The TikTok *Fitna*: Moral Panics, Short-Form Video, and the Contested Public Sphere in Pakistan

Hina Nawaz [1] Syed Abdul Siraj [2]

[1] PhD Mass Communication, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

[2] Senior Professor at Department of Media Studies, Bahria University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: professorsiraj58@yahoo.com

Corresponding Author: hinanawaz.191@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In Pakistan, the social media platform TikTok is in a paradoxical situation: it has become one of the most popular applications in the country and simultaneously the topic of frequent state bans. The paper claims that this recurring confrontation is not simply the issue of policing immoral content but a symptom of deeper societal conflict in the definition and control of the public sphere in the digital era. Based on the theory of moral panic by Stanley Cohen and counter-publics by Nancy Fraser, we examine the official state discourse supporting the idea of TikTok as a Fitna (a source of chaos or sedition). We argue that this platform is an effective, decentralized counter-public among the youth, rural citizens, and other groups often marginalized by Pakistan elite, state-controlled media. By critically analyzing various applications of the platform, including vernacular commerce and religious discourse, and considering the rise and fall of bans, this paper records the creation of a new, contentious space. We find that the TikTok battle is a main arena of the future of the Pakistani public sphere, where global platforms can radically reconfigure social and political communication at the grassroots, disrupting established patterns of state-centric cultural and informational control.

1. Introduction

The World's Most Contested App

In Pakistan, TikTok is a social media that is used as a cultural paradox. It is hailed as one of the most popular applications especially among the youth, but it is also experiencing several government bans that are indicative of underlying societal fears. This paper will contend that this is not a conflict over policing immoral content but rather a deep-seated conflict over the nature of the public sphere, cultural values and state control in the digital era. The repetitive official rhetoric that portrays TikTok as a source of moral anarchy and sedition places the platform as a case example in a state-driven moral panic, a phenomenon that refers to the concentration of societal anxieties on a given group of people or an issue that is labeled as a threat (Cohen, 2011).

The research paper enters the international discourse on platform governance that has been Euro-Americanized and has centered around the freedom of speech or data privacy. We argue that the main tension in most Global South situations is rather between state-led attempts to sustain socio-cultural and political stability and the decentralized and disruptive cultural production promoted through the global platforms. In order to examine this tension, this paper will synthesize the theory of moral panic with an idea by Nancy Fraser (1990) on counter-publics. We believe that TikTok in Pakistan is a dynamic counter-public; a different discursive environment, in which marginalized communities can express their identities and disrupt the mainstream discourses. The paper will initially describe this theoretical framework in more detail, then give a rich description of the Pakistani TikTok-scape, examine the cycle of state bans and reversals as a moral regulation mechanism, and finally make a conclusion about the larger implications of considering digital public spheres in post-colonial contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework: Moral Panics and Contested Publics

A two-fold theoretical approach is needed to comprehend how the state responds to TikTok in Pakistan. The moral panic concept describes the process of state and elite response, and the counter-publics theory describes what is being responded to: the creation of a new, powerful space of public expression.

The original principle of moral panic by Stanley Cohen (2011) offers a crucial understanding. Moral panics are periods of high, usually hyperbolic, popular anxiety about a condition or group as a challenge to social values. The key to this process is the presence of moral entrepreneurs, politicians, media figures, or community leaders, who recognize a threat and make it more prominent to the masses. The object of the panic is referred to as a folk devil, a scapegoat of more general social fears about change, modernity, or loss of control. The state in Pakistan through the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) has played the role of a moral entrepreneur on several occasions, branding TikTok a folk devil that encourages vulgarity and endangering the Islamic identity and culture of the country. This is not merely a censorship process; it is a kind of moral regulation that is meant to strengthen the parameters of acceptable social conduct in a time of perceived crisis (Hier, 2016).

In addition to this, the concept of the public sphere, as introduced by Jurgen Habermas (1989), a sphere of rational-critical discussion, can serve as a point of departure in the interpretation of digital discourse. Nevertheless, its utopian view of one, integrated sphere has been criticized on the reason that it ignored the existence of social inequalities. Here, the intervention provided by Nancy Fraser (1990) is more relevant. Fraser suggests that there is one monolithic public sphere which had marginalized groups historically. Rather, she assumes that there are various counter-publics, alternative spheres in which women, minorities, and other subalterns can model and spread their own versions of their identities, interests, and needs. Such counter-publics are arenas of discursive contestation in which other norms and social possibilities are envisioned.

The paper will argue that TikTok in Pakistan is a dynamic and disputed counter-public. It provides a space where young people, women, and rural communities can express themselves and criticize social norms in a manner that is usually not possible within the limits of the Pakistani mainstream media, which has historically been state-influenced and where journalism practice

tends to follow the official accounts (Siraj and Hussain, 2016). Efforts to regulate morality by the state in the form of bans therefore constitute a literal confrontation between a given order and a newly arisen and decentralized space of mass discourse where the very meaning of Pakistani culture is being actively challenged.

3. The Pakistani TikTok-scape: More Than Just Dancing

The state discourse of immorality intentionally oversimplifies the multidimensional and complex truth about TikTok use in Pakistan. The platform is a dynamic cultural production, economic and political expression ecosystem, which mirrors and conditions contemporary Pakistani society. The study of its various applications provides a clear picture of the type of counter-public formation that Fraser theorized.

3.1. The Vernacular Internet

The format of TikTok focuses on accessibility, and it gives users an opportunity to use the regional languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi and Pashto to express themselves. This creates a vernacular internet that does not rely on the Urdu- and English-language dominance of the elite media, but allows cultural storytelling and community building (Arora, 2016). This linguistic diversity is not just by coincidence, but rather, a political act of bringing visibility to identities and cultures which tend to be made invisible in the national public, thus serving as a potent instrument of making subaltern groups noticeable.

3.2. The Micro-Economy of the Creator Class

Arguably more important than expression, TikTok now serves as an influential micro-economy to small entrepreneurs, artisans, and influencers. The platform has features empowering users to promote products and services directly, which encourages the creation of a creator economy to give visibility and financial sustainability to those who do not have access to formal marketing platforms (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). This informal political economy is a threat to the state-centric approaches to the development process, as well as a channel to financial independence, especially to women and young people, which, in its turn, may be regarded as the challenge to all the established social order.

3.3. The Digital Pulpit and Political Soapbox

TikTok has turned into a crucial platform of both religious and political speech, as well. The platform features a new generation of digital religious influencers, who post spiritual content in accessible formats that can be viewed as engaging. At the same time, the app is used by other users as a formidable weapon of political satire and social commentary, creating awareness about the issues which can be easily suppressed in other forms of media (Sharif et al., 2024). Politically charged content is easily spread across the platform, creating groups of mutually grieved interests and desires. This makes TikTok an influential, albeit informal, means of activism and civic education and makes possible a form of political speech that is more fluid, more satirical and makes state actors less able to dominate than official journalistic production.

4. The State vs. The Platform: A Cycle of Bans and Reversals

The Pakistani state-TikTok relationship is marked by a chaotic pattern of bans and reinstatements. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) as the main moral entrepreneur has blocked the application several times, the first time in October 2020 and subsequently several times. The official explanation has always been based on the inability of the platform to filter the content of immorality, indecency, and vulgarity that contravene the social and religious values of Pakistan (Liu, 2024). It is a typical story of a moral panic, as the discourse is organized to mobilize mass opinion by presenting TikTok as a corrupting foreign force and users as folk devils who are threatening the moral fabric of the country. The actions of the state are an obvious endeavor to carry out moral regulation and reestablish its control over the national communicative space.

Nevertheless, every ban has been widely criticized by the public and has been relatively short lived. The reactions offered by TikTok have been strategic, with the promise of better content moderation and showing compliance through proactive removal of millions of videos. What is more important is that, due to the extensive social and economic presence of the platform, long-term bans are expensive politically. The application has triggered a micro-ecosystem of creators and small

entrepreneurs who rely on it to make a living, and who have formed a strong constituency to demand its revival (Kamran, 2023). The given dynamic demonstrates the Sovereign Dilemma: the need of the state to take control of morality and information collides with the fact of a global platform that is closely connected with the social and economic life of the country. This highlights the constrain of the state power against the face of decentralized, networked counter-publics that are also the centers of major economic activity.

5. Conclusion: A New Public in Formation

The Tik Tok battle in Pakistan is a decisive battleground of the future of the Pakistani public sphere. The attempts at controlling the fast changing digital environment can be seen in the cyclical prohibitions enforced by the state under the guise of moral panic. Nevertheless, the resilience of the platform illustrates the shortcomings of the traditional, state-centric concept of informational and cultural control in the wake of the formidable, global digital platforms.

The platforms such as TikTok are fundamentally reconfiguring the bottom-up social and political communication, despite the efforts by the state to suppress it. Offering an outlet of vernacular expression, alternative economic activity and uncensored, unfiltered political critique, TikTok is an effective counter-public whereby the marginalized voices can challenge the discourses propagated by elite power structures. This new public is not just the reaction to the state control, but the appeal to a broader, more pluralistic discourse, which acknowledges the differences of the identities and experiences of the country.

The example of the TikTok Fitna has more general implications on communication studies. It demonstrates that platform governance discourses are frequently less concerned with data privacy than with the basic struggles over culture, morality, and political influence in Global Souths. It emphasizes the agency of the users in adapting global platforms to local demands, building vibrant counter-publics that are both subversive of the state power and Western corporate standards. These digital spaces are therefore reshaping the future of the Pakistani public sphere, marking the beginning of a new age of decentralized communication in which the state authorities might have a harder time forcing their narratives upon them without challenge.

Conflict of Interest

Funding

References

Arora, P. (2016). The bottom of the data pyramid: The unique challenges of collecting digital data in the Global South. *First Monday, 21*(2). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v21i2.6309

Cohen, S. (2011). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, (25/26), 56–80.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (T. Burger, Trans.). The MIT Press.

Hier, S. P. (2016). Moral panic, moral regulation, and the civilizing process. *The British Journal of Sociology, 67*(3), 414–434. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12201

Kamran, S. (2023). The thermometer broke! Digital purdah, class, and gender transgressions on Pakistani TikTok. *Social Media + Society, 9*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231182359

Liu, D. (2024). Borderline content and platformised speech governance: Mapping TikTok's moderation controversies in South and Southeast Asia. *Policy & Internet, 16*(3), 543–566. https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.388

Puryear, C., Vandello, J. A., & Gray, K. (2024). Moral panics on social media are fueled by signals of virality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 127*(1), 84–103. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000379

Sharif, M., Ameen, M., & Taj, I. (2024). Rhythm of political semiotics: Analyzing TikTok's influence on Pakistan's political narratives. *Journal of Media, Culture and Communication, 5*(2), 1-25.

Siraj, S. A., & Hussain, S. (2016). Journalism in Pakistan: Practice and function. *Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities, 24*(2).

Zeng, J., & Kaye, D. B. (2022). From content moderation to visibility moderation: A case study of platform governance on TikTok. *Policy & Internet, 14*(1), 79–95. https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.287

Zulli, D., & Zulli, D. J. (2020). Extending the discourse of memes: Intertextuality, resonance, and the everyday. *New Media & Society, 22*(11), 2008–2023. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820909511.