

Is TikTok a Public Sphere for Democracy in China? A Political Economy Approach

Hui Lin

Digital Humanities, Kings' College London, UK

hui.2.lin@kcl.ac.uk

Abstract: This study aims to investigate whether TikTok can be regarded as a new public sphere for democracy in the Chinese media context. Previous studies focused on the investigation of Weibo (a Chinese counterpart of Twitter) as a public sphere. However, Jia and Han (2020) argue that Weibo is not an online space for public discussion anymore but a platform for marketing and advertising. With the commercialization of social media, plenty of researchers paid attention to TikTok's commodification and its commercial implications, while research on the role of TikTok as a public sphere is still limited. By adopting theoretical frameworks from "public sphere" and "political economy", this study questions: 1) why users participate in public issues on TikTok? 2) how do citizens use TikTok to participate online? 3) does TikTok contribute to the creation of a public sphere? Empirical method, 20 semi-structured interviews around China, is utilized to understand citizens' views and participation behavior. This study argues that the reason why users participate in public issues on TikTok is entertainment. Users are attracted by the platform which offers creative and humorous videos to disseminate public information. Getting interested in its entertainment feature, users utilize TikTok to view public-related videos. According to respondents of interview, 18 out of 20 users indicate they seldom use the "search button" or "create button" on TikTok, rather, they merely browse videos there. In this sense, TikTok is not a public sphere because of lacking critical interactions. In contrast to Habermas's claim that social media is a "pseudo-public sphere" (Habermas, 1989), this study describes TikTok as a "limited public sphere" which do, to some extent, generate public discussions and debates about socio-political issues directly or indirectly. Nevertheless, the social impact of this sphere is restricted, that is, online public engagement is confined to liking, sharing, and short commenting lacking in critical discussions and is ineffective in transferring online political engagement to offline participation (Kim and Ellison, 2021). Thus, TikTok facilitates citizens' political engagement superficially and it is harder for that engagement to have any subversive impact on democracy.

Keywords: TikTok, public sphere, political economy, video users, participation

1. Introduction

Since July 2021, the ban of after-school tutoring in China has stimulated active political participation among citizens. They joined online discussions and created user-generated videos about the policy on TikTok, but shortly thereafter these discussions succumbed into chaotic interactions or even quarrels. It was not the first time that TikTok performed as an online space for public discussion. During this period, citizens cooperate actively on the platform expressing their ideas as comments, following the discussions in fan communities, and recording videos themselves to discuss the case. When navigating TikTok, users can search any type of videos and can participate in online discussion either in the "Comment" section or as real-time comments. This may herald a new era of civic participation on digital video platforms. With 800 million active users, the advent of TikTok has captured scholars' attention to investigate its implications in online entertainment and e-commerce (Zhang, 2021). Nevertheless, its role as an online space for political discussions remains understudied.

2. Literature review

2.1 Online civic participation in China

When referring to online civic participation, Weibo has been frequently discussed as an online sphere for public participation. Many scholars celebrate audience empowerment in political conversation enabled by social media platforms, while they have several limitations: 1) platform limitation: instead of examining civic participation on a wide range of platforms, they concentrate on Weibo to draw their conclusions of civil society (Wang, 2016; Min, 2016). Yet, Jia and Han (2020) argue that Weibo is not an online space for public discussion but a platform for marketing and advertising. 2) Spatial limitation: this is problematic because scholars who agree with audiences empowerment base their studies on the investigation in users who live in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (Wang, 2016; Cheek, T. et al. 2018), while others living in areas (such as three or four-tier cities and rural areas) are neglected. 3) temporal limitation: scholars pay attention to the interplay between civic participation and state manipulation under various historical and cultural contexts which influence the outcome of conclusions (Qiu, 2009; Shen and Breslin, 2010; Tai, 2006). In the video booming era when everyone is able to make their voice heard in a visualized way, the operations of the media industry have been transformed by "platformization" (Neiborg & Poell, 2018), a process of multifaceted transformation of globalized societies

(Poell et al., 2019). At this juncture, research to assess the public sphere is a necessity in this video-dominated media landscape. Thus, to fill these research gaps, this study pushes the discussion of public participation further to video streaming platform TikTok, aiming to investigate the role of TikTok in the construction of a public sphere, the accessibility of the platform to include the publics from all social statuses, and users' participation behavior on it.

In recent years, TikTok has been studied from various perspectives, while the investigation of political communication and political economy of the platform is far from adequate. Li Xu et al., (2019) have investigated the reasons why TikTok become popular. They argue that there are three major reasons for its popularity including diversified marketing strategies, advanced technological affordances, and the familiarity of the target consumers. Yet, all these analyses focused on marketing studies and the marketplace of the platform rather than users of TikTok. Zhu et al., (2019), drawing on information communication of official accounts on TikTok, discussed the communication situation of official health-related accounts, which are controlled by Provincial Health Committees in China on the platform. Utilizing the method of content analysis, they argued that streamers should adopt an easily understandable format combined with music and subtitles to attract users. Their study, providing in-depth insights into media content, also fails to investigate TikTok users. At this juncture, Zuo and Wang explored user behavior from a cultural studies perspective, arguing that users' participation is not only an expression of popular culture but also a reflection of users' self-expression and cultural identities. However, they did not combine users' participation with political economy and political communication. As an increasing number of official accounts publish videos regularly on TikTok with millions of users, there is a need to explore TikTok as a public sphere. Thus, this study deals with this research gap to investigate whether TikTok can be regarded as a public sphere.

2.2 TikTok as a Public sphere

Habermas's conception of a rational critical public sphere is utilized as the theoretical background to this article. For Habermas, the public has been conceptualized as "open-to-all" events and occasions rather than close and exclusive affairs. Following this idea, he characterizes some key elements of the public sphere including the formation of public opinion, accessibility to all citizens, freedom of expression and disinterested participation, and debate over public issues (Habermas, 1989, p136; 1989, p127). Nevertheless, these ideas have been criticized as an idealization of the bourgeois public sphere where rational discussion and uninterested consensus seem rather romantic (Fuchs, 2014). Along with the transformation of socio-cultural circumstances, from capitalism and liberal democracy to state manipulation and monopoly capitalism in the 19th century, Habermas declares a transition from the liberal public sphere to the media-dominated public sphere. He concedes that the pervasion of mass media reaches wide individuals and allows them to participate in online public discourse. Yet, he casts a pessimistic light on this mediated public sphere. Concerning institutionalization and commercialization, he suggests that manipulative corporate and institutional manipulation threaten the online public sphere to be an open, disinterested, and rational space.

This study takes Habermas's conception of the critical public sphere as a starting point. Following his concept of 'public', the Chinese conceptualization of 'public' 'citizens' and 'civil society discourse' were not formed until the transformations of social contexts at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Xu, 2014). China's involvement in the global market economy fosters media marketization as well as social stratification and problems (Sun et al, 2004). This facilitates the emergence of public opinions especially citizens' critiques on public issues. Existing literature constantly critiques whether it is suitable to use "public" and "public sphere" in the Chinese context with the argument that Habermas's bourgeois public sphere fails to fit the Chinese context where the bureaucratic framework is lacking (Rankin, 1993). Yet, they always end up their research with historical political analysis to compare the concept of the public sphere between China and western countries (Cheek, T. et al. 2018). However, instead of driving into comparative political studies, this article uses Habermas' public sphere as a manifestation to clarify TikTok as an intermediary platform for civic participation. Habermas concept of the public sphere, which describes the relationship between private interests of everyday life in civil society and the realm of state power, helps to manifest the idea of open intermediate arenas where interactions are made between the citizens and political actors (Rankin, 1993).

This study concentrates on the institutionalization of the public sphere. This is because the social context of the new public sphere in China is to some extent parallel with the socio-cultural context of the mediated public sphere in Europe. Commercialized corporates and government intervention penetrate into the online entertainment space, which stimulates citizens to declare freedom from state and market through political

participation (Xu, 2014). At this juncture, this study examines whether TikTok is an arena for the “public” where users can approach transparent and inclusive political issues and contribute to the country’s democracy. For Yuezhi Zhao (2007), the conceptualization of “public sphere” is a liberalist stance which merely involves the upper social class. But this view may be out-of-date. With the advent of the Internet, public discussion has changed from physical arenas to virtual spaces and the rise of new media enables individuals to access public information and make active participation (Xu, 2014; Yang, 2011; Ahmed & Jia, 2014). The new public sphere may be able to include wider and more diverse voices. Hence, this article will examine audience media using behavior to explore whether citizens can form public opinions, easily access information, participate online with disinterested personal interests, and form debate contributing to democracy.

3. Methodology

Interviews around China are utilized to understand audience motivations and participation behavior on TikTok, which can help to provide answers to how and why questions substantively (Weiss, 1994). Between August and November 2021, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with heavy TikTok users. Heavy users mean a group of people who use streaming for more than one hour and 7 days per week (Hagen, 2015; Bolderman, L. & Reijnders, S., 2021). Respondents were recruited through purposive sampling to be relevant to the study which focuses on the users’ behavior and their motivations to participate in these videos. Also, respondents from various parts of China (not only those living in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, but also in three-tier cities and rural areas in Heilongjia, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Hubei etc.) have been invited in order to explore whether people from margined places can also join the public discussion online. 14 men and 6 women were participated between 19 and 35 years old.

I used open-ended questions in a semi-structured format to ensure the conversation flowed organically (Weiss, 1994; Brennen, 2013). Each interview lasted around 50 minutes and informal discussions were about 20 minutes. They were conducted through voice calls on Wechat because public issues are quite sensitive, and respondents would be more open to answering these questions if the atmosphere is a bit more private (Jamieson, 1997; Levis, 2017). At the beginning of the interview, icebreaker questions were designed to make a warm start and build intimacy between interviewer and respondents (Brennen, 2013). We started a conversation about participants’ professional background and their daily use of TikTok. Next, we discussed their motivations to watch and participation behavior in videos. Then, the interviews concluded with a discussion of challenges to express their ideas and join the public discussions on TikTok.

Our results were basically drawn from interviews and were further informed through transcripts analysis. I analyzed the data through four-step strategies “data preparation, data exploration, data reduction, and interpretation” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010). Along with the interview process, I initially coded the content in Nvivo for themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). When noticing the theme began to repetitive with no categories emerging, a sufficient sample had been achieved and I began to recode the descriptive transcripts in themes to examine users’ viewing behavior and participation in TikTok.

4. Findings

Scholars have provided valuable suggestions to discuss the potential for new media platforms to political communication (Benkler, 2006; Fuchs, 2014), while a handful of them examine the relationship between the political economy of the platform to the concept of the public sphere (Garnham, 1992). Based on these theoretical investigations from western theocratists, this study tends to put emphasis on political economy and also consider political communication, as both of them help to determine whether TikTok is a public sphere or not (Fuchs, 2014). In line with dimensions of political economy and political communication, respondents’ answers covered three aspects including universal access, algorithms which is a part of the capital accumulation mechanism, and political content production.

4.1 Does user-friendly technological affordances mean universal accessibility?

The entertainment feature of video streaming enables a wide range of users to access information and give them an opportunity to express their ideas. When describing their motivations to use TikTok, 90 percent of users (n=18) indicated that they would like to access and gain information using TikTok due to its easy technological affordances. Xiaoqing, who live in a rural area in Qinghai province explained: *“TikTok is an ideal entertainment platform for me where I could access different kinds of videos whose interfaces are easy to use and grasp the*

ideas” It seems that the easy-to-use interface of TikTok makes it achieve universal accessibility to reaches a wide audience.

However, although people have equal opportunities to access public issues through videos, “universal accessibility” to online participation is hard to obtain through easy-to-use technological affordances. According to Habermas, universal accessibility or open-ness should also include universal freedom of speech, opinion, association and assembly other than merely the right to gain information (Habermas, 1989, p. 227). When asking respondents’ ways of online participation, their answers are in line with one of the limitations of the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas has discussed, that is, the limitation of freedom of public opinion. Respondents are less likely to express their opinions because it is associated with education background and material resources (Habermas, 1989). Respondents from less developed areas give a clear answer. Mengwei, from the Northeastern China, said: *“Although I am a deep viewer, I rarely comment on these serious videos. Sometimes I have an impulse to comment on those videos, but I lack confidence because I know TikTok is a platform filled with educational people who are master students or even doctoral students. Yet, I could also spend money to buy “liking” in order to increase popularity. However, I do not have money and I am not willing to spend money on the entertainment platform. It is even ridiculously to be serious on an entertainment platform, isn’t it?”* He lacks the confidence to participate and do not think he could make a difference because of lacking in education and material property. He knows the platform have paid service to popularize their ideas to make their voice heard. However, he does not have money to do that. In other words, material possessions limit his participation online. This is in pair with Habermas’ public sphere theory, which stresses the aspects of political economy in the conceptualization of the public sphere. Pointing out that one of the prerequisites to attend public sphere is the command of resources, he argues that “one could expect from economically dependent masses a contribution to the spontaneous formation of opinion and will only to the extent to which they had attained the equivalent of the social independence of private property owners” (Habermas, 1992, p. 432). In other words, the equal opportunity for users to participate online is based on their property and material base, which contradicts the universal equality to access (Habermas, 1989, p. 124). In this sense, Habermas argues that the new media platform is a pseudo-public sphere with immanent critiques.

However, although the public sphere has some limitations and critiques, TikTok, as a widely accessible platform with millions of followers, has facilitated the ordinary to speak for themselves. After all, it represents a *tendency* towards democracy by giving people a “microphone”. Xiaozhang from Shanxi province indicated: *“TikTok provides a platform to be seem. Everything is put under public supervision which is a great leap in the new media era. But I think Kaishou, another short video platform, does better than TikTok. Many people can express their opinion on it through videos although there exist some limitations”*. Admittedly, it has a long way to go but it starts to change people’s minds from ideological-injected mindless viewers to active participants. Brad also offered a similar indication: *“We should not deny video streaming platforms give ordinary people a chance to make expressions. I knew someone living in Xinjiang Province. The only way for them to access the outside world is video steaming platform. This is because these people have less education and even cannot read a whole literary text. The visualized form of short videos helps them gain information and easy-to-use affordances also help them to publish their stories. Although their potential audiences are limited, they are satisfied with sharing, especially sharing with strangers.”* In this sense, Kuaishou, instead of TikTok, does much better. In this sense, this study describes TikTok as a limited public sphere where participation is superficially confined in “Liking” or “yes or no, support or un-support” comments. But what is undeniable is its provision of an arena for people to speak out opinions even naïve and inconsequential. Rauchfleisch & Schäfer (2015, p150) propose that social media platforms “serve as outlets for critical opinions” although they are always under the strict censorship from the government institution. Thus, we should admit the degrees of public participation and expression of critical opinions are limited. In contrast to Yang (2011)’s conclusions that the Internet and new media platforms develop critical skills for citizens so that these communication appliances facilitate democracy, this study is against this rosy conclusion when spotting light on “others” living in small cities or rural areas with the argument that participation on TikTok is superficial rather than critical.

4.2 Algorithms mean success and failure

Algorithms make users maintain on TikTok. Users are exposed to whatever they like. Although the platform also recommends public news and public issue-related information to them sometimes, they are willing to have a look because most of videos meet their preferences. Some respondents said that the algorithm allows them to see whatever they like without effort. Xiaozhang revealed that: *“I seldom use “search” to look for information. I just watch recommended videos and the system can trace my “liking” to further recommend similar videos”*.

Algorithms use “sorting, filtering, and ranking” functions (Neumayer and Rossi, 2016, p. 4) to recommend users personalized content to maintain them on the platform and increase their engagement (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Many respondents (n=12) are satisfied with the personalized information provided by the platform. Yu indicated that: *“I like recommendations on TikTok because I can watch preferred type of information without spending time on searching. It is quite efficient”*. This means social media algorithms make the use of media much easier (Corettie and Picca, 2018),.

Yet, scholars have warned the detrimental effects of this algorithmic functions which create opinion echo-chambers and result in radicalization (Jast and Latzer, 2017). In line with them, respondent Dong observed this threat and mentioned that *“I like to watch TikTok because it recommends what I like. I acknowledge this algorithm poses a threat to my views and horizons because I would be confined in a small circle of what I like. However, it is a platform for entertainment you know, I merely use it for some time and do not take it seriously. So, it would be fine”*. Other than opinion echo-chambers, the recommendation mechanism also make users lazy like couch potatoes. 95% (n=19) heavy users who enjoy using TikTok have one thing in common: they rarely *search* for information but just *watch* information. In other words, they are always viewers with limited interactions rather than users who participate in the comment section and contribute to video publication. This means algorithms make people less likely to make interactions, let alone active participation in public-related issues. This means social affordances associated with algorithms also “entail negative consequences for social movement” (Coretti and Pica, 2018, p. 74).

Moreover, TikTok’s algorithm mechanisms set one of the limitations for people’s public participation, that is, the requirement for property in public participation. Media companies use algorithms in their capital accumulation mechanism, especially in information distribution through a “techno-commercial” process (Poell and Van Dijck, 2015, p. 529). The platform offers paid service for ordinary users to buy a wider exposure. So the number of potential audiences to reach depends on the amount of money for users to pay. But if users are not willing to pay for the service, algorithms will result in that users’ videos will soon be “covered” by other new videos and high-quality videos with sufficient “views” and “liking”. Respondent Brad offered a more detailed clarification on this phenomenon when talking about difficulties in expressing opinions: *“User-generated videos by ordinary people are difficult to reach a wider audience. TikTok is filled with influencers who are professional teams to make short videos or those who are supported by multichannel companies. These videos are of high quality than videos created by me. When I publish videos, I found that in the first hour I gained more exposure and more likes. After a period of time, my videos do not obtain sufficient liking to make further exposure and recommendation. They sink down in the TikTok’s information sea”*. This means algorithms threaten the visibility of ordinary users and the inclusiveness of the platform.

Therefore, as most users merely like or simply comment which has been mentioned above, algorithms prioritize influencers’ content over content created by ordinary users, which overwhelms ordinary’s voices and prevent them to be “users”. This is because user-generated videos from the bottom-up are impossible to obtain sufficient “liking” and number of “views” in time so that these videos would be squeezed out by new videos and influencers’ high-quality videos who gain large popularity and a great number of likes. Hence, this study argues that algorithms on TikTok impede public participation by turning audiences into just viewers rather than users who generated videos.

4.3 Public content production towards entertainment

Respondents thought highly of entertainment characteristics of political content, which arises their interests in public related issues. 75 percent (n=15) of respondents revealed that they like to watch public content produced on TikTok because of entertainment features. For example, Wei said: *“I watch entertainment videos to relax. Although sometimes I also watch videos about public issues such as political policies and education, they are quite different from serious news on television. These relaxed videos are easier to hook my attention than other serious television news”*. The respondent Wei mentioned that the major reason to watch videos is relaxation and entertainment.

These responses are in accordance with the media owner’s expectations. In order to attract young users to TikTok, official accounts make their videos humorous and understandable by using special effects. They add subtitles, emojis, and special effects to circulate serious topics (Zhang, 2021). These methods gain publishers a great number of audiences. However, these entertainment characteristics actually gain viewers rather than participants. 85 percent of respondents (n=17) merely view these videos but rarely make interactions. When

they seldom make comments, they are emotional and irregular. When asking the reasons, respondents Baoy provides clarity: “I regard it as an entertainment platform so I would think all the information is not serious. I will not associate videos with public participation because I think these two are separated on different platforms”. Public-related videos are to entertain people so it appears on TikTok, while public participation, more serious and formal, should be obtained on Weibo or subscriptions of Wechat. Jason, a postdoctoral student Xi, commute between Shenzhen and Hongkong, also said that: “I sometimes comment online but very rare. This is not because I do not have comments or critical ideas, but because I am busy with my work. I don’t have time to waste on online discussions on such an entertainment platform as they are of no use”. According to him, he has the prerequisite, education background and material base, to engage in public participation. However, spending time participating online seems a waste of time for him because of the entertainment.

Here emerges new tension between the platform expansion and audience participation: although TikTok adopts the entrainment feature to attract more audiences from different social strata, it fails to involve them in-depth into participate in public issues online. This tension is in line with Sullivan’s previous study on Weibo that it is an apolitical space where users and topics are highly entertaining (Sullivan, 2012, 2013), as respondents in this study mentioned that TikTok is a too entertaining and relaxed platform to be an arena for formal public issues. Putting TikTok in this position, audiences are less likely to involve in public videos, let alone to provide critical opinions for democracy. To put it simply, entertainment characteristic allows the platform a wider audience extension but restrict people’s deeper participation.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study argues that easy-to-use affordances, algorithms and entertainment features attract users to engage in public-related videos on TikTok. According to the qualitative research method, the reasons why users participate on TikTok in public-related issues is that the user-friendly technological affordances and interfaces, which results in the universal accessibility of the platform. Another reason for user engagement with public issues is algorithms which trace users’ preferences and provide personalized video to users. Last but not least, entertainment feature attracts users to participate on TikTok, which expose users to humorous and entertained videos. For these reasons, users engage in public-related videos merely through “Liking” and simply “commenting”, while their expression of critical opinions towards public issue is still lacking. Thus, TikTok is not a real public sphere and it not contributes to the creation of public sphere. As users indicate they seldom search but frequently watch on the platform, algorithms encourage people to be viewers just to watch favorable videos rather than users or participants to make in-depth interactions and publish critical user-generated content. Additionally, public content production towards entertainment undermines the importance and seriousness of the information. This means the entertainment feature distracts users’ attention from serious information. In this sense, TikTok tends to be reducible to merely an entertainment tool.

Based on Habermas’ conceptualization of the “pseudo-public sphere” (Habermas, 1989), this study describes TikTok as a “limited public sphere” which do, to some extent, generate public discussions and debates about socio-political issues directly or indirectly (Lee, 2019). Nevertheless, the social impact of this sphere is restricted, that is, online public engagement is ostensible with liking, sharing, and short commenting without critical discussions. Thus, if TikTok wants to bring a profound impact on democracy to be a public sphere, there is still a long way to go.

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