The India-China Tiktok Case: A Question On Youth's Freedom Of Expression And The Limits Of Cultural Tolerance

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Abstract	Article Info
The authors explore the intricacies of TikTok's restriction in India, emphasizing its connection with China and the resulting regulatory and policy implications. TikTok, a leading digital platform, has been utilized by Indian youth as a means of self-expression, mostly through short films. This inquiry explores the effects of TikTok on many sociocultural aspects by using a multicultural approach. It also looks into efforts to discover alternatives and promote collaboration between India and China. By examining reputable media sources and published works, the authors' research has uncovered intricate details about the reasons for the ban. These results have had an impact on how users behave and how Indian culture is shared worldwide.	

INTRODUCTION

TikTok, a well-known social media platform, especially by the younger generation, served as a channel for highlighting and flaunting their culture, skills, and interests through short video content, standing out for its remarkably high levels of user interaction. (D'Souza, 2023). In 2020, the platform, along with 58 other Chinese applications faced a major setback in India, leading to their suspension in the country. The primary cause for its ban stems from a border conflict between India and China, dating back to 1962. Furthermore, concerns about privacy and sovereignty have contributed to the tensions rising further (Song & Ray, 2023).

As of the first quarter of 2020, TikTok has accumulated a total of 611 million downloads (30.3%) from India alone, making India the biggest source of TikTok installs as of 2020, followed by China and the United States, which had 196.6 million (9.7%) and 165 million (8.2%) installs, respectively (Chapple, 2020). The application's suspension had a substantial effect on various aspects of Indian life, leaving millions of users without an alternative platform. TikTok has been utilized not only as a platform to express one's cultural identity but also mobilized education and cross-cultural engagement. The application also became a place of sanctuary that allowed its users to freely express themselves without being concerned about government interference and censorship, allowing a bypass to different societal divides. Furthermore, influencers and other users who relied on the application for income are forced to look for an alternative to recover (Pahwa, 2020).

Further, it is skeptical that India has restricted specific applications from China while maintaining relations with the country such as trade, despite what occurred within the border. While privacy and security concerns may be the issue, TikTok has adhered to the Indian government regulations to ensure data is localized and filtered correctly (Song & Ray, 2023).

An ethical theory known as "cultural relativism" claims that morality is a social construct rather than a universal concept, and that morality is determined by a society's moral standards (Quinn, 2020, p. 174-175). The primary aim of this paper is to elucidate the suspension of TikTok in India and how it affects youths using social media platforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discusses relevant literature related to the India-China TikTok ban. It focuses on pointing out primary aspects that form the foundation of this study.

The Possible Effects of Tiktok Ban to India's Youth Demographic

In a study by Roth et al. (2021), it is said that youths feel motivated to use technology to express themselves, create significant social identities, and interact with their peers. This makes an argument that the Tiktok ban in India might lessen the platforms that youths use to express themselves online. On another note, TikTok is built in a specific way that gives users more interactions with either a trending algorithm or content with their self-representations (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). This indicates that TikTok's ban in India makes it harder for young people to personalize their social media watching experiences since TikTok's affordances and design elements impact the user experience in a variety of ways. Lastly, it is also possible that some youth demographic in India have lost their community because of the ban. Garg (2023) asserts that TikTok, as a social media platform, is an app that separates various societal groups, giving people in remote communities a way to interact with well-known public personalities and become famous to an extent that was previously unreachable. This says that TikTok gave some demographics a platform where they can be known as a celebrity and belong to a community that they are comfortable with.

Cultural Tolerance, Cultural Expression, and Identity

Cultural tolerance is the practice of acknowledging, respecting, and appreciating the diversity of cultures, beliefs, traditions, and practices within a society. It involves recognizing and valuing the differences among individuals and communities, and fostering an environment where everyone is treated with dignity and fairness. This idea is widely accepted in situations covering distinctions, like race, ethnicity, religion and sexuality. It extends across political spectrums. However, the capacity to develop, evaluate and implement policies is often constrained by the interpretations of tolerance and intolerance. These interpretations can vary depending on the context and purpose. For example, the term 'tolerance' can sometimes imply endurance or bearing with things one dislikes or disapproves of. On occasions it can signify mindedness and a general willingness to embrace a broad range of differences or even celebrate the practices and behaviours of those,

with differing perspectives. (Galeotti, 2014). The idea of tolerance discussed in this context differs from relativism because individuals often use concepts, like harm, rights and the minimum standards of liberalism to determine whether certain actions or beliefs are acceptable (Verkuyten et al., 2020). The ban on TikTok, in India has greatly hindered users' ability to express their identity.

The democratic nature of TikTok, which is based on its user-friendly interface, played a crucial role in overcoming cultural and linguistic obstacles (Garg, 2023). The platform provided users with an exclusive venue to showcase their cultural uniqueness, offering content in 15 different regional languages. In addition, TikTok's ability to work well with inexpensive devices has fostered inclusion, allowing individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in the cultural exchange. The prohibition caused a disturbance to this platform that promotes democracy and inclusivity, resulting in the absence of a crucial tool for cultural expression, especially for users from underrepresented areas.

The absence of TikTok has not only limited the linguistic diversity of content but has also hindered the inclusive nature that allowed users to share and celebrate their cultural identities on a global stage. It is also mentioned that before the TikTok ban, different socioeconomic groups used the platform before TikTok was banned, and viewers' content was filtered by the algorithm based on their interests and preferences. Lower- class content creators cannot exist on Instagram by nature because their content restricts their audience.

Youth Freedom of Expression in India

The Indian Constitution ensures the protection of the freedom of expression for young individuals under Article 19(1)(a). The Article ensures that all people of India, particularly the youth, have the right to freedom of speech and expression. Various courts and legal scholars have provided interpretations and explanations of this right throughout history. A significant legal matter that emphasized the crucial role of freedom of speech for young individuals. Section 66A of the Information Technology Act is a legal provision that permits the apprehension and penalization of persons for sharing online content that is deemed "offensive" or "annoying"; nevertheless, the Supreme Court of India has ruled it to be unconstitutional. The court underscored the imperative of safeguarding the liberty of speech for young individuals in the era of digital technology. Acknowledged the influence of youth in molding public discourse. The verdict acknowledged the significance of the internet and social media platforms as crucial channels for the dissemination of opinions and ideas among the younger demographic. The Supreme Court's ruling to invalidate Section 66A underlined the significance of preserving freedom of speech and protecting it inside the realm of social media. The role of the youth in driving social change and taking part in democratic processes proved an important judgment precedent in protecting the rights of individuals, to freely express themselves in the digital Era without fear of arbitrary restrictions or censorship. Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015).

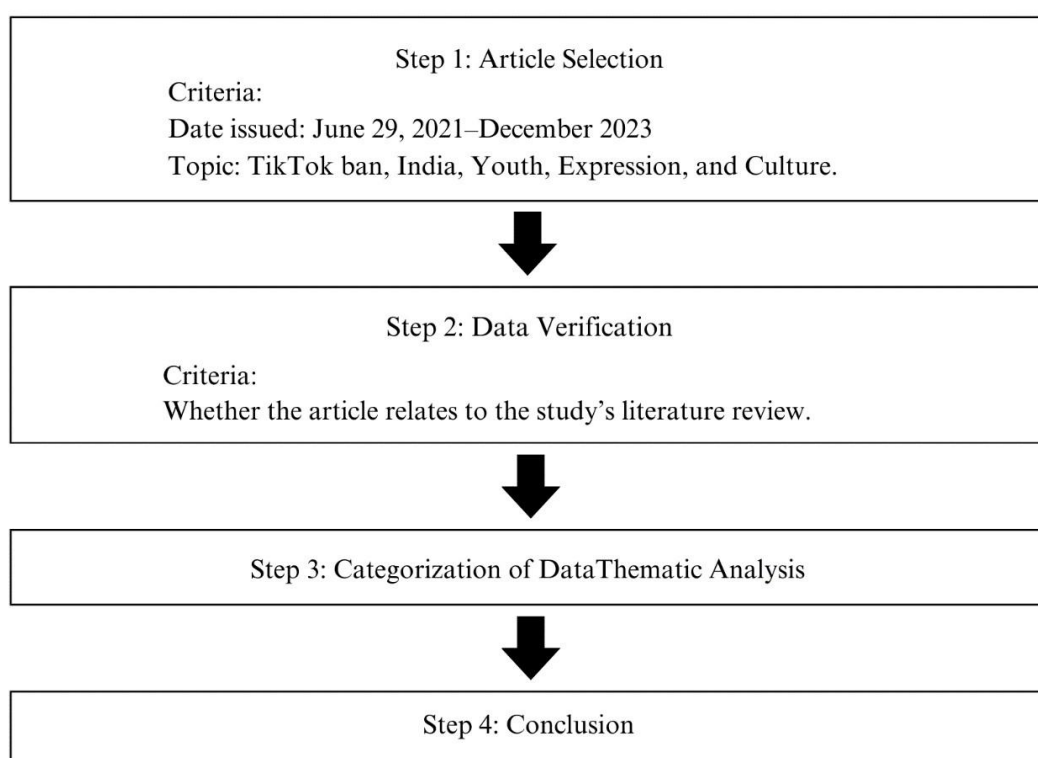## Geo-Politics Dynamics and Ethical Considerations

The India-China dispute originates from the 3,488km border along the Himalayan Region; this border runs along the northwest of the Karakoram Pass and ends in Arunachal Pradesh. The problem stems from not having an internationally accepted boundary and the lack of an agreement over the "Line of Actual Control" (LAC), turning it into a big land dispute between the two nations. While several rounds have been made for diplomatic negotiations and standoffs, the underlying tensions within the border occasionally erupt into confrontations. One instance of such escalation was the clash in the Galwan Valley on June 15, 2020. The class resulted in twenty (20) casualties on the Indian side, while the exact number of Chinese fatalities remains uncertain. (Jash, 2022). Following the military clash on the India-China border, the Indian government decided to ban TikTok, along with other Chinese applications dating back to June 2020. The ban was executed under S.69A of the Information Technology Act 2000, which allows the government to block public access to content in the interest of national security, among other reasons. The rationale for situating the ban is the combination of deteriorating Sino-Indian relations and the attempt of the government to assert digital sovereignty by protecting Indian citizens from foreign data governance (Kumar & Thussu, 2023). According to a study conducted by Madlani and Joshi (2022) the ban is perceived as a strategic step to promote the utilization of homegrown applications and create new prospects for the Indian technology sector. As a result, this can lead to economic effects such as more job opportunities and greater investments in local startup companies.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a qualitative research method because they wanted to find out why TikTok was banned in India and how it affected young people. Cultural and political factors were also a part of the study. A study by Bhandari and Bimo (2020) backs this up by saying that a qualitative approach works best for looking at non-numerical data and coming up with results that show why people act that way. A structured literature review method is used to collect and analyze data. This method includes a narrow searching strategy that uses pre-set criteria to find all available data that meets those criteria. This lowers the chance of bias and allows for a thorough analysis of the data (Technische Universitat Berlin, n.d.). Along with that, Turney (2023) says this method works great for finding specific answers in the area or checking how well a solution is working. This approach will allow the researchers to assess how the freedom of speech of the Indian youth has been affected by the ban and to explore political and cultural factors that influenced the government's decision.

Data used in the study are from various news articles and research articles spanning from June 29, 2020, to December 2022 (see Figure 1) two years after the ban. A two-year timeframe was chosen to capture the most relevant articles and recent developments in India after TikTok's ban to examine the impacts of the ban on Indian citizens, especially the youth, rather than assessing economic and political affairs between India and China. Other social media platforms that were banned except for TikTok are not covered by the study, this paper focuses on the impacts of the ban on the youth's engagement with social media platforms and the cultural tolerance between India and China.

Figure 1. Data Collection and Processing

Step 1: Article Selection
Criteria:
Date issued: June 29, 2021–December 2023
Topic: TikTok ban, India, Youth, Expression, and Culture.

⬇

Step 2: Data Verification
Criteria:
Whether the article relates to the study's literature review.

⬇

Step 3: Categorization of DataThematic Analysis

⬇

Step 4: Conclusion

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following is a compilation of various news articles and research publications gathered between June 29, 2021, and December 2023. The data are systematically categorized into three themes, showing the underlying reasons behind the ban and its effects on the youth population of India.

Theme 1: Rise of homegrown applications to fill the void left by the ban.
TikTok's ban in India in June 2020 opened an opportunity to fill the slot TikTok left in its market, within 48 hours of the ban, the number of installations and creation of alternative applications for TikTok in India has increased dramatically. India has many active social media users who view internet videos for up to 45 minutes

to hours almost every day. It indicates the growth in daily time spent on video content by Indian citizens over the past two years after the ban was announced. As a result, numerous alternative applications such as MX TakaTak, Moj, Roposo, and Josh gained popularity after the ban (Dieterich, 2022). The success of these programs served as a stimulus for the creation and development of these domestic alternatives demonstrating the resilience and creativity of India's software development community. MX TakaTak is one of the 4 major alternative hometown apps that were popular in India a few days before TikTok was banned, it resembled similar features with TikTok, both offering short video content creation that can be shared and viewed by other social media platforms (Khaleej, 2022). A similar app created by Moj, Sharechat. A video-sharing website that received 50,000 downloads in just two days in July has enabled its users to create fashion vlogs representing various cultures it also has similar features as TikTok where one can publish music videos and lip-sync clips (Majumed, 2020).Roposo, a video platform in India for sharing visual media, experienced a significant surge in its user base of 22 million within just two days after the ban on TikTok. According to Mayank Bhagadia, the co-founder and CEO of Roposo, there was an increase of over 600,000 installations per hour during the period. Roposo offers users the opportunity to both watch and create videos, while also providing them with a chance to earn money through the application. Like TikTok, it offers effects and filters such as lighting options, stickers, and time-lapse features. The app is available in 10 languages, including English and several local Indian languages, and offers users access to more than 25 channels for engagement (Javaid, 2020). Another notable domestic short video platform is an application by Dailyhunt called "Josh". It takes pride in its dedication to producing content specifically tailored for the audience of those residing in non-urban areas known as 'Bharat', which caters to 60% of the population segment that is more in tune with traditional Indian cultural practices. It is built on the concept of creator-first as it allows users to engage and contribute to the app's feature curation and has been effective since it gained traction with 50 million app downloads, 23 million daily active users, and 1 billion daily views (Bhutani, 2020).

Theme 2: Youths of india seeking alternatives for cultural expression and economic opportunities.
TikTok's popularity can be attributed to its diverse features, capable of tailoring content to each user. The application specializes in short video content creation and harbours a user-friendly interface that allows users to highlight their imagination publicly. The platform's focus on virality has allowed users to showcase their skills with the help of innovative editing features that highlight audio effects and music. This aspect of the application has made it addictive to every class and age but has deeply resonated with the younger demographic (Jain & Arakkal, 2022). According to an article by Iyengar (2020), the platform not only paved the way for individuals like Jaya Lall, who unexpectedly discovered her talents in creative expression but also has been used for various artistic expressions such as singing and dancing that represent the Indian culture and have even displayed Indian agricultural techniques/methods. Furthermore, 23-year-old Prem Vats, along with
1.2 million Indian creators has built a reputation on TikTok over the years to make a living out of content creation (Bansal, 2020).
However, it was not until its ban that millions of users and creators were without their favorite platform for entertainment, expression, education, and income. Along with this, many TikTok stars lost their fame and followers. Some users tried to migrate to other platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, or Indian alternatives but faced challenges in adapting to different formats, features, and audiences. In the same article mentioned previously by Iyengar (2020) despite the availability of several TikTok alternatives in India, such as Moj, Josh, Roposo, Chingari, and Mitron, none of them have been able to replicate the success and appeal of TikTok. TikTok's unique algorithm, user interface, content diversity, and community engagement made it stand out from its competitors. Additionally, popular TikTok users were interviewed about how they coped with the situation after losing their huge fan base and income due to the ban. Similarities in their response state that alternative apps like Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts cannot be compared to TikTok's success in India and that alternatives will take time to take off their popularity (Chakravarti, 2021).

Theme 3: Legal and regulatory implications of the TikTok ban in India
The TikTok ban in India has brought up important legal and regulatory issues, prompting debates about how to find a balance in the age of technology between freedom of speech and national security concerns. In line with Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, which permits blocking access to platforms

regarded to be a threat to public order or national security, the Indian government implemented the ban. The Indian government is authorized to issue content-blocking orders to online intermediaries, including search engines, online marketplaces, Internet Service Providers (ISPs), and telecom service providers, under Section 69(A) of the Information Technology (IT) Act. These orders can be issued if the restricted information or content poses a threat to India's national security, sovereignty, or public order. Section 69(A) empowers the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) to ban access to websites or apps deemed to contain content harmful to India's sovereignty and integrity. The decision to prohibit these platforms is frequently based on recommendations from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and information from central intelligence agencies. (Nextias, 2023)

The process of restricting internet websites or apps entails the government demanding that any agency or intermediary restrict public access to information generated, sent, received, or stored on any computer resource. The request to block access must be accompanied by written reasons. Failure to comply with blocking orders may result in monetary penalties and imprisonment for social media intermediaries. However, it is vital to remember that blocking can only be used when the Central Government determines that it is required, and the reasons for blocking must be documented in writing. In the case of "Shreya Singhal vs Union of India" in 2015, the Supreme Court of India overturned Section 66A of the IT Act, which penalized transmitting abusive comments via communication services. However, the court determined that Section 69(A) of the Information Technology Rules 2009 is constitutionally lawful. The court acknowledged that Section 69(A) is a carefully drafted provision with various safeguards, including the necessity that reasons be documented in writing and the possibility of contesting the blocking order through a written petition under Article 226 of the Constitution. Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015). It is also worth noting that TikTok has been accused of misusing users' data, despite claims that it does not operate in China and complies with data privacy laws which TikTok quickly denies and states it complies with Indian data privacy laws. This ultimately led to the Indian Government banning TikTok in India and it signifies that the Indian government to give priority to asserting control over the digital sphere and protect its citizens' data privacy. BBC Newsround (2020)

CONCLUSION

The decision of the Indian Government to ban TikTok, in India became a matter influenced by factors such as geopolitical tensions, considerations for national security and debates surrounding privacy and security concerns. The Indian government pointed out concerns related to security and data privacy as the reasons behind the ban on TikTok. These concerns arose due to allegations of data theft and unauthorized transmission. There were worries about TikTok practices of collecting information and behavioural data which raised speculations about cybersecurity and user privacy. However, TikTok has expressed its commitment to abide by the regulations, in India. Reassured that it has not shared user information outside of India. However, no pieces of evidence exist about data privacy concerns on TikTok. The Indian Government banning TikTok in India signifies that the Indian government wants to give priority to assert control over the digital sphere and protect its citizens' data privacy.

TikTok has left a great legacy in India through its advanced features which not only enabled the Indian population, particularly the youth, to express their imagination through an array of creative methods, but also played a crucial role in showcasing Indian culture to a global audience. In addition, some users even generated economic value through the application by investing time to build a reputation for financial gain. This implies that these users can become influential figures to foster an environment where cultural expression and Indian culture are promoted. Unfortunately, the platform's ban left a significant mark in India in both economic and sociocultural aspects. The consequences were especially evident, given that India is TikTok's largest foreign market, thus affecting millions of Indian users. On a positive note, the ban favored the rise of local TikTok alternatives to fill the void left by the sudden ban for its users. However, despite the availability of many alternatives, most of the users expressed their dissatisfaction with these alternatives, pointing out their features lacking compared to TikTok, and their global presence limited. Therefore, most Indian content creators shifted their content and reputation to other globally recognized platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. This indicates that the emergence of homegrown applications was ineffective.

Researchers seeking to explore similar discourses are recommended to incorporate statistical analysis into their data to provide much accurate information. The timeframe for data collection in this research was established

to assess the origins of the issue and its developments. Adjusting the data collection timeframe is advised for those researchers who seek data that is compatible across various fields and disciplines.

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