

The Influence of TikTok on Political Perception

A qualitative study on Politically Insensitive Youth in Taiwan

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Abstract

Social media platforms provide direct access to an unprecedented amount of content (Cinelli et al., 2021) and radically changed the mechanism by which countless public worldwide form opinions and communicate. The main motivation for most people to use social platforms is entertainment-oriented, however, inevitable exposure to political content may influence one's political viewpoint. In response to the rapid rise in the use of TikTok, I undertook focus groups and semi-structured interviews on politically insensitive youth. A qualitative analysis of this data finds: (1) TikTok as a trendsetting space increases the possibility of users being passively exposed to political content that they consider to be of no interest in everyday practice, which is less often the case on Facebook or other social media platforms. (2) Political content on TikTok is considered more relatable, tangible, and accessible. (3) TikTok increased political awareness but does not substantively mobilize direct institutional political participation. (4) Excessive emphasis on amusing trivia limited TikTok as an emerging political communication tool to take full advantage. This finding enables a deeper understanding of the role that TikTok plays in potentially shaping the perception of politically insensitive youth and provides a reminder to those who try to achieve political goals through TikTok.

Keywords: Political communication, politically insensitive youth, political perception, social media platform, TikTok

Introduction

In September 2016, Chinese company ByteDance released the film-based social media platform that enables users to create and share films ranging from a few seconds to several minutes. (Anderson, 2020) It is called Douyin in China and TikTok in the International market. TikTok's acquisition of Musical.ly in November 2017 brought it 80 million users, mostly in the United States. With this, TikTok managed to push itself into the overseas market. (Iqbal, 2023) Since then, TikTok has experienced exponential growth and popularity in the past few years, unseating Facebook as the most downloaded app. (Vijay & Gekker, 2021) As of Q1 2021, it has exceeded 3.5 billion all-time downloads worldwide (Ang, 2022) and has approximately one billion monthly active users (Wallaroo Media, 2023).

TikTok is an extremely influential platform characterized by an algorithmic-driven design that constantly recommends engaging short-length videos to a global audience. (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2023) Users are asked to choose their interests from a list that includes animals, comedy, travel, food, sports, beauty, art, gaming, science, etc. and this determined which videos to be pushed according to their selection. (Anderson, 2020) Rather than encouraging the formation of online communities, TikTok offers an incessant flow of personalized films feed on the 'For You' page. (Van Poucke, 2023) TikTok users will see content from a variety of accounts, even those they have never followed or interacted with. Thus, some argued the prevalence of the algorithm sets TikTok apart from other outwardly

similar social media platforms, while they are still ostensibly only an enhancement of a user-driven experience on other platforms. (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022)

Tolentino (2019) described TikTok as a social network that has nothing to do with one's social network, an enormous meme factory, compressing the world into pellets of virality and dispensing those pellets until you get full or fall asleep. Those pellets of virality are then easily shared outside of the platform on other social media platforms which brings more users to the app. (Anderson, 2020) This precisely describes how TikTok constantly recommends engaging short-length videos to a global audience (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2023) and becomes an extremely influential social media platform.

Technology networking public is nothing new, but how to mobilize the politically insensitivity citizens has long been a struggle for candidates and activists. Berger and Milkman (2013) pointed out high-arousal emotionality as a key driver of viral social media posts, while Papacharissi (2014) also coincidentally describes the affective public as fragile, fluid, and turbulent. This raised serious concerns as established structures, such as legacy media institutions or professional journalists, are losing relevance and influence. (Lünenborg, 2019) Instead, messages on social media platforms, which lack planning and centralization, reach millions of people around the world through emotional power and algorithmic serendipity. (Hautea et al., 2021) This precisely explains my interest in TikTok's influence. Because humor and play are at the center of TikTok culture (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2023), its 'affective

contagion' or so-called 'memetic power' is more to be expected than conventional channels and other social media platforms.

TikTok is beyond doubt a huge success in pop culture and business. Yet its political potential is obvious as well ambiguous. TikTok has become the main source of information for more and more people. In the U.S., adults under 30 who say they regularly get news from TikTok has roughly tripled between 2020 and 2022, in contrast with many other social media sites, where news consumption has either declined or stayed about the same in recent years. (Pew Research Center & Matsa, 2023) It was also found the emergence of TikTok as a political actor (Vijay & Gekker, 2021) and a new strategic tool for politicians to drive political narratives. (Hidayat & Muksin, 2022)

A rising digital platform itself is not a problem, but the hidden concerns raised by its Chinese ownership, highlight the substantial difference between TikTok and any other main social media platforms. The Chinese government was dedicated to foreign propaganda and building of 'cultural soft power' way back in 2007. (Edney, 2012) A study has warned of China's ability to manipulate, censor, propagate, control, and influence TikTok and use it in the exercise of political power. (Melin, 2020) From this, as a country facing the risk of cultural, political, and military invasion the most, it is reasonable to worry about whether the emergence of TikTok has contributed to a substantial change in political perception among Taiwanese young people.

Meanwhile, political alienation or apathy among young citizens has been increasingly studied in the last decade. To find out whether and how TikTok usage has in any way overcome the reasons that retard political participation, I focus on young TikTok users who do not participate in voting and are not familiar with political affairs, trying to understand which TikTok political films, if any, resonate with them more and what behaviors they have taken in response to it. This study will help to better understand the future political landscape and provide suggestions for activists and politicians who try to promote political intentions through TikTok.

Therefore, this study focuses on TikTok and political communication to explore how TikTok usage influences the political perception and behaviors of politically insensitive youth.

My research questions are as follows:

RQ1: Compared to other content, how do politically insensitive TikTok users react to films they identify as political content?

RQ2: How has exposure to TikTok's political content changed politically insensitive users' perceptions of politics?

Theoretical Background

TikTok is an under-researched but increasingly significant platform for political expression. (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023) Work by Hautea et al. (2021) discussed how earnest climate activism competes with mocking satirists, playful attention-seekers, and bored

time-killers for visibility and clout on TikTok. This is one of the few studies that focus on the use of the platform's effective affordances to spread awareness of important issues. It was found TikTok creators often combined sincere appeals with humorous text or visuals to improve the palatability, appeal, and dissemination of a topic such as climate change, around which discourse is often politically and ideologically charged. Coincidentally, another recent study on the TikTok accounts of governmental health departments in China applied the concept of Message Sensation Value (MSV) to describe the public's reaction to public service announcements. Zhu et al. (2019) pointed out that films shorter than 60 seconds with original music and subtitles were more likely to engage citizens. However, whether these films were just digital detritus floating through social media platforms or did they contribute to a broader, coalescing awareness of the issue is inconclusive.

Several intrinsic characteristics of TikTok deserve scholarly attention. Firstly, with billions of active users spread across 154 countries, TikTok is undoubtedly the most thriving platform today. (Ruby, 2023) Any study of social media platforms should not ignore this large and growing group. Public perception traditionally sees TikTok as trivial and less important than other social media platforms because of its young user base. However, some have come up with the exact opposite view. In the work of Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023), they strongly emphasized TikTok, rather than more mainstream platforms like Facebook or Twitter, as a worth researching place to study youth online political expression. TikTok is strongly

youth-focused. As of September 2022, almost 50 percent of the content creators on TikTok were aged between 18 and 25 years old (Statista & L. Ceci, 2022) and 60 percent of users are Gen Zers (Wallaroo Media, 2023), who will continue to exert political influence in the following years. Not to mention how much young people care about what their peers think when forming their attitudes about political issues. (Lee et al., 2012) It is forward-looking to explore how they form their political perception.

Secondly, the geopolitical conflict over its ownership and operations (Kaye et al., 2020) is unprecedented. Several governments, including the United States, Canada, Australia, the European Union, India, and Taiwan, have escalated efforts to restrict access to TikTok due to national security concerns. Some also believe TikTok has become a source of China's soft power (Nazaruk, 2021) so they could use TikTok's content recommendations for misinformation (Holpuch & Maheshwari, 2023) and disseminate state propaganda. (Perper, 2019) Considering that tensions between China and Taiwan had been increasing (Brown, 2023), Taiwan is perhaps one of the countries most in need of vigilance against Chinese ownership as well as concern about the impact of the use of TikTok on people's political perception. Furthermore, with the same language, TikTok has even more influence on Taiwanese users than in any other country. Seeing it only as a neutral social platform might underestimate TikTok's political influence.

Lastly, not only TikTok narrates political information differently from conventional

media channels, but also the politically insensitive youth are hard to reach through traditional political propaganda. (Hartley, 2010) Therefore, ignoring the growing number of people who build political perceptions on TikTok will lead to a wrongly assess of the current political landscape.

Methods of Empirical Research

I conducted the focus group and additional in-depth individual interviews with 11 TikTok monthly active users in Taiwan, ranging in age from 18 to 27 years in 2023. A self-report questionnaire was required beforehand to understand their TikTok usage and past political participation and ensure that appropriate respondents were selected.

All the respondents accessed their TikTok account at least once a week in the past year. Citing app developers and marketers, they all meet the criteria of monthly active users. Most of them were primarily social media consumers. Their TikTok usage scenarios included aimless scrolling, browsing algorithmic-feed films, clicking hashtags, searching keywords, and interpersonal communication with close friends and random users through clicking the Like button or sharing.

All the respondents were not politically active. They reported being absent in voting, protests, and petition in the past year and held strong opinions on neither political party affiliation nor stance on unification and independence preference. Furthermore, they claimed that obtaining political information is not one of their motivations for using TikTok.

Extra effort was put into ensuring that the sample is relatively heterogeneous so that allows insights into varied settings and avoids over-represent. 5 of the respondents were female, and 6 were male. They lived in varied geographical areas in Taiwan from the north to the south, including the capital city, large metropolises, and mere countryside. The respondents further comprised a broad mix in terms of educational background, occupation, livelihood, interests, and lifestyles, as shown in table 1.

TABLE 1

Overview of the respondents and their background characteristics (n = 11)

| Anonymous Identifier | Gender | Age | Residency ^a | Educational Attainment | Occupation | Household Income ^b | Political Affiliation ^c | Identify |
|-------------------------------------|--------|-----|------------------------|------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------|
| Focus Group 1 (approx. 2 hr) | | | | | | | | |
| A1 | M | 19 | Centre / Urban | College or University | Student | 3 | Not applicable | Taiwanese |
| A2 | M | 22 | Periphery / Rural | Secondary Education | Manual Worker | 1 | Slightly Pro-Unification | Both |
| A3 | F | 22 | Periphery / Rural | Post-graduate Degree | Office Worker | 2 | Not applicable | Taiwanese |
| Focus Group 2 (approx. 3 hr) | | | | | | | | |
| B1 | M | 25 | Centre / Rural | College or University | Manual Worker | 2 | Not applicable | Taiwanese |
| B2 | M | 20 | Periphery / Urban | College or University | Office Worker | 3 | Not applicable | Both |
| B3 | M | 27 | Centre / Urban | Post-graduate Degree | Freelancer | 3 | Slightly Pro-independence | Taiwanese |
| B4 | F | 25 | Centre / Urban | Post-graduate Degree | Office Worker | 3 | Slightly Pro-independence | Taiwanese |
| B5 | F | 26 | Centre / Urban | Post-graduate Degree | Freelancer | 2 | Slightly Pro-independence | Taiwanese |
| Focus Group 3 (approx. 2 hr) | | | | | | | | |
| C1 | M | 22 | Periphery / Rural | College or University | Office Worker | 2 | Not applicable | Taiwanese |
| C2 | F | 18 | Centre / Urban | College or University | Student | 5 | Not applicable | Taiwanese |
| C3 | F | 22 | Periphery / Urban | College or University | Office Worker | 2 | Slightly Pro-independence | Taiwanese |

^a Center refers to the politically, economically, and culturally dominant region in the west of Taiwan, including the capital city (Taipei city) and other 5 municipalities. The other 16 cities and countries are classified as peripheral regions. Both center and peripheral regions contain urban and rural areas.

^b The level of household income is classified into five levels according to income tax rates.

Level 1 is the lowest while level 5 is the highest.

All interviews were conducted online with satisfactory conditions. The focus group interviews were divided into three parts with 3 to 5 respondents respectively. To encourage the free expression of affectively charged information, the focus group interviews consisted of respondents with similar political affiliations. It was emphasized that there are no right or wrong answers expected, not everyone needs to answer every question and they didn't have to agree with what other respondents said.

The focus group interview started with grand tour questions to determine the research objects, places, people, events, and time and how all these elements interrelate. (Forsey, 2010) Discussion topics included regular usage patterns, the types of content they paid more attention to and why, and additional self-expression. Respondents were asked to describe as detailed as possible how they spend time on TikTok on an ordinary day. The pre-determined set of open questions allows new ideas to be brought up during the interview as a result of the respondents' responses. (Knott et al., 2022) Following these broad introductions, specific incidents were focused on and sought further clarification through probe questions.

To better understand the actual TikTok usage, respondents were first asked to describe any content they saw on TikTok that they thought had political implications. This explained what kind of films impressed the respondents the most. Then I presented TikTok films on topics related to unification and independence to the respondents because this is one of the most

prominent issues nationwide. This is to observe how different respondents form political perceptions prompted by the same TikTok content. The content of the film is detailed along with their responses in the following section of the research findings.

Each focus group interview lasted about 2.5 hours and was recorded and fully transcribed. Transcriptions were broken into smaller units of content, coded carefully, and searched for thematic similarities and differences to build grounded theory. (Boeije, 2010) All study result has been fully anonymous to ensure the confidentiality of the respondent's identity.

Finding

Overarching themes emerged upon analysis as follows:

TikTok as an Everyday Practice of Trendsetting

Bhandari and Bimo (2022) described the frequent presence on TikTok as an accumulation of social currency for future social interactions. From this perspective, TikTok is a trendsetting space that offers offline conversation materials. 'Have you seen that on TikTok?' (A2) is a common sentence used by respondents and their offline networks. Respondents reported either regular or sporadic TikTok usage, like a daily ritual before bedtime (B3) or distraction in the queue (C1). The former is more of a habit to ensure you stay connected with others. Users spend a considerable amount of time to 'see what's going on.' (B3) The latter is what Bengtsson and Johansson (2022) described as interval use. With the main purpose being to pass the time 'just because having nothing else to do at that time' (A3), users do not expect

to see anything specific. It is referred to as 'a short break' as well. (A3) In his study on the use of Facebook Live, Nguyen (2021) pointed out that people can recover from mental unhealth and regain strength to come back to real life through this seemingly aimless use of social platforms. These all explain why TikTok users hold an open attitude toward unexpected and unfamiliar content.

Frequent usage naturally makes TikTok the main source of various information for users, despite most respondents being dismissive of the description of viewing TikTok as a formal source of news. Respondents showed 'satisfaction with the push content' (A2) and agreed 'TikTok understands me and knows what to show me' (C3), even though they have seen political content while they consider themselves not interested in politics.

When asked to give a general description of TikTok usage, respondents often, unprompted, made comparisons to other prominent social media platforms. The continuously recommended default content replaces the function of maintaining the existing network and makes TikTok more like purely a source of unspecified information. A large amount of trend content appears in a short period, yet they only took further interaction on a small part of them. For content from random, unknown creators, whether it resonates is the main factor affecting users' following behaviors. 'I shared the films I found funny or make sense to those I assumed they could understand and would feel the same as me after watching it.' (C1) For example, 'I shared films illustrating overwhelming parenting situations to my new parent's friends.' (B1)

It is worth noting that during the interviews, none of the respondents, unprompted, mentioned that they shared political content with others, even though it was later found they did remember certain political content that they thought was amusing. They first determined whether the content is relatable and then decided whether to take follow-up actions. 'We are not used to talking about this (politics) ...I don't see why I should bring it (TikTok political contents) up to them.' (A2) The recognition of 'this film is about people like me or for people like me' (A1) is the key factor in whether to interact with the TikTok film.

Blurring The Tension Between Amusing Play and Serious Political Participation

The reasons why young people are alienated from politics are not the main focus of this study. However, to explore whether TikTok usage helps promote a more positive attitude towards politics or further encourages participation, it is necessary to mention what has been hindering them. Then it can be examined whether political content on TikTok removes these barriers.

A diverse negative attitude toward the political field was mentioned during the interview, ranging from disinterest, and dislike, to distaste. Some said they 'didn't avoid politics on purpose but happened to be occupied by something more interesting' (C1 and C3), while others said they are 'annoyed when someone forces me to accept their opinion.' (A2) Despite the different causes of absence in elections, they all agreed that it took time and effort to participate in politics. Participating in politics is considered 'a waste of time' (B2) because

‘it does not matter whether you participate or not and it won't cause any loss if you do not participate’ (B1). They would rather spend their leisure time on other hobbies. At the present stage, ‘a lack of knowledge of politics and public affairs resulted in their ignorance of political messages and absence in elections, but they were confident being capable of participating if only they want to. (A3, B3, and C1) In other words, low motivation rather than lack of money, time, access, or knowledge is a more prominent factor for youth political alienation. Playful culture on TikTok happened to address this issue.

TikTok political content can be roughly divided into three categories. From independent creators, whose film content usually mocks or spoofs politicians of the opposing parties, with the main purpose of making people laugh and attracting followers. Official accounts of politicians, on the other hand, focus on presenting what work has been done, aiming to increase reputation and seek support from citizens. Special effort was put to create a relaxing atmosphere to echo the culture of the platform. Still another, TikTok posted by news media accounts is somewhere in between. While maintaining an objective statement of events, it is necessary to create as many eye-catching highlights as possible. A respondent (A1) shared a typical example of news extraction reporting a conflict between two female Councilor. The photographer deliberately close-up her awkward and ugly expression ‘to make it even more hilarious.’

Humor, playfulness, and irony are easily observable features of communication online.

(Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021) Not only Cervi and Divon (2023) took a deep dive into how TikTok's rich set of vernaculars and rooted playful cultures contributed to the widespread activism on TikTok, but Li et al. (2021) also found films with dancing content received greater public engagement. Most respondents expressed a higher acceptance of content they found interesting, regardless of the subject of the film. 'The vivid filter, background music, popular memes, and spoof plots' (A1, A3, B2, B4, C1, and C3) help keep them curious. Also, 'there were some political expressions, but not much' reduced the desire to skip it. (B4) The amusing content even attracted one of the respondents (C3) to follow the media News official account. 'Films with exaggerated subtitles, sound effects, and hilarious edit...I just cannot stop laughing,' he said.

This highlights the critical importance of appealing and easily comprehending content, especially for the uninterested, and explains why political content on TikTok is therefore perceived to be more relatable, tangible, and accessible than that on conventional channels. A stress-free atmosphere makes users feel they are killing leisure time rather than working (A2) or 'absorbing knowledge to fulfill civic duties' (B5). Light format, in terms of background music, language, length, and subtitles, does not compromise the quality of the content yet motivates longer viewing (Zhu et al., 2019) and downplays the seriousness.

Another observation, pointed out by Lewis (2018), is that most online influencers possess institutional affiliations yet deliberately downplayed these connections to underscore

their reliability. The respondent (C3) who mentioned he follows the official account of media News on TikTok also stated he ‘does not know which media group that account belongs to.’ Since the owners of news media groups usually have obvious political party affiliation, some of them even served in political parties, it is reasonable to speculate that the news more or less implies political preferences. Many conventional media groups create their official accounts on social media platforms with creative names to make it difficult for people to associate with the relevant. For example, the mentioned TikTok account is @geevideo, which is belonged to Eastern Media International. Its TV channel is called ETTV News and online news is named ETtoday.

Politically insensitive youth showed instinctive resistance to political issues and general distrust toward the political system and politicians. ‘I rarely watch the news on TV or online news.’ (A2 and C3) because ‘It is boring.’ (B1 and B2) and ‘annoying’ (A2). There was also dissatisfaction against politicians, who think ‘all they do are begging voters to support them and abuse competitors.’ (B5) Among the various information channels of the media group, TikTok has become the only channel that has successfully reached young audiences due to its entertaining feature. News clips or even media accounts were considered acceptable on TikTok, because:

“...it does not feel like watching News...it is humoristic and not much effort is needed to understand it. It is as pleasant as playing video games or watching

movies.” (C3)

Any content has the potential to draw TikTok users’ attention as long as it is amusing enough. No respondent reported currently following the official accounts from professional politicians, but they mentioned the reason being ‘it would be boring’ (B5) rather than preference based on political viewpoint. These showed that it is effective for politicians to deemphasize their institutional role to avoid ignorance and show their friendly personality. For those who consider themselves to know nothing about politics, a film posted by politicians or political parties is considered irrelevant to them or boring, so they are more likely to scroll away.

Meanwhile, some recalled occasionally seeing political content from non-political accounts they followed, for example, accounts dedicated to comical skits or street interviews. When most of his content is interesting, random films from the creator became more inviting and users were more likely to ‘see if anything is interesting too’ (B2) Politically insensitive youths took political opinions from influencers they were familiar with as endorsement, even though these celebrities were not at all known as politics experts. Despite admitting they tend to agree more with what their preferable influencers said, they do not think it is appropriate to call them supporters.

“Some people criticize us for being brainwashed by KOL, but I neither vote nor persuade others whether to vote.” (B1)

Strongly emphasized that no concrete action such as voting, canvassing, or donation is taken, 'even if we see some political discourses on TikTok and accept it as our idea, it will not have any real impact.' (A1, A2, B1, B4, B5, C1, and C5) To them, receiving and believing political messages on TikTok is 'neither initial intention' (B1 and C4) 'nor an issue worth considering,' (A1, A2, and C1).

In the research on young people being abstainers in elections, Henn et al. (2005) found evidence that far from being apolitical and apathetic, they are interested in political issues. While my respondents said they were 'not interested in politics at all' (A1-3, B1-2, C2-3), they do care about certain social issues that matter to them. One (B2) mentioned the extension of military service because it affected his younger brother. Another respondent (C2), being an athlete, expressed disappointment with the Sports Administration and the Ministry of Education for 'not doing their duties.' Another (A2) shared he saw an e-sports live broadcaster shares his experience of getting a Covid-19 vaccine and his thoughts on the mask mandate. They noticed the unsatisfactory situation but none of them go any further, because 'it is established' (A2), 'I do not want to waste time and effort' (B2), and 'I do not know what to do to make a difference.' (C2)

Previous studies found citizens are forced to retreat from participation due to a lack of feelings of entitlement (Visser et al., 2021) or political technical competence. (Laurison, 2015) Their abstention is more the result of incapacity. My finding, on the other hand, pointed out

that those who were seen as politically insensitive youth were not blind to all policies. They simply decided not to put in unnecessary effort because they felt low efficacy. Their abstention is a voluntary rational choice. This is why once it is amusing content, they are more willing and capable of understanding. TikTok, a meme-like platform, maybe the most suitable environment to blur the tension between amusing play and serious political participation. Once users 'accept' the first political content, the accuracy of the algorithm will bring them even more content with implicit ideology and get them used to it.

Passive Exposure on TikTok

The main experience on TikTok is algorithm-based, which greatly increases the chances of TikTok users being passively exposed to content that they don't think they are interested in, rather than depending on self-selection and real-life relationships as on Facebook. The message obtained by the latter users considerably comes from the accounts they follow or the communities they join. Not only do politically insensitive youth don't actively take part in political-related communities in the first place, but some respondents even said that they would consciously ignore friends' posts on Facebook because they 'expected it to be political messages that I was not interested in.' (C1) When browsing Facebook, users can 'predict what a post will be about based on their knowledge of friends.' (A3) The respondent gave an example:

“When someone is on their honeymoon, you would expect them to post a lot of travel photos or romantic stuff. Likewise, when a major event occurs, you just

know some friends will speak out their opinions.” (A3)

This familiarity allowed them to ‘scroll away from the long paragraph.’ (B1) On the contrary, regarding the usage of TikTok, it was frequently mentioned that the unpredictability of film content ‘from unknown creators recommended by the algorithm’ (C2) ‘aroused curiosity’ (A2) and ‘patience’ (B1), so politically insensitive youth are less likely to skip political messages. Unlike friends on Facebook or Instagram, who post whatever they want rather than what other users are interested in, the TikTok algorithm is more concerned with user preferences. It ‘works like a personal chef’ (B5) who constantly feeds users with all kinds of messages while adjusting the recommendation basis to make it more customized. Since the algorithm professionally ensures that users always see the content which they are interested in, TikTok users are more open-minded to passively accept various types of content when unfamiliar accounts pop up randomly because ‘there might be something interesting too.’ (B5)

TikTok as an Invitation to New Target Audience

The dissemination of political content through Internet communities is nothing new. The online social media platform is generally believed to play a key role in broadening the public sphere and facilitating the extensive participation of people. (Waller, 2013) Yet TikTok goes a step further and has been theorized as helping democratize politics and elicit participation from audiences that are conventionally hard to reach (Hartley, 2010) mainly because light formats like memes and parodies humorously lower the barriers.

Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023) described TikTok as a vibrant space for youth political engagement because this is where they can share their views in ways that are appealing to peers. Young people greet their friends with a sentence like ‘Have you seen that on TikTok?’ (A2) and learn the latest craze, such as trending creators, viral filters, and widespread challenges, from their friends.

As mentioned above, willingness is the crucial factor in whether to participate in politics. Even political content that is not considered attractive in the first place, as long as it is amusing enough, may still become a topic shared by young people with their friends. One respondent (C1) said he shared a news clip of two politicians scolding each other to friends who he assumed would enjoy it. The behavior was not based on any political purpose, but pure entertainment. ‘Just like sharing pets TikTok.’ (C1) In such cases, playful political content serves as an invitation for a new target audience to interesting civic engagement.

Besides, recognizable music helps draw users’ attention to political messages they might otherwise be less keen on. ‘I sometimes rewatch a film just to listen to the background music again and again.’ (C2) TikTok is no longer just an environment filled with frivolous trends. Jokes, pranks, lip-synching, and viral dance challenges are used by motivating creators to spread their political stances more covertly but broadly.

The significance of TikTok being a stepping stone into the political field cannot be ignored. Half of the respondents recalled the political discourse they saw on TikTok films later

on other occasions, for example, overhearing conversations among colleagues, which in turn added a more comprehensive perspective. When hearing someone discussing the topic they saw on TikTok, they not only ‘pay more attention’ (A1 and B4) but also ‘feel familiar with the actor they mentioned or the context of the events.’ (C3) The respondent gave an example:

“Hearing someone discussing what I saw on TikTok... is like someone is talking in a language you understand, you will naturally be curious about what they are talking about.” (C3)

This vividly illustrates how TikTok ‘translates’ a political event in the real world into easy comprehend format and lets politically insensitive youth feel relevant to it. Repeated exposure to a certain issue online and offline made them ‘recall the mocking films on TikTok related to this’ (A1) and ‘feel this is really something I should know.’ (C4) The feeling of not wanting to be left behind the trend became a mindset that drove their focus on politics.

The focus on humorous and spoof plots rather than political implications might not be in line with the so-called ideal politics, which should be detached, objective, and serious. However, it was this less political atmosphere that made politically insensitive youth more willing to accept the message. Evidence is that when delving into more details about social platforms usage, most respondents mentioned that they can clearly distinguish the political content on TikTok is different from other channels, and consider it to be ‘more understandable’ (A1, A3, and C2), ‘less serious’ (C2 and C3), ‘more animated’ (A1 and C3) and ‘popular.’ (A2

and C4) Understandable narratives could be especially important that some respondents even stated they ‘scrolled away from dull TikTok films which were similar to ordinary news.’ (B5)

TikTok, An Emerging Political Weapon?

Whether a social media platform is effective and efficient for political communications depends on its capability to shape perceptions and mobilize action. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter have long been used as part of communications strategy in political campaigns. As a platform that attracts numerous users, TikTok is naturally attractive to politicians and ambitious activists. In terms of efficiently spreading information and reaching the largest number of hidden groups, the prominent advantage of TikTok lies in memorable and easily replicable memetic format. “

The cartoon-like format, such as ‘repeating clips’ (A1, A3, B1, and C2), ‘facial close-up’ (A1-3, B2, B4, B5, C1, and C2), ‘colorful and huge subtitles’ (A2, B1, and B2), ‘non-establishment language’ (B4), and ‘animated audio effects’ (A2, B1, and C3) were mentioned by several respondents when describing ‘amusing political TikTok films’. The ‘exaggerated plot’ (B1, C1, and C3) was frequently cited as an example when discussing the so-called impressive content. These well interpret the concept of ‘politainment.’ Being entertaining is far more important than how informative the content is. The short film's length as well makes it pleasant and digestible. One respondent (B3) said it ends before you even get bored or want to scroll away.

Another noteworthy feature is the playfulness-centric culture encouraging a variety of unofficial creators with eye-catching formats and content, which have traditionally been considered inappropriate for professional politicians. When asked whether they remembered watching films released by official accounts, not a single respondent gave a positive answer, but some made a guess based on the interestingness of the films. Respondent (C3) described a film where only a man speaking to the camera from the beginning to the end, and guessed it was news extraction released by official accounts because 'it looks quite formal.' Others said 'what I saw was too insane to be official.' (B5) Not only do users not care whether the films come from an official channel, but they even have a lower evaluation on the official channel, such as relatively plain, too serious, and incomprehensible. This is the main difference between TikTok and any other social media platform.

However, the relative lack of established structures allows TikTok to narrate messages in a more turbulent way and thus raised serious concerns about misinformation because of the lack of easily verifiable official sources. A study on COVID-19 highlighted the dangers that misinformation can be harmful to public health when it was shared freely among users and can travel farther and faster than the truth. (Desai et al., 2022)

Follow-up actions are often taken when watching content they are interested in that allows users to construct a more complete understanding. For example, 'searching for the resort that I saw on traveling TikTok' (B3) or 'compare multiple DIY tutorial TikTok to figure out the

cheapest method.’ (A1) These behaviors, such as clicking hashtags to watch more films on the topic or searching for the keywords, serve as a fact-check though this may not be their initial intention. With little interest in politics in the first place, they are less likely to do the same thing when they saw political content on TikTok. ‘I have never checked a certain politician for his background or political opinions just because I saw him on TikTok.’ (B1) Although the respondents emphasized that they neither believe everything they saw nor vote for certain candidates after seeing these films, they also admitted having difficulty thinking critically due to limited sources of information and follow-up inaction. Despite being aware that ‘political competition may result in the deliberate obscuration of some messages’ (C3), politically insensitive users were lenient with it. ‘I hardly ever wanted to check further because I just don’t care that much.’ (B1) Moreover, they argue ‘the hidden truth won’t stop the presented truth from being true’ (A2) and ‘people tend to believe whatever they believe is true.’ (B4)

This led to another general concern about political content on social platforms. That is, exacerbating polarization, which is largely due to the instinct of preferring information adhering to their worldviews and ignoring dissenting information. That are echo chambers. Carson (2021) noticed people on both sides of the political spectrum would ridicule the opposing side. Creators of political content would convey the positives about their party and mock and bash those on the opposite side, often demonizing them. Gal (2019) also explored the use of ironic humor to promote in-group social bonding but further out-group segregation.

In this regard, the politically insensitive youth interviewed showed several different attitudes. Some believed ‘lacking established subjective opinions on any political position allows them to be less likely to feel insulted or offended’ (C2) and ‘keep relatively open-minded to accept (or not accept) various political content fairly.’ (A2) They ‘watch anything as long as the filming is good.’ (A2)

Others noticed that they were more often fed with political films with certain positions and attributed it to the algorithm. ‘I do see films criticizing the ruling party more often.’ (C1) It is worth noting that its Chinese ownership discourages most politicians and supporters of pro-independence parties to create accounts. Thus, the message presented on TikTok, at least from the official, is biased.

In short, how politically insensitive youth see more political content on TikTok and almost exclusively receive political knowledge from TikTok affirming its irreplaceable advantage. Yet the concern of misinformation and polarization is even worsened by the feature of their audiences.

Shaping political perception is convincing others that you're telling the truth, for example, this issue deserves priority attention, this policy can achieve desired results, or some govern better than others. While politics and governance are indeed professional, the ignorance of the content of the films by politically insensitive TikTok users made it more difficult to understand the process of perception forming.

To explore more precisely how TikTok political content influences users' political perception and to exclude the bias caused by films quality or other variables, I presented a film that convey a neutral stance after understanding their position on the issue of unification and independence and then asked respondents to share what they saw and felt.

The political status of Taiwan is a controversial and complicated issue involving the recognition of sovereignty and international law. In recent years, a significant portion of Taiwanese citizens supported maintaining the 'status quo', but this could mean different things for pro-independence citizens versus pro-unification ones. To address these neglected differences, Chen et al. (2020) proposed a more detailed measurement tapping into the specifics of the term status quo when conducting the survey delving into Taiwanese public opinion toward the relationship between Taiwan and China. Respondents of this study, the so-called politically insensitive youth, all fell into the two types of status-quo supporters defined by Chen et al. This group of people held different recognition of whether Taiwan (ROC) and China (PRC) have been two separate sovereign entities, but both support the existing de facto state and oppose the idea of any constitutional reforms that they believe could antagonize China. Concrete actions to either declare independence or seek unification are considered unnecessary.

The political status of Taiwan is a prominent issue. 'Any Taiwanese knows about this.' (B1) Yet it does not have a significant impact on daily life, at least when no further action is taken by either government. Hence, politically insensitive youth are especially likely to feel

that it does not matter which position to take and that it won't make any difference. Compared to policies at the practical level, more respondents hold them in pure contempt. For example:

“I do not think it is a real issue.” (B1)

“Neither party can do anything to change the situation.” (A1 and B2)

Other respondents showed feelings of powerlessness:

“If it happens (to be a war), we don't have a choice.” (C2)

“I believe this is not something that Taiwanese citizens can decide for themselves. Ideally, it should be, but it is not...the attitude of the United States, the European Union, or Japan is rather important.” (C3)

Then I presented a 60-second film of a street interview conducted by domestic mainstream media, asking university students about their attitudinal perspective on desired cross-strait policy. Five out of seven respondents expressed support for maintaining the status quo, with one each supporting unification and independence. One of the students who mocked unification with an exaggerated Chinese accent caught the attention of most respondents, regardless of their position, simply because ‘his expressions and body language are vivid’ (A2, B1, and C2) and ‘he reminds me of the funniest joker among my friends.’ (B4)

When asked to recall the content of the film, they tended to mention those they felt were particularly close to their belief. This can be seen as a process of reinforcing one's point of view. One respondent (A2) commented a university student, whose position is similar to his previous

expression, was 'telling the truth.' Another respondent (B2) quoted the university student to support his point of view and said 'That was what I said.' Still another (B3) stated 'I have heard some friends saying the same thing as the female university student.' Yet rather than agreeing, the respondents are more likely to say they remembered the response because they understand what the interviewed students were talking about. This once again highlights that people tend to empathize with familiar viewpoints, which is undoubtedly one of the causes of echo chambers.

Strong on TikTok, Weak on The Ground?

The popularity that TikTok has now acquired facilitates politically motivated content creators. Politicians and activists can utilize digital social media platforms to maintain visibility, pursue collective action, influence public opinion, and ultimately hope to gain support in the democratic system in a more immediate manner than previous local organizing. (Abidin, 2021)

Previously we identified the impact of (passively) exposure to TikTok political content on strengthening users' perceptions. But the inability to mobilize further institutional political participation aroused my curiosity.

In terms of online behavior when seeing the content of interest, respondents reported 'search for the keyword' (A1, A3, B1-5, and C2), 'click the hashtag' (all), 'make a screenshot' (A1-3, B2-4, C1, and C3), 'leave a comment or like' (all), 'save the link' (A2, A3, B4, and C1), 'share the link to a like-minded friend' (all) or 'subscribe the account.' (A2, B2 and C2) As for

the political content, most respondents said (A1, A3, B1-4, C1, and C3) they did not react differently just because it was political. 'As long as the filming is good' (A2), they would 'leave a like' (all) and 'share it to who would understand it.' (B3, B4, and C3) A respondent shared an experience:

"I paid attention to films with local politicians introducing authentic traditional food. I checked the restaurants they visited, asked my local friends, and went with my girlfriend." (B3)

Most respondents highlighted the importance of being amusing, explaining why political campaigns targeting youth deliberately downplay serious issues and instead focus on displaying personal life and enhancing political persona, much of it overtly entertaining. A similar scenario is found in the content analysis of official accounts of politicians. Taking the official TikTok account of one of the presidential candidates (@doctorkowenje0806) for example, the number of views of the dance challenge (120.5K) was much higher than the interview extraction (9.7K) released during the same period.

However, none of them took direct political action, such as voting, signing petitions, or contacting politicians, after exposing them to political content on TikTok. This may be expected, though. Mobilization is one of the highest levels of political communication, yet campaigns on TikTok focus on entertaining trivia to please their young audiences rather than serious issues. Candidates and parties are instead less often seen overtly encouraging online or

offline participation. Despite some respondents categorically reporting that they recognized a certain politician or knew about a political event because they ‘saw it on TikTok for the first time’ (A1, A3, B1, B4, B5, C1, and C3), the others admitted they ‘can barely recognize which party or constituency the candidate belongs to’ (A2 and C1) This experience pointed out a key fact that while TikTok was the first step for politically insensitive youth to hear some trivia of politics, the follow-up perception building relied on daily life situations. Even if some respondents did, in addition to just viewing political content, sometimes shared, commented on the film, or tagged friends, they didn't see the behavior as politically motivated. Not to mention institutional political participation, which is largely ignored by the respondents. Because ‘it is one thing to be funny, but a whole another story to decide who to vote.’ (C1 and C3)

Moir (2023) observed similar situations in the study of Jagmeet Singh, the leader of Canada's New Democratic Party who was framed as a case of failed digital campaign strategy. How NDP did not significantly improve its political standing in the 2021 federal election indicated that he did not translate his authentic TikTok celebrity into youth votes. Thus, for certain politicians, whether high exposure to TikTok increases the chances of winning the election is inconclusive. Yet it is reasonable to hold a sense of cautious optimism that political content on TikTok contributed to productive online political talk at least a minimum.

Conclusion and Discussion

The significance of the various roles of TikTok in youth political lives has been widely recognized. For example, as a space for post-electoral discourse (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019), cross-cutting political talk (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021), and representations of protest and media critique (Literat et al., 2022).

This study complements a Taiwanese perspective on the growing interest in TikTok, one of the countries with the tensest relations with China. One of the primary theoretical contributions is to distinguish TikTok from the research tradition of seeing social media platforms as a whole, which underestimated the culture base on abundant entertainment, hijinks, and comedy. The attributes that make TikTok so popular are meanwhile the main reasons why it can easily exert political influence on politically insensitive youth.

The main contribution of this study is to explore whether and how political perception is shaped by comparing the typical experience of TikTok usage with that of politically related content. At the same time, emphasizes the difference between TikTok and other 'traditional' social media platforms, and the importance to treat TikTok with more caution for its potential influence. Since most of the young users are the voters of the future, trends on TikTok have the potential to herald real-world change. Not to mention my finding that politically insensitive youth are voluntary absences based on rational choice rather than lack of competence.

For politically insensitive youth who seldom get political messages from conventional channels or participate in politics, TikTok is indeed one of their main sources of passive

exposure to political content, though they neither see it as a formal news source nor evaluate the message politically. On one hand, the algorithm-centered design limits the influence of social interaction with existing networks. It is no longer self-selection but an unknown algorithm that dominates what users see and brings unexpectedly interesting political content. The expectation of 'being amused' increases their patience and acceptance of all content, including potentially political content. Online exposure and offline interpersonal interaction experience jointly create a more comprehensive understanding of political events, and make politically insensitive youth think 'This is a trend I need to know.'

On the other hand, politically insensitive youth are more patient with TikTok films for their light format and inviting content, which is cartoon-like, short, animated, and easy to comprehend. This reason applies to both political content and other themed films. Young people share their amusing TikTok experiences with friends. Even political content potentially becomes a talking point among the youth as long as it is funny and memorable, though this is not politically motivated.

TikTok as an emerging political communication tool has not yet taken full advantage. Both delicate technique and participative intention must be refined if political mobilization is to be truly effective. While politically insensitive youth were reached by random political content on TikTok in a way that conventional news channels or even Facebook struggle to do, no further cross-cutting discussions or concrete institutional political participation were

launched then. It is still a long way from getting these people to become politically sophisticated. It is obvious to find the user experience is excessively focused on the jokes and thus, gives up the opportunity for in-depth discussion. With the willingness to take a more proactive approach with the attempts to connect with the youth, TikTok is undoubtedly an advantageous platform for main political parties. Yet the main suggestion drawn from these findings for better youth political participation is to convey a more comprehensive political perception than just amusing trivia.

Meanwhile, it is still highly controversial whether it is beneficial that young people who know little about politics construct their political perception through TikTok. On one hand, although TikTok has achieved great success among the public, it still faces an uphill battle to improve its reputation. Especially considering Chinese ownership, coupled with the aforementioned tension between Taiwan and China, some political parties in Taiwan do not encourage their candidates to blatantly embrace it as part of their digital political communication strategy. Thus, the message presented on TikTok, at least from the official, is biased. Moreover, the lack of established structures raised serious concerns about misinformation, brainwashing, and polarization because users are not able to rely on official sources for verification. Yet users are not aware of these risks and ignore how little autonomy they have over what content they are exposed to. Overemphasizing their abstention at this stage, they rationalize their neglect of whether TikTok can influence their political perception. The

concern about the platform itself comes from the fear of Chinese cultural and political invasion.

The main limitation of this study comes from the small sample size which may raise doubts about generalizability. Young adults are not necessarily a representative sample of all those who use TikTok, and the findings cannot be generalized beyond the scope of this study. Yet, it is important to note that almost 60% of TikTok users are under 30 with roughly 41% of users between the ages of 16 and 24 years. (Wallaroo Media, 2023) This group of people would be a very effective target if the Chinese government indeed intends to brainwash Taiwanese citizens by manipulating, censoring, propagating, controlling, and influencing TikTok.

Besides, this study relied heavily on respondents' self-reports, and it was not possible to ensure the quality of mentioned films, or whether users accurately understood the political implications. This limitation raises important questions that require a further longitudinal study on this emerging area to understand whether and how TikTok imposes a systematic change in electoral politics.

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