

Living in a Moment: Impact of TikTok on Influencing Younger Generation into Micro-Fame

Badriya Abdul Jaffar
Amity University Dubai

Sadia Riaz
SP Jain School of Global Management Dubai

Arif Mushtaq
City University College of Ajman, UAE

ABSTRACT

In recent years since the creation of TikTok, there has been a rapid increase in the use of such applications by teenagers to gain popularity and cure boredom. The app was developed in China and is owned by Byte Dance. Initially called Musically, the advanced app, now known as TikTok, has 500 million monthly active users and is accessible in 34 languages. Followed by YouTube, Snapchat and Instagram, TikTok is the 4th most downloaded social app. Previous studies conducted show that such image focused apps lead to several mental health issues like body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, narcissistic personalities etc. The usage of this application has resulted in child pornography, cyberbullying and parental disengagement. The paper uses a pragmatic approach to examine in-depth reasons behind TikTok becoming a sudden massive success amongst teenagers along with its positive and negative effects. Content analysis is performed on parent's views and comments left as feedback at the app store for downloading this application. Qualitative data gathered is transcribed and codified to derive emerging themes. Focused group interviews with a few up and coming TikTok micro celebrities are conducted to explore their underlying thought processes, problems and other interesting facts about the application. The study proposes a conceptual framework as roadmap of TikTok micro-fame which could be used by other studies and researchers. The study substantiates a fact towards understanding the areas of further research in designing and developing the application from a functional as well as users' perspective.

Keywords: TikTok, Teenagers, Image-focused apps, Microfame, Popularity, Content analysis

Introduction

TikTok is one of the most popular apps on social media. This app is the world's prominent destination for creating short-form mobile videos in Asia, United States and other parts of the world. It emerged from the founders of the app called Musical.ly. TikTok, also known as Douyin in China, started in September 2016 and is maintained by Byte Dance (Lauren Hallanan, 2018). This media app is accessible in over 150 marketplaces and in 75 languages (Mehvish Mushtaq, 2018). TikTok has generated a modern trend among teenagers and permits users to make and share short 15 to 60-second short video and lets them choose songs, effects, or soundbites. An additional benefit is that collaboration which is a major motivation where they can do a "duet" with someone by responding to their video which results in a limitless chain of responses. In September, it exceeded

Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat in monthly installs in the App store. Due to 500 million worldwide effective users, with 6 million US downloads as of November TikTok became such a hit. As TikTok is like social media apps like Snapchat, Vine, or Dubsplash, it has gained its influence since it offers far more options for creators. TikTok is also a high rated app in the Google Play Store which is 4.6 and makes this application highly qualified merging Artificial Intelligence and image capture ("English Department", 2018). Existing literature has been collected and reviewed as part of secondary study. Primary data has been collected through reviews given by variety of people using the TikTok platform to make videos and parents of TikTok users. A serious gap can be identified in this study. The major audience to this app is teenagers. Yet this app is exploited by many users and displays TikTok as an app with more negative

impacts than positive. This study includes three main objectives:

- To evaluate the reasons as to why TikTok app has gained its sudden massive attention and determine positive and negative impacts of the application.
- To conduct a primary research constructed on content analysis of parent's opinion about TikTok and an interview a few up and coming microcelebrities to get their reviews about the application.
- To propose a conceptual framework to serve as users roadmap for TikTok's micro-fame.

Therefore, it is very important to understand how TikTok has been playing a crucial role in youths' life. Parents need to be aware of what their children's do and see in this app. This study hopes to benefit in relation to TikTok users which may help the psychologist in the future and parents to recognize why it has an immense effect on the younger generation.

Literature Review

In this section we have identified literature references broadly covering the objectives. Different theories have evolved through time to explain why applications suddenly gain a massive user base. A study conducted on the TikTok app suggested the user-centric theory which is a repetitive procedure where they focus more on the users and their needs. UCD requires the users throughout their process and carry out number of research and plan methods to produce extremely useful and reachable products for the users. As TikTok is purely created based on user's knowledge and understanding. As this app is not only used as a social network but focuses more on user's innovation and provides the users by offering them to easily convey their imagination. Reviewing the study by Jiang Xiao Yu (2019), the same is proven by the theory of user centric. Another article encouraged the business model which is also one of the reasons for gaining sudden massive attention. Business model represent the reasons of how the company produces, distribute and seize merit in financial, societal, cultural and further situations. However, to understand why it is unique, it is important to see the company behind TikTok, ByteDance. ByteDance had secured a round of subsidy from SoftBank and additional depositors consist of \$3b with an

estimate of \$75b. Their main mission not only aims to deliver knowledge but also to create a productive hub, present and motivate users and this idea helps their strategy in product growth. Users like Loren Gray, the LaBrant family, Baby Ariel, Kristen Hancher, Cameron Dallas, Gil Croes, Jayden Croes, Savannah Soutas, Liza Koshy and Mackenzie Ziegler who have created their fortunate brands and have their own music careers and most significantly YouTube channels. These top 10 influencers have gained millions of followers and can earn millions of dollars as more brands are ready to collaborate with influencers on this platform. As TikTok is capturing market shares apart from further common and famous media apps. Hence, ByteDance is violently advancing in progress and achieving its fame (Gennaro Cuofano, 2018). TikTok's business model like other media apps contain two main components that is users and advertisers. Its income comes from advertisements and app purchasers by TikTok users. Most important point to be noticed here is that users don't pay for downloading this app and using it but TikTok bundles its revenue from the data of the users that they get from you (The economic times, 2019). The recent statistics displays us that there are 500 million monthlies active TikTok users around the globe. Studying the article by Gennaro Cuofano, the same is represented by the business model. The way the app is designed is another benefit for TikTok to achieve its unexpected huge recognition. The first thing that makes TikTok different from other media apps is with the availability of several kinds of background music's, challenges, dance videos, magic tricks and funny videos that fascinate the youths to connect with the app. The second one is that this app requires less amount of time to create a video, 15 seconds which is an advantage for the users as this factor fit into the user's rapid lifestyle which makes TikTok totally different from other competing apps. This unique design of TikTok is a plus for the product and to support its development and growth. The first ever short video app to use big data analysis is TikTok. They have used big data analysis to understand the liking of the users so that they can suggest diverse contents to them which is easy for the users to select what they prefer (Hou Liqian, 2018).

The positive impacts are that TikTok has a chance in the field of education where the teachers can use this app in classrooms as a tool to illustrate an idea or example, which would work easily for students in schools (Brittany Marklin,2018). Another area where TikTok can spread its positive impact is through charity where the user shares a video based on holiday-themed augmented reality (AR) filters with the hashtag #CreateforaCause will give \$2 million to charity as the users post the video. Celebrities like Ashley Benson, Khloe Kardashian, Nick Jonas, Vanessa Hudgens, Nina Dobrev and Serayah who combined with this app to raise awareness for the campaign (Robert Williams,2018). TikTok is one of the top media apps which gives an opportunity to people who can showcase their acting skills and other talents through this app which may help the users to get chance in acting in film industries. As TikTok contains more negative influences than positive influences. An article published by The New Indian Express (2019) announce that in December alone 36 calls from children and adults was received by the counsellor of Tamil Nadu at the 104 helplines regarding TikTok bullying, harassment and addiction. A 23-year-old who committed suicide in Vyasarpadi in Tamil Nadu, he took the dangerous step after he was teased online for dressing up like a woman and posted on TikTok. Most targeted audience in this app are school students who are often seen in school uniforms posting videos of themselves in classrooms which give an opportunity to stalkers to guess which school they go to. "If at all china wants demographic data from ByteDance's userbase, it will perhaps be able to pull out more data than the Indian

government itself. This is not often considered a threat by local policy makers, but the truth is that they will have data relating to your height, weight and even how many users wear spectacles," said Moses Sam Paul working in Heptagon Technologies (The New Indian Express, 2019). "A lot of the content (on TikTok) is negative, especially for children," said Rudiantara is the reason why this has been blocked in Indonesia because the content in it is not suitable for children and not educational. Another article from The Economic Times (2019) states that the court of India ruling to ban the app TikTok from downloading as it contains "pornographic and inappropriate contents" said the government. Children were vulnerable and might get uncovered to sexual predators (The Economic Times, 2019). In 2019 India alone has obtained 88.6 million TikTok users regardless of the inappropriate content it holds. Youngsters who are getting addicted to TikTok or other similar apps, their future is in danger and because of this the mindset of the young children are ruined. It also exposes kids and Indian teenagers to cyberstalking, online predators and being victims of criminal offense. TikTok was compared to Blue Whale Challenge by the Madras High Court which lead to youth committing violent actions and impose self-harm. Moreover, it has been expelled from using, spreading and downloading any videos in India.

Methods and Procedures

In this paper, a primary research has been conducted through content analysis of parent's comments and feedback on TikTok and its effect on children. The idea was to look for most commonly used words (expressed as experience with TikTok application). Data was

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of Parents Feedback on TikTok App-store

Inappropriate Content	Privacy and safety	Mental health
Inappropriate songs and lyrics	Poor privacy precautions	Depressing
Promoting nudity	Sexual predators	Cyber-bullying
Adult language	Privacy settings not working	
Mature content	Paedophiles	
Pornography	Private accounts do not help	
X-rated contents	Not for kids under 16	
More of inappropriate content.		
Graphic violence		
Toxic and offensive app		
Mature eyes only		
Nasty app for kids		
Disturbing and addicting		

highly qualitative (N # 78). The qualitative data collected was transcribed and codified (Table 1).

The emerging codes and themes were recreated in Visio software for conceptual modelling purpose that can be seen in Figure 1. Conceptual model is based on high level of qualitative data abstraction and thematic correlation.

Based on codes and labels, coded findings of content into semi-structured themes. Themes included (i) inappropriate researcher contents (ii) privacy and settings and (iii) mental health. These themes highlighted the key areas where parents left key inputs in the app store feedback column.

- **Inappropriate content theme:** It included key concerns of parents like “a lot of nudity in this app” and “inappropriate songs and lyrics”. One parent said, “I came across very sexually inappropriate content”. It also includes “Disgusting”, “offensive songs” are easily searchable and “pornography exists”. The app also contains pop ups in the newsfeed where “every time I opened the app it would show a random person’s video, with no control over age appropriate parameters.” This app is not recommended for anyone under 18 years of age as it “turned into a child pornography platform”. The indecency of the app has accelerated to an extent where “adults are friending kids and spamming them with commercials with inappropriate content.” An extremely concerned parent states the unacceptable content “will de-sensitize them and they will think its ok. It subjects your children to extremely foul language and dancing”. Due to its negatives, this app has been described as “offensive and toxic”.
- **Privacy and settings theme:** Parents were of the considerate view that this app is more worried about gaining high number of users rather than protecting the youth “App has Poor Privacy Precautions”. Majority of people have reported “paedophiles” on this app. The duet feature of this app allows older men and creeps to create inappropriate responses to videos of children and women. The men record inapt and sexual reactions to videos of kids 18 years and younger, which is a key issue parents have noticed as well

“There are many child predators.” TikTok is a dangerous app to young kids as it permits people to easily “gather information” about users from their videos.

- **Mental health theme:** TikTok has also been a base for users to “bully” other users which leads to “depression” and “suicide” which need to be reported.

The last objective of this paper was to interview a few up and coming TikTok artist and their evaluations about this application. These individuals each have over 5k followers on the app and could be called microcelebrities. Each of them had their own perspective of the app.

1. Anjana Viswanathan, 19-year-old young girl from Kerala, India. Joined this app in 2018. She joined TikTok after during her vacation post-higher secondary examination. She felt boredom and was attracted to the digital world of TikTok for entertainment and for the purpose to kill boredom as there was a lot of hype about TikTok. “I was not very talented, so for me it was a good platform”. She made a video and posted it on the application getting some about 10 likes. However, she has 41.7 K followers now. She started making basic videos that are funny, musical, duet features and comedy-bits. Her parents encouraged her but warned while “Don’t post videos in any inappropriate way”. She said I get “negative comments but not suggestive or derogatory comments”. She has found micro-fame with this application that viewers now recognize her, and she felt very happy being recognized and clicked photograph. Her newfound micro fame contributed towards her self-confidence and appearance conscious. She has never faced any stalking or bad experience. However, she mentioned that her friends have faced comments based on their dressing sense from viewers that are extremely derogatory. She said that under-teenage minor kids should be careful or supervised by their parents as viewers pose racial comments, based on their looks and acting skills. She said that “If your account is private there are no issues”.
2. Akansha Dudeja, is a 19-year-old girl from Mumbai, India. She joined TikTok in

Nov-Dec 2018 because a “friend of mine had suggested this application”. She always wanted to be an actress or do with performance arts. She joined TikTok to explore her acting talent. She mostly posts videos on famous Bollywood songs, mimicking dialogues or trending videos, “I choose the videos and craft it the way I like, I do not take requests from viewers”. Her parents have been fine, are positive and supportive. She has 10k followers on TikTok. I received positive comment like, “superb, nice, looking nice”. She said that perhaps she gets these comments more because of her appearance than talent. As for negative comments, viewers post body shaming comments that she would ignore and prefer not to react. People can be “nasty and post extremely cheap comments sometimes”. She feels that she has not achieved micro fame but yes, at times, people recognize her, and she feels happy about it. She also felt that this application is not very safe for children as there are stalkers and child predators. There is high vulgar content, which is not good for children and minor. This application has also improved “my dressing sense and learnt how to carry myself socially”. I like some social media influencers: Pinky Francis, Ashiqa Bhatia, Avneet Kaur and Rishab Chawla and Abhishek Kumar.

3. Rahul Krishna is a 21-year-old boy from Kerala, India. He has 40 k followers. He had joined Musi.ly initially in 2015 for entertainment purpose. My “friends suggested, and I got addicted to it” and what I liked the most was when “people posted their response and commented that my acting skills was good, I realized I could be an actor and it became my passion”. Most of his videos are based on emotional and expressive content. He also takes request from people. “I am doing an album song with my friends right now”. He doesn’t think he is a TikTok celebrity and see any micro fame coming along the way. He said, “Lots of people are there so I am not the one with best talent”. He agreed to getting a lot of female attention, but not faced any stalking. I do get negative comments from “people who discourage creative ideas” but he said his friends have been receiving body shaming

comment and trolling. He believes “TikTok is nice entertainment app but also has a negative side” as one gets public attention which could be unnecessary. There are people who approach to extract personal information through fake accounts. My parents have initially called me “crazy” and didn’t support. Now they have changed their mind and started supporting. I think minors and kids should use it properly and carefully as content/material is way open in India, then in Dubai which is restricted and safer. Girls post exposing videos to get quick likes and recognition, which is not based on talent or expression. Rahul felt his confidence level has improved, he speaks better, and his dressing sense has changed for good.

4. Asbar Ali, 22-year-old student partially from Kerala and partially from Mumbai. He joined TikTok in October-November of 2018 and currently has around 4K followers. He started TikTok with a group of his friends to entertain others and kill boredom. In the beginning, He was not used the features of the application but once he got a hang of it, he opened doors for himself. He has received a lot of positive reviews on his videos, with people calling it ‘superb’, ‘good acting’ and encouraging him to continue. However, he has not received any negative backlash on his videos but acknowledges the fact that when he makes videos with any girl, people make derogatory comments on the girls acting and dressing style even. On his account he makes tons of musical and duet bits as well as videos with his friends. His parents have watched his videos and encourage him to continue making them, while being vigilant of the content and maintaining his grades. He is a part of the UAE TikTok artists group. Once you’re a member of the TikTok team “you can’t be a member of any other social media platform because of the contract” and in case if you enter your account would get deleted from TikTok as the member has violated the contract. He has noticed that at times female TikTok stars have trouble reporting inappropriate as they do not want to indulge in any trouble outside the application. The new policies instated in

the app have made it easier to block out inappropriate content with new features like blocking comments section, reporting fake profiles etc. He also stated that in UAE the app is strictly maintained, and improper content get deleted immediately compared to India. He believes these features have made it easier and safer for people to make videos on TikTok. As for, what he thinks about children making videos on the app, "Age is just a number" anyone and even 10 or 100 likes makes them excited and motivates children to make more videos. Everyone should make videos on the TikTok and view it only from an entertainment perspective.

Conceptual Model (Road Map to TikTok Micro-Fame)

As shown in Figure 1, conceptual model demonstrates the roadmap of the TikTok micro-fame. It is used by users in different age groups, apparently no restrictions on that. It is used by two dominant age groups: minors (under teens) and teenagers. It also displays how parents played a role in their journey of achieving micro-fame and exhibits the reasons to use the application along with negative and positive effects of this application.

Discussion

This study focuses on the concept of TikTok gaining it sudden massive attention. This is also supported by two theories, one of the theories is the user's centric theory which means which mainly focuses on users and their needs. As TikTok is an app which emphasis on users' requirements which results in easy access to TikTok users. Another theory is the business model theory where the company mainly focuses on financial, societal, cultural and other conditions. The main business model behind this app is the Byte Dance which has secured its funding from SoftBank and additional deposits consist of \$3b with an estimate of \$75b. Loren Gray, Baby Ariel, Savannah Soutas, Liza Koshy who have created their fortunate brands and have their own music careers and most significantly YouTube channels. These influencers who have gained massive followers and can earn millions of dollars as more brands are ready to collaborate with them on this phase. Including both Google Play downloads starts and Apple App store, this app graded third in the world as of November 2018. It has also gained 4th position in the world subsequently at least

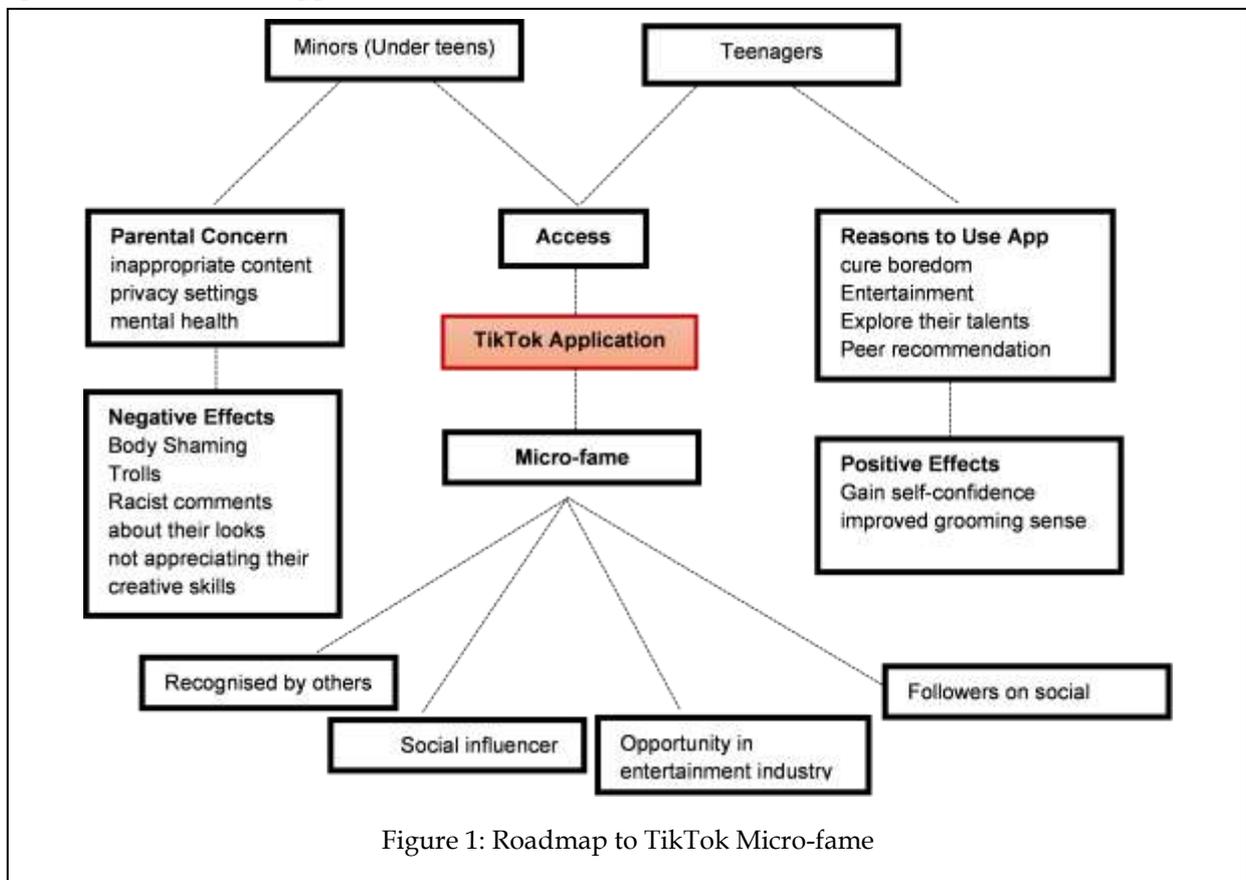


Figure 1: Roadmap to TikTok Micro-fame

June 2018. TikTok was combined with Music.ly app in August 2018. This allowed the Chinese app to come in the US market with Musical.ly which is already a boosting app. The design of the app is also one of the reasons for TikTok to gain sudden massive attention. First are the features available for the user like challenges, dance videos, duet feature and magic tricks that attract the youths to use this app. Second is that it needs less time to make the video which is a benefit for the users. This app has also used big data analysis which allows them to understand the likings of users and helps them to recommend varied contents to users as they prefer. This study also concentrates on the positive and negative impacts of this app. Positive influences are that this app provides a chance to teacher to illustrate an idea or example which would help students in classrooms. This app can also be used to raise awareness and for donation. It also permits users to showcase their acting skills and other talents thorough this app. As TikTok holds more of negative impacts than positive impacts. Newspaper articles have found a lot of cases where children and adults are calling counsellors at different times to complain about harassment, bullying and addiction that they experienced through this app. TikTok has been such a dangerous impacts on people that has even lead to self-harming and suiciding because of cyber bullying. This news is evident in the newspaper articles that is studied in literature review. This app mostly aims school students posting videos. This app has been creating a lot of negative content for children. The court of India reigning to ban TikTok as it includes "pornographic and inappropriate contents". Irrespective of the inappropriate content it claims India alone has 88.6million users. This news is also observable in newspaper articles that is studied in literature review. This study also includes primary research based on content analysis of parent's response and observations of this app and its consequence on their children. Content analysis has been divided into themes like inappropriate contents, privacy and setting and mental health. Inappropriate contents include inappropriate songs and lyrics, sexually inappropriate content, child pornography, disgusting and offensive songs were the key concerns expressed by parents. Privacy and settings were also major worry by parents like poor privacy precautions, paedophiles, child

predators and bullying. Mental health issues like bullying leads to depression and suicide shared by parents. As part of the primary data, four interviews were conducted of Students from in India, living in the UAE who regularly make videos on TikTok. All these interviewees have over 5k followers and aged from 19-22 years old. Some of the interviewee said that they started making videos to kill boredom, entertainment and others to explore their hidden talents. All four of the users had string support and encouragement from their parents but one of the TikTok user was called "crazy". This application has helped them to increase their self-confidence, dressing sense and one of them realized that they had a serious acting potential. All of them experienced negative comments or their friends experiencing cheap and nasty comments. Negative comments like "body shaming", "racial comments", "their looks" and "acting skills". Some of the interviews stated that this app is inappropriate for minor kids a it contains "high vulgar content". One of the TikTok user mentioned that female users had a lot of trouble reporting problems directly. Therefore, TikTok is just an app for entrainment, kill boredom and to explore their acting skills.

Conclusion

Plethora of research and studies have been done to understand why TikTok has gained its sudden massive attention and its effects on the younger generation. This study is important so we can improve the functional perspective and user's perspective of this app. This platform also exceedingly provides to the user's preferences which often results in the misuse of its features and vulgarization of the content. There are contents that disrupts the ordinary mortals of the society, absence of effective and precise value guidance. The content seems to be standardized and some part of the content contains Violation. The user-centric theory which effortlessly validates the "uses and gratification" theory. If it's only based on "satisfaction" and if there is no "guidance" the entire function will deteriorate. In India especially TikTok has be a major concern leading it to the ban of the app due its inappropriate content and Pornography. I, as an Indian want to preserve a safe and confident in-app environment at TikTok. More actions should be taken to defend users against misapplication, their privacy and

digital security. It should also enable users to report content that are inappropriate and violate community guidelines. This study would also help parents to recognise the negative impact such image-focused applications have on the children and enlighten teenagers to be more vigilant while using the app. From the above data collected it was seen that there were similarities in the issues raised by parents' opinion and the participants' interviewed. Both parents and the interviewees state that vulgarity and inappropriate comments are present on the app where the interviewee's asserting that girls are more likely to face cheap and objectifying comments. In the aspect of privacy settings, most claim that the app is quite safe with new laws being implemented post the ban of the app in India. As for minors, it's not safe with its highly suggestive and vulgar content. Two of the interviewees said that kids need to be monitored on the app as "age is just a number". I would conclude this study by stating that this app should follow to the part of "gatekeeper" and should eliminate the energy of harmful content. It can also improve the "aesthetic taste" and encounter the high level "spiritual needs" of users by giving quality content. This paper also discusses reviews given by individuals "microcelebrities" about TikTok.

References

- All about TikTok, the Chinese app in the eye of a storm in India. (2019, April 5). The Economic Times. Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/software/all-about-tiktok-the-chinese-app-in-the-eye-of-a-storm-in-india/articleshow/68739941.cms>
- C. Gennaro. (n.d). TikTok Business Model: The Rise of Creative Social Media by AI - FourWeekMBA. Retrieved from <https://fourweekmba.com/tiktok-business-model/>
- C. Nicola. (2018, august 16). Parents may worry about China's social media app TikTok, but it's far from a waste of time. Retrieved from <https://yp.scmp.com/news/features/article/110179/parents-may-worry-about-chinas-social-media-app-tik-tok-it%E2%80%99s-far-waste>
- Clock is ticking: Experts urge caution as popularity of TikTok surges. (2019, January 6). The new Indian express. Retrieved from <http://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2019/jan/06/clock-is-ticking-experts-urge-caution-as-popularity-of-tiktok-surges-1921096.html>
- E. Kyleigh. (2018, December 19). Top 10 TikTok Influencers. Retrieved from <https://neoreach.com/top-tik-tok-influencers/>
- G. Mohul. (2019, April 4). TikTok Has Been Banned in India; HC Says TikTok Is Polluting Youngster. Retrieved from <https://trak.in/tags/business/2019/04/04/tiktok-has-been-banned-in-india-hc-says-tiktok-is-polluting-youngsters/>
- Indonesia bans TikTok music video maker app over 'negative content'. (2018, July Coconuts Jakarta. Retrieved from <https://coconuts.co/jakarta/news/indonesia-bans-tik-tok-music-video-maker-app-negative-content/>
- Lasseen Ida. (n.d). TikTok: Should I Be Worried? Retrieved from <https://kindaba.com/tik-tok-worried-musically-social/>
- T. Kat. (2018, august 6). Can TikTok Be the Next Vine or Are Seconds-Long Streaming Apps Over? Retrieved from <https://www.inverse.com/article/47817-what-is-tik-tok-the-app-flooding-social-media-with-ads-and-partnerships>
- Xiao Yu, jiang. (2019). Research on TikTok APP Based on User-Centric Theory. Applied Science and Innovative Research, 3. doi:10.22158/asir.v3n1p28.
- W. Robert. (2018, December 21). TikTok ties AR content sharing to charitable giving in celebrity-filled campaign. Retrieved from <https://www.mobilemarketer.com/news/tiktok-ties-ar-content-sharing-to-charitable-giving-in-celebrity-filled-cam/544921/>.
