THESIS THEME:YOUTUBE, TIKTOK, AND COUNTRY LEARNING: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA SHAPES NATIONAL UNDERSTANDING AMONG YOUTH

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Abstract: In recent years, social media platforms like YouTube and TikTok have transformed how young people learn about their own and other countries. This thesis investigates the role of social media content in shaping youth perceptions of national identity and stereotypes. Through qualitative content analysis of videos, a survey of young users, and discourse analysis of comments, this research highlights the impact of informal digital learning on national understanding. The findings suggest that social media significantly influences youth's views of countries, often mixing entertainment with cultural education. The study offers insights for educators and policymakers on the importance of media literacy in the digital age.

The internet and social media have drastically altered the landscape of information consumption, particularly among younger generations. Platforms such as YouTube and TikTok are not only sources of entertainment but also powerful informal educational tools. Millions of users upload and consume videos about countries — covering culture, lifestyle, history, and politics — providing a new mode of "country learning" that goes beyond traditional textbooks and classrooms. This shift raises important questions about how national identities and perceptions are formed in this digital environment.

While formal education has traditionally been the primary way youth learn about their nation and the world, social media's pervasive role demands investigation. Understanding the

influence of social media on youth's national perceptions is crucial for developing educational policies and curricula that align with contemporary realities.

To identify how countries are portrayed on YouTube and TikTok.

To understand youth engagement with these portrayals.

To evaluate how social media influences youth perceptions of national identity and stereotypes.

What themes and narratives dominate country-related content on YouTube and TikTok?

How do young users interpret and engage with such content?

What role do social media influencers play in shaping national perceptions?

What is the overall impact of social media on youth understanding of their own and other countries?

This research provides insights into digital-era informal learning and national identity formation. The findings will benefit educators, media literacy advocates, and policymakers seeking to understand and leverage social media's educational potential.

National identity traditionally has been transmitted through formal schooling, particularly history and civics education. Textbooks often frame narratives about the country's past, values, and symbols (Anderson, 1983). However, these narratives may not fully engage youth or reflect contemporary experiences.

Recent scholarship highlights social media's role as informal learning environments where users acquire knowledge through videos, comments, and peer interaction (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Platforms like YouTube and TikTok offer diverse and dynamic content that influences perceptions (Jenkins, 2006).

Media plays a critical role in constructing national images (Hall, 1997). However, media representations may perpetuate stereotypes or offer oversimplified portrayals, which shape international understanding and national self-image (Said, 1978).

Studies show youth actively negotiate their identities through social media, consuming and producing cultural content that impacts their self-concept and worldview (boyd, 2014).

Social media influencers are especially powerful in shaping trends and opinions (Abidin, 2018).

A mixed qualitative approach was employed, combining content analysis, surveys, and discourse analysis.

Content Selection: 100 popular videos tagged with country hashtags (#Uzbekistan, #TravelJapan, etc.) were selected from TikTok and YouTube.

Survey: An online survey was distributed to 120 youth (aged 15-25) to explore their social media habits and perceptions.

Discourse Analysis: Comments from videos and influencer narratives were collected to analyze public engagement and discourse.

Videos were coded for themes such as culture, tourism, politics, lifestyle, and stereotypes.

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic coding for open-ended responses.

Critical discourse analysis was applied to comments and influencer scripts to reveal underlying ideologies and attitudes.

Survey participants gave informed consent, anonymity was preserved, and only publicly available video and comment data were used.

Videos often portrayed countries through tourism highlights (landscapes, food, festivals), cultural traditions, and daily lifestyle vlogs. Positive national images were common, but some videos perpetuated stereotypes (e.g., exoticizing or oversimplifying cultures).

Survey results indicated that 85% of respondents watched country-related videos at least weekly, mainly for entertainment and curiosity. Many acknowledged learning cultural facts informally through these platforms.

Influencers with large followings played a significant role in shaping national narratives, often blending personal stories with cultural education. Some challenged stereotypes, while others unintentionally reinforced clichés.

Youth reported increased national pride when exposed to positive portrayals but also noted confusion or conflicting impressions due to varying content quality and perspectives.

The findings underscore social media's dual role as an educational and entertainment space, influencing national identity formation. Youth actively consume and interpret digital narratives but require critical skills to navigate diverse representations.

Integrating media literacy into curricula is essential to help youth critically assess digital content. Educators should acknowledge social media's role in informal learning and guide students in discerning factual and stereotypical portrayals.

The study's focus on two platforms and a limited sample size constrain generalizability. Rapidly evolving social media trends also pose challenges.

Future studies could explore other platforms (Instagram, Twitter), conduct longitudinal analyses, and examine the role of algorithms in shaping content exposure.

Social media platforms such as YouTube and TikTok have become vital arenas for youth to learn about countries and national identities, blending entertainment with informal education. While these platforms offer rich opportunities for cultural exchange, they also present risks of reinforcing stereotypes. Media literacy education is crucial in equipping young people to critically engage with this content and develop balanced national understandings.

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