Is TikTok a Public Sphere for Democracy in Egypt? The Application of Habermas's "Pseudo-Public Sphere"

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores TikTok's potential as a new space for engagement within Egypt's media landscape. This study addresses three core questions: 1) What motivates users to discuss public issues on TikTok? 2) How do Egyptians use TikTok for online civic participation? 3) Does TikTok support the emergence of a public sphere in Egypt?

Design/methodology/approach: Using qualitative research approach, this study conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with Egyptian TikTok users aged 18 to 35 from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Thematic coding was applied to analyze their motivations on TikTok's role in civic engagement.

Practical implications: This research highlights the challenges of using TikTok as a platform for civic engagement in Egypt. Policymakers, media scholars, and digital activists should consider how platform design and algorithmic curation influence political discourse and explore ways to enhance TikTok's potential for meaningful public debate in Egypt.

Results: The study found that while users engage with public issues mainly out of curiosity or entertainment, their involvement is mostly passive, limited to liking and sharing videos. Very few participants create original content or engage in meaningful discussions. TikTok's algorithm prioritizes entertainment driven content, which limits its effectiveness as a space for substantive political discourse. Reflecting Habermas's concept of "pseudo-public sphere," TikTok operates as "limited public sphere," fostering surface-level discussions that rarely translate into real world democratic engagement.

Originality/value: This study fills a gap in the literature by offering empirical insights into TikTok's role in shaping public discourse in Egypt.

Keywords: TikTok, public sphere, Egypt, video users, participation, civic engagement

1. Introduction

Social media has become a part of the political world over the last decade (Placek, 2024). It has become a source of information that society relies on. The dependence on social media has led to misinformation influencing public opinion (Adler & Goggin, 2005). Over the last few years, the social media app TikTok has gained power in the political environment and could even be considered a campaign tool (Supriyanto and Muryanto, 2024). TikTok is a social media platform founded in 2016 by the Chinese company ByteDance. Its primary use was dancing videos created by teenagers, but over the years, TikTok has shifted and now caters to people of all ages (Quick & Maddox, 2024). This social media platform is no longer just an app known for dancing videos, but it provides content that teaches others(Ngov, 2024). As TikTok use is skyrocketing, it is important to investigate it. It has become one of the leading social media applications used today by all people because of its influence. Because all types of people are using this social media app, it needs to be studied in a political context since misinformation on social media platforms has been increasing (Ngov, 2024). Since the early 2020s, TikTok has emerged as one of the most popular social media platforms in Egypt, particularly among younger users. Its short-video format and creative content have transformed how Egyptians consume and interact with media. During key events such as government reforms, economic challenges, or societal debates, Egyptian TikTok users have shared videos reflecting their opinions (Ahmed & Khaled, 2020). However, this engagement often shifts toward entertainment-driven interactions rather than meaningful dialogue. Unlike platforms like Facebook, which played a pivotal role in political mobilization during the Arab Spring, TikTok is primarily designed to prioritize entertainment over

debate (Lim, 2024). This raises critical questions about whether TikTok can effectively function as a public sphere, fostering robust dialogue among diverse voices about Egypt's socio-political realities (Jia & Han, 2020).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Shifting Dynamics of Online Public Engagement in Egypt

In Egypt, platforms like Facebook and Twitter have historically been at the forefront of online civic participation, particularly during key events like the 2011 revolution (Wang, 2016). However, over time, these platforms have become increasingly commercialized, diminishing their roles as spaces for public discourse. Similar trends have been observed globally, as platforms initially celebrated for enabling political discussions have gradually shifted toward marketing and entertainment purposes (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Ngov, 2024). As TikTok continues to grow in Egypt, it necessitates a reevaluation of how civic participation unfolds in a media ecosystem dominated by short-form videos. While some studies, such as Ahmed and Khaled (2020), have examined TikTok's popularity for cultural expression, its potential to support democratic discourse remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by investigating TikTok's role in fostering public discourse within the Egyptian context.

2.2 TikTok's Digital Age for Public Talk

In reality, the public sphere is often dominated by a particular group of individuals who control the conversations and discourse within the sphere (Habermas, 1989). Now, in the age of the Internet, the public sphere has seemingly been implemented online. Social media platforms make virtual meeting grounds a new space for deliberation (Lyn, 2024). The structure of these online spaces seems to be similar to the structure of the public sphere: a space for the masses, circulating discourse, and relatively equal. Yet, even online, exclusions are made so that some voices are valued more than others. This paper seeks to analyze the platform TikTok, observing if it is comparable to the public sphere. This research is grounded in Habermas's concept of the public sphere, which describes a space where open, rational discussion is accessible to all citizens (Habermas, 1989). Although Habermas critiqued the modern media-driven public sphere as superficial and easily manipulated, his framework remains a valuable tool for analyzing digital platforms like TikTok. In Egypt, where socio-political discussions are influenced by commercialization, TikTok provides a unique lens to examine the evolving nature of online discourse (Wang, 2016).

2.3 Social Media Platforms and Civic Engagement

According to Adler and Goggin (2005), civic engagement as social change has been defined many times, and not one definition can conclude the meaning of the term. In his definition of the term Civic engagement, David Crowley (n.d.), founder of Social Capital, Inc., focuses on the element of social change inherent in civic engagement: "Civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of the community in order to help shape its future. Eventually, civic engagement has to include the dimensions of social change." Studies show that social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have played significant roles in Egypt's civic engagement during key events like the 2011 revolution (Ngov, 2024). Each platform offers unique affordances that influence civic participation. For instance, Facebook was widely used for organizing protests, YouTube for sharing impactful visuals, and Twitter for real-time updates (Balfour, 2024). These platforms supported different aspects of mobilization, such as communication, public awareness, and visibility, though their efficacy varied depending on their design and user base. This interplay between platform affordances and civic movements demonstrates the diverse roles social media can play in socio-political transformation (Ahmed & Khaled, 2020). As TikTok exploded in popularity following the initial lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, use from individual users skyrocketed (Quick & Maddox, 2024). During this time, political content became universal across the application. Politics play out daily on TikTok, as individuals craft messages within the technological affordances and sociocultural dynamics of the app, thus becoming a platform for civic engagement (Lyn, 2024).

2.4 Cultural Dynamics of Short-Form Content

The rise of platforms like TikTok emphasizes brevity and virality, reshaping how civic issues are discussed (Couldry, 2024). Short-form videos often focus on easily consumable content, blending entertainment with political or cultural expression (Wang, 2016). Such formats can be both a strength—due to their wide reach—and a limitation, as they might oversimplify complex issues. TikTok, for example, has been popular for enabling cultural expression, though its role in enabling civil conversations, its sustained democratic discourse remains under researched (Agabo, 2024). Its emphasis on visual and participatory content encourages creative ways of political expression (Ahmed & Khaled, 2020). Algorithms and Echo Chambers TikTok's algorithmic structure significantly influences the diversity of socio-political discussions. By prioritizing content based on user interaction patterns, the platform can create echo chambers where users are exposed predominantly to content aligning with their existing beliefs. This structure can limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, potentially hindering meaningful democratic discourse. However, the platform's ability to amplify trending topics also makes it a powerful tool for mobilization when harnessed effectively for civic purposes (Ngov, 2024; Lyn, 2024).

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, conducting 30 semi-structured interviews with Egyptian TikTok users between September and November 2024 to explain and verify the research questions. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to include a diverse mix of socio-economic and geographic backgrounds, covering urban areas such as Cairo and Alexandria as well as rural regions in Upper Egypt. The age range of participants spanned from 18 to 35 years and included students, professionals, and content creators. Interviews explored participants' motivations for using TikTok, their engagement with socio-political content, and their perspectives on the platform's role in public discourse. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes. The data were analyzed through thematic coding to identify patterns in behaviour and perceptions, providing a comprehensive understanding of user interactions on TikTok (Quick & Maddox, 2024).

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings reveal that most Egyptian TikTok users engage with socio-political content primarily out of curiosity or for entertainment purposes, rather than to participate in meaningful discussions. Twenty-three out of thirty respondents reported that their interaction with such content was largely passive, involving activities like liking or sharing videos rather than commenting or creating their own content addressing public issues (Ahmed & Khaled, 2020). While some participants acknowledged TikTok's ability to spotlight socio-political topics, they also highlighted challenges, such as the platform's algorithm favouring entertaining over informative content (Lyn, 2024). Unlike Facebook's grassroots mobilization efforts during the Arab Spring, TikTok engagement rarely results in offline action or significant political outcomes. These findings align with Habermas's concept of a "pseudo-public sphere," as TikTok fosters discussions that are often superficial and lack depth (Habermas, 1989).

4.1 Interview Analysis

In the context of this research, 30 simi structured interviews were conducted to collect data from active TikTok users. The semi-structured interview questions were designed to align with the study's core questions, aiming to explore Egyptian TikTok users' motivations, behaviors, and the platform's potential to support a public sphere. Questions were close ended and open-ended to allow participants to elaborate while ensuring the key themes were addressed. The participant members were males and females from the within the ages 18 to 35. The participants were selected from this age category specifically as TikTok active users worldwide based on statistics of 2024 (Statista, 2024). Stating that most of active users on TikTok are young adults and adults. There were in total 30 participants see table 1.

Table 1. The classification of participants in the simi structured interviews by age

No of Participants	Age
6	19
5	20
4	21
5	25
4	30
6	35
Number of Participants in Total = 30	

Source: from the current research analysis

The Interview questions, were divided into two main sections:

The first section included close-ended questions that were used to verify the primary motives behind TikTok user engagement with socio-political content. The results of the interviews concluded three main motives based on the thematic analysis and the pattern of answers. The three main motives were concluded to (curiosity, entertainment, passive interaction). Table 2 illustrates the percentage breakdown of these motivations. The second section included open-ended questions. These open-ended questions admitted participants to express their experiences and views freely. The final themes were extracted from the coding and analysis of the responses in this section.

Table 2. Participant Motives for Engaging with Socio-Political Content on TikTok

Motives	Percentage
Curiosity:	30%
Entertainment	50%
Passive interaction	20%

Source: from the current research analysis

4.1.1 Thematic Analysis

From the percentages in table 2, it can be concluded that most of the participant's primary motives behind TikTok user engagement with socio-political content is for entertainment purposes, 50% of sample had the same answer. The other two motives were 30 % curiosity, and 20% passive interaction respectively. Table 3 represents the themes extracted from the interview.

Table 3. Themes, description and codes

Theme	Description	codes	Interpretation	Percentage
Entertainment	Half of the participants view socio-political content on TikTok for entertainment purposes. Most of the codes extracted include terms that present a sense of entertainment.	- "It's engaging to watch socio-political content on TikTok." "It's fun to watch." - "I enjoy the creative presentation of serious issues on TikTok."	TikTok's nature and format, includes short videos and presents them in a humorous manner, making socio-political topics more relatable and entertaining.	50%
Curiosity	Another theme extracted from a significant number of the participants is that their engagement with socio-political content is to satisfy their curiosity about these topics.	- " watching socio-political content makes me learn more about trending issues." - "TikTok introduces me to new ideas and thoughts related to politics."	TikTok as a platform enables its users to encounter political topics and ideas related to their society that they might not have otherwise sought out.	30%
Passive Interaction	The least percentage of the interview participants engage only passively, such as by scrolling or watching the socio-political content without any further interaction.	- " Through TikTok I just scroll through the feed." - "I rarely comment or share; I just watch."	Some of the TikTok users within the samnple in thisn study are content consumers rather than contributors, reflecting a passive approach to engagement.	20%

Source: from the current research analysis

The rest of the close ended questions participant's respond are summarized in table 4.

Table 4. Close ended questions participant's respond

Question	Criteria	Results	Common Responses	Percentage
Duration of TikTok Usage	Usage Duration	Majority of the particpants are using TikTok for more than two year.	- "More than 2 years"	70%
Daily Time Spent on TikTok	Time Spent	More than half the particpants spend 2–4 hours or more on TikTok daily.	- "2–4 hours daily" - "Always scrolling" - "More than 4 hours"	60%
Primary Type of Content Consumed	Content Preferences	Entertainment content is the most frequently consumed followed by Socio-political content justifying diverse interests.	- "Entertainment, mostly trends and humor" - "I follow political debates and news too" - "Entertainment, political and social issues"	60%
Device Usage	Preferred Device	The majority access TikTok through smartphones.	- "Smartphone"	80%
Age-Related Questions	Impact of age on Content Engagement	The majority felt age affects their preferences and choice of content.	- "Yes, age matters" - "Younger users are more into trends, not political topics"	90%
	Suggestions about age-specific content appeals.	Most agreed that TikTok content is tailored and more suitable to specific age groups.	- " I strongly agree" - "Content feels relatable for my age group more than older people"	100%
	Frequency of age-targeted content	The answers varied between "Sometimes" and "Often"	- "I notice it sometimes" - "Often discussions that are for younger adults"	
	Engagement Levels Compared to Others	Participants believed their age group engaged more than others.	- "About the same or more" - "Probably more"	
	Relevance of Socio-Political Issues	Socio-Political Issues were perceived as slightly relevant by most participants.	- "Neutral" - "Somewhat relevant"	

Source: from the current research analysis

The second part of questions in the simi structured interview consisted of open-ended questions allow people to answer

in any way they see fit. Open-ended questions do not enforce answers on people, they rather allow expression and keep conversations going (Hoets, 2009).

The balance between entertainment and education is critical in fostering engagement. While curiosity drives exploration and learning, the platform's entertainment value ensures sustained interaction. Passive users highlight a need for inclusive content that resonates even without active participation.

Some of the most repeated comments extracted from the Interviews were, "I scroll through socio-political content just out of curiosity, but I don't feel compelled to comment or engage." "The videos are entertaining, but I doubt their potential to bring real change." "TikTok's algorithm keeps pushing funny or light-hearted takes on serious issues." "Even though some topics seem important, the content lacks depth and context." "Sharing videos is easy, but starting a meaningful conversation feels pointless on TikTok."

The findings reveal that most Egyptian TikTok users engage with socio-political content primarily for curiosity or entertainment. Passive interaction (liking or sharing) dominates, with minimal creation of original content or participation in public discussions. While the platform can spotlight socio-political issues, its algorithm prioritizes entertainment, aligning with Habermas's concept of a "pseudo-public sphere." Consequently, TikTok engagement remains superficial, rarely leading to substantial offline impact or political mobilization.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that while TikTok does provide a platform for socio-political discussions in Egypt, its ability to function as a genuine public sphere is limited. The platform's design, which emphasizes entertainment, coupled with the predominantly passive behaviour of its users, restricts its capacity to foster critical debate or drive meaningful civic engagement. As such, TikTok operates as a "limited public sphere," enabling surface-level discourse without translating into substantial offline impact. Future studies could explore comparative research across different regions or delve deeper into TikTok's algorithms and their influence on public discourse (Quick & Maddox, 2024; Lyn, 2024).

Authors contributions

Dr. Nada Adel Attia and Dr. Nourhan Tosson Ibrahim Ahmed were responsible for the study design, literature review, and interview guide development. Both Dr. Nada Adel Attia and Dr. Nourhan Tosson Ibrahim Ahmed conducted the interviews and transcribed the data. Dr. Nada Adel Attia drafted the manuscript, and both authors collaborated in analyzing the findings and revising the text. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. Both authors contributed equally to the conception and execution of this study.

Competing interests

Sample: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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