

The Impact and Challenges of TikTok in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract. With the rapid rise of short-video platforms, TikTok has become an important medium for intercultural communication. Its algorithmic recommendation and user co-creation mechanisms have not only transformed modes of content dissemination but created new opportunities for marginalized and cultures in remote areas to gain visibility on the global stage. However, this process is accompanied by multiple challenges, including data privacy, platform censorship, and cultural localization. This study investigates the impact of TikTok on intercultural communication and the associated political, legal, and cultural challenges. By analyzing TikTok's mechanisms of content production, algorithmic recommendation, and user interaction, it examines the ways in which the platform enhances cultural visibility, promotes intercultural exchange, and shapes globally circulated cultural phenomena. The results indicate that TikTok, by lowering creation barriers, strengthening interactive features, and using interest-based distribution, has enhanced the global dissemination of marginalized cultures, supported cross-cultural exchange and integration, and influenced cultural identity and social participation. Moreover, its global expansion encounters governance pressures, where striking a balance between global governance and local compliance emerges as a key challenge for sustainable development.

Keywords: TikTok cross-cultural communication, Algorithmic recommendation, User Generated Content (UGC), Digital platform governance

1. Introduction

In recent years, short-video platforms have emerged as a powerful force in shaping global media consumption and cultural exchange. Among them, TikTok stands out as a leading platform that combines user-generated content, algorithmic recommendations, and interactive features to engage millions of users worldwide [1]. In contrast to traditional media, which mainly distributes content based on location or language, TikTok leverages interest-based algorithms to deliver personalized content, enabling cultural products to cross borders quickly and widely [2]. This paper examines the characteristics and communication mechanisms of TikTok, focusing on how the platform facilitates cross-cultural interaction and the spread of marginalized or localized cultural content. By analyzing the platform's features, content creation pathways, and recommendation systems, it highlights TikTok's role in reshaping the flow of cultural information, fostering hybrid cultural expressions, and building interest-based communities. In addition, TikTok's global expansion faces political,

legal, and cultural challenges. Issues such as data privacy, regulatory compliance, and the need for cultural adaptation complicate its operations in different countries. The study further investigates these challenges and TikTok's strategies for balancing technological innovation, content diversity, and social responsibility in its global operations. Through this investigation, the paper seeks to offer preliminary insights into the role of algorithm-driven platforms in intercultural communication, highlighting their potential as well as possible limitations in supporting global cultural exchange.

2. Characteristics and communication mechanisms of the TikTok platform

2.1. Platform features and user behavior

TikTok has transformed users from passive recipients into active creators by lowering creation barriers, optimizing algorithmic distribution, and strengthening community interaction [3]. Its built-in short-video creation tools, along with a wide array of filters and templates, significantly reduce the technical barriers to content production, thus allowing ordinary users to generate visual content without professional equipment. The platform's regularly launched topic challenges and popular imitation trends provide low-cost participation pathways for users, easing the creative burden while driving continuous growth in user-generated content (UGC). This de-professionalized production mechanism effectively broadens the sources of cultural content, promoting the integration of local cultural elements with a global outlook. Besides, TikTok's targeted algorithmic recommendations facilitate the cross-regional circulation of cultural content through user behavior. By tracking users' watch time, engagement, and interaction patterns, the platform delivers content based on interests instead of traditional social networks [4]. And this enables marginalized cultures to spread globally through likes and comments. Importantly, this mechanism not only boosts content visibility but also reinforces the clustering of interest-based communities. As a result, users naturally gather around tags like Hanfu, beauty, or street dance to form subcultural communities. Leveraging tools such as likes, duets, and remixes, they repeatedly deconstruct, reassemble, and circulate cultural content across different contexts, building a dynamic network for cross-cultural interaction.

2.2. Globalization and cross-cultural communication

TikTok's recommendation system acts as an algorithmic curator in the global circulation of culture. Unlike traditional dissemination logic centered on geography or language, TikTok relies on users' interests and behavioral data to precisely match individualized content needs, giving marginalized cultural themes the opportunity to enter mainstream discourse [5]. For instance, videos showcasing Nigerian traditional dances, Indian handicrafts, or Yunnan dialect songs can rapidly transcend geographic boundaries through user reposting and interest-based spread, prompting imitation and creative adaptation across different cultural settings. Previous studies have shown that this interest-based recommendation mechanism not only expands the reach of cultural dissemination but also increases the global visibility of diverse cultures [6]. Additionally, features such as "challenges," "duets," and "remixes" provide users with sustainable participation mechanisms, enabling cultural content to evolve under algorithmic guidance. Through these features, users can engage in meme-like reinterpretations based on existing templates, facilitating the interaction between local symbols and global trends to generate new forms of cultural expression. For example, a Ghanaian dancer's street dance performance might be combined by users in the US or Europe with local popular music to create a new hybrid version. This mixed-mode dissemination extends the reach of cultural

elements while breaking down the binary between cultural centers and peripheries, promoting the bottom-up circulation of diverse cultures in a global context.

2.3. Content creation and distribution paths

Driven by both UGC and interest-based recommendations, TikTok serves not only as a channel for cultural content distribution but also as an incubator for global cultural narratives. The platform encourages a “imitate-adapt-recreate” cycle, hence enabling cultural content to circulate sustainably among users. For instance, a short video featuring Hanfu might be reinterpreted by different users through street dance remixes, Western pop soundtracks, or local dialect narrations, creating hybrid expressions with multiple cultural narratives. This decentralized, fragmented process allows a single cultural symbol to evolve repeatedly across diverse contexts, blurring traditional cultural boundaries and fostering layered cross-cultural resonance and identification [7]. It is worth noting that under this mechanism, interest-based communities function not only as nodes for content dissemination but as sites for the reproduction of cultural meaning. Users gathered around tags such as “#Hanfu,” “#Makeup,” and “#StreetDance” actively form dynamic cultural communities, where users’ content creation, comments, and interactions promote cultural understanding and recognition while shaping new forms of identity expression globally. Through this dual technology-and-community-driven model, TikTok effectively stimulates the production and circulation of diverse cultures, highlighting the platform’s unique mediating role in cross-cultural communication.

3. The role of TikTok in cross-cultural communication

3.1. Cross-cultural communication and information flow

As an algorithm-driven short-video platform, TikTok has become an important channel for cross-cultural information flow, through which interest-based recommendation algorithms distribute diverse content across cultural boundaries, altering the global flow and structure of information [8]. This algorithmic distribution transcends geographic and linguistic barriers, enabling marginalized cultural symbols to achieve cross-cultural visibility and mobility through visual and contextualized expression. Existing research shows that TikTok’s “short, frequent, and fast” narratives, together with multimodal symbols of images, sounds, and movements, weaken language barriers in cultural communication. For example, content like street food, folk dances, and crafts needs little text and sparks emotional resonance and cultural imagination across contexts. This sensory-centered, “de-languaged” logic lowers barriers to understanding while also amplifying the emotional influence of cultural content, thereby facilitating the circulation and integration of diverse cultures. In addition, TikTok’s UGC and interactive design position users as key producers of cross-cultural information [9]. By visually recording festivals, dialects, and traditional skills, and through features like duets, comments, and re-creation, users spread cultural elements globally in multiple directions. It has been observed that TikTok’s “topic challenge” serves as both a content distribution tool and a self-organized arena for cultural participation. Through algorithmic promotion of challenge tags, users expand cultural production within weakly connected networks, generating a cycle of “algorithmic push-user reproduction-interest aggregation” and forming a decentralized cultural network distinct from traditional top-down

3.2. Global cultural phenomena and identity construction

Through its information flow, TikTok plays a key role in shaping global cultural trends and cultural identity [6]. From an operational perspective, it restructures the production and dissemination of cultural discourse through celebrity strategies and trending mechanisms. Top accounts, including film and television stars, musicians, sports idols and regional influencers, serve both as entry points for traffic and as hubs for cultural symbols and their reproduction. It has been found that celebrities enhance the worldwide presence of local cultural symbols and facilitate the circulation of regional cultures. In this context, TikTok demonstrates its ability to “re-encode” local cultural symbols via topic planning and contextualized operations. For example, festival symbols like Western Christmas, Easter, and Chinese New Year temple fairs, are transformed into entertaining, participatory content templates via challenges, short skits, and filters, encouraging users to produce secondary cultural content in an entertaining way. And this approach lowers the creative threshold and enables local symbols to acquire new meanings and emotional resonance in cross-cultural circulation. Similarly, regional music genres like jazz and hip-hop generate multiple versions across languages and regions via covers, remixes, and derivative dances, thereby illustrating TikTok’s pattern of cultural flows as “de-territorialized, re-localized, and re-hybridized.” Besides, interactions on the platform strengthen emotional connections and cultural identity. Using these interactions, TikTok’s comment, duet, and secondary creation features encourage young users to interact with foreign cultural content in real time, boosting content reproduction and forming weak-tie connections. Through short videos of transnational couples, street life abroad, or cross-cultural family interactions, users explore other cultures, enhancing empathy and cultural connection. By combining interest aggregation, contextual imitation, and weak community connections, TikTok enables emotional and identity bonding that sustains cultural diversity.

3.3. Platform role and interaction with social movements

In addition to entertainment and identity functions, TikTok increasingly shapes public opinion and drives social mobilization [10]. Existing studies show that TikTok facilitates grassroots narratives to spread through UGC and algorithms, confronting traditional narratives. Users capture events on-site via short videos, analyze media content, or produce satirical material, creating personalized and emotionally charged narratives that enable certain social issues to spread globally. This pathway, combining emotional narratives and weak-tie dissemination, expands public awareness and partly bypasses media control. However, openness and algorithmic rules bring risks to information flow. Studies show law enforcement and regulators can track users via public videos and interactions, leaving content creators’ identities and data exposed. This highlights the tension between grassroots mobilization and privacy protection. In transnational public issues, TikTok is increasingly part of a multi-party governance network for information negotiation and agenda-setting. Institutions from different countries attempt to influence issue visibility and public sentiment through collaborations with influencers, top creators, and the platform. This shows that short-video producers have evolved from traffic nodes to new types of issue gatekeepers. Moreover, TikTok’s closed-loop system of interest aggregation and algorithmic recommendation intensifies the influence of social issues while simultaneously heightening risks such as information polarization, emotional manipulation, and the spread of misinformation. Given these amplified risks, a central challenge for global governance is balancing TikTok’s algorithmic efficiency with oversight of public issues, as its recommendation system both spreads social issues widely and complicates their management. Effective governance

demands collaboration among stakeholders to manage risks while also preserving the influence of the platform.

4. Political, legal, and cultural challenges in TikTok's global communication

4.1. Political and legal constraints

In its global expansion, TikTok should navigate governance challenges arising from cross-country political and legal differences [11]. As a multinational digital platform, its big data collection and algorithmic recommendation systems continuously process multidimensional user information, including geographic location, search preferences, browsing history, and social interaction traces. These mechanisms boost personalization but simultaneously raise issues of privacy, data security, and national interest. In certain countries, its parent company and international data flows have triggered debates over national security and technological sovereignty. For example, the United States and several European countries have imposed strict regulations on user data access, cross-border transmission, and overseas storage, regulating the platform through legislation and executive orders. From a regulatory perspective, digital governance frameworks such as the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Digital Services Act (DSA) impose stringent standards on TikTok's data processing, platform accountability, and content compliance. TikTok must therefore balance operational efficiency with adherence to diverse legal requirements on data minimization, transparency, and traceability, increasing pressure on its technological and policy infrastructure. Despite efforts to reinforce compliance through data localization, data centers, and updated privacy policies, TikTok's cross-border data flows continue to raise distrust among regulators and the public. Besides, political volatility and cultural sensitivities increase operational challenges, since entering certain markets often involves content control and cultural adjustments. Research indicates that tightening regulations or temporary bans may drive users to alternative platforms, reflecting their sensitivity to governance transparency and content freedom. This "multi-platform migration" reshapes the digital public opinion ecosystem and imposes new demands on TikTok's user retention strategies and global operational stability.

4.2. Cultural adaptation and content management

In the context of globalization, the reconciliation of cultural localization and content diversity under a unified system constitutes a major challenge for TikTok [12]. Prior studies have shown that, unlike platforms with highly homogenous content, TikTok prioritizes local culture and user expression. Through flexible operational strategies, it enhances the local relevance of its content. For example, in the Japanese market, TikTok has engaged well-known celebrities, launched participatory challenge campaigns aligned with local culture, and designed facial effects to lower users' psychological barriers to public expression. This "cultural embedding-technical adaptation" strategy has effectively expanded its user base. In Southeast Asian markets, similar strategies highlight the significance of cultural adaptation. In its operations, the platform avoids sensitive topics, focusing on entertainment, community, and festive culture. For instance, regional symbols such as Ramadan and the Water Festival are integrated into challenge campaigns and special effects, establishing a bidirectional flow between global content localization and local cultural globalization. As such, this mechanism strengthens users' sense of belonging to the platform's content while also encouraging them to actively participate in cross-cultural narrative construction via imitation and creative reproduction. It is worth noting that TikTok also reinforces its social responsibility image through

support for local creators and collaborations with public welfare initiatives, alleviating some market resistance to the platform's cultural export and commercial objectives. For example, the platform partners with local governments or social organizations to promote tourism, education, and public welfare topics, building a narrative of public value and providing greater local support for cross-cultural communication. However, the maintenance of strategic flexibility across diverse cultural contexts, combined with managing content conflicts and value differences, remains a central challenge for TikTok.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that TikTok has effectively overcome linguistic and geographical barriers, leveraging UGC and algorithmic recommendation mechanisms to promote marginalized cultures across cultures. Interest-based communities and challenge mechanisms further drive the creation and interaction of diverse cultural content, strengthening users' engagement with and identification of different cultures. This reshapes the traditional top-down communication model, establishing a "bottom-up" logic driven by user interests, active participation, and content co-creation. In major global events, TikTok has served as a platform for public opinion and information, revealing its potential and tensions in digital politics. However, data privacy concerns, censorship, and cross-country regulatory conflicts limit its sustainable development. In addition, cultural diversity and local habits impose additional requirements on content strategies. In the future, should TikTok strike a dynamic balance between global governance and local cultural contexts, it is poised to transcend its role as a mere entertainment platform and evolve into a crucial medium for global cultural exchange and public discourse.

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