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'Cringe' is defined as the involuntary physical and psychological experience of embarrassment, awkwardness, and discomfort felt by viewers (Pradhan and Drake, 2023). With the rise of short-form videos on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels, both the creation and consumption of visual and audiovisual content have surged. Users frequently experience vicarious cringe while engaging with this content. However, because these videos cover a wide range of genres, themes, and target audiences, the impact of vicarious cringe on user engagement is poorly understood. This brings us to our research question: How does vicarious cringe influence user engagement with visual content on social media platforms?

We plan to analyze data from the subreddit r/TikTokCringe, which curates popular cringe-worthy content from TikTok and other short-form video platforms. Each post includes visual content, genre classification, and user comments, offering a rich dataset for understanding user engagement with cringe-inducing material.

To assess the effect of vicarious embarrassment on content engagement, we will use a mixed-methods approach. First, we will collect quantitative engagement metrics such as the number of likes, upvotes, shares, and comments for each post. These metrics will provide a direct measure of how users interact with cringe-inducing content. Next, we will conduct a qualitative analysis by performing sentiment analysis on the user comments. This will help us gauge the emotional tone of the audience's reactions, ranging from positive (amusement or empathy) to negative (discomfort or rejection). By combining these metrics, we can draw insights into how vicarious embarrassment influences both the volume and nature of user engagement with this type of content.

This research aims to contribute to the literature on online user behavior. We anticipate that the findings will provide insights into how users interact with cringe-inducing content, engage with content creators, and connect with other users on social media. Additionally, the results are expected to help platform providers better understand user preferences and refine their content recommendation algorithms. The findings may also offer valuable guidance to content creators, enabling them to tailor their content more effectively to align with audience preferences.

References

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