

TikTok: Social Media Surveillance

Whether the Banning of TikTok is Justified and its Wider Political Impact on Students

01. Introduction

- TikTok, a Chinese social media app, has faced privacy concerns due to its Chinese ownership and governments have threatened to ban TikTok.
- Many states label it a 'national security threat' but concrete evidence is lacking.
- It is crucial to examine the political implications of the ban, including potential freedom violations.
- This research explores the political impacts of TikTok's surveillance and media manipulation, analysing whether a ban on TikTok is justified.
- Previous studies mainly examine the national-level impact; this research delves into the opinions of student TikTok users and their parents. It investigates users' willingness to boycott the app.



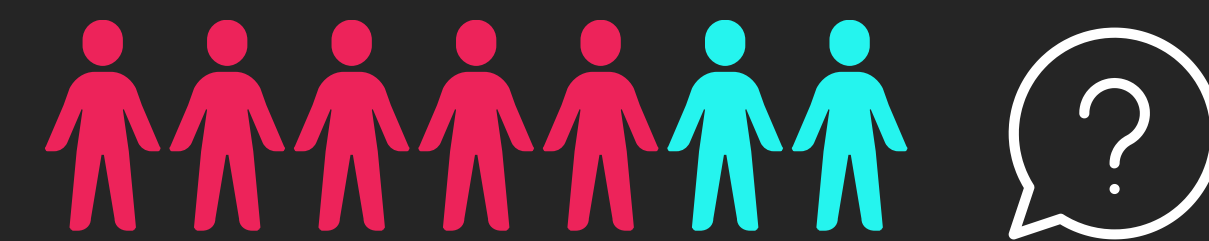
AIM: EXAMINE WHETHER THE BANNING OF TIKTOK IS JUSTIFIED

02. Literature Review

- TikTok's alleged social media surveillance and political censorship practices have put it under intense scrutiny. Yet, technical analyses question the severity of these threats, signifying TikTok's apolitical stance and dismissing exaggerated security and privacy risks.
- Using international relations theories, realism theory posits that a state's self-interest prioritises survival, potentially leading to conflicts over power. The Trump's administration suspicion of China's ambitions contributes to this perspective. The perception of TikTok as a 'national security threat' can also be seen as socially constructed, shaped by state interests.
- Organizations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) argue that banning TikTok is unjustifiably paternalistic as it undermines free speech and sets troubling precedents for the banning of other social media platforms.

03. Methodology

- Objective: Providing a qualitative report to highlight users' opinions on this topic to draw inferences
- Recruiting British and mainland Chinese university students, who actively use TikTok or Douyin. A total of forty-seven students participated, responding to Likert scale questionnaires tailored to TikTok and Douyin users. They assess opinions on topics such as media manipulation, willingness to boycott, and the perception of a ban as a violation of freedom.



- Interviewing five parents of teenage TikTok users explores their concerns about TikTok's censorship, misinformation, and their recommended potential solutions.

04. Results

• Questionnaire for University Students

~ TikTok users are inclined to boycott the app if there is proven illegal data collection but are less likely to do so if labelled a national security threat by the government. They generally disagree that TikTok poses a national security threat. Douyin users are less committed to boycotting even in the face of malicious behaviour but more inclined to believe that ByteDance can collect their personal data illegally.

~ In terms of the ban's paternalism, users partially agree that it's harmful but do not prefer an outright ban, and they are rather neutral about it violating their freedom.

~ Both platforms serve as news sources for students, with more trust in Douyin than TikTok. TikTok users believe some TikTok content is manipulative but have more distrust in ByteDance's information, compared to Douyin users.

• Interview with parents of TikTokers

~ All parents of TikTok users express concerns about censorship and media manipulation, not limited to TikTok but encompassing various platforms. They worry about its biased algorithms and disagree with TikTok being a news source.

~ Most suggest ByteDance should intensify scrutiny of its content, while one parent trusts the government more due to TikTok's Chinese origin. They all advocate for increased regulations on TikTok, with some proposing these rules apply to other platforms too.



05. Discussion



- The results show that users value concrete evidence over government labels. Thus government intervention may not be necessary, as users are ready to act if evidence emerges. Existing studies show that TikTok does not engage in malicious activities so a ban based on national security risks is unsupported.
- Douyin exhibits more malicious activities, but users are less committed to boycotting it, possibly due to their dependence on it as both a social media platform and a news source.
- The ban is not entirely unjustly paternalistic, given user concerns about potential harm, but considering TikTok as a news source suggests that a 'soft paternalistic' approach, such as education about surveillance and censorship risks, might be more suitable.
- Instead of an outright ban, many favour increased scrutiny of TikTok's content and activities to mitigate its risks, such as 'Project Texas'. Yet its effectiveness is debatable. A consumer data privacy law covering all apps rather than singling out TikTok might be a better solution in addressing data collection practices across digital businesses, thus curbing data supply to adversaries.

06. Conclusion

- The research findings highlight the importance of evidence-based decision-making and nuanced solutions to TikTok's alleged risks.
- Banning TikTok due to national security reasons lacks justification, given skepticism about this status; and users are unwilling to boycott solely based on government labels without solid evidence of its security risks.
- Any outright ban on TikTok is not the most suitable, even with proof of surveillance. Other approaches like education and consumer data privacy legislation might be more effective in addressing privacy concerns while respecting users' autonomy.