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TikTok as Art: Visual Culture Art Education in an Afterschool Art Program

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TikTok as Art: Visual Culture Art Education in an Afterschool Art Program

By

CHLOE CHRISTYNE MORRELL, Bachelor of Fine Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

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Tik as Art: Visual Culture Art Education in an Afterschool Art Program

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Abstract

This research and the objective were to investigate the firsthand experience of visual culture art education in an after-school art program. The after-school program was focused mainly on an underserved population. We focused our concentration on the social media app TikTok. The author investigated visual culture theorists and discovered ideas from Terry Barrett and his use of denotations and connotations and their relationship to art. The participants were members of the Boys and Girls Club of Nacogdoches who analyzed TikTok videos using annotations and denotations, then in return created their own individual videos inspired by an original TikTok video. The participants discussed and analyzed TikTok videos which led to deeper discussions into the customer services industry, African American representation, and internet safety. Through observations and discussions, along with individual and group interviews, the research project led to the need for narrow guidelines on visual culture, social justice, and safety on the internet.

Keywords: TikTok, Visual culture art education, after-school program, art education, underserved population, boys, and girls club

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	5
Why After-School Programs.....	5
Pros and Cons of Afterschool Programs.....	6
Positive Youth Development.....	7
Importance of Art Education.....	9
Hidden Class Rules.....	11
Art Education is for All Children.....	13
The Boys and Girls Club and the Underserved Population.....	14
Visual Culture Art Education.....	15
TikTok.....	19
Methodology.....	21
Design.....	22
Connotations and Denotations.....	23
Video Production.....	30
Data Collection.....	31
The Research Project.....	36
Video Analysis.....	37
Findings.....	41
Conclusion.....	44
References.....	45

Introduction

I was asked by one of the members of the Boys and Girls Club (BGC) of Nacogdoches, Texas if I had an iPhone or an Android. This member was a 10-year-old girl who always had a smile on her face no matter how she felt. She spent a lot of her time in the art room with me along with a select number of members. I remember telling her what model of iPhone, which was a yellow iPhone XR, it was newer, but not the newest model. Every child in the room was fascinated by my phone and the idea that I could afford a newer model. A lot of them did not have access to a phone and if they did it was an older model and an Android. I asked them if it matter what type of phone I had, and they stated that they could tell if someone had a lot of money by the type of phone they had. These children come from homes that did not have much access to material things. Having a phone is important to their daily lives because a lot of their lives are programmed around them including access to social media. A high-quality iPhone to these children at the BGC is a representation of a high-quality lifestyle with little to no financial need.

Nacogdoches, Texas is in Deep East Texas about two and a half hours away from major cities of Dallas and Houston. The financial status of the locals is on the lower side, the people there live below the poverty line. A large portion of Nacogdoches is struggling to maintain their basic needs and this unfulfillment

bleeds into the children's everyday lives including school time. My interaction with the children in the community is mainly lower income children at the BGC of Nacogdoches. I spend my time doing arts and crafts projects with them and taught basic concepts in art education. Although we spent a portion with art concepts, I noticed a larger percentage was spent handling behavioral issues.

These children have problems that many people do not have to experience in their lives, but similarly they enjoy things such as social media and the internet. Visual culture is heavy in children's lives, visual culture is the aspects of culture that are described visually, this ranges from TikTok to the news channels they interact with. TikTok is a Chinese owned social media company that hosts short, filmed videos. These videos range from comedy, dances, pranks, beauty, cooking, and more. TikTok's importance to the younger generation I saw constantly in my interaction with the members of the BGC. Nearly all the children knew about TikTok even if they did not interact with the app directly. The members that did not directly interact with the app admitted to watching compilations on YouTube when they got home.

Visual culture art education (VCAE) is an interdisciplinary study that seeks to include aspects of visual culture in the art classroom. It could also be a way to understand and evaluate the things that are seen in popular culture. One of the purposes of VCAE is to provide tools for students to be aware of visual culture and how to take what they see and in return interpret it. Technology is an

important part of visual culture because this is where a lot of the intake of visual imagery comes from. Access to technology and its imagery can be overwhelming and difficult to censor when there are large amounts. VCAE is a tool to help filter what is accurate and to help understand what is being seen.

The research purpose is to investigate VCAE in an afterschool program. I wanted to explore different imagery that can be categorized in visual culture. Visual culture is a broad term due to the different layers that can be found in popular visual culture. I wanted to explore popular forms of visual culture through the lenses of VCAE to see if concepts taken from Terry Barrett's connotation and denotations approach works with visuals found in contemporary social media. The social media app TikTok is the most current app to the youth at the Boys and Girls Club. I noticed before my research that a large portion of their time at the club was making TikTok dancing videos by themselves or even with friends. TikTok is a video making platform with many genres that can be found within the app. The members in my group were ages nine through thirteen years old and there were about ten children involved in the research project. They were already active on TikTok and were happy to explore the ideas of looking at it as a form of art.

Through exploration and research, the BGC members found video trends they were interested in participating in. I presented to the group two videos of my choice that they evaluated the denotation and connotations they saw in the videos.

Then they found videos to use as inspiration to participate in trends popular on the app. They then used the app to create a video in response to the video they chose. This research expanded their understandings and problems that come with having access to the internet, cyber bullying, African American representation, and the importance of current and validated resources.

Literature Review

Why After-School Programs

After-school programs provide programs for the students who missed out on things like art in public school. These programs and art educators tend to lack funds or must manage with a minor budget. Lack of funds influences after-school programs immensely because the limited funding they do get is used on one project or even a program (Spohn, 2008). These funds rarely are for upkeep on structural issues or directorial staff, thus leading to high turnover rates. Art educators in the public school system face similar challenges as they get limited funding because administration is focused on other core subjects due to standardized testing (Spohn, 2008). Students miss out on great art opportunities because of limited resources that art educators and after-school programs have. Art is not prioritized and do not have access to the resources and research that other subjects have.

Art education should be a priority because it provides grounds for growth in community awareness and involvement for students. Artists create work inspired by community events and issues. Therefore, it is important to provide quality art programs for youth. I have experience teaching art with Boys and Girls Club of Nacogdoches since September of 2021. The members that attend this program come and go frequently because a lot of them are from lower income

families. A large percentage of these children are minorities, mainly African American and Hispanic and age ranged from 10-13 years old. I had the opportunity to do a variety of projects with them ranging from painting (acrylic), drawing, and even coil clay pots. In the time that I had with the members there were instances that some of their education was missing information. Through interaction and coming back every week we were able to establish trust with a few of the members who frequented the art classroom with us.

Pros and Cons of Afterschool Programs

According to Robert Halpern (1999), the interest in after-school programs grow from four driving concerns. The first trepidation addresses parents' concerns that the streets and playgrounds are no longer dependable for safety or good use for children after school time. Next, leaving children alone can be stressful and lacks productivity due to the absence of adult supervision. Another concern is a belief that to be productive in their basic academic skills, low-income children need the extra time for advancement. Lastly, Halpern (1999) continues to say, the confidence that more fortunate peers could freely explore arts, athletics, and other extracurricular activities in an inequity that should be the same for lower-income students. Halpern (1999) reports that after-school programs are distinguishable and alive, but they also have difficulties of their own. After-school programs are safe spaces that allow for certain freedoms of exploration that public schools tend to lack. These programs are at times, however, saddled with the task of inattentive

state ran schools. Staff members frequently come with little to no official training and have a high turnover rate. Even with these limitations, an encouraging outcome is demonstrated in the relationships between the staff and children in after-school programs which are supportive and sincere (Halpern 1999).

Positive Youth Development

After-school activities and positive youth development (PYD) build self-esteem and confidence of students and focus on social justice in these communities (Montgomery, 2017). PYD within after-school programs strives for positive relationships and role models students can look up to and establish bonds with their peers and their communities (Ersing, 2009). The importance of PYD in these art programs also creates pathways for self-expression, which can be challenging for students whose lives are centered around trauma at home, self-discovery, self-esteem, trust, and confidence issues (Ersing, 2009). Building self-esteem and confidence in students is part of after-school programs and with PYD there is also the focus on social justice in these communities (Montgomery, 2017). Social justice is a common theme amongst after-school programs because of the gaps in the underserved population, due to their lack of resources because of race, financial burdens, etc. (Kraehe, 2013).

Funding for the arts is constantly decreasing. As of 2008, nearly eighty percent of schools experienced budget cuts (Jung, 2018). As a result, their art programs are the first to be cut or even disregarded completely by schools (Jung,

2018). Sixty percent of schools have cut their arts programs completely (Jung, 2018). During times of economic troubles, the United States frequently reduces public funding for the arts. It may seem like not a huge deal but compared to other countries who willingly participate funding of the arts regularly, the United States is lacking significantly (Jung, 2018). Germany, for example, funds public arts education, orchestras, and opera houses (Jung, 2018). If that is not enough, art has been designated as one of the key subjects in the No Child Left Behind Act, but funding is still being cut (Jung, 2018). In 2009 the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were created to create more accountability for public schools in their standard of language arts and math. Although art is named a core subject, CCSS did not name any art related standards for public schooling (Jung, 2018). Without having any guidelines, how are public schools expected to follow these common core standards while receiving funding they needed to run decent programs? As a result, organizations such as the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS) have taken the initiative to develop core standards for public schools (Jung, 2018). Even with the lack of funding, art is often undervalued on its own terms and usually what art can do for the testing subjects (Gee, 2007). There are many benefits for students who take part in art classes. Research states that students who participate in art classes do better on standardized testing (Gee, 2007). Although the arts have benefits to helping students with their other core subjects, the arts have a deep connection to daily life and cultural significance

(Gee, 2007). Importance aspects of daily life, such as the workforce, are changing and members who can problem solve and develop creative solutions are needed (Psilos, 2002).

The Importance of Art Education

After school programs often target underserved and socio-economically disadvantaged communities by providing tutoring, arts, and childcare for families who need extra help. These after-school programs help parents but come with their own problems such as a lack of funding, high turnover rates, and having to make up for public school education when it falls short (Halpern, 1999). These obstacles can be challenging, but there are significant outcomes that come from after-school programs, particularly art programs. Youth involved in afterschool art programs show improvements in problem-solving, positive risk-taking, increased confidence, and self-esteem (Ersing, 2009). These are quality traits that build self-sustaining adults that the current workforce is looking for in their employees (Psilos, 2002).

The number one problem facing many after-school programs is the lack of funding. When schools do get funding, they are focused on a particular program or a particular project (Heath, 2001). Although these matters are important to these programs, there is a need for directorial staff and structure (Heath, 2001). The evaluations also focus on the end goals for the project rather than the long-term outcomes (Heath, 2001). There is a concern for school-age youth in low-

income areas and how they are spending their time outside of schools, therefore leading to the need and growth of after-school programs. These students live in dangerous areas and often their parents are having to work feverishly to make ends meet. That is where the need for programs to help with after-school childcare and the need to provide some form of support in helping with schoolwork, such as tutoring.

The school system is presented with the rules and regulations of middle-class hidden rules and therefore leaving those students who live amongst the lower class to struggle academically (Payne, 2005). Ruby Payne discusses in depth the hidden rules of three socio-economic classes and how children living in poverty are the ones who lose out in education and even day-to-day scenarios. Children in poverty play by a different set of rules than those among the middle and upper class because their day-to-day situations vary. Students among the lower-class handle and interpret everyday obstacles differently. Their financial stability is lacking, but their relationship with their family and friends is of higher importance to them due to their focus on the present rather than that of the future. The future is not known to them and often leads to moving and more financial hardship. Arts in after-school programs become important because they help students build confidence and cognitive skills through problem-solving and working with the community to create works of art with skills they developed through self-discipline and dedication. There needs to be more research and

resources dedicated to after-school programs to help them thrive even when funding can be scarce. Therefore, it is important to have access to resources that provide information to art programs focusing on quality art education with a tight budget. BGC have little access to art materials, and I found myself using free materials often. After school programs are an interest in my research, but I knew I would have to find materials that cost little to no money.

Hidden Class Rules

In her book, *a Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Ruby K. Payne (2005) addressed her experiences as an educator in a school located in a low-income region. Payne worked closely with children who grew up in chaotic situations and often had to struggle to survive in their rough neighborhoods and harsh surroundings. Payne emphasized the “hidden rules amongst the classes” of lower, middle, and wealthy classes. These rules set the economic classes apart and make it difficult for those of the lower class to move up to the middle class. These hidden rules of separate classes have important roles in the work force and even education. It is important to know these rules to navigate life and for those in the lower classes to acquire the necessary resources to live a more comfortable life (Payne, 2005).

Children come from homes of generational poverty, a form of poverty that can happen in many family generations, and homes where resources are scarce. Students in homes of poverty are familiar with the hidden rules of their economic

class. The rules they know can affect their lives outside of their homes because the rules of the middle and higher classes are different from the lower class. This can be seen with children who are in school and usually struggle behaviorally because the school setting tends to follow the rules of the middle classes. An example would be it is rude to interrupt the teacher, but when conversing with people from their same economic class there tends to be a lot of interrupting other conversations. Children from the underserved areas are not able to quickly adapt to the hidden rules of other classes because they are used to a different lifestyle at home (Payne, 2005).

Underserved children often experience crime in their neighborhoods and are likely to be exposed to violence, as well as drug and alcohol abuse, leading to a decrease in education progress (Forrest-Bank, 2016). One way to help with the gaps of learning is through after-school programs (Forrest-Bank, 2016). This can be a difficult task due to the limited research in after-school programs (Forrest-Bank, 2016). Research conducted by John, Wright, Rowe, and Duku (2009) showed significant improvements in student social and artistic skills after participating in after-school art programs. In other such studies there was a drastic decrease in their emotional problems as well (John, 2009). A decrease in teen pregnancies, school dropout rates, and academic failure are some of the things that after-school programs work hard to prevent by having students engage in community volunteering (John, 2009). Rather than seeing these underserved

students as a problem that needed to solve, they helped the students develop problem solving skills (Ersing, 2009).

Payne's book about the hidden rules of the classes helped a lot with understanding the choices the children at the BGC made and why they did it. It allowed me to consider their home lives and how that effected their decision making and behavior. Ruby Payne gave me insight to the things that held more value to the members such as relationships and trust. Building a relationship with the members was important to the children because of their lack of material advantage. Finally, her book helped me better understand myself. I grew up in the same environment as a lot of the BGC members and had little access to our basic needs because of my mom who was a single mother of four. The hidden rules made me realize a lot of my life choices that lead me to now have greatly affected how interpret things such as my relationships and finances.

Art Education is for All Children

Art education is something that should be accessible to everyone but can be difficult for students who are failing in academic areas that are subject to standardized testing. These students spend less time in their creative classes such as fine arts to make up for lack of achievement in standardized testing (Spohn, 2008). Frequently these children have hard home lives and need the extra attention to help them succeed because they are having to focus on surviving at home. The underserved community try to navigate life by making ends meet so it

can be difficult to provide all the resources to their children while having to work. This leads to an increase in after-school programs necessary to provide childcare, tutoring, food, and a safe environment to build a community of role models for these students who are commonly underserved. After-school programs provide activities that these students miss in public education because they are working on filling gaps in arts education.

The Boys and Girls Club of Nacogdoches, Texas, and Underserved

Population

The BGC is limited in their funds, especially money that goes towards their art room. They have basic supplies such as acrylic and tempera paint, paint brushes, scissors, pencils, markers, colored pencils, etc. Programs such as these strive for a successful art program, but do not have much funding in place and need more resources that can provide quality art education with little to no budget due to their locations in underserved communities. According to Amelia M. Kraehe and Joni B. Acuff underserved population is defined as "...cultural articulations and material conditions that prevent certain groups from fully accessing and benefiting from the resources and opportunities for effective education, including high quality art experience." According to the 2020 government census, close to thirty percent of Nacogdoches is living under the poverty line.

Students who tend to be in most need academically have little to no access to art education due to their locations, schools in these areas lack funds for higher quality educational materials (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013). BGC members are some of the students who have little to no access to high quality art experiences. I would find myself filling in the blanks of information that they should be familiar with given their age and what grade they are in. An example would be a large portion of the members would be unfamiliar with primary colors and secondary colors. I spent time guiding them on which colors we mixed to create the secondary colors so they could mix the correct colors for their projects.

Visual Culture Art Education

There is an emphasis that art education needs to change and focus more on present art rather than the hyper fixation of the past (Wilson, 2003). Visual culture art education (VCAE) is a newer take on teaching art education in the classroom. Visual culture art education is a way to study and interpret visual imagery that is prevalent in culture. Visual culture is a broad term that includes magazines, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, memes, news outlets, commercials, movies, television shows, and more. A problem that theorists have with VCAE is its broad number of genres that it covers and overwhelming amount of visual imagery (Efland, 2005). Efland states that visual culture has a way of leveling the field rather than there being an art hierarchy that we see in the fine arts (2005). Certain cultures value other works of art over others and this is due for many

reasons, religion, aesthetic values, etc., (Efland, 2005). An example would be Christianity and the value they put into crosses that can often be seen hanging up as decoration in their homes. Another example can be textile craft such as quilting that can be found in Hispanic cultures. This is growing due to accessibility to information and visual imagery found on the internet. Terry Barrett, Paul Duncum, and Brent Wilson are theorists who partake in the importance of VCAE significance to the understanding of contemporary culture. Theorists such as Dorn see problems in the lack of art in this concept (2002). Understanding and building critical analysis through scrutiny of visual culture skills are the outcomes in VCAE (Duncum, 2002). Freedman (2003) writes that “students have a lot of experience with design qualities and information picked up from viewing all of the images they see, but do not have the analytical skills needed to critically reflect experience”. VCAE provides skill building in analyzing and reflection while simultaneously allowing for creative freedom in art making. VCAE provides both analyzation skills and creativity, that lead to constructing artworks that reflect student understanding of what they see. Although life skills are developed it is stated by critics of VCAE that there is higher emphasis on critique than the art making (Duncum, 2002).

Visual culture also emphasizes diversity in culture such as from Black Lives Matters, feminist issues, and LGBTQ (Freedman,1994). There is a need for social reconstruction and providing ways for students to creatively interpret these

issues through their own terms of understanding that is important for self-accountability. Alice Lai (2009) in “Images of Women in Visual Culture”, focuses on gender issues specifically how women are perceived in images in visual culture. Lai (2009) mentions the importance of VCAE and the connections to gender, race, and sex issues that are emphasized in current visual culture. Visual culture leads to the creation of new ideas such as the feminist pedagogy and its emphasis on “students seeking knowledge on their own terms and in terms of group and collaborative learning...” (Garber, 2003). The diversity of VCAE is important to my research because majority of the BGC members are African American. Representation matters to them in every aspect of their lives and VCAE is an outlet for understanding and interpreting diversity.

Visual culture art education pushes back the tendencies for teachers to take control and mold minds of students on how they want them to interpret information. Herrmann (2005) states that it is not the intended purpose of VCAE, but rather an emphasis on self-exploration and understanding. She gives examples of teachers adopting VCAE, but them falling short because the teachers interfering too much with the process (Herrmann, 2005). I prevented this in my research by giving simple guidelines such as internet safety and regulations. I gave each student complete control over their videos; what trend they wanted to use and how they were going to use it. I also had no part in making the videos, other students were familiar with video editing, and they helped each other. Art

and its materials changes constantly with the world around it (Wilson, 2003). Transitioning from focusing on the present rather than the past is going to be a struggle at first, but Wilson believes teachers need to look to their students because they are the key to understanding visual culture (2003). Students experience visual culture constantly in their lives and have learned how to filter it and take it in (Wilson, 2003). Art throughout history is an element of its past (Tavin, 2005). Artist responds constantly to what is happening visually and visual culture art education is no different.

VCAE is broad and complex and is something that can be difficult to create curriculum for that allows art making. Terry Barrett (2003) uses connotations and denotations to understand how to interpret visual culture in the classroom. Barrett writes that “denotations and connotations are at play in all of visual and verbal communication, and their consequences can be more serious than designers’ attempts at influencing our choices... (2003).” He used this method to break down items relevant to age groups in visual culture, for example for preschoolers he talked about the teddy bear (Barrett, 2003). Barrett’s method of VCAE was strong in method of interpretation but lacked artmaking. This method I adopted in my research project to help the BGC members understand what they were seeing and provide an outlet to make connections and to be able to verbally describe these messages. Art making is important to art education, but not as important to the goal of visual culture art education. This leads to the final

art product not being aesthetically pleasing, but more for students to reflect on their understandings and providing a form of visual that they have complete control over.

TikTok

TikTok is a Chinese owned social media app started in September of 2016 where users post short videos that range from comedy, dances, art challenges, cooking, lifestyle, and more (Montag, 2021). According to TikTok, "[they are] the leading destination for short-filmed mobile videos." And their mission "is to inspire creativity and bring joy" (TikTok). The app can be downloaded on both android and iPhone through their Appstore. This app attracts more younger users, about 32.5% of users in the United States are 19 years old and younger. TikTok allows those 13 and over the opportunity to sign up for an account while those 12 and under are filtered through TikTok for younger users.

TikTok in the United States is used by a large portion of younger users. This is a social media that they are interested and involved with. Although TikTok has a bad reputation with the cyberbullying and dangerous and destructive challenges it has the publicity to create and enact change. This app can be a good source to create and help with educational needs. There are opportunities to use TikTok to teach internet safety, but also new was to creatively express oneself through comedy, dancing, cooking, and more. That is what I am doing my research project providing skills for younger generations to critically analyze

information they see on the internet. They gain these through a platform they are interested in and understand. The participants become self-aware in the sense of understanding information in visual culture.

Methodology

This study is based on the qualitative research design of the case study. According to Creswell (2013), a case study is "...the study of a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting." The contemporary setting is important to the context of the research. The contemporary setting is the interaction that the Boys and Girls Club participants have with the social media app, TikTok, which is producing viral trends around the world. Videos that become popular have minimal time to be popular before the next video or trend takes over. The contemporary context of a case study fixates on the sensation of the fleeting popularity of TikTok trending videos. Visual culture art education is the study of visual imagery relevant to contemporary culture through analysis and interpretation. Then, in return, the participants created artwork keeping in mind their understanding of the original TikTok video. Theorists conclude the importance of understanding contemporary imagery through discussion and analysis (Tavin, 2005; Barrett, 2003; Duncum, 2002; Freedom, 1994). While critics believe the theory falls short in many ways, the lack of artmaking is the number one critique (Herrmann, 2005; Dorn, 2005; Efland, 2006).

The research study is an examination of visual art education in an afterschool program that is largely consisted of the underserved population. The underserved population has different life understandings, and they experience

visual culture differently due to their disadvantages. Payne (2006) describes the hidden rules of the classes and why they handle situations the way they do. The underserved population values relationships more than anything because of the lack of material things (Payne, 2006).

Design

My research began with building trust with the participants. I had ten children from the BGC ages 9-13 that participated in the research project, but eventually went down to six. I had the opportunity to work with the Boys and Girls Club for over six months before the research project began. Through this time, I built a relationship with the children, but also with the administration who permitted me to work with the members of the club on this research. Once trust was built, I used Barrett's (2003) understanding of connotations and denotations and their relationship to the arts. Barrett (2003) describes connotations and denotations as more serious than the intention of designers. The members had the opportunity to talk about what they saw and what it meant when I presented them with two different videos to discuss among themselves. My goal was to involve myself as little as possible throughout the process. Visual culture art education theory is formatted to present students with freedom through knowledge gain and experience. Their personal findings are important to the study without teacher influence.

Connotations and Denotations

After I chose the videos to present, I gave a reminder of what the project was about and why we were doing it. The members were to collect videos of trends they were interested in and bring them to the classroom to discuss. The goal was to use a popular visual culture outlet to interpret connotations and denotations of the trending videos to better understand what is happening. I wanted to use Barrett's (2003) method of interpretation to understand visual culture but push it farther by allowing students to take their interpretations and create art with it and see what happened when they are given freedom. They were excited to be creating something with a platform they were interested in. First part of the project we discussed what denotations and connotations were. Barrett (2003) broke down the denotations and connotations of different elements of visual culture with groups ranging from art educators to preschool age. None of the members were familiar with the two words. I described them as denotations being what you see in the art compared to connotations being what is implied/mean.

I began the process with an example, and I chose a simple meme that I found through a quick internet search. I had it up on the board and began with describing what the denotations were, or specifically what I saw. Once I broke down the denotations, I began discussing the connotations or analyzing what I

saw regarding what it means. I even allowed them to discuss it with me and amongst themselves to really get them started and thinking about what denotations and connotations means to TikTok videos. After using the meme example, I introduced them to one of Savannah Moss's videos. I wanted them to see her video because she has an interesting approach that I thought would help the members think of TikTok as of an art form rather than just a social media platform. Moss's comedic videos became very popular due to the randomness. Her videos have quick transitions that lead into random backgrounds and bizarre scenes that have dreamlike qualities that could potentially be described as surrealism. As shown in Figure 1, a lot of Moss's videos she is dressed as a Starbucks employee and would ask the viewer "how may I help you?". There were instances of her poorly pouring milk into a cup which is a concept that presented itself in a lot of her comedy videos.

Figure 1

Exceptional customer service Pt. 9



Note. This TikTok video was created January 2022 by Savannah Moss. The figure shows Moss greeting the viewer in a Starbucks employee uniform and badly pouring milk in a Starbucks cup.

The members did not have much of a discussion about this video and mainly commented on the randomness and the oddness of it. They were also very interested in her transitions and her editing of videos which is something big in the TikTok community. The little discussion that we did have on Moss's video centered around the customer service industry. A few of the Boys and Girls Club members voiced their opinions about how these representatives are treated and how her video really showed the things that customer service representatives deal within the industry. Due to privacy matters each child is under a pseudo name. Ana Smith said, "my mom works at one of the restaurants in town and there are times when she comes home sad because customers called her stupid, dumb, idiot,

and even [racial slurs] because of things that she had no control over” (A. Smith, personal communication, February 25, 2022). She continues to say that “anytime I’m out in those places I am extra nice to the workers because I always think of my mom” (A. Smith, personal communication, February 25, 2022). Although Savannah Moss is videos are tended to be more lighthearted there are some underlining themes of the things that customer service workers must deal with in their jobs.

After breaking down Savannah mosses video using the connotations and denotations method, I introduced Jamie Big Sorrel Horse’s trending video. This video brought on a lot of discussion amongst the group. They had a lot to say about the things they could see and what it applied to the meaning. In the case of Horse’s dance trend this video was stitched to another TikTok user’s video (see **Figure 2**). It started with a man recording himself dancing in his bathroom mirror to “Say It Right” by Nelly Furtado then stitched to the end of the video is Horse dancing the same way.

Figure 2

Untitled



Note. This TikTok video was created January 2022 by Jamie Big Sorrel Horse. The figure shows Horse in his bathroom mid dance and lip syncing to “Say It Right” by Nelly Furtado.

Some of the words that were mentioned when asked about the denotations of the video were “bathroom, sink, mirror, blue water, white guy, brown guy, bullying, cyber bullying, making fun of, different, iPhone, Android, dancing, ...” The thing that the group was most interested in is that they felt this video was a form of bullying. Jamie is obviously different in the way he looks and the way he dances.

The children felt that user who stitches Horse's video to the end of his own was making fun of the way he dances.

After the video ended Megan yelled out "That was mean! Why did they have to make fun of that boy? It doesn't matter that he looks different!" (M. Williams, personal communication, February 25, 2022). The group had a long discussion about how they felt bullying on the internet is a huge problem today and even in school. Although being in school is in person, bullying on the internet can be worse because there's no accountability since no one knows if you're who you say you are. I asked each of the members if their parents had internet safety discussions with them. I also asked if their internet access is limited in what they can and cannot do. Many in the group had parents that talked to them about internet safety, and they were limited in some of the things they could do. One participant said, "my mom has a lock on my tablet to keep me from going to certain places on the internet." (L. Doe, personal communications, May 3, 2022).

One girl's mother didn't really like TikTok but signed the permission slip because it was in a controlled setting. The parent was ok with her daughter participating because we were using TikTok for younger users. I had the chance to talk to the mother and she asked about TikTok for younger users. I explained the restrictions that it has and that we would not be participating in anything that was unsafe or inappropriate. TikTok for younger users is very limited in what children under the age of 13 can do. They are not allowed to post, interact with

other users this includes commenting on videos, they cannot search for users, they are not allowed to sign up for an account, and their access to certain sounds and music is limited. They can watch videos that are heavily filtered for a younger audience. A few of the members who wanted to participate in the research project did not because their parents did not want them to. These parents were particularly worried about TikTok because of the recent trend where students were destroying school bathrooms.

When talking about Jamie Big Sorrel Horse's video it brought up a lot of concern with the animosity that comes with the internet and how a lot of the girls, more than the boys, are warned about predators on the internet. Once we were done discussing the Horse's video, I opened the comment section and read some of the comments to them. The group thought it looked like a form of bullying, but from the comments a lot of them were being supportive of this person and really boosting him up for such a popular trend. After the discussion about problems that they saw they discussed things that were good that came out of TikTok. How TikTok has many videos on social justice and that they have seen videos where someone or another user defends others against bullies.

The members took an interest in discussing the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that took root during the summer 2020. They felt that TikTok was a good place to really see and interact with people like them and they felt they had that supportive community of African Americans the social media platform.

Visual culture can be platforms for diversity, the members found that through the BLM movements and other African American users on TikTok.

Video Production

After the discussion about Horse's video, I introduced the artmaking aspect of the project. At first, I was wanting each participant to bring in a video that they were interested in. Then as a group they were going to choose a video to focus their project on and respond by making their own videos. Because an aspect of TikTok culture is that there's a lot of creating and responding to different TikTok trends. I found this aspect of TikTok to be important and that the members should participate in a particular trend that they were interested in. Throughout the time they were making videos my idea changed, rather than everyone bringing in different videos and then choosing one together each member got to choose their own video. Allowing each member to create an individual video of their choice was the best method because it allowed them to choose what they were personally interested in. Each of the members were interested in different subjects such as dance videos, cooking videos, slime making videos, and even the art making challenges. This grew as an idea because it really showed the versatility and the layers within the TikTok platform.

Throughout the process of this project the numbers of members in the club went down because of a change in management. There were also many behavioral problems with the students due to the fighting and disrespect to staff members.

The new unit director came in and wanted to reduce behavioral problems to really bring up the Boys and Girls Club to a better situation. During this time, I lost four of my members who were involved in the project due to being kicked out of the program because of behavioral problems. While this was happening there were some members who didn't want to create the videos and were more interested in editing the videos.

In the TikTok community there is an appreciation for well-made and edited videos. A top contender in well-made videos is how well the user can use different and unique transitions. Some of the members who wanted to create videos explored TikTok to find trends they were interested in. While those who did not, assisted the creators in editing the videos and even holding their phones to take shots. There are forms of editing in the TikTok app, but a lot of the members used outside sources to cut videos, edit videos, add filters, and even add music to their videos.

Data Collection

The participants had the opportunity to make videos using their personal devices, but there was a large portion who did not have access to a personal device. If they did not, I would allow them to use my phone and they would save their videos to the drafts. Once I collected the videos, I began collecting data through interviews both individual and group discussions that I recorded and reviewed when I began writing.

During the data collection, I focused on asking questions such as, why they chose the video and their understanding of how TikTok worked. If they could see TikTok as an art? What made a TikTok video viral? Connotation and denotation questions related to the video they chose.

The whole process led to discussions of racial discrimination, the customer service industry, and internet safety. Visual culture art education is important for providing skill-building in the analysis and interpretation of contemporary visual culture. Providing skills to the underserved population who spend time in schools with limited resources allows them to keep in terms of contemporary culture and issues. These are skills they can build to be present in their adult lives.

Something else I discovered is that the terms and conditions are there to help you. During this research I went through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application process. This is a committee that reviews research to make sure that it is being completed ethically. During the process I was sent back some concerns and there were a few that were easy adjustments, but the main worry was the age limit for TikTok. The IRB brought up the concern that TikTok's age limit for creating an account was thirteen years old. The group I was working with were ages nine to thirteen and most of the group were ten through eleven. They were not allowed to have an account or post anything on the platform due to the terms and conditions stated in the TikTok app. When I initially found this out

there was a panic because I was too far involved in the research of the topic. There was time and effort in the process that with this set back I believed that I was going to have to start over and continue in a different direction. Then with some research and help we discovered a section called TikTok for Younger Users. This section was created in 2019 with anticipated hope to better protect younger users. TikTok wanted to protect children's privacy and filter the mature content from reaching the younger users (TikTok, 2020). This term update is for users who are under the age of thirteen and are in the United States. They can engage in videos filtered for their age, but with little data collected by TikTok. They can create videos using filters and music, but the younger users are limited to only downloading the videos to their personal devices rather than posting them for other users to see (TikTok, 2020). TikTok for younger users limits access to other users and even certain sounds/music found on the app.

TikTok for Younger Users was problematic at times, it was limited in ways such as preventing younger users from searching other operators on the app. A huge problem I ran into was, research participants were prevented from posting videos to the app because they were under the age of thirteen. The goal of TikTok is creating a video and then eventually posting it publicly on the app. I struggled with the idea of the videos not being posted on the app because it is a major part of TikTok. In the end, posting the videos was not as important as creating the videos and even discussing the underlying themes of certain TikTok trends and

videos. The importance of internet safety being a part of art projects and projects in general in the classroom. As persons who work directly with the next generation it is vital to educate them on the dangers that exist on the internet. There is also the importance of validated sources. Misinformation floods social media platforms and the web that it is important to show students where to find original sources or even credited sources. In this project we have a chance to do it and that is in the research of finding the original creators of these videos to validate credit where it is due. This also supplies the original information that can become changed over time. The group had to find a trend they were interested in and locate the original video they were successful for all of them except one. It was not clear where it began, and I helped them during their research to find the original creator and still came up short.

Research and accurate sourcing are important in the visual culture art education community especially for the members that were part of minority groups. They felt they needed to be extra considerate when using other creator's content, so they got the credit they deserved for coming up with an original concept. Cynthia Cruz, an eleven-year-old research participant, mentioned to the group "I think we should pay attention to things we see and what it says because I know my mom always told me not to believe everything I heard or saw on the internet (C. Cruz, personal communication, May 3, 2022)."

Their personal findings are important to the study without teacher influence, but also their safety is and to reach both goal I had certain guidelines that they had to follow for safety:

1. *They had to show me the original source.* This idea is discussed later in the paper but is important to this generation to credit those who create content. There are minority communities who are not getting the credit or the representation that they deserve.
2. *They were not allowed to post the video.* Per TikTok guidelines users under the age of thirteen could not have an account through the app. Through the same terms younger users under thirteen were not allowed to post videos.
3. *No inappropriate content.* This was very important. When using TikTok for younger users this is prevented, but some children who were over thirteen had access to adult content. They were limited to appropriate sounds, trends, and videos.

These guidelines were put into place as protection. This was an important part of the project because the children had access to internet therefore it was vital that we discussed internet safety. This discussion may not be happening in their homes, and I wanted them to be precaution not only with this research project, but in their personal time.

The Research Project

Trust is an important concept with children in underserved communities. They have a hard time trusting those in power such as teachers, government officials, and officers (Payne, 2006). They are limited in materials and things, but relationships are very important in their day to day lives but can be difficult to start when outside the family (Payne, 2006). I spent more than six months with the BGC and through this time I built meaningful relationships with members, and they would in return spend time listening and creating with me. This made it easier for me to introduce projects and partaking in the privilege of them being open minded.

The research project began with me bringing in two videos from TikTok that were trending at the time of the presentation. With social media platforms such as this, trends are fleeting and quick. There is always something else to take its place. The videos were from creators @savannahmosss and simple dance video by @jamie32bsh. Something to note is that a lot of the time the algorithm, which is data collected through the app to provide videos like those you interact with, is different for each person's app and some trends I may not see and same with the BGC members. It all depends on what users interact with and are interested in. @savannahmosss is someone that not many of the members were aware of, but a few seen her on them for you pages (FYP). The

FYP is the algorithm bringing you videos that you are interested in and interact with. The two videos of my choice were unrelated in all sense, and I kept in mind the interest of the BGC members and that was the dance trends plus I wanted to focus on the comedic side of TikTok which is what @savannahmoss's videos really focused on.

@jamie32bsh or Jamie Big Sorrel Horse is a Native American with roughly 7.8 million followers. His most influential video is a dance he created in his bathroom to the song "Say It Right" by Nelly Furtado. After the video went viral it became a new trend that many took part in by stitching Horse's video to the end of their video of them performing the same dance in the bathroom. It was important that I chose a video that the members were familiar with especially one that is in the dance category. @savannahmosss or Savannah Moss is mainly known for her dance videos, lifestyle videos, and comedy skit videos, Moss has roughly 9.9 million followers. Moss's comedy videos are the ones I presented to the children. These videos are dream like in the sense of the content. There is a random quality to what is happening in the videos, and I thought it would be interesting in relation to looking at TikToks as a form of art.

Video Analysis

Once there was time to meet with the group the time went by quickly. I met with each of the members we watched the original video and then the video they made in response. We talked about their videos why they chose it and what

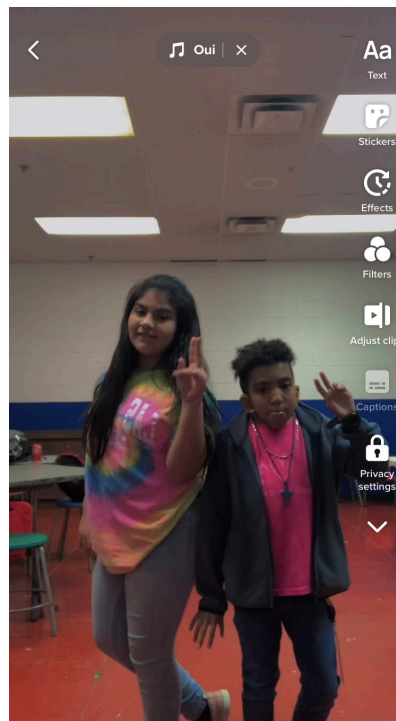
were their thoughts on learning about visual culture. One member stated, “I never thought about the meanings behind some of the pictures and videos I saw on the internet, and I would ignore the ones I did not understand and cared about” (L. Doe, personal communication, April 1, 2022). A collective answer from the students was that they enjoyed the project and felt that it was exciting doing art with something they were interested in because it was an app they interacted with every day. “I like TikTok, and I am on it every day. It is nice doing something with TikTok because I like it so much” (A. Smith, personal communication, May 3, 2022). Another thought that was brought up by the members was they would have never thought of TikTok being a way to make art. They are usually used to art “being about paper and pencils because that is usually all they had in the classroom” (C. Cruz, personal communication, May 3, 2022).

After the individual interviews we all met as a group and watched the original videos and their responses to the original videos. It was like individual interviews on how it went, but this time I had members choose one video out of all the members due to a limited time and we would discuss the connotations and denotations. The participants chose a pair of the members who decided to do a TikTok dance (see **Figure 3**). One of the participants in this video I was not able to get an interview with him because he did not come back to the Boys and Girls Club. The song that was used for this trend is called Oui. They chose this video because the dance was simple. She “liked to dance, but some of the dances could

be hard” (A. Smith, personal communication, May 3, 2022). I showed the original video, not by the original creator because we were not able to locate the original video.

Figure 3

Untitled



Note. This TikTok video was created two members of the Boys and Girls Club for this research project. The figure shows the two members participating in the trend to the sound called Oui.

Then we took time to discuss what the group saw in the original video and what information they knew about the trend. “I only see white people do this trend” (A.

Smith, personal communication, May 3, 2020). And usually, the ones who did this video dance were girls. I asked if they knew who the creator of the dance was, but they did not know either. A prior discussion led me to know the importance of giving credit to who originally created the trend because there's big problems in the TikTok community with African American creators not getting credit for dances that they created. And at least one instance of a Native American creator not getting credit for a particular sound he created that became popular.

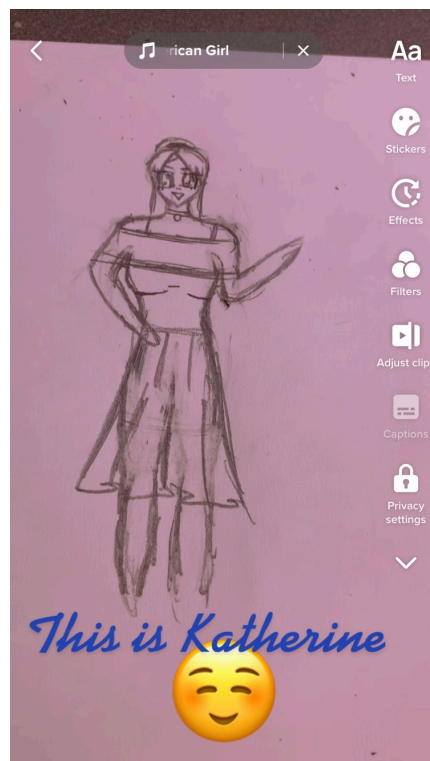
Accreditation became an outlet for discussion about the lack of representation that African Americans have and the unfair treatment they receive. Megan stated that “she liked TikTok because [she] saw a lot of girls on there who were black and had a lot of followers” (M. Williams, personal communication, May 3, 2022). She continued to talk about how “a lot of the girls were pretty and when she read the comments people were saying nice things” (M. Williams personal communication, May 3, 2022).

TikTok had moments when all the good was erased by the worse of videos such as the trend where there were students destroying bathrooms at their schools and filming the process. Recently there was a male creator who would drink from cans and then film himself throwing these cans into the ocean afterwards. Social media can be an outlet for support and change, but also a quick outlet for destruction and prejudices. The members agreed that there needs to be discussion on how to safely use the internet. Lena mentioned “I think everyone should be

warned about how the internet can be bad” (L. Michaels, personal communication, May 3, 2022).

Figure 4

This is Katherine



Note. This TikTok video was created by a member of the Boys and Girls Club for this research project. The figure shows L. Michaels participating in a TikTok art trend.

Findings

TikTok was very difficult to use because of the complexity and the layers of the app. A couple of the members had a hard time finding a video they wanted

to use because of there being so many choices. This led to time being wasted because members scrolling through the mass amounts of videos. Another problem was having enough time to work on the research project. The environment of after school programs are very active and there is a lot of coming and going.

There were also struggles with behavioral problems in the program which is normal considering after school programs are usually targeted at lower income areas. Although my group did well in the behavioral category, there were instances of other children acting out. Thus, lead to my superiors pulling me out of my group sessions sooner than planned to help reduce group sizes and hopefully the misbehaving. Due to this issue and being understaffed the research project took longer than I anticipated. In the afterschool setting time with the children is fast paced, time is narrowed to give time for the children to participate in all the rotations. The children that come to the BGC spend all day in school and their attention span was short when I met with them. When I met with my research participants it was hard to get them to concentrate some days and get through discussions. I spent a large portion of my time trying to bring the conversation back to the prior conversations.

The research project determined denotation and connotations a simple way to analyze visual culture in the art classroom. The concepts were easy for the participants to grasp. This method provided the key points of visual culture, analysis, and interpretation, in the afterschool art program. The participates were

able to follow along in discussions and even knew more about how TikTok works than I did in some cases. Critics worry about the lack of art making in VCAE and I had the same worries. Visual culture art education has strong ideas in dissecting contemporary visual imagery, but little art making. And the art making that was talked about often fell short because of teacher interference. VCAE is about knowledge through experience and how are students supposed to experience anything when educators tell them what to experience. This research project led to discussion and understanding of visual imagery. I used a contemporary social media app TikTok to understand visual culture that is popular to the youth of the Boys and Girls Club of Nacogdoches, TX. This led to them understanding the concepts that plague culture such as minority representation and internet safety. Through research experience and discussion, the members have basic skills they can use to understand imagery they see on social media and other sources of visual culture.

Conclusion

The BGC members gain knowledge of interpreting and dissecting visual culture that they interact with every day. They developed skills in research and understanding the importance of correct sources. Discussions about TikTok lead to the importance of education of the troubles that the internet can cause especially for younger users. The members explained that they had the chance to discuss the pros and cons that the platform provided. The students explained the importance of social media and how it opened the world to the large communities of support especially in minorities. They felt having access to social media provided the community and the feeling of better representation of African Americans that is not so readily available. They understood how it cannot be appropriate for younger users, but also a place of self-confidence. Visual culture art education is not about the final art product, but the understanding that takes place to creating and dissecting the visual world that is taking place around our students and providing them the skills to understand what they see. Then allowing them to create in response to what they grabbed through discussion and dissection. “Being heard is important to me because I have something to say like other people do” (L. Michaels, personal communication, May 3, 2022).

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VITA

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