TikTok: Platform Capitalism and Prosumer Culture

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Dancing through the apocalypse

TikTok is well-known in the world of social media as an app that uniquely allows users to make short clips with the aid of several audio-visual effects. While being criticised as a tool for creating increased procrastination, it was nonetheless seen by many as a welcome escape from the fear of COVID-19, providing an outlet to dance and express oneself. As people were forced to stay home, the use of social media applications rose with an associated increased reliance on technology. An ongoing process of digitisation has been experienced over the last decade, especially with the use of social media. However, TikTok as an app exponentially grew during the pandemic due to its unique features and characteristics that tied in with the general practices and norms of experiencing lockdowns. Moreover, TikTok has become the leading site and one of the major tools for communication, information sharing and creative engagement. This project endeavours to uncover the 'supply' and 'demand' aspects of TikTok within society through a Political Economy approach. This paper will also discuss TikTok's exponential growth through its unique business model and the changes it has had on social norms and activities – uncovering the everyday politics of TikTok.

The everyday business side of TikTok

TikTok generated USD $11 billion in 2022, mainly through advertisement revenue and in-app gift purchases. While this figure represents nothing new as a business model for social media, TikTok has intensified many of the regular practices that shape the rise of 'platform capitalism'. Platform capitalism refers to the rise of 'platform' firms that serve as an outlet for several businesses and individuals to trade commodities, mainly through the utilisation of user's data (Srcinek, 2017). As online platforms increasingly shape economic transactions, social media outlets' money primarily comes from ad revenue – unlike other platforms that tend to serve as more of an e-commerce market, such as eBay or Amazon. In this model, ad revenue specifically works through 'Open APIs', otherwise known as Application Programming Interface, where the data of user-behaviour and engagement is openly accessible for firms to deliberately target their ads to users (Langley and Leyshon, 2016). This is often visible through the use of short advertisement clips to featuring ads in sidebars.

More users means more money. Srcinek (2017) argues that platform firms veer towards greater monopolisation within the sector, with major social media firms such as Facebook acquiring smaller firms, making TikTok's spectacular rise unexpected. While TikTok's rise represents a drastic change in the norms surrounding the use of social media, it is also a result of the greater use in Artificial Intelligence (AI) in shaping ad targeting and personalising content. Unlike the conventional analysis of likes, comments and other interactions, TikTok's AI algorithm is known for extensively analysing the content of popular clips in users' feeds in order to decipher their preferences and identify popular trends (Ma and Hu, 2021). As such, the AI algorithm's analysis collection of information informs the businesses through its open API (Ma and Hu, 2021). Beyond just the analysis of users' hashtags and feedback data (i.e. likes, comments, shares), this is also coupled with extensive data on the users' demographics, ranging from gender, age and even devices (Ma

and Hu, 2021). This information ranges from popular dance moves, food trends or playful challenges that are all captured by the algorithm. Moreover, this collection of data amounts to a positive feedback loop whereby the app can identify common preferences, leading to a more personalised feed of posts and ads, in which the process then continues, encouraging more consumption and exposure to advertisements. This follows a long line of 'surveillance capitalism', where the app (more vigorously than others) reproduces the raw data of user's info and interactions (as behavioural data) into technologies that predict their actions and behaviour for firms to utilise (Zuboff, 2019). Thus, the ability to presume users' activity – such as likes, comments, buying in-app purchases – all wields a greater power for both the app and firms to exploit this for their targeted advertising and content. While exploitation in this case may not concern the use of physical or even mental labour of users being expropriated by the firm, it nonetheless represents the ability of the app to capitalise on users' info in the pursuit of accruing more profit.

The TikTok-ification of the everyday

While social media use in general had massively risen from the onset of the pandemic, the functions it performed for individuals, including connecting with friends and loved ones, seeking entertainment and information, were seen to be best provided by TikTok. Renowned for its fast videos and viral sounds, TikTok appealed to the increased demand for short-form content. The app saw 315 million downloads in the first quarter of 2020 alone, reaching 1.2 billion monthly active users by the end of 2021 (Sensor Tower, 2020; Wallaroo Media, 2023). Arguably seen as the 'people's app', TikTok's format of posting 15-second-long video clips directly appeals to the younger demographic for its emphasis on entertainment. Out of surveyed Gen Z individuals, 42 per cent saw entertainment as their main purpose for seeking social media content (Forbes, 2020).

TikTok's growth can also be attributed to its unique type of online celebrities and personalities, most notably in the US. TikTokers Addison Rae and Charli D'Amelio, became famous for their short clips dancing to viral sounds. Both individuals had a major impact on TikTok's industry and success, and created a key popular cultural movement around the world for young people (Lorenz, 2020). These videos, which were the most downloaded, ultimately created an escape from the reality of the pandemic, and a way for young people in particular to connect to their peers and the world (Li *et al.*, 2021). TikTok additionally facilitated comedians, such as Sara Cooper, to satirise political issues and key figures – such as Trump's presidential legitimacy during the pandemic. Moreover, TikTok's success as a platform is due to easy accessibility to the younger demographic and their ability to create content, no matter the subject.

Irrespective of its ability to connect people, the use of TikTok during the lockdowns was a dilemma in itself and presented a paradox. On one hand, lockdowns reduced life to a monotonous experience interspersed with statistics of death rates, COVID-19 infection rates, as well as the local and global number of cases. TikTok was used for access to current news surrounding the virus, government press conferences and health advice (Li *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, the explosion of TikTok seemed to suggest that people were having fun, dancing, creating and allowing people of society to have a positive outlet amid the uncertainty. It presented to the global public that, while we were socially distanced, we were technologically connected and alive.

However, as the pandemic persisted, TikTok was one of the largest outlets for the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding the pandemic (De Coninck, 2021). With its ease of use and editing features, the app became a key perpetrator of misinformation of political news stories (Hsu, 2022). These

types of manipulated political deceptions caused a series of public misinformation on key issues – including climate change, to which TikTok users used a fake screenshot stating that climate change is 'seasonal' (Hsu, 2022). Additionally, misinformation concerning COVID-19 has been made evident in various altered audios of Vice President Kamala-Harris, who appeared to have said that all people who were hospitalised from COVID-19 were 'vaccinated', when in fact the original audio proved to be the opposite (Hsu, 2022). Moreover, the fast and often overlooked TikTok speed-scroll highlights the dangerous nature of TikTok's role in facilitating the rise of conspiracy theories and mass misinformation. Politically, the implications of these fabricated conspiracy theories and manipulation of government content through TikTok's platform disempowers the role of government and their health policies. Ultimately, these actions continued to reduce and undermine their political influence on world governments and negatively impaired and disoriented the world's view in approaching official COVID-19 government health policies.

Conclusion

Despite its exceptional qualities, TikTok represents the common and growing epitome of prosumer culture – where the consumer of a product plays an active role in the growth and development of the product of itself. Not only does the app highlight the growing active participation from otherwise passive consumers, it also positions the consumers themselves being the product as a result of their attention and use being commodified. It also represents a dual process whereby the increased demand by users to have highly personalised and often overstimulating social media content has led to a greater encouragement by TikTok through their use of ad targeting from their algorithm. At a time where social media was highly monopolised, TikTok's spectacular rise stems from the social context of COVID-19 lockdowns, as well as its ability to intensify the common practices that shape platform and surveillance capitalism.

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