

Muted Group Theory Amongst Mediums

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Muted group theory is shown across all platforms. Platforms engage those who are in the majority and tend to overshadow those in the minority. Minorities have a hard time finding a platform to express themselves due to shadow banning and other strategies incorporated into the media. Instagram, TikTok, and twitter are a few examples of platforms that happen to shadowban minority groups. As time goes on, more and more groups fall under the muted group theory due to the politicized climate of today. Society is becoming more polar and creating unsafe mediums for communication. Muted group theory is becoming more and more relevant.

For informational purposes, muted group theory is the theory that certain groups of people are hushed from stating and posting their opinions or art due to their sexuality, race, status, or gender. Muted group theory requires certain aspects to be present. The dominance shown between groups is a highly important part of muted group theory. Dominance and sub-dominance explain the disparity between marginalized groups. “MGT can help those who have become aware of dynamics between the powerful and the marginalized but do not have a clear framework for articulating this awareness” (Barkman), meaning that muted group theory explains disparities and can help people work through them. According to Barkman, there are three tenets to the muted group theory: “dominance, acceptability, and subordination” (Barkman). Dominance creates privilege and can skew how one views the world. The more dominant group sees the world through a privileged lens. Acceptability explains that the minority group’s actions and opinions are less respected and accepted. Muted group theory helps to disrupt the discrimination. Subordination explains that the sub-dominant groups have to reach and change in order to meet the needs of the majority. Muted group theory recognizes these tenets and instills change. Barkman uses various examples to show the disparity between men

and women, women being the subordinate group and men being the dominant group. Women tend to have to succumb to men and change their ways to meet the expectations of the men. But, I believe this theory can be used in other ways, especially through mediums.

### **TikTok**

TikTok is a new platform medium where artists and influencers can create their own video content and post it online for likes and comments. TikTok began as an application known as Musically and then they changed the name and re-marketed and re-branded to become the well known application TikTok. Here they changed they way the application works and added new features to encourage creation. Followers and users can use the application to post their own videos using various sounds and hashtags that can be seen by people all over the world. They share to both their followers and a common area known as the for you page. The for you page is an area of the application where people can view posts from around the world without having to follow accounts. One can view videos from any account on the for you page. But, there is an algorithm to see which videos get displayed on the for you page. This is where muted group theory comes into play.

One example of muted group theory goes back to the Black Lives Matter movement. TikTok claimed that they had a glitch that took down videos referring to the Black Lives Matter Movement. Activists were suppressed through this glitch and the trending hashtags were being taken down. Around the world people were rising up and protesting against the so-called TikTok shadowban: ““With that being the direct next event after my Black Lives Matter posts, it was kind of hard to see it as anything but shadow banning”” (Mccluskey). This user describes his views as going significantly down after posting a black lives matter related video. The Black Lives Matter movement trended over the application for a period of time. Eventually, users who

participated in the trend saw their video view count go down due to shadowbanning. This applies to muted group theory because TikTok was decreasing views for those in the black community. They were muting black creators due to the polarized community of politics. Many took the shadowbanning as racism. It was and continues to be a major controversy within the community. Muted group theory is applicable due to TikTok choosing a certain community to shadowban.

Another way TikTok has applied muted group theory is through the LGBTQ plus community. Many countries have created restrictions on the LGBTQ plus community because of their views according to their country's laws. There are shadowbans in place to restrict certain groups and hashtags from reaching a greater audience. "While TikTok may believe in "accountability and transparency", its algorithm keeps getting caught out for discrimination" (Hunte), meaning that TikTok is aware of what they are doing. Because this lifestyle is considered abnormal to those who run the application, they do not allow certain posts to be made due to the opinions. The community has come forward and stood against this poor way of thinking and has been trying to create change. For example, many individuals in the community have figured out how to get around the shadowban. They use different hashtags and try to shape their content into regulation standards. They are a muted group and are working towards creating a better platform that embraces diversity and inclusion in order to post freely and positively. Transgender people have been submitting complaints towards the application stating, "in February, transgender users complained of censorship on TikTok after many had posts removed from the video-sharing platform" (Hunte). Censorship is another issue. It is a way for the application of TikTok to limit the amount of content being posted about the LGBTQ plus community. TikTok uses muted group theory to control the media and posts being shared on the application. They tend to hit on minority groups and limit what information they share.

Sex workers are also a minority on the application TikTok. There has been reports of sex workers' accounts being banned and cut off: "All of them said they had not violated TikTok's policy, but had linked to either their OnlyFans or their websites linking to their OnlyFans in their bios, which they believe led to them getting removed from the platform" (Dickson). TikTok is discriminating against sex workers by not allowing them to post, even when they are not breaking violations. They are deleting accounts with no warning. Sex workers are widely discriminated against and it shows through the platform medium. In November of 2020, there was a movement known as the "TikTok purge" (Dickson). TikTok went through various accounts and accused them of violating terms and agreements. With this so called violation they deleted many sex workers' accounts. But, they did not delete everyone's account. Many famous actors who have turned to Only Fans, a platform where one can show nudity for payment, were allowed to keep their accounts. For example, while various others got their accounts deleted due to linking their Only Fans account, star Bella Thorne was allowed to keep her link on her account. This caused major uproar. Many complained to the application. TikTok used muted group theory to falsify sex workers and create an unsafe platform for them to create content.

### **Instagram**

Another application that has used muted group theory is Instagram. Instagram is a medium platform that allows users to share pictures, stories, and videos. It started back in 2010 and has been a major source of social media ever since. Posting any type of content can be reached by people all over the world by a simple search. Hashtags are a powerful tool to search for posts relating to what someone is looking for. It uses an algorithm to display certain posts on both one's feed and the explore page. The explore page is much like TikTok's for you page. It chooses certain posts for one to see. Many reports suggest that Generation Z uses Instagram as a

main source of news outlets and information. The algorithm includes muted group theory because Instagram controls what posts are available and what hashtags on posts are appropriate.

One example is that the platform banned those who promote conversion therapy. Now this is not necessarily a minority group being suppressed but it still relates to muted group theory. Instagram set up guidelines for banning those who promote conversion therapy due to its bad implications. Conversion therapy is proven to not work and puts survivors at a higher risk of depression and suicide. In fact, this example of muted group theory has had positive impacts: " 'We don't allow attacks against people based on sexual orientation or gender identity and are updating our policies to ban the promotion of conversion therapy services,' Tara Hopkins, Instagram's public policy director for Europe, the Middle East and Africa, said in a statement" (Picheta). Muted group theory in this case has kept the platform safe for people of the LGBTQ plus community. It started because activists on the application called for a rescind of all conversion therapy advertisements because it enhances triggers. Muted group theory in this case was a positive aspect of the application of Instagram.

Instagram has also recently set a ban on Russia due to the ongoing war with Ukraine. They have banned Russian language and hashtags as well as banning accounts as a whole. The day the war started, Russian posts decreased a significant amount. Many Russians depend on the application for sales and livelihood: "Many Russian entrepreneurs -- including photographers, artists, shop owners, content marketers, and influencers to name a few -- heavily depend on Instagram to generate income and the ban has been a blow to their livelihood" (RFE/RL). Instagram has used muted group theory in order to decrease Russia's access to social media. Muted group theory involves Instagram in this way. But, Instagram is not the only thing to blame. The government of Russia has also taken a part in shadowbanning certain posts and

accounts from its citizens. The government uses suppression to make sure its citizens cannot access certain media in order to gain more control of the population. So, not only is Instagram using muted group theory, but so is the Russian government.

Similar to TikTok, Instagram has recently changed its terms of service to ban sex workers from selling and promoting their OnlyFans: “Sex workers — and specifically OnlyFans adult content creators — are not allowed to market themselves on Instagram” (Rimm). This creates a disparity between sex workers and other businesses who use Instagram as a way to sell and advertise their businesses. Instagram no longer allows sex workers to tag or post their links to their sexual online presences. Most sex workers who got most of their income through Instagram have had to change their status and use other social media for advertising purposes. Instagram has disallowed sex workers from creating revenue on the application. The new Instagram updates seem to disable sex workers and their livelihoods. Many times the application removes posts and accounts with no warning so many sex workers feel that they are walking on eggshells: “I posted a fully clothed photo mentioning my OnlyFans sale and it was taken down from my story twice. Every day I wake up thinking, *‘Is this the day they delete my account?’*” (Rimm). Instagram has used muted group theory to make the platform unsafe for sex workers.

## **Twitter**

Twitter is a medium platform that allows users to create accounts with their own profile picture and own banner. A person can post “tweets” with links and hashtags that contribute to the feed. Tweets are limited to a certain amount of characters and are usually short and sweet. Twitter has been around since 2006 and is still considered a major platform for communication.

Twitter tends to be one of the least regulated mediums in that it does not do much to discriminate against groups of people. But it does use muted group theory to hush certain groups.

A rather surprising finding from the NY Post is that up until recently major republicans had been shadowbanned. After Elon Musk bought twitter, republicans numbers went up drastically: “Prominent conservatives have seen their Twitter followers balloon since Elon Musk’s \$44 billion takeover was announced — prompting claims that the sudden surges proved the platform imposed secret bans on certain accounts” (Brown and Crane). Twitter has been known to ban and shadow certain republicans. This means their tweets do not show up on the search bar or on the feed. This is discriminatory against the republican party. Elon Musk took the algorithm public in order to help share what was really going on. Twitter was banning certain posts from being tweeted in order to sustain a non political platform. They thought they were promoting safety, but really they were discriminating against the republican party. Twitter claims the increase in followers is due to Elon Musk being more transparent on the twitter diagnostics and more people creating accounts now knowing that twitter is becoming more transparent. Muted group theory applies due to the increase in followers that were lost due to shadowbanning certain posts. The theory explains why they were not gaining followers at the normal amount.

Twitter has also started to ban accounts using the hashtag #IstandwithPutin. It creates an unsafe environment, so twitter took steps to create a better platform that did not push propaganda. Russian users have received less likes and views: ““Russia isn’t getting the same impact of its audiences as it historically has gotten,” Gonzalez said. “The audience is certainly believing more so the Western portrayal that it’s a tragedy for Ukraine and Russia is the aggressor. That narrative is quite firm right now” (Collins and Korecki). Twitter has taken steps to provide support and accurate information through tweets, likes, comments, and views. This



has been discriminatory towards the Russian citizens who use twitter. Muted group theory comes into play because of the hushed groups being perpetrated by their new terms and conditions.

Muted group theory explains why certain mediums of communication use terms and services to mute groups who create a negative impact on their multimedia environment.

Dominant groups tend to overshadow those in the minority and it shows throughout all forms of social media. Again, muted group theory is the idea that groups are discriminated against and cannot express themselves due to being muted. Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok are just a few examples of muted group theory in action.

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