Original Article

Loving the enemy app: Resistance versus professionalism in 'post-TikTok' India

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Abstract

This article addresses how the Chinese short video-sharing platform TikTok, a key actor of global platform economy and its disconnect or subsequent ban influenced and changed ideas of creativity in India. Through qualitative interviews and content analysis of TikTok videos (available on YouTube), YouTube interviews of content creators and newspaper articles of the app ban, this paper suggests that TikTok, as a 'memetic text' and a site of 'vernacular creativity', encourages both 'everyday acts of resistance' and professionalism/entrepreneurial citizenship. While the app ban signposts digital 'imitation' publics' transition from 'low' to 'high' technology environments, the values of professionalism and entrepreneurship remain constant. The paper shows the tension between professionalism/entrepreneurship and the 'everyday acts of resistance' to state-led technocratic vision. It argues against the disconnect between democratisation and 'demoticisa-tion' of technology.

Keywords

Global technology, TikTok, Chinese digital media, creativity, entrepreneurship, professionalism, resistance, platform economy

Introduction

In October 2021, *Rest Of World*, a web-based technology magazine, published an article titled '*Instagram has largely replaced TikTok in India, and erased working-class creators*' that narrated

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the story of Savitri and Sanatan Mahato, a brother-sister duo and TikTok influencer-turned-local celebrities in a small village in one of the poorest Indian states, Jharkhand (Sharma, 2021). The Mahato siblings acquired money, fame and recognition among waiters, mechanics and blue-collar workers in their neighbourhood by making TikTok videos (Sharma, 2021). In India, TikTok, which enjoyed immense popularity with 200 million users in 2020 (Basu & Mandavia, 2020), appealed to marginalised social groups in particular – girls of Bahujan or backward caste groups, for instance, used the Chinese short video platform to create and post anti-caste content (Subramanian, 2021). After the central government banned TikTok in June 2020 following border tension with China, the Mahato siblings migrated to Instagram Reel. But the number of followers of their videos dropped drastically in the new space. Global platforms such as Instagram Reel and Indian platforms, like Chingari and Moj, were launched to fill the vacuum left by TikTok's exit (Sharma, 2021). With 160 million active users in February 2022, Moj currently remains the leader in India's short video app market ('ShareChat and MX Media announce a strategic merger', 2022).

The scholarship of Indian platform economy and digital political culture largely addresses the 'localisation' of global technology platforms such as YouTube and Facebook but there remains limited understanding of the socio-cultural implications of TikTok, which exemplifies the 'going out' of Chinese digital media companies, and its ban. Most early studies of TikTok focused on its Chinese origin as well as data management, user privacy, potential bans and its impact on the socio-cultural climate, digital economy and legal framework (Zeng, Abidin, & Schaefer, 2021). Such studies, however, do not address users' 'enjoyment of the use of technology', which drive the operations of digital platforms, along with state and industry practices (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019). Keeping in mind the growing participatory potential and localisation tendencies (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019) of technology, this research explores the relationship between TikTok and 'vernacular creativity' or 'creative practices' in 'highly particular and non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions' (Burgess, 2006, p. 206) in India, and the implications of the app ban on creative processes.

The notion of the creative class in a neoliberal economy conjured up the image of the educated urban youth and their 'productive leisure' (Burgess, 2006). But the story of TikTok in India shows the popularity, expansion and the 'enjoyment of use of technology' among social groups in non-elite social settings. A study of the popular Chinese app and its ban thus remains related to under-standings of localisation of technology, linked to the aspirations of gender, caste, class and sexuality (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019). This paper thus attempts to 'globalise', if not 'decolonise', the notion of creativity from exclusive Euro-American neoliberal understandings (Kloet, Lin, & Chow, 2020). Creativity, which translates to 'everyday cultural production' (Burgess, 2006) of digital publics, remains significant for exhaustive understanding of digital platforms. The growing access and expansion of digital technologies over the past few decades encouraged 'new visibilities' and possibilities of representation of ordinary people's culture and diverse voices (Nayaka & Reddy, 2022). Such processes signal a 'demotic turn' (Turner, 2010) of the digital media culture, as ordinary users, via creative practices and user-generated content, contribute to a celebrity culture and become media content themselves (Turner, 2010). Even though popular digital participation may not necessarily conform to the norms of 'rational discourse in public domains', creativity may also shape popular political/democratic participation and create new imaginations of politics (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019). New forms of mediation and mobilisation around various issues, centred around technological architecture like hashtags, memes and networks, are known to shape public political life (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019) and democratic participation.

This paper, therefore, remains interested in how TikTok and its subsequent ban influence creativity and in the consequences of such processes for democratic engagement. This paper raises

the following questions: How and why did TikTok relate to vernacular creative practices in non-elite social settings as opposed to other global technologies? What are the consequences of the ban for vernacular creative practices? How did the uses of TikTok and its ban relate to democratic participation or the mobilisation/engagement of digital publics around issues? This research draws from in-depth interviews of content creators, writers and other stakeholders, qualitative content analysis of online videos (TikTok videos and YouTube interviews of content creators) and newspaper articles. This article positions TikTok as the 'easy-to-use/indulge' (Zhang, 2021) or 'low' technology (compatible with users' 'low technological literacy' (Joyce, Peine, Neven, & Kohlbacher, 2017) and as a site of 'everyday acts of resistance' (Ong, 1991). Even though the app ban marked the moment of digital publics' transition from 'low' ('easy to use technology') to 'capital-intensive' 'high' technology (Amir, 2013), professionalism and the notion of the ideal entrepreneurial citizen (Chakravartty & Sarkar, 2013; Irani, 2019) remain central to 'vernacular creativity' (Burgess, 2006) in both environments and limit the possibilities of 'everyday acts of resistance' (Ong, 1991). This paper shows the continuity of the values of professionalism/ entrepreneurship in both 'low' and 'high' technology and demonstrates the tension between the ideals of professionalism/entrepreneurship and technology's ability to trigger 'moral resistance' (Ong, 1991). This research argues that there remains overlap between the 'demotic' and democratic possibilities of the digital.

'Digital platforms creativity' and the demotic versus democratic

Over the past few decades, the growing access to technology encouraged 'new visibilities' and possibilities representation of ordinary people's culture and diverse voices (Nayaka & Reddy, 2022). The digital emerged as the site of creativity or productive leisure/voluntary work and 'vernacular creativity' (Burgess, 2006) or 'creative practices that emerge from highly particular and non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions' (Burgess, 2006, p. 206). It also triggered new forms of political imagination and engagement by digital publics (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019) in societies of the global South. Traditionally, 'low technology solutions' including policies such as 'one laptop per child' were seen as appropriate to usher in development (such policies were later criticised for top-down/one-way technology transfer) (Hess et al., 2017). 'Low technology' was seen as appropriate for users with 'low technological literacy' and 'limited capacity to learn' (Joyce et al., 2017). However, in recent times global digital cultures witnessed fast technological transformation. Mediated mobilisations such as the *#metoo* and *#blacklivesmatter* – the latter also inspired *#dalitlivesmatter* in India – became central to public life. In India, fast-growing markets and a state-led digitisation agenda encouraged large-scale digital penetration in both rural and urban areas (Udupa, Venkatraman, & Khan, 2020). With growing access to technology, 'millennial Indians' or the population that came of age or born in the new millennium employed digital technologies to mobilise, satirise and express their interest in political matters (Udupa et al., 2020). This 'millennial' digital population also represented diverse caste and class backgrounds, moving beyond the category of the educated, urban middle classes (Udupa et al., 2020).

TikTok traditionally remained popular with youth groups and the teenaged population in diverse global settings. The Covid-19 outbreak and the global lockdowns in 2020 reportedly expanded and diversified its user base to include the elderly and service workers such as teachers and healthcare workers (Zeng et al., 2021). However, in India the app remained popular in particular with marginalised social groups. The digital news platform *The Print*, for instance, reported that an Indian Twitter user went to the extent of ascribing caste identities to the big digital platforms at the time of an online war of words between prominent content users of YouTube and TikTok: While

Instagram and YouTube were identified as Brahmin (the highest caste group), Twitter as Kshatriya (the second highest) and Facebook as Vaishya (the third), TikTok was perceived as being a Shudra or the lowest of the four castes of the traditional Hindu hierarchical caste system (Yadav, 2020). Past studies of TikTok focused on data management, user privacy, potential bans (Zeng et al., 2021), personality traits/psychology of users, public engagement, public health messages and humour (Abidin, 2021). The app has been conceived as the 'silly playful platform' and a space for 'comedic content' or silly fun (Schellewald, 2021). The features of imitation, replication, remix and 'mimesis' remain inherent (Zeng et al., 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2020). It would be pertinent, therefore, to explore how such platform features relate to digital creative practices among diverse social groups, an area that remains unexplored in literature.

This paper conceives creativity as the 'everyday cultural production' of 'ordinary cultural producers' that remains linked to access, literacy and self-representation (Burgess, 2006). In optimistic accounts of 'platform capitalism'/'platform economy'/'platform society' (Dal Zotto & Omidi, 2020), creativity translates to 'voluntary work' or 'productive leisure' (Burgess, 2006) of the 'creative consumer' (Burgess, 2006). Such 'voluntary work'/play/'productive leisure' (Burgess, 2006) is said to usher in economic progress and innovation (Dal Zotto & Omidi, 2020). In contrast, political-economic critiques (Casilli, 2017; Dyer-Witheford, 2015; Huws, 2014) draw attention to the free/unpaid and exploitative nature of labour of 'prosumers' and the monetisation/corporate commercial commodification of user data in a neoliberal economy. This research departs from both celebratory accounts and political-economic critiques and recenters the interest in creativity in the light of the growing popular participation and localisation of digital platforms (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019). In India, for instance, YouTube emerged as the site of urban subcultures as well as a platform to showcase the life and culture of communities in a south Indian village (Nayaka & Reddy, 2022). Such examples are said to suggest ordinary people's ('demotic') access to media and technologies and signpost a 'demotic (as opposed to democratic) turn' (Turner, 2010) of the digital media culture. Even though the everyday creativity of the digital and the 'demotic' have been differentiated from 'resistance or aesthetic innovation' and democratic access (Burgess, 2006, p. 206), a study of TikTok and 'vernacular creativity' can be seen as relevant in discussions of political engagement and new political imaginations. Global platform companies such as Facebook remained predisposed towards the discretionary spending and the convenience of delivery of elite urban consumers in India (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020). In contrast, TikTok's expansion and popularity among diverse caste groups across smaller cities and towns remain pertinent. In India, caste remains a powerful category; for instance, Dalit caste groups challenged their historical marginalisation through digital activism (Udupa et al., 2020). This research doesn't naively expect the digital to flatten marginalisation and differences with regard to caste, class, region and religion. The term political/democratic in this paper thus departs from Habermasian understandings of rational deliberations in the public domain (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019). Rather democratic participation translates to new forms of mediation and digital publics' mobilisation surrounding specific issues.

Unlike the experience of the developed world, the transition from one technology to another has not been very linear in countries such as China and India that leapfrogged straight into Internet and smartphones (Flitsch, 2008; Nayaka & Reddy, 2022). The rapidity with which globalisation took command led to accelerated processes of transformation (Flitsch, 2008). Anthropological studies in rural northern China in the twentieth century show the 'appropriation and domestication of new technologies' (Flitsch, 2008) and the values placed by users on specific skills ([1] social skills, for instance) and resources in the shaping and uptake of new technologies (Bray, 2008). A study of TikTok and its ban in a non-elite social setting gives the opportunity to investigate the relationship

between 'vernacular creativity' and skills/use of technology that remains relevant in the context of technological transformation of the global South.

Research methodology

The research methodology combines qualitative interviews and content analysis of three kinds of data set – (i) TikTok videos, created by the users of the app, (ii) in-depth interviews and YouTube interviews of prominent content creators and (iii) newspaper articles, published by the websites of *The Times of India (TOI)*, India's largest-selling English daily and the English language business daily *Economic Times (ET)*. Both dailies are published by the national media conglomerate Bennett Coleman & Company Ltd. (BCCL). Even though TikTok was banned in India, popular video content, originally created by users, remained available on YouTube at the time of writing this article. A total of nine qualitative interviews were conducted telephonically in February and March 2022. The interviewees were shortlisted via newspaper reports and were contacted via snowballing methods, based on recommendations of technology reporters and other industry observers. The interviews were conducted in Hindi with the help of a research assistant[2] and the transcripts were translated to English by the author. In addition, the web podcast of a popular influencer/former TikToker was transcribed/translated. A section of former TikTokers, studied in this research, described themselves as paid content creators in personal and YouTube video interviews.

A total of 50 online videos, which featured creative content and interviews of prominent TikTokers, were analysed. These videos represented India's transient labour population and those who participated in protests against a controversial citizenship law in India in December 2019. Twenty-nine TikTok videos, which showcased migrant groups among others, were uploaded on YouTube by the independent web magazine *Raoit*. The names of TikTok stars were shortlisted through newspaper and other reports. The online archives of the *TOI* and *ET* were accessed through the digital database of Press Reader. A search with the keywords 'TikTok ban' revealed 205 and 219 articles, respectively, between the time frame of May 1 2020 and December 5 2021. Articles, which dealt with geopolitical or data security and privacy concerns, were eliminated. A total of 17 and 12 news items were shortlisted, respectively, from the dataset of *TOI* and *ET* for qualitative content analysis because they quoted and directly dealt with life, livelihood, wages, income and creative practices, future interests and performances of TikTok content creators. This study combined two methods of qualitative content analysis – 'conventional content analysis', with codes directly flowing from the data, and a 'structured' 'directed approach' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) with predetermined coding categories. The following categories were derived directly from the dataset of TikTok videos, uploaded on YouTube by independent web magazine *Raoit*: walking/mobility of migrant workers; work/activities of male workers and female content creators and visual aesthetics and protest/resistance activities. YouTube interviews of the content creators were analysed through the 'structured' 'directed approach', where the initial coding categories (success, entrepreneurship and professionalism) were predetermined (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Silly (subversive) fun: Creativity comedy and everyday resistance

This section of the article draws from the qualitative content analysis of TikTok videos, created and shared by India's migrant or informal transient workers at the time of Covid 19, and those uploaded during protests against a controversial citizen law. In December 2019, India's central government introduced a citizenship law, which was perceived by many as discriminatory towards the Muslim population. The specific features of imitation, replication, remix and 'mimesis', which remain

Figure 1. Migrant couple dancing to a Bollywood number during India's lockdown in 2020 in a TikTok video.

inherent to the platform (Zeng et al., 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2020), – and comedic content or 'silly fun' (Schellewald, 2021) acted as the route of creative self-expression by marginalised communities or "vernacular creativity" (Burgess, 2006). A TikTok video, shared by *Raoit* on YouTube (Raoit, 2020a) and shown in Figure 1, for instance, showed a migrant couple, seemingly traversing long distance by foot. With heavy luggage balanced carefully on their head, the couple broke into a dance and lip-synced to a popular Bollywood film song. The original, a romantic number from a 1990s' film, had the following lyrics: 'I eloped with you from your house' (Raoit, 2020a). TikTokers often rely on the lyrics of a specific song – a Bollywood number in this instance – to narrate and advance the storyline (Abidin, 2021). The lip-syncing-centred performative act reflected self-deprecating humour and subverted the original lyrics to demonstrate their difficult trek back home during a lockdown. India's transient labour population that migrates within the country's borders for seasonal/temporary work in multiple sectors became the centre of news since Covid unfolded in India in 2020. As the central government announced a national lockdown with a few hours' notice, the migrant population, facing an imminent livelihood threat, rushed to return home. The spectacle of low-wage workers, walking the length and breadth of the country, represented nationally and internationally as a humanitarian crisis, snowballed into a major policy challenge to authorities. Through the subversion of the original song and self-deprecating humour during a difficult historical moment, the TikTok videos arguably displayed a form of 'moral resistance' (Ong, 1991, p. 300). While differing from traditional protest activities, such resistance derived from the subjects' practical consciousness (Ong, 1991) and lived experiences of inequality and injustice.

Such 'everyday forms of resistance' (Ong, 1991) also remained evident in another TikTok video, which showed hundreds of burqa-clad Muslim women marching and demonstrating against the citizenship act of 2019, while a romantic/sentimental Bollywood song with the following lyrics played in the background: 'We will win if you are there with me' (Sahbaj Home Tik, n.d.). The original number was subverted to draw attention to Muslim women's resistance to perceived injustice.

Another TikTok video, uploaded on YouTube by *Raoit* (Raoit, 2020b), showed a group of workers break into an impromptu jig on an empty highway and lip-sync to an old Bollywood chartbuster with the following lyrics: 'When (we) find job, we would find love' (Raoit, 2020b). The comedic performance by migrants in the middle of an empty highway during lockdown and joblessness questioned the 'established order', although this form of resistance,[3] through silly fun and memetic act, lacked 'articulated awareness' (Ong, 1991, p. 300). The national migration crisis that brought to the forefront the country's economic inequality remains pertinent to this very logic of unarticulated resistance. TikTok videos, uploaded by *Raoit* webzine on YouTube, also showed informal workers at the site of wage work – near garbage bins in the streets, construction sites and the traditional shop floor. One video showed a worker, balanced dangerously with a rope, painting the walls of a high-rise building. In other videos, waste workers, while removing garbage in the street and cleaning sewage, sang to Bollywood film numbers with the following lyrics:

'I am a poor man and I don't live in a castle' (Raoit, 2020c);

'Let me show you my pathetic plight, let me tell you my sorry story' (Raoit, 2020d).

Manual scavenging historically remained linked to caste in India as the Brahmanical social order assigned 'the most polluting' task of removing human excreta to Dalit or backward groups (I & Majumdar, 2021), perceived as 'untouchables'. The digital news portal *Scroll* reported that such social inequalities were exacerbated during Covid as sanitation and sewage workers continued to work in the frontline without adequate protective gear and safety measures (I & Majumdar, 2021). TikTok videos spoofed popular romantic Hindi film songs to represent labour conditions at everyday sites of activity such as the streets, sewage corners and buildings. The digital culture of comedic 'silly fun' and lip-syncing, imitation and replication of hit movie songs thus not only offered an avenue of creative expression but also implicitly challenged the state-centric vision of[4] Digital India that historically prioritised elite users (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020). A rural TikTok creator in a video cracked a joke on the Indian government: The male content creator, staring straight at the camera, dared to ask the central government a small question – would the government consider removing the Chinese company-manufactured electric metre installed in his house? He quipped that such a move perhaps would be a good idea; if not anything, it would solve the problem of soaring electricity bills (Raoit, 2020e). The functionalities and 'user sociality and engagement' of TikTok (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) remain qualitatively different from the opportunities offered by hashtag, a key technological architecture of Twitter, which allows 'distributed individuals to locate, self-organize' and converge around issues and information streams such as *#metoo* or *#Black-LivesMatter*. In contrast, the above-mentioned TikTok videos show the ability of digital 'imitation publics' (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) to transcend the ritual of content replication and self-expression and create opportunities of 'everyday forms of resistance' (Ong, 1991). The lip-syncing/replication/ subversion of Bollywood romantic numbers and the self-deprecating humour contrasted with state-centric/elite narratives of suffering and welfare that emerged as dominant media tropes through which the migration problem was addressed. The possibilities of 'everyday forms of resistance'

([Ong, 1991](#)) emerged from users' ordinary cultural production and everyday creativity, which were encouraged by TikTok's inherent technological infrastructure. The features of mimesis/imitation/replication and silly fun/comedic content suited the needs of low-end users and new digital literates.

From 'low' to 'high' technology: Creativity app ban and transition

This article positions TikTok as the 'easy-to-use/indulge' or 'low' technology ([Bray, 2008](#); [Joyce et al., 2017](#)) that offered video creators the opportunity to search for people with common interests and to 'feature themselves lip-syncing, dancing, or doing a trick, always with 15-second-long clips set to music' ([Zhang, 2021](#), p. 224). Traditionally, in science and technology studies 'low technology', which was seen as appropriate for the rural poor, contrasted with 'high innovation clusters' ([Amir, 2013](#)) that remained dedicated to national industrial development. Sometime in 2019, when she was still in her teenaged years, Aditi of Barabanki, a small town near the northern state Uttar Pradesh's capital city Lucknow, managed to gather 70,000 followers on TikTok within just four months, by uploading lip-syncing videos and song and dance performances. To lip-sync to popular songs on TikTok, this content creator needed 'no preparation':

> 'Everyone said I should get on it (TikTok).... I googled and searched the Internet and started making videos when I was in 11th standard (high school)… I did it completely on my own… To lip-sync I needed no preparation …' (A.S. Thakur, personal communication, 2022).

The self-learning or the lack of 'preparation' ('no preparation') indicates the varied tools, filters and Augmented Reality (AR) effects that are easily afforded to digital publics. TikTok's algorithm-driven approach, which differentiates it from other apps ([Zhang, 2021](#)), made it possible for users to quickly gather followers. While she needed 'no preparation' to make videos on TikTok, Aditi invested in elaborate shooting equipment including an expensive DSLR camera, as she enjoyed moderate success on global digital platforms like Instagram Reel and Moj, MX TakaTak and other Indian apps in the post-TikTok digital milieu. This article suggests that as they adopted other apps, video content creators transitioned from 'easy-to-use' 'low' (TikTok) to 'capital-intensive' 'high technology' that lacked algorithm- and AR-driven features and aligned with the Indian state-led technocratic vision. ShareChat, a software company run by former graduates of the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology, launched the short video platform Moj after TikTok's ban as a 'replacement' and 'Indian rival' ('*ShareChat launches Moj*', 2020). Such apps were described as TikTok's 'replica' by users and tech writers as they hoped to emulate the former's success with low-end groups. Users just scroll down their smartphones and sift through videos and are not required to actively choose what they wish to watch next ([Ma & Hu, 2021](#)). The risk and threshold of video creation too remain low on TikTok, thanks to the plethora of available tools and resources ([Ma & Hu, 2021](#)). Naina, a 20-year-old female former TikTok influencer from Gwalior, an upcoming tier-two city in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, not only purchased a better camera and phone but also spent more than an hour on make-up to make it big on the new apps. She reiterated the necessity to 'give her best' to shoot videos.

> 'Whatever I earn, I must invest… I have to give my best… What would be a high-quality video on TikTok would not turn out to be so on Moj… Instagram is very different… I have given my best (on Instagram) … I spent one and a half hour to dress up (make-up), yet there was not much gain…' (N. Sisodia, personal communication, 2022).

Former TikTokers like Naina were recruited by the Indian app Moj because she had 1.2 million followers at the time of the ban. While new users could easily gain an audience on TikTok, one had to cross a certain threshold of followers to succeed as an influencer on other apps. The following comment by technology writer Anurag Verma indicates the dominant attributes (reliance on algorithm and the ingrained tools, filter and AR effects), which differentiated TikTok and led to its popularity among India's semi-urban or rural non-elite users.

> 'TikTok promotes new accounts, (but) Instagram (only) promotes the top influencers… There is a certain requirement to post a video on Instagram (Reel)… there (was) no such requirement on TikTok… one needs a camera stand, ring light (ring light with a tripod) (for Reel). One would (also) need a somewhat expensive camera' (A. Verma, personal communication, 2022).

In an interview, published by web-based publication *YourStory*, Nikhil Gandhi, the head of TikTok India in 2020 drew attention to the country's digital divide and low literacy and emphasised the app's appeal to 'first-time Internet users' (Mitter, 2020). The company's first-ever Indian Content Creator conference, held in Mumbai in 2019, brought together 500 influencers, many from small towns, and announced its commitment 'to actively contribute to the country's creative economy' and empower digital Indians (TikTok, 2019). In a collage of TikTok videos uploaded on YouTube by online entertainment company Soham Entertainment, Indian TikTok star Faisal Shaikh, who was known by the name of 'Mr. Faisu', and his group members, can be seen performing, replicating and recreating Bollywood and regional film songs and cracking jokes from the bed, kitchen and other domestic spaces of everyday activity (Soham Entertainment, n.d.). Shaikh or 'Mr. Faisu', who grew up in Dharavi, Mumbai's largest slum, and helped his father with a struggling 'nightie (loose and comfortable nightwear for Indian women) business', created 13–14 TikTok videos daily for a year ('*From earning Rs 50 a day to owning a BMW*', 2020; Joinfilms, 2019a). The inherent feature of mimesis, along with the reliance on algorithm, arguably made it 'easy' for the youth to use and 'indulge in' TikTok (Zhang, 2021).

As telecom giant Reliance Jio and the state-led Digital India campaign spearheaded a 'data revolution' in 2015, the country witnessed the popularity of Chinese-origin apps (Singh, personal communication, 2020), with their number surging from 18 in December 2017 to 44 by 2018 as per web reports (Junjie, 2019). Global platforms such as YouTube gave space to people from diverse backgrounds who explored different genres and content (Nayaka & Reddy, 2022). However, YouTube's 'Indian subcultures' (Nayaka & Reddy, 2022) remained qualitatively different from TikTokers' concurrent lack of purpose and the need to do something '*hatke*' or different, which propelled them to try out '*pagalpanthi*' or crazy antics. In a web podcast, popular TikToker Puneet Kumar, who was known as 'Puneet Superstar', said that neither could he dance nor do comedy. Yet, he wanted to make videos and became popular on TikTok with his '*pagalpanthi*' (Verma, 2021). TikTokers, often lacking a definite purpose, used the app 'to do something different'. Pradeep, a staff at a university canteen in Dadri, a small village in Uttar Pradesh, for instance, downloaded TikTok because he wanted to 'create something unique' and do 'something different'. In a viral video, available on the app Likee, Pradeep can be seen eating a green bell pepper that evoked comic response. In contrast to such '*pagalpanthi*', Indian YouTubers uploaded daily vblogs of rural life in the southern state of Telangana (Nayaka & Reddy, 2022). An engineering graduate, hailing from a village in Telangana, started YouTube's *My Village Show* with his friends in 2012 to showcase rural life (Nayaka & Reddy, 2022).

Drawing on Bourdieu's theorisation of[5] 'cultural capital', Ollier-Malaterre, Jacobs, & Rothbard (2019) propose the notion of 'digital cultural capital' to explain how some social groups and

individuals manage technology better than others through skill, awareness and motivation. Along with capital investment, which was seen as essential by users to successfully transition from TikTok to Instagram Reel and other apps in the aftermath of the ban, 'digital cultural capital' (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2019) too remained a prerequisite. TikTok remained popular in India among users of marginalised caste and class backgrounds, even though their video content did not always highlight social inequalities or caste identities. But Instagram pages like @dalitartarchive and @dalitcamera politicised India's caste inequalities by documenting the histories of the 'intersections of caste and art', and therefore, can be argued to be distinguished by 'cultural capital' (in this case exemplified through knowledge/awareness of the politics of caste oppression, which may have been inherited or acquired through education).

TikTok acts as a '(commercial) video Wikipedia', whereby 'users can enter the platform, watch their favourite videos, engage in the challenge games of interest, and gain knowledge and happiness', all free of cost (Zhang, 2021). This, coupled with the 'vernacularisation' (of content in multiple Indian languages) (Mitter, 2020), contributed to the app's market expansion. For instance, Akash, who hailed from a village near Raigadh, the capital of the central state of Chhattisgarh, wanted to represent his culture on TikTok. The necessity to represent his own 'Chhattisgarhi' culture was encouraged by the app's inherent features of mimesis and replication (Zulli & Zulli, 2020), as Akash wanted to do what 'Hindiwallahs' (Hindi language content creators) did:

'After I watched videos by Hindiwallahs (Hindi language content creators), I felt I should make my own videos with music. Then I downloaded (apps) and added music' (A. Sahu, personal communication, 2022).

Haryanvi and Bhojpuri chartbusters are seen as non-elite in the Indian cultural context, when compared with Mumbai-based popular Hindi cinema songs that enjoyed global appeal. The semi-urban and rural TikTokers performed hit numbers of non-Hindi language movies in viral videos. The app's popularity thus also led to the burgeoning of the regional music industry, which feared a 25–30% revenue hit, after the ban (Bhatt, 2020).

Hope and hard work: The professional and entrepreneurial citizen

The previous section highlighted the inherent differences between TikTok and other digital platforms. TikTok has been conceptualised as 'low technology', keeping in mind its inherent features that catered to the needs of rural/semi-urban users. This section asserts that the skills of 'professionalism' and 'entrepreneurship' remained the key defining feature of India's digital publics in both 'low' (TikTok) and (post-TikTok) 'high' technology environments. The twin tendencies of entrepreneurship and citizenship, while promoting 'direct action' on 'social issues' like gender-based discrimination as well commercial activities, however, limit the opportunities of 'moral resistance' or 'everyday forms of resistance' (Ong, 1991). In a digital culture, the 'unlikely creative class' is known to spontaneously perform 'vernacular creativity' through 'self-taught practices' (of being grass rooted and 'authenticity') (Lin & de Kloet, 2019). This research, through the following example, however, shows that it is not just 'self-taught practices' but a 'movie direction'-like professional culture that remains central to India's short video digital space. Such professionalism also united TikTok with other platforms in the post-ban digital space, despite differences.[6] Past research of user-generated online videos (Ding, Yang, Li, & Zhang, 2021) and smartphone users (Yang, 2021) in China indicate the porous boundary between 'amateurs' and 'professionals' and the transformation of 'hobby'/'serious leisure' into 'hobby business'. This paper further confirms this

trend as India's post-TikTok digital short video content production assumed the semblance of large-scale movie production with elaborate outdoor shooting, grooming/make-up, professional camera and 'good quality content'. For instance, during a long-distance train journey from Mumbai to Delhi, Raghavendra, a content director with ShareChat-owned Moj, and his team of content creators recreated the scenes of the Hindi film *Bachchan Pandey*, which starred Bollywood superstar Akshay Kumar in the role of a gangster.

> 'Creators only have the idea but we (the content directors) have a different vision… we bring the camera (to outdoor sites) … We gather creators in the same way as directing a film… … (but) on TikTok videos went from viral from (users') homes' (R. Prajapati, personal communication, 2022).

Content directors like Raghavendra, formerly an aspiring actor from Kanpur, an industrial town of Uttar Pradesh, hired, groomed and even loaned out technical equipment to small-time content creators. Such training and grooming contrasted with the spontaneous creativity ('no preparation') of TikTok, as videos easily went 'viral from home' (in absence of outdoor shooting). However, notwithstanding the potential for impulsive self-expression, the boundary between spontaneity and hard work/professionalism blurred at the same time on TikTok.

Millions of people made TikTok videos, but those by Lucknow-born Amir Siddiqui, a former top influencer of the app, went viral because they were created 'professionally' and had the 'message' of 'love, peace and humanity', as reported by him in an interview uploaded on a YouTube channel (Join Films, 2019b). For India's 'micro-celebrities' (Tan, Wang, Wangzhu, & Zhu, 2020), hard work and hope (hope labour) (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) thus remained essential for self-publicity, along with digital tools. Mumbai's Faisal Shaikh or 'Mr. Faisu' made 13–14 TikTok videos daily on comedy or romance-themed content; such videos too went viral because of perceived 'hard work'. Shaikh and his team worked 'professionally' and searched for the ideal 'location and dressing', as narrated by him on a YouTube interview (Join Films, 2019b). In a study of digital work in India, professionalism has been perceived as the path to overcome the 'culture of servitude' that remains inherent to certain occupations like beauty/salon work in South Asian societies (Komarraju, Arora, & Raman, 2021). This article shows that professionalism translated to hard work and a recipe for success in both 'low' and 'high technology' environments.

TikTok emerged as the site of 'hope labour' (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013), as it helped fructify content creators' dreams of forging links with Bollywood: As indicated by a *TOI*-report, Siddiqui, a former TikToker, got the chance to promote the movies of his idol and Bollywood superstar Salman Khan and work with celebrities (Kaushik, 2020). As narrated by Siddiqui in a YouTube interview, TikTok users – when they acquired fame and recognition – were approached by big brands to promote products and films. TikTok, therefore, was constructed as a site of 'hope labour' or a platform that motivates voluntary online social production. Such digital production, while often un- or under-compensated, is undertaken to gain exposure or experience, with the hope that future (employment) opportunities would follow (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). This sentiment also resonates with Gwalior's Naina who after transitioning to Moj and Instagram Reel sought a career in Mumbai's entertainment industries. In a celebrity event organised and uploaded on YouTube by Celebrity Face, an Indian online portal-cum-talent company, 21-year-old female influencer Garima Chaurasia or 'Gima Ashi', had some tips for aspirants:

> 'If you are a TikTok creator lip-syncing is the foundation (of your job) … One might think that it is just acting but you must also know the camera angle… I constantly check and adjust my camera angle while shooting... You must learn the basics' (Rakesh Dwive di Productions, 2020).

The northern state Uttarakhand-born Chaurasia's advice shows that professionalisation and training remain inherent to vernacular creative practices. In TikTok videos, Chaurasia, and female co-star Rugees Vani, performed popular Hindi film songs (Tragedy King, 2019), wearing identical outfits, arguably as a strategy of product differentiation. The above cases illustrate the discursive significance of individual aspiration, skill and hard work – the essential ingredients for grassroots entrepreneurship.

Vernacular creativity, performed through acts of joyful, voluntary work and productive leisure, also translated to exalted civic agenda and the necessity of 'doing one's bit' for the nation (Irani, 2019). This remains evident as Siddiqui in a YouTube interview spoke of his commitment to convey the 'message' of 'love, peace and humanity' through viral videos (Joinfilms, 2019b). The dual narratives of the message of 'love, peace and humanity' and professionalism ('professionally' created viral videos) remain suggestive of humanitarianism and enterprise that tend to go hand in hand in 21st India (Chakravartty & Sarkar, 2013). TikTok star Puneet, for instance, earned 'a lot' by making comedic videos during India's first lockdown in March 2020, and distributed a part of his income to the poor as part of his civic commitment.

> 'I earned a lot during the lockdown because people were home and they demanded comedy. I distributed money to the poor. People sent me almost 1.5-2 lakh (INR) via Paytm' (Verma, 2021, 34.00).

Entrepreneurial work, therefore, does not remain merely an economic activity, but translates to the ideal Indian public's civic sense and the commitment to do something good for the country (Irani, 2019). By expressing his commitment to oppose communal harmony, online trolling and cyberbullying of women and the third gender through hashtags like *#amiragainstcyberbullying*, Siddiqui – as reported in a YouTube interview (Joinfilms, 2019b) – wanted to change the future generations of India. The core economic, entrepreneurial activity (differentiating the videos/product with messages of 'love, peace and humanity') thus juxtaposed with his responsibility as the ideal citizen (Chakravartty & Sarkar, 2013).

In India, the contours of the platform economy remained linked to long-term state policy that sought technocratic solutions to the country's developmental goal (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020; Chakravartty, 2004). Technology such as the personal computer and electronic communication networks historically became synonymous to the state-led vision of development and progress (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019). Such nationalist technocratic vision translated to notions of Indian self-sufficiency, which rationalised TikTok's ban and the call for *desi* or indigenous apps. As reported in media interviews, TikTok stars, while worrying for life and livelihood, proclaimed support for the app ban, which was perceived to be a nationalist act (Doval & Sarkar, 2020). Siddiqui, as reported in a *TOI*-article, hoped for an indigenous app that would support Indians (Kaushik, 2020) and emulate the entrepreneurial recipe of TikTok. By expressing his commitment to an 'indigenous app', Siddiqui proclaimed his 'ideologies of belonging' and claimed his 'membership to a nation' (Irani, 2019). Another influencer Resty Kamboj, who had 6 million followers on TikTok, expressed support to the ban as India lost many of its soldiers to China, according to a *TOI*-report published on July 1 2020 ('*What's next for TikTok stars post the ban?*', 2020). Paras Tomar, another TikToker, showed nationalist commitment because his earnings from the app was 'nothing' when compared with what China made from TikTok ('*What's next for TikTok stars post the ban?*', 2020).

Conclusion

By exploring the link between 'vernacular creativity' (Burgess, 2006), TikTok and its ban in India, this paper aimed to develop complex understandings of the interaction of a non-Western digital media platform and everyday life in a society of the global South. Firstly, the study shows that 'vernacular creativity' at the time of crises created opportunities for 'everyday forms of resistance' (Ong, 1991). Secondly, the app ban signified 'digital imitation publics'' (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) transition from 'low technology' (Hess et al., 2017; Joyce et al., 2017) to capital-intensive 'high technology' (Amir, 2013). Apps such as Instagram Reel and Moj necessitated advanced technological investment as well as social/cultural capital and aesthetics. Thirdly, this research shows the continuity of professionalism/'entrepreneurial citizenship' (Chakravartty & Sarkar, 2013; Irani, 2019) in both 'low' (TikTok) and 'high' (post-TikTok apps) technology environments, despite the differences of investment, algorithm-/AR-driven features and digital cultural capital. India's ban of TikTok, adoption of new platforms and the transition remain significant in the light of the speedy technological transformation and accelerated processes of globalisation (Flitsch, 2008; Nayaka & Reddy, 2022) that remained common in societies of global South. Even though 'low technology' solutions were traditionally seen as appropriate for marginalised social groups in the periphery, 'high innovation' vs. 'low technology' binary at the same time has been challenged (Hess et al., 2017). Bray (2008) highlights the values placed by users on specific skills and resources in the shaping and uptake of new technologies. This study contributes to this scholarship and reiterates the significance of professionalism/'entrepreneurial citizenship' (Chakravartty & Sarkar, 2013; Irani, 2019) as a core value in technological transformation and transition. Such processes of 'entrepreneurial citizenship' promotes 'direct action' on 'social issues' (Chakravartty & Sarkar, 2013) and the 'necessity to do one's bit' (Irani, 2019) for the nation, but at the same time limit the opportunities of 'moral resistance' or 'everyday forms of resistance' (Ong, 1991). This article, therefore, demonstrates the tension between resistance and professionalism/entrepreneurship. Past scholarship (Burgess, 2006; Turner, 2010) distinguishes between the tendencies of democratisation and 'demoticisation'. However, the tension between resistance and professionalism/entrepreneurship demonstrates that both demotic and democratic tendencies overlap and co-exist in the digital. This article thus argues against the binary between democratisation and 'demoticisation' of technology and suggests that both processes can be at work through 'vernacular creativity' in a platform economy.

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Notes

1. In an introduction to a special issue, Francesca Bray (2008) reiterates the importance of social skills, for instance, in the adoption of water-boiler-coolers and web pages, both seen as modern technologies in twentieth century rural East Asia.

2. The author would like to thank Neha Tripathi for her assistance with data collection and transcription.

3. Ong (1991) refers to 'everyday forms of resistance' to analyse oppositional practices that proliferate in systems of injustice and domination, by drawing the instances of Malay female factory workers in Kuala Langat, Malaysia – the latter routinely reported of 'spirit possession' (self-reports of supernatural force or spirits attacking female workers in factory floors in order to be sent home) to cause disturbance, force shutdown and thus disrupt neoliberal work/factory regimes in industrial zones. 'This layer of moral resistance is derived from the basic, practical consciousness of subjects; and though often lacking an articulated awareness of its own, it can disrupt and subvert the established order' (Ong, 1991, p. 300).

4. The state-led Digital India campaign underpinned the promise of universal access to online services and a fully integrated data infrastructure and global tech giants such as Facebook (along with its affiliate WhatsApp) remained receptive to this state-led vision (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020). India's positioning as a 'digital power' coincided with the state's initiative to court Silicon Valley giants as well as forge systemic partnerships with domestic conglomerates such as Reliance to draw investments for data centres and fibre network projects (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020).

5. Referring to Bourdieu's theorisation, Ollier-Malaterre et al. (2019) refer to different forms of cultural capital: incorporated cultural capital that is inherited through familial lineage; objectified cultural capital like art and paintings that can be purchased; and institutionalised cultural capital that can be acquired later in life through educational qualification.

6. Referring to user-generated online videos featuring translation of China-related foreign media content, Ding et al. (2021) show how the necessity to expand one's fanbase and give viewers the best possible viewing experience drew 'non-professional', 'amateurs' into the 'professional translation community'. Such phenomenon indicates the blurring boundary between amateur-professionals and professionalisation of digital content creators. The growing smartphone use, which created a booming 'digital-visual economy', also contributed to the professionalisation of amateur smartphone photographers and the transformation of a 'hobby'/'serious leisure' to 'hobby business' (Yang, 2021). With skillful netizens routinely recruited by Chinese tech-firms for their understanding of consumers' photographic preferences, there emerged 'professional amateurs' (Yang, 2021).

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