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FRANKFURT'S BULLSHIT THEORY AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF POVERTY IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA: A CASE STUDY OF "MUD BATH" LIVE CONTENT ON TIKTOK

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of "selling poverty" in the post-truth era through TikTok live content represents a shift in the meaning of poverty from a structural issue to a visual commodity packaged for the attention economy. This study aims to reveal how such narratives are constructed and to analyze them through Harry G. Frankfurt's Bullshit Theory, employing a qualitative method and a case study approach via online observation of TikTok live content featuring poverty as the main subject. The findings show that narratives are built through framing, the creation of pseudo-events, and emotional exploitation to evoke sympathy while generating financial gain. Within the framework of Bullshit Theory, this practice reflects an indifference to factual truth, blurring the boundary between fact and fiction. The representation is not intended to promote structural change but rather to shape public perception in line with the creator's interests, reinforced by economic incentives, an instant-profit mentality, and audience support through TikTok's gift feature. This phenomenon is not merely a digital trend but an ethical, social, and political problem in the post-truth era, demanding strict regulation, improved digital literacy, and critical public awareness to restore the understanding of poverty as a structural issue requiring systemic solutions rather than viral entertainment.

Keywords: Post-truth, Bullshit Theory, TikTok, poverty, commodification, digital exploitation.

Introduction

The post truth era has fundamentally reshaped how societies negotiate the boundaries between truth, representation, and mediated reality. Public perception is no longer anchored primarily in empirical facts. Instead, it increasingly relies on emotional resonance, narrative appeal, and algorithmic amplification. As epistemic authority gradually shifts from traditional knowledge institutions to digital influencers and platform driven logics, representations of social issues become more vulnerable to distortion, simplification, and commodification. This shift in epistemic culture has profound implications for how structural problems such as poverty are interpreted, circulated, and consumed within the digital public sphere.

Contemporary social media ecosystems, with TikTok as one of the most influential, exemplify this transformation. As a platform engineered to prioritize rapid visibility, affective engagement, and viral circulation, TikTok elevates content that triggers strong emotional responses while pushing aside content that offers analytical depth or factual nuance. Its algorithmic infrastructure rewards spectacle, dramatization, and emotional cues, allowing narratives that are detached from material reality to spread widely and shape public sentiment. Within this environment, poverty is increasingly transformed from a complex socioeconomic condition into a performative asset capable of attracting attention and generating monetizable interactions.

A striking example of this phenomenon is the emergence of mud bath livestreams, in which elderly individuals, children, or economically vulnerable adults are presented in degrading and sensationalized conditions to provoke pity and encourage viewers to send digital gifts. These broadcasts reveal a troubling shift in the mediation of poverty. They demonstrate how suffering can be transformed into a consumable digital object that blends authenticity,

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emotional manipulation, and economic desperation. Poverty becomes reframed not as a structural issue rooted in inequality and limited access to resources, but as a form of entertainment shaped for public consumption.

Harry G. Frankfurt's Bullshit Theory provides a critical analytical lens for understanding this phenomenon. Frankfurt argues that bullshit is distinct from lying because it is characterized by indifference toward truth itself. In the context of TikTok poverty content, creators do not necessarily attempt to deceive viewers. Rather, they construct emotionally charged performances designed to maximize attention and financial gain regardless of factual accuracy. This indifference toward truth aligns closely with platform dynamics that promote emotional circulation over informational integrity, making bullshit not merely an individual communicative act but a structural feature of digital culture.

Daniel Boorstin's concept of the pseudo event further illuminates the dynamics at play. Pseudo events are staged occurrences created for publicity and repetition within media environments. Mud bath livestreams reflect all these characteristics. They are orchestrated, repeatable, and produced specifically to achieve visibility in an algorithmic system that rewards emotional spectacle. As a result, the representation of poverty becomes increasingly performative and distanced from its material and political foundations.

This article examines how poverty themed content on TikTok operates as a pseudo event embedded in the post truth media landscape. It investigates how economically marginalized individuals are positioned within digitally mediated power relations, how financial precarity is exploited for online profit, and how these dynamics contribute to the broader commodification of poverty. The study also addresses the ethical, political, and epistemological implications of transforming social suffering into viral entertainment. By exploring these interconnected issues, the analysis aims to deepen the understanding of how post truth conditions shape public perceptions of poverty while reinforcing structural inequalities through distorted and commercialized portrayals of marginalized lives.

Literature Review

The study of poverty representation in media reveals that portrayals of marginalized groups are often shaped through reductive and sensationalized narratives. Scholars argue that such representations simplify complex structural realities and reinforce longstanding stereotypes that influence how society understands the causes and consequences of poverty. Emily Jones explains that media institutions frequently present poverty as a one dimensional phenomenon, reducing it to visible suffering while ignoring broader political and economic contexts. This tendency transforms poverty into an object of public consumption, encouraging audiences to focus on emotional spectacle rather than structural analysis. Roy and Crane extend this argument by demonstrating how humanitarian imagery and digital platforms can turn poverty into a commodity. In this process, suffering becomes a marketable asset, circulating in digital spaces where empathy can be converted into financial reward.

The emergence of online begging on contemporary platforms illustrates a significant evolution in how poverty is performed and monetized in the digital era. Research on TikTok shows that economic precarity and limited employment opportunities encourage individuals or intermediaries to stage dramatized scenes of hardship to attract viewer donations. Shahana and colleagues describe this as a shift from traditional street begging toward technologically mediated performances designed to fit the logic of algorithmic visibility. These performances rely on emotional intensity and repetitive storytelling to maximize engagement, creating a form of digital exploitation in which vulnerable individuals are placed at the center of content production but remain excluded from meaningful control over the narratives that define their identities.

Power relations are central to understanding this dynamic. Dowding's analysis of exploitation emphasizes that unequal access to economic resources and decision making authority enables powerful actors to benefit disproportionately from the labor or vulnerability of others. Digital platforms amplify these asymmetries because creators or account owners often control the framing, distribution, and profit generated from content featuring marginalized individuals. The subjects, in contrast, become passive participants whose suffering is strategically curated to generate attention. This dynamic reflects broader inequalities embedded in digital infrastructures, where visibility and value are determined by algorithmic systems that reward spectacle rather than authenticity or agency.

The broader context of these developments is shaped by the epistemic conditions of the post truth era. Frankfurt's concept of bullshit provides a critical foundation for understanding why misleading or exaggerated portrayals of poverty thrive in contemporary digital environments. According to Frankfurt, bullshit emerges when communicators are indifferent to the truth and instead focus on creating statements that serve a particular purpose, such as emotional persuasion or personal gain. This differs from lying, which presupposes an awareness of truth and a conscious intention to conceal it. In post truth media ecosystems, factual accuracy becomes less important than the ability to provoke reaction or gain visibility. Studies by Fuller, Lipinska, and Lee show that social media platforms provide fertile ground for this phenomenon because they reward emotional content, blur distinctions between authentic and staged experiences, and erode boundaries between information, entertainment, and performance.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives illustrate how poverty is reshaped within digital cultures that prioritize emotional spectacle, economic incentives, and algorithmic visibility. Poverty becomes not only a social condition but also a performative product whose meaning is constructed through commodification, exploitation, and epistemic indifference to truth. This integrated framework provides a foundation for analyzing how TikTok mud bath content operates within post truth conditions and how marginalized lives are reinterpreted in ways that obscure structural inequalities while amplifying digital forms of exploitation.

Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the dynamics of poverty themed livestream content on TikTok. Data collection was conducted through sustained online observation of livestreams that showcased mud bath performances and other forms of digitally mediated poverty displays, allowing the researcher to examine patterns of behavior, performative elements, and audience interactions in real time. This observational data was complemented by an extensive analysis of supporting documents that included scholarly literature, governmental regulations, and digital platform policies relevant to issues of online exploitation, representation, and content monetization. The analytical process followed the qualitative framework developed by Miles and Huberman, which emphasizes iterative cycles of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This procedure enabled the researcher to systematically identify recurring themes, categorize representational patterns, and interpret the broader socio political implications embedded within the content. Special attention was given to the construction of narratives, the visual strategies employed to elicit emotional responses, and the power relations that emerged between content creators, the vulnerable individuals featured in the broadcasts, and the audiences who participated through comments or digital gifting. Through this integrated methodological approach, the study provides a detailed and critical understanding of how digital poverty performances are produced, circulated, and consumed within contemporary social media environments.

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Findings and Discussion

TikTok as a Post Truth Digital Environment

TikTok operates as one of the most influential digital environments in the post truth era because its algorithmic design systematically privileges content that evokes emotional intensity, rapid engagement, and instant gratification. The platform's recommendation system continuously refines user feeds based on affective responses rather than informational value, a mechanism that encourages the circulation of emotionally charged content regardless of its factual accuracy. As a result, representations of social issues are shaped less by their correspondence to reality and more by their potential to stimulate reactions such as shock, sympathy, or curiosity. This dynamic aligns closely with post truth conditions in which audiences increasingly rely on affective cues and narrative coherence rather than empirical evidence to form opinions.

Within this ecosystem, staged depictions of suffering gain exceptional traction because they are easily consumable, visually dramatic, and capable of producing strong emotional feedback loops. TikTok's architecture accelerates these processes by compressing complex social realities into short, visually striking clips that leave little room for nuance or critical reflection. Consequently, content that dramatizes poverty can spread rapidly even when it distorts the actual lived experiences of marginalized individuals. The dominance of emotional persuasion over factual representation demonstrates how TikTok functions as a digital space where the boundaries between authenticity and performance become blurred, ultimately reinforcing the cultural logics of the post truth era.

Poverty as Pseudo Event and Digital Performance

The phenomenon of mud bath livestreams illustrates how poverty is transformed into a pseudo event, a concept introduced by Daniel Boorstin to describe occurrences that are orchestrated specifically for public visibility rather than emerging organically from lived reality. These livestreams are produced with the explicit intention of generating attention and financial contributions, making them highly curated performances rather than accurate depictions of economic hardship. The repetitive nature of the acts, the deliberate staging of environments, and the dramatic gestures employed to evoke pity demonstrate how creators actively construct spectacles of suffering to satisfy the expectations of digital audiences.

Moreover, the performative quality of these broadcasts creates a mediated version of poverty that prioritizes emotional spectacle over structural explanation. Viewers encounter poverty not as a multidimensional socio economic issue rooted in systemic inequality but as a simplified and dramatized performance tailored for entertainment. The emphasis on visual dramatization encourages audiences to interpret suffering as an isolated and individualized condition rather than a consequence of broader social and political failures. This reinforces superficial understandings of poverty that obscure its structural determinants, contributing to a culture in which economic precarity becomes a consumable object rather than a problem requiring collective action and policy intervention.

Marginalized Subjects in Digital Power Relations

The individuals featured in poverty themed TikTok livestreams, often elderly, disabled, or economically vulnerable, occupy profoundly unequal positions within the digital production process. Their role in the content is typically confined to passive participation, with minimal autonomy over how their images or experiences are represented. This dynamic reflects broader patterns of digital marginalization in which the vulnerable become objects of spectacle rather than subjects with agency. Creators and account owners typically exercise full control over the framing, interpretation, and monetization of the content, positioning marginalized individuals as tools for extracting emotional and financial responses from viewers.

This imbalance of power is magnified through TikTok's interactive features such as digital gifting, which creates a transactional relationship between audiences and performers.

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The flow of gifts reinforces the idea that the value of the marginalized subject is tied to their ability to elicit sympathy and emotional gratification. In this context, the representation of poverty becomes inseparable from the economic incentives embedded within the platform. The subjects' lack of agency not only reflects existing social inequities but also reproduces them through digital mechanisms that commodify vulnerability. The result is a configuration of power in which both creators and viewers hold significantly more influence than the individuals whose lives are being displayed, further entrenching their marginalization.

Bullshit and Indifference to Truth

Frankfurt's theory of bullshit offers a compelling framework for understanding why misleading or exaggerated portrayals of poverty thrive on TikTok. According to Frankfurt, bullshit is characterized not by the intention to deceive but by a disregard for whether statements or representations correspond to the truth. This indifference is apparent in content that prioritizes emotional resonance, virality, and financial gain over accurate depiction. Content creators may not consciously attempt to mislead their audience, yet their focus lies entirely on generating persuasive performances that maximize engagement. In the context of poverty themed livestreams, the authenticity of hardship becomes secondary to the strategic production of emotional spectacle.

This epistemic indifference raises significant ethical concerns, as audiences may base their perceptions of poverty on performances that bear little resemblance to actual socio economic conditions. When creators prioritize attention and profit above truthful representation, they contribute to a digital culture that normalizes manipulative portrayals of human suffering. Over time, the repetition of such stylized performances shapes public expectations, encouraging viewers to interpret poverty through overly dramatized or sensational lenses. The ethical implications extend beyond individual creators, revealing broader cultural patterns in which truth becomes subordinate to emotional impact, further entrenching the post truth condition.

Erosion of Political Legitimacy of the Poor

The transformation of poverty into digital entertainment has far reaching consequences for how the public understands and engages with social inequality. When poverty is repeatedly framed through dramatized performances, structural issues such as unemployment, inadequate welfare systems, and persistent socio economic disparities are rendered invisible. Instead of recognizing poverty as a systemic problem that requires political intervention, audiences are encouraged to view it as an individualized condition that can be temporarily alleviated through digital gifts or emotional responses. This reinforces paternalistic attitudes that position the poor as passive recipients of charity rather than as rights bearing citizens entitled to social protection.

As these distorted representations circulate widely, they weaken the political legitimacy of marginalized communities by framing their struggles as spectacles rather than as urgent social issues. This undermines the public's capacity to empathize with the structural dimensions of poverty, reducing incentives for collective action or policy reform. Ultimately, the commodification of poverty within digital environments not only perpetuates stereotypes but also erodes the social foundations required for the political empowerment of the poor. When suffering becomes entertainment, the structural nature of inequality becomes obscured, weakening the societal commitment necessary to address it through meaningful and sustainable change.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the TikTok mud bath livestream phenomenon is not merely an isolated instance of online entertainment but a revealing manifestation of how poverty is reconfigured within the post truth digital landscape. The findings show that poverty is transformed into a commodified and dramatized spectacle that prioritizes emotional

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resonance over structural understanding. Frankfurt's Bullshit Theory helps illuminate this process by showing how creators operate within an epistemic environment where truth is neither valued nor required. Instead, they construct emotionally charged performances aimed at maximizing engagement and financial gain. This dynamic is reinforced by TikTok's algorithmic infrastructure, which privileges content designed to provoke affective responses, thereby creating fertile ground for pseudo events that distort the lived realities of marginalized individuals.

Beyond the representational implications, the study highlights how such content reproduces and intensifies existing power imbalances. Vulnerable individuals featured in the livestreams are often positioned as passive objects within a digital economy that extracts value from their suffering. Meanwhile, creators, audiences, and platform systems benefit materially or emotionally from these performances. This asymmetry not only perpetuates exploitative practices but also shapes public perceptions of poverty in ways that obscure structural inequalities, reduce empathy, and undermine collective responsibility. Misrepresentations rooted in emotional spectacle redirect attention away from systemic issues such as social welfare failures, employment precarity, and institutional neglect. As a result, these distorted portrayals weaken the political legitimacy of marginalized groups and limit the possibility of mobilizing effective advocacy or policy reform.

The study therefore underscores the urgent need for a multifaceted response that includes stronger regulatory frameworks to address digital exploitation, increased digital literacy to encourage critical engagement with online content, and broader public education to reframe poverty as a structural issue rather than a form of entertainment. By promoting ethical content creation and fostering critical awareness, society can begin to challenge the normalization of exploitative digital practices and restore attention to the systemic conditions that produce and perpetuate poverty. Such interventions are essential not only for protecting vulnerable individuals but also for rebuilding a collective understanding of poverty grounded in justice, dignity, and structural analysis.

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