becomes particularly interesting and relevant to the margins as methods approach when considering that it is people from marginalized groups that speak up for themselves by providing first-hand experiences and knowledge concerning perspectives shaped by society. This is also highlighted by Chemmencheri who argues that media needs to change its production of knowledge in a way that it acknowledges the representation of the ‘subaltern’ to be a political struggle (Chemmencheri 2015). Moreover, the need to focus on self-reflection and learning from the margins is also supported by Capozzi, who focuses on racism and the need for cultural humanity to support these minority communities (Capozzi 2020). She argues for the importance of incorporating the community within the entire research process to give them a space to maintain a voice, emphasizing that minority communities are the best representatives for themselves (Capozzi 2020). Thus, I argue that TikTok can be used as an alternative media tool to incorporate those voices into research to help researchers avoid misrepresentation or silencing the margins. However, even though TikTok videos are public and available to see and be used by anyone including researchers, it is still necessary to ask for consent when considering ethical questions. Therefore, the user I will use as an example will remain anonymous. In the video, the woman stitched a video by another woman who argues that “our insecurities are our problem. It is not a celebrity’s job to make us feel comfortable.” The woman who stitched the video then calls out this statement and explains why it is problematic, emphasizing the roots of the constructed beauty ideals laying in capitalism and the patriarchy, and how celebrities promote and encourage this issue of a dominantly insecure society. How this example can be used for research purposes, for instance, for feminist studies is that the researcher can get in contact with the publisher of the TikTok video and ask further questions concerning the issue of feminism and plastic surgery. Moreover, the comment section can also be implemented into the research, as well as other TikTok videos that might have stitched that particular video, made a duet to it, or videos with similar hashtags to understand younger teenager’s personal take on the issue. To conclude, although TikTok is used for entertainment purposes, it provides many teenagers the space to talk about social and political issues that concern and matter to them. This not only allows marginalized groups to represent themselves by sharing their own experiences and perspectives but also can be used by researchers to avoid possible ways of disempowering or silencing margins with their work through misrepresentation and oversimplifying complex struggles.

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