

TikTok’s silent curriculum: How algorithmic content shapes ethical and civic understanding among Nigerian undergraduates

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Article Info	Abstract
Original article	Background: In the age of algorithmic media, TikTok has become a significant informal learning space for Generation Z, especially in shaping perceptions of ethics, power, and justice. Aims: This study examines how final-year Library and Information Science students at the University of Ilorin engage with TikTok’s “silent curriculum”, a set of implicit and emotionally charged lessons embedded in short video content. Guided by informal learning theory, critical media literacy, and research on algorithmic governance, the study investigates how students interpret and absorb ethical and civic messages encountered on the platform. Methodology: Using qualitative design, 12 active TikTok users reflected on the platform’s educational influence. Data collection was through semi-structured interviews and digital diaries over four weeks. Findings: The students often encounter content related to social justice, mental health, gender identity, and political commentary, commonly communicated through humour, storytelling, and aesthetic trends. These engagements support reflection and awareness, yet they are shaped by algorithmic patterns that promote particular narratives while limiting others. The study shows that TikTok can serve both as a participatory space for civic learning and as a platform where performative ethics and misinformation circulate. For Library and Information Science students, this raises important questions about their future responsibilities as ethical managers of digital content. Conclusion: The paper recommends a redesign of digital literacy approaches to include emotional awareness, ethical judgement, and understanding of platform structures. By centring the perspectives of Nigerian Gen Z students, the study adds to knowledge on how digital platforms act as instructional agents in contemporary civic learning.
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1. Introduction

In the digital age, the boundaries between formal and informal learning have become more permeable, particularly for Generation Z, whose educational experiences are closely linked to social media platforms (Khair et al., 2025). Among these platforms, TikTok, a short form video sharing application, has become a significant cultural and knowledge shaping space. Through algorithmically curated content, participatory practices, and visually driven communication, TikTok functions as a site where young people encounter, negotiate, and internalise ideas about ethics, power, and justice. Much of this learning occurs outside formal educational settings and develops through unstructured and decentralised processes that are emotionally engaging yet largely unseen within institutional curricula. This study refers to this form of informal learning as a 'silent' or 'hidden' curriculum (Priyanshu & Vijay, 2024).

For students of Library and Information Science, this shift carries clear implications. As future information professionals responsible for organising knowledge and supporting informed citizenship, they must respond to changing expectations around digital literacy, ethical judgement, and civic awareness. TikTok's influence on the moral and political outlook of Gen Z raises key questions about contemporary learning, including who assumes the role of educator, what forms of knowledge circulate, and how credibility is judged within algorithmically governed spaces. Unlike formal curricula that are deliberately designed and assessed within academic institutions, TikTok's silent curriculum is emergent and affective (Kolber, 2024). It is shaped by viral trends, creator narratives, and platform logics that favour visibility and engagement. Users regularly encounter brief lessons on social justice, identity, mental health, and activism, often communicated through humour, storytelling, and performance. These messages are value laden and influenced by incentives that reward emotional intensity and alignment with popular narratives, positioning TikTok as a pedagogical actor that operates without clear educational oversight.

The consequences of this form of learning for Gen Z are considerable. TikTok can widen access to diverse viewpoints and amplify voices that are often marginalised within formal systems. At the same time, its algorithmic design may encourage echo chambers, circulate misleading information, and support performative expressions of ethics. For Nigerian students facing economic uncertainty, social tension, and political instability, TikTok often functions both as an emotional outlet and as a space where political and ethical positions are shaped. Within this setting, many young people learn to articulate identity, express dissent, and imagine social change, sometimes in ways that sit uneasily alongside formal educational aims.

TikTok was selected because its design and patterns of use

distinguish it from other social media platforms in ways that are especially relevant to informal learning among Generation Z. Unlike text-centred or network-based platforms, TikTok relies on short form video, algorithmic content delivery, and passive discovery, which exposes users to ideas beyond their immediate social networks. AI technology has facilitated algorithmic analysis of each user (Salehi et al., 2025) and this structure enables rapid circulation of ethical, civic, and political content, often delivered through humour, storytelling, and visual performance, making such messages more emotionally engaging and memorable. TikTok also has high uptake among Nigerian undergraduates and plays a central role in their everyday information consumption, giving it a stronger presence in shaping attitudes and judgements than many other platforms. For these reasons, TikTok offers a distinctive setting for examining how algorithmic media influences ethical reasoning, perceptions of power, and civic understanding.

Despite TikTok's prominence, scholarly understanding of how it shapes ethical and civic learning among Nigerian Gen Z students remains limited. Existing research has examined social media in relation to activism and identity, yet short form video platforms have received far less attention as learning spaces, particularly in relation to informal moral and civic education. This gap is especially concerning in Nigeria, where formal education systems often struggle with curriculum relevance, limited resources, and wider social pressures. In such settings, TikTok may operate as an alternative source of learning and meaning making, yet its educational value and ethical consequences are rarely examined in a sustained manner.

Power, justice, and ethics were selected as key analytic concerns because they appear repeatedly in the types of content Gen Z users encounter and engage with on TikTok. Algorithmic curation does more than distribute information; it elevates certain voices, narratives, and emotional expressions while limiting others, making questions of power unavoidable (Salehi et al., 2026). Issues of justice emerge as users engage with content on inequality, identity, governance, and social struggle, often framed through personal testimony and popular trends rather than formal civic instruction. Ethics is central because these encounters influence moral judgement, responsibility, and public expression within spaces governed by opaque platform rules. For Library and Information Science students, these themes carry particular weight given their future roles in mediating information, assessing credibility, and supporting civic participation. Examining TikTok through these lenses allows the study to link everyday digital engagement with wider concerns about knowledge authority, moral reasoning, and civic life.

This study responds to this gap by examining how final year Library and Information Science students at the University of Ilorin engage with

TikTok as a site of ethical and civic learning. It considers the types of content that attract their attention, the values they internalise, and the challenges they face when navigating algorithmically curated information. Through this focus, the study aims to clarify the educational possibilities and risks associated with TikTok and to inform approaches to digital literacy within the professional preparation of future information practitioners.

2. Research questions

- What types of ethical and civic content do Nigerian Gen Z students encounter on TikTok?
- How do final year Library and Information Science students interpret and internalise messages related to power, justice, and ethics on TikTok?
- What role does TikTok's algorithm play in shaping students' exposure to ethical and civic content?
- What implications does TikTok's silent curriculum have for digital literacy education in Library and Information Science?

3. Review of key concepts

Figure 1 explains the interrelationships between the variables. It delineates the pedagogical dynamics through which TikTok operates as an informal learning environment for Gen Z learners, particularly in the context of ethical and civic engagement. At its core, TikTok is conceptualised as a platform that facilitates content exposure through short-form, user-generated media. Its design and aesthetic appeal serve as the initial gateway through which users encounter a diverse array of narratives, often without the intention of seeking educational content.

The platform functions as an informal learning space, wherein users engage with content outside the boundaries of formal instruction. This decentralised mode of learning is characterised by spontaneity, peer-to-peer interaction, and the absorption of knowledge through everyday digital practices. Crucially, this learning is shaped by algorithmic governance which is the underlying logic of TikTok's recommendation system, which curates content visibility and thereby influences the ethical and civic themes to which users are exposed. Within this ecosystem, users encounter what may be termed silent curriculum themes: implicit lessons concerning ethics, power, justice, and identity. These themes are not formally taught but are embedded within the affective and visual language of the platform. Gen Z learners interpret and internalise these messages, often aligning them with their lived experiences and evolving civic identities. This process of engagement fosters shifts in moral reasoning and social consciousness.

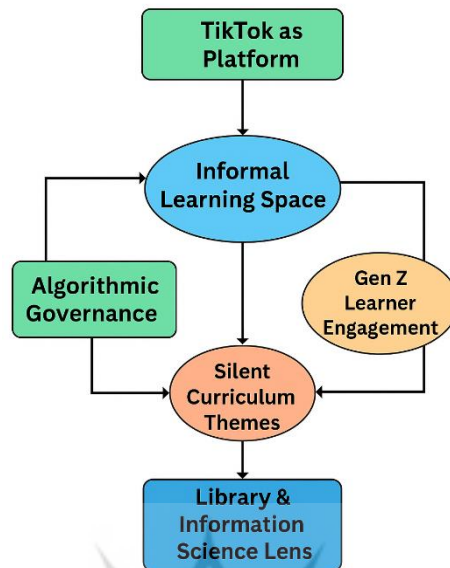


Figure 1. Researcher's conceptualisation of the role of TikTok in shaping algorithmic content among Nigerian Gen Z undergraduates

The final component of the framework introduces the Library and Information Science (LIS) perspective, which provides a critical and professional context for evaluating this learning. Through tools such as media literacy, ethical information management, and digital citizenship education, LIS students are equipped to critically study the content they consume and contribute to, thereby bridging informal learning with formal ethical frameworks. Together, these components illustrate a interrelationship between platform design, algorithmic influence, and learner agency in shaping ethical awareness in digital spaces.

4. Literature review

4.1. Types of ethical and civic content encountered on TikTok

Informal learning on digital platforms provides Gen Z students with access to diverse ethical and civic content outside formal educational settings (Tazhenova et al., 2024; Tervo, 2025; Stanfield, 2024). TikTok delivers short videos addressing social justice, mental health, identity, and political issues through humour, storytelling, and visual performance (Zaffos, 2024; Balogun-Ibikunle et al., 2024). This “silent curriculum” exposes users to multiple perspectives, often amplifying marginalised voices while privileging content aligned with platform trends and emotional engagement (Dawson, 2024). For Nigerian students, these platforms offer alternative avenues to explore identity, ethics, and civic responsibility, supplementing formal education constrained by outdated curricula or socio-political limitations (Greenhow & Lewin, 2019; Dunmade & Tella, 2023; Winarjo, 2025).

4.2. Interpretation and internalisation of ethical, justice, and power messages

Gen Z learners interpret TikTok content through digital fluency, participatory habits, and emotional engagement (Ogunniran et al., 2023; Smith, 2025; Dunmade & Tella, 2023). Critical media literacy helps students assess content credibility, ideological positions, and ethical implications (Kellner & Share, 2019). On TikTok, distinguishing genuine activism from performative content and navigating moral ambiguity is challenging (Banda, 2025; Papacharissi, 2015). TikTok's algorithm shapes which narratives students internalise, influencing moral judgement, understanding of power, and engagement with justice-related issues (Davutoglu, 2025; Jones, 2025; Kolber, 2024). For Library and Information Science students, these competencies are essential for professional practice in evaluating information and supporting civic learning.

4.3. Algorithmic mediation of exposure to ethical and civic content

TikTok's algorithm determines what users see, how frequently content appears, and which voices gain visibility (Davutoglu, 2025; Jones, 2025). Content aligned with popular trends, humour, or emotional resonance is amplified, while other perspectives remain marginalised. This mediates Nigerian students' exposure to ethical, civic, and political messages, shaping learning and interpretation (Zaffos, 2024; Dawson, 2024). Scholars note that algorithmic governance affects public discourse and cultural visibility, making it central to understanding moral and civic development on the platform (Davutoglu, 2025; Jones, 2025). For Library and Information Science students, recognising these dynamics is crucial for promoting ethical access, evaluating credibility, and managing digital information.

4.4. Implications for digital literacy and civic learning

TikTok contributes to digital citizenship, understood as the norms, behaviours, and responsibilities of online participation (Ribble, 2011). Engagement with ethical and civic content can foster civic awareness, political participation, and moral reflection, but also encourage performative activism, echo chambers, or withdrawal for mental health protection (Ofei et al., 2024; Papacharissi, 2015). Digital literacy education must therefore include critical media literacy, ethical evaluation, and awareness of algorithmic influence (Kellner & Share, 2019; Beier, 2023). This equips Library and Information Science students to navigate informal learning spaces responsibly and support ethical civic engagement online.

4.5. Research gaps in within the African academic environment

Most studies on TikTok and informal learning focus on Western viewpoints, leaving African perspectives underexplored (Balogun-Ibikunle et al., 2024). Nigerian Gen Z learners face unique challenges

including limited mental health support, socio-political instability, and intergenerational tensions. Library and Information Science curricula often prioritise traditional information management, with limited focus on digital literacy, ethical engagement, or platform critique. This study addresses these gaps by exploring how TikTok's silent curriculum shapes ethical and civic development among Nigerian students (Dunmade & Tella, 2023; Winarjo, 2025).

5. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from three interrelated domains: informal learning theory, critical media literacy, and algorithmic governance. Together, these frameworks provide a lens through which to examine how TikTok functions as a site of informal ethical and civic education for Gen Z learners, particularly final-year students of Library and Information Science at the University of Ilorin.

5.1. Informal learning theory

At the core of this study is the recognition that learning is no longer confined to formal institutions. Informal learning theory, as articulated by scholars such as Malcolm Knowles (1975) and later expanded by Livingstone (2001), posits that learning occurs continuously through everyday experiences, often outside structured curricula. Informal learning is typically self-directed, interest-driven, and embedded in social contexts. In the case of TikTok, users engage with content not as students but as participants in a dynamic, peer-driven media ecosystem. They encounter ethical dilemmas, political commentary, and social justice narratives through short-form videos that are often humorous, emotionally charged, or aesthetically curated.

For Library and Information Science students, this form of learning is particularly significant. As future information professionals, they must be attuned to the ways in which knowledge is acquired, shared, and validated outside traditional repositories. Informal learning theory thus provides a foundation for understanding how TikTok operates as a pedagogical space albeit one that is decentralised, unregulated, and shaped by user-generated content.

5.2. Critical media literacy

To interrogate the content and interpretive processes involved in TikTok engagement, the study adopts a critical media literacy framework. Rooted in the work of Kellner and Share (2007), critical media literacy extends beyond traditional media literacy by emphasising the ideological, political, and economic dimensions of media texts. It encourages learners to question the power structures behind media production, the intentions of content creators, and the role of audiences in meaning-making.

This framework is particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where young people are increasingly turning to social media for information, identity formation, and civic engagement. TikTok's algorithmic logic often privileges sensationalism, emotional resonance, and conformity to platform norms. Critical media literacy enables students to interrogate these dynamics, asking not only what is being communicated but why and to what effect. It also equips them to discern between performative activism and genuine civic engagement, which is an essential skill in an era of digital misinformation and ethical ambiguity. For Library and Information Science students, critical media literacy is not merely an academic exercise but a professional imperative. As curators of digital content and facilitators of public knowledge, they must be able to evaluate the credibility, bias, and ethical implications of media texts. This framework thus supports the study's objective of assessing how students interpret and internalise the values embedded in TikTok content.

5.3. Algorithmic governance and platform pedagogy

The third theoretical pillar of this study is the concept of algorithmic governance, which refers to the ways in which algorithms shape user behaviour, visibility, and access to information. Gillespie (2014) and Noble (2018) have shown how algorithms are not neutral tools but socio-technical systems embedded with values, biases, and commercial interests. On TikTok, the "For You" page curates content based on user interaction, thereby creating personalised learning environments that are both empowering and limiting.

This study conceptualises TikTok as a form of platform pedagogy. Platform pedagogy is a term used to describe how digital platforms inadvertently teach users through design, affordances, and algorithmic curation. Unlike formal educators, platforms do not have explicit curricular goals, yet they shape what users see, how they engage, and what they come to value. For Gen Z learners, this means that their ethical and civic sensibilities are being shaped not by teachers or textbooks, but by algorithms optimised for engagement and profit. Understanding algorithmic governance is crucial for Library and Information Science students, who must navigate and critique the infrastructures that mediate access to knowledge. This framework allows the study to explore how students experience and respond to the silent curriculum of TikTok, explicitly stating what is amplified, what is silenced, and how these patterns influence their understanding of justice, power, and ethics.

6. Synthesis of the frameworks

By integrating informal learning theory, critical media literacy, and algorithmic governance, this theoretical framework provides a robust foundation for analysing TikTok as a site of informal ethical education.

It situates the platform within broader debates about knowledge production, digital citizenship, and the role of media in shaping public consciousness. For Nigerian Gen Z students, and particularly those training to become information professionals, these frameworks offer tools for both critical reflection and professional development in an increasingly algorithmic world.

7. Methodology

7.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how final-year Library and Information Science students at the University of Ilorin engage with TikTok as an informal learning space, with attention to ethical, civic, and political content. A qualitative approach allows for detailed examination of participants' experiences, interpretations, and meaning construction within digitally mediated settings. The study is exploratory and seeks to identify patterns of engagement and ethical reflection that cannot be captured through quantitative measures. Elements of digital ethnography and narrative inquiry guide the design, enabling attention to everyday interactions with TikTok and the learning processes embedded within them.

7.2. Population and Sampling

The population consists of final-year undergraduate students in the Department of Library and Information Science at the University of Ilorin. These students were selected because their training in information systems, media literacy, and ethical information practices equips them to reflect critically on digital platforms. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who were active TikTok users and willing to discuss their experiences. Participants were required to be in their final year, use TikTok at least three times per week, and have engaged with content related to ethics, power, or justice. Twelve participants were recruited, ensuring diversity in gender, socio-economic background, and digital habits. This sample size allows for thematic depth while remaining manageable for detailed analysis.

7.3. Justification for sample size

A sample of twelve final-year students was deemed sufficient because, in qualitative research, interpretive depth takes priority over breadth (Bantugan, 2025). Thematic saturation in interview-based studies often occurs within twelve participants, particularly when participants share similar academic and digital experiences (Christou, 2025). Homogeneity of the sample supports the identification of meaningful patterns without reducing analytical rigor (Ahmed, 2025). In addition, sustained engagement through semi-structured interviews and four weeks of digital diaries was feasible with twelve participants, ensuring consistency, ethical oversight, and rich data collection.

7.4. Data collection methods

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and digital diaries.

7.4.1. *Semi-structured interviews*

Each participant took part in an individual interview guided by a semi-structured schedule focusing on TikTok use, content exposure, interpretation of ethical and civic messages, and perceived influence on moral reasoning and civic identity. Interviews lasted 10–15 min and were conducted via WhatsApp. When participants responded using voice notes, recordings were transcribed into text using the Microsoft Office 365 translation feature.

Transcription accuracy was ensured through manual verification: the researcher listened to each original audio recording while reviewing the transcript, correcting any errors in wording, phrasing, or meaning to ensure the text accurately reflected participants' responses. Participants were informed that interviews would be recorded and transcribed, and consent was obtained prior to data collection.

7.4.2. *Digital diaries*

Participants maintained digital diaries over four weeks, submitting an average of seven entries each. Diary entries included screenshots, brief descriptions of TikTok videos, emotional reactions, and reflective commentary on perceived learning. These entries were analysed alongside interview transcripts, allowing triangulation and longitudinal tracking of participants' engagement with ethical, civic, and political content.

7.4.3. *Data analysis and coding reliability*

Data from interviews and diaries were analysed using thematic analysis. Initial codes were generated through close reading of transcripts and diary entries and grouped into broader categories aligned with the research questions. Coding consistency was ensured by a research assistant independently reviewing a subset of transcripts and diary entries. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, refining code definitions and strengthening the reliability of the thematic interpretation.

7.4.4. *Data analysis*

Thematic analysis was conducted manually by the researcher, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

- Familiarisation with the data,
- Generation of initial codes,
- Searching for themes,
- Reviewing themes,
- Defining and naming themes,

- Producing the report.

All WhatsApp transcripts and diary entries were printed and coded by hand. Manual analysis was chosen due to the small size of the respondents. Initial codes were derived inductively from the data, allowing themes to emerge organically. Thematic categories included the following:

- Ethical interpretation,
- Value internalization,
- Algorithmic influence,
- Civic identity formation,
- Emotional engagement.

7.5. Trustworthiness and rigour

To ensure credibility, member checking was employed: participants reviewed their transcribed responses and confirmed accuracy. Triangulation was achieved by comparing insights from interviews and diary entries. Transferability was supported through thick description of the study context, participant profiles, and platform dynamics. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. The researcher kept a reflective journal to document positionality, interpretive decisions, and potential biases particularly important given the shared generational identity with participants and the informal nature of WhatsApp communication.

7.6. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Communication and Information Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Ilorin. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw, and the confidentiality of their responses. Verbal consent was recorded via WhatsApp, and pseudonyms were used in all reporting. Given the emotional nature of some TikTok content, participants were advised to avoid documenting distressing material. Support resources were shared in case of discomfort during or after participation.

7.7. Limitations

While WhatsApp facilitated flexible and candid data collection, it also introduced limitations such as uneven response depth and potential distractions. The small sample size limits generalisability, and manual thematic analysis, while rich, is time-intensive and subject to interpretive bias. Nonetheless, the study's methodological choices were appropriate for its exploratory aims and context-specific focus.

8. Results and Discussion

8.1. Demographic data

The demographic profile of the 12 participants in this study provides

essential context for interpreting their engagement with TikTok as an informal learning space. All respondents were final-year undergraduate students enrolled in the Department of Library and Information Science at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. Their ages ranged from 21 to 25 years, with a mean age of 23. This age bracket aligns with the broader characteristics of Generation Z, whose digital fluency and social media immersion are central to the study's focus. Gender representation was balanced, with 6 male and 6 female participants. This parity allowed for comparative insights into how gendered experiences may influence the interpretation and internalisation of ethical content on TikTok. Participants hailed from diverse states across Nigeria, including Kwara, Lagos, Kaduna, Enugu, and Rivers, reflecting a cross-regional spread that enriched the cultural and ideological perspectives captured in the data.

Religious affiliation was optional, but nine participants identified as either Muslim or Christian, with three choosing not to disclose. While religion was not a primary variable in the study, its presence in participants' reflections particularly on moral and ethical issues suggests its relevance in shaping digital engagement.

Socio-economic background was self-assessed, with most participants describing themselves as middle-income, though two identified as coming from low-income households. All respondents had regular access to smartphones and mobile internet, though the reliability of connectivity varied. This digital access was crucial for sustained engagement with TikTok and for participation in the study via WhatsApp. Academic performance was self-reported, with CGPAs ranging from 2.8 to 4.5. While not directly correlated with TikTok usage, students with higher academic standing tended to articulate more critical reflections on content credibility and ethical nuance.

The data collected is depicted as Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants (n= 12)

Participant ID	Gender	Age	TikTok usage frequency	Device used to access TikTok
P1	Female	22	Daily	Smartphone
P2	Male	23	4-5 times/week	Smartphone
P3	Female	21	Daily	Smartphone
P4	Male	22	3 times/week	Tablet
P5	Female	23	Daily	Smartphone
P6	Male	24	5-6 times/week	Smartphone
P7	Female	22	Daily	Smartphone
P8	Male	21	2-3 times/week	Laptop
P9	Female	23	Daily	Smartphone
P10	Male	22	4 times/week	Smartphone
P11	Female	21	Daily	Smartphone
P12	Male	23	3-4 times/week	Smartphone

Source: Researcher

The analysis of data from 12 final-year Library and Information

Science students at the University of Ilorin revealed five major themes:

- TikTok as a gateway to social consciousness,
- Interpretation of ethical messages,
- Internalisation and behavioural shifts,
- Algorithmic visibility and content curation,
- Critical awareness and professional identity.

These themes are discussed in Table 2, supported by participants' verbatim responses and situated within relevant literature.

Table 2. Themes from thematic analysis

Theme	Description	Verbatim quote	Frequency
Informal learning	TikTok as a space for unstructured, peer-driven knowledge acquisition	"I was just scrolling for fun, then I saw this video about police brutality..." P03	11
Ethical reflection	Exposure to moral dilemmas and social justice issues	"That video about workplace sexism made me rethink how I behave at work." P07	9
Mental health awareness	Increased sensitivity to emotional wellbeing through TikTok content	"I used to think depression was not real until I saw Nigerians talking about it." P05	8
Algorithmic influence	Awareness of how TikTok's algorithm curates and filters content	"It's like TikTok decides what I care about based on what I liked yesterday." P02	10
Performative activism	Concern about users adopting ethical stances for visibility rather than conviction	"Some people just post activism stuff to get likes, not because they believe it." P06	7
Civic identity formation	TikTok shaping how students see themselves as citizens and change agents	"I feel more politically aware now than I did before joining TikTok." P10	6

Source: Researcher

• **TikTok as a gateway to social consciousness**

All participants reported encountering content related to ethics, justice, or power on TikTok, often unexpectedly. While many joined the platform for entertainment, they found themselves drawn into conversations about gender rights, mental health, and political activism. Digital diary entries which have been incorporated also documented these encounters over several weeks, showing that participants' awareness and reflections developed gradually rather than from single interactions.

"I was just scrolling for fun, then I saw this video about police brutality in another country. It reminded me of EndSARS. I didn't expect to feel so emotional." Participant 3

This aligns with Sefton-Green and Pangrazio's (2021) notion of "platform pedagogy", where users are taught not through formal instruction but through emotionally resonant, peer-generated content. TikTok's participatory culture enables micro-learning moments that are affective and memorable.

- **Interpretation of ethical messages**

Participants demonstrated varying levels of interpretive engagement. Some critically analysed the content, while others accepted messages at face value. Interpretation was often shaped by personal experience, cultural background, and emotional tone.

"There was this girl talking about how women are treated in workplaces. I could relate because I've seen it happen during my internship. It made me think more about gender bias."
Participant 7

"Sometimes I don't even know if the person is joking or serious. The way they use humour makes it hard to tell."
Participant 9

This reflects Kellner and Share's (2007) emphasis on critical media literacy, defined as the ability to decode not just the message but also the medium and its intent. The ambiguity of tone on TikTok complicates interpretation, especially when serious issues are presented through satire or trends.

- **Internalisation and behavioural shifts**

Several participants reported that TikTok content had influenced their values, attitudes, or behaviours. This internalisation was often subtle, occurring over time through repeated exposure.

"I used to think mental health was just for 'oyinbo' people. But after seeing so many Nigerians talk about depression on TikTok, I started taking it seriously." Participant 5

"Now I try to be more conscious of what I post. I don't want to spread ignorance or be insensitive." Participant 11

These findings support Livingstone's (2001) argument that informal learning is cumulative and socially embedded. TikTok's silent curriculum operates through repetition, peer validation, and emotional resonance, gradually shaping users' ethical frameworks.

- **Algorithmic visibility and content curation**

Participants were acutely aware of TikTok's algorithmic logic. Many noted that the platform seemed to "know" their interests and often

reinforced their existing views.

“Once I liked a few videos about feminism, my whole fyp changed. It was like TikTok decided I was a feminist.”
Participant 2

“I hardly see anything about politics unless I search for it. It’s mostly comedy and dance.” Participant 10

This reflects Gillespie’s (2014) concept of “public relevance algorithms,” which shape what users see and, by extension, what they learn. While some participants appreciated the personalisation, others expressed concern about being trapped in echo chambers.

“It’s like TikTok is feeding me what I already believe. I don’t get to see other perspectives.” Participant 6

This raises ethical questions about the role of algorithms in shaping civic knowledge and critical thinking. As Noble (2018) warns, algorithmic curation can reinforce bias and limit exposure to diverse viewpoints.

To further illustrate the types of ethical and civic content participants engaged with, Table 3 categorises the dominant TikTok trends and their associated emotional and thematic dimensions.

Table 3. Dominant TikTok trends and their associated emotional and thematic dimensions

Content category	Example video/trend	Emotional tone	Ethical/ Civic theme
Political activism	#EndSARS protest videos	Urgent, Empowering	Police brutality, Youth dissent
Gender equity	Skits on workplace sexism	Reflective, Humorous	Feminism, Gender bias
Mental health	Personal stories on anxiety	Vulnerable, Empathetic	Mental health awareness
Identity & Expression	LGBTQ+ coming-out videos	Bold, Affirming	Identity politics, Inclusion
Religious tolerance	Interfaith dialogue clips	Calm, Thoughtful	Coexistence, Respect for beliefs
Climate awareness	#SaveThePlanet challenges	Alarmed, Hopeful	Environmental justice
Performative activism	Trend-based virtue signaling	Ironic, Satirical	Authenticity vs. Visibility
Historical memory	Videos on colonial history, slave trade	Informative, thought provoking	Postcolonial critique, Justice

Source: Researcher

• Critical awareness and Professional identity

Interestingly, many participants linked their TikTok experiences to their academic training. They expressed a sense of responsibility as

future information professionals to help others navigate digital platforms critically.

“As an LIS student, I feel like I should help people understand that not everything on TikTok is true. We need to teach digital literacy.” Participant 1

“We’re learning about information ethics in class, but TikTok shows how it plays out in real life.” Participant 8

This suggests that informal learning on TikTok can complement formal education, reinforcing concepts taught in the classroom through real-world application. It also highlights the potential for Library and Information Science curricula to incorporate critical media literacy and platform analysis. The findings of this study affirm that TikTok functions as a powerful site of informal learning for Gen Z students, particularly in the realm of ethics, power, and justice. The platform’s silent curriculum delivered through trends, storytelling, and algorithmic curation, which shapes users’ moral reasoning and civic identity in ways that are both empowering and problematic. While participants demonstrated critical awareness and emotional engagement, they also faced challenges in discerning credibility, interpreting tone, and escaping algorithmic echo chambers. These findings echo Marwick and Boyd’s (2014) observations on the emotional labour of digital participation and Papacharissi’s (2015) concept of “moral fatigue” in hyper-visible online spaces. For Library and Information Science students, TikTok offers both a learning opportunity and a professional challenge. As future stewards of information, they must be equipped not only to navigate but also to critique and curate digital content ethically. This calls for a reimagining of LIS education, as one that integrates informal learning, platform literacy, and emotional intelligence into its core.

9. Conclusion

This study has illuminated the complex and often overlooked pedagogical role of TikTok in shaping the ethical and civic consciousness of Nigerian Gen Z learners. Through qualitative engagement with final-year Library and Information Science students, it became evident that TikTok operates as a silent curriculum, which is an informal, algorithmically mediated learning space where users encounter, interpret, and internalise ideas about justice, power, and ethics. Participants’ reflections revealed that while the platform is primarily perceived as a source of entertainment, it frequently serves as a gateway to social awareness, emotional engagement, and moral reflection.

The findings underscore the dual nature of TikTok’s influence: on one hand, it fosters democratised access to civic discourse and ethical

narratives; on the other, it risks reinforcing echo chambers and performative engagement due to its algorithmic logic. Students demonstrated varying degrees of critical media literacy, with some able to interrogate content and its ideological underpinnings, while others struggled with tone, credibility, and emotional overload.

Importantly, the study highlighted the intersection between informal digital learning and formal academic training. Participants were not passive consumers but active interpreters who linked their TikTok experiences to their professional identity as future information practitioners. This suggests that platforms like TikTok are not peripheral to education but central to how Gen Z constructs knowledge and values in a digital age. TikTok's silent curriculum is shaping a generation's ethical imagination in ways that demand scholarly attention, pedagogical innovation, and professional responsiveness, particularly within the field of Library and Information Science.

10. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed for educators, curriculum designers, and information professionals seeking to engage meaningfully with Gen Z learners in digital contexts.

First, Library and Information Science programmes should integrate critical media literacy into their core curriculum. This includes training students to analyse digital content, understand algorithmic influence, and evaluate the credibility and ethical implications of media texts. Such skills are essential for navigating platforms like TikTok, where informal learning is emotionally charged and ideologically complex.

Secondly, educators should recognise and validate the pedagogical potential of informal digital spaces. Rather than dismissing platforms like TikTok as distractions, they should be incorporated into classroom discussions, assignments, and reflective exercises. This approach bridges the gap between students' lived digital experiences and formal academic learning.

Thirdly, professional development for LIS educators should include exposure to platform pedagogy and digital youth cultures. Understanding how Gen Z engages with media is crucial for designing relevant and responsive educational interventions.

Fourthly, students should be encouraged to create ethically informed digital content themselves. By participating in content creation, they can develop a deeper understanding of information ethics, audience engagement, and the responsibilities of digital citizenship.

Finally, collaboration between LIS departments and media studies scholars could foster interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and shaping digital learning environments. Such partnerships would enrich both theoretical insight and practical application.

These recommendations aim to reposition LIS education as a forward-looking discipline that equips students not only to manage information but to critically engage with the digital ecosystems that shape public knowledge and civic life.

11. Areas for future research

While this study offers valuable insights into TikTok's role in informal ethical learning, it also opens up several avenues for future research that could deepen and broaden understanding of digital pedagogy among Gen Z learners.

One promising direction is a comparative study across disciplines. Investigating how students in fields such as law, education, or political science engage with TikTok could reveal disciplinary variations in interpretation, internalisation, and civic identity formation. Such research would help identify whether certain academic backgrounds predispose students to more critical or passive engagement with digital content.

Another area worth exploring is the longitudinal impact of TikTok's silent curriculum. Future studies could track how sustained exposure to ethical and civic content on the platform influences students' beliefs, behaviours, and professional choices over time. This would provide insight into the durability and depth of informal learning outcomes.

Additionally, research could examine the role of language, humour, and aesthetics in shaping ethical interpretation on TikTok. Given the platform's reliance on visual and performative communication, understanding how these elements mediate learning could enrich theoretical models of digital pedagogy. There is also a need to investigate the emotional labour involved in digital citizenship. Studies could explore how Gen Z learners manage moral fatigue, algorithmic anger, and silent withdrawal in response to overwhelming or polarising content. Finally, future research should consider the perspectives of educators and policymakers. Understanding how they perceive and respond to the pedagogical implications of platforms like TikTok could inform more inclusive and adaptive educational strategies.

12. Implications for theory and practice

This study contributes to both theoretical discourse and practical application in the fields of Library and Information Science, media studies, and digital education. Theoretically, it advances the concept of platform pedagogy by demonstrating how TikTok functions as a decentralised, affective, and algorithmically governed learning space. It also reinforces informal learning theory by showing how Gen Z learners acquire ethical and civic knowledge outside formal institutions, through emotionally resonant and socially embedded experiences.

The study further enriches critical media literacy theory by highlighting the interpretive challenges posed by short-form video

content, particularly the difficulty of discerning tone, credibility, and ideological framing. It suggests that media literacy must evolve to address the aesthetic and algorithmic dimensions of contemporary platforms.

Practically, the findings underscore the need for LIS educators to engage with students' digital realities. TikTok is not merely a site of distraction but a space where ethical reasoning and civic identity are actively negotiated. Educators must therefore design curricula that reflect this complexity, equipping students with the tools to critically engage with digital content and contribute ethically to online discourse.

For information professionals, the study highlights the importance of platform literacy and emotional intelligence. As curators of public knowledge, they must understand how information is received, interpreted, and internalised in digital spaces. This requires a shift from technical competence to ethical and affective responsiveness. In conclusion, the study bridges theory and practice by showing that digital platforms like TikTok are reshaping how young people learn, feel, and act. It calls for a reimagining of educational and professional paradigms to meet the epistemic and emotional needs of a digitally native generation.

Conflict of interest

The author declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the author on reasonable request.

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Appendix

Interview guide for TikTok's silent curriculum: How algorithmic content shapes ethical and civic understanding among Nigerian undergraduates

The aim of this interview is to understand how students engage with TikTok as an informal learning space, particularly in relation to ethics, power, and justice.

Section A) Demographic information

Please provide the following details before the interview proper begins:

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. State of Origin:
4. Religion (optional):
5. Socio-economic background (brief self-description):
6. Access to digital devices (e.g., smartphone, laptop):
7. Internet access (frequency and reliability):
8. TikTok usage frequency (e.g., daily, weekly):
9. Other social media platforms used regularly:
10. Academic performance (CGPA range):

Section B) Background and Usage

11. How often do you use TikTok, and for what purposes?
12. What kind of content do you usually engage with on the platform?
13. Can you describe one of your typical TikTok sessions?

Section C) Ethical and Civic content

14. Have you come across videos that discuss social issues like justice, power, or ethics?
15. Can you recall a specific video that made you reflect on a moral or political issue? What was it about?

Section D) Interpretation and Internalisation

16. How did you interpret the message in that video?
17. Did it change or reinforce any of your beliefs or values? How?
18. Do you ever share or discuss such videos with others? Why or why not?

Section E) Algorithmic influence and credibility

19. Do you feel TikTok shows you certain types of content more than others? Why do you think that is?
20. How do you decide whether a TikTok video is credible or trustworthy?

Section F) Broader impact and Professional identity

21. Has TikTok influenced how you think about social justice or civic responsibility?
22. As a Library and Information Science student, how do you see your role in helping others navigate platforms like TikTok?

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