

## TIKTOK IN RURAL PAKISTAN: EMPOWERING YOUTH THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA, CULTURAL EXPRESSION, AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

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### Abstract

This study investigates TikTok's transformative impact on rural youth in Pakistan, focusing on how the platform fosters personal growth, social connections, cultural expression, and economic opportunities. Using a phenomenological approach and an interpretive research paradigm, thirty participants from rural areas of Lahore were selected based on their engagement with TikTok. Semi-structured interviews and Colaizzi's seven-step data analysis method were employed to explore users' experiences and perceptions. Findings reveal that TikTok empowers rural youth to navigate social, economic, and educational challenges, overcome societal constraints, and embrace innovation and resilience. The study addresses three key questions: (1) What motivates rural users to watch, create, and share content on TikTok? (2) How does TikTok impact the personal and social lives of rural youth? (3) In what ways does TikTok contribute to empowerment and inclusive social interactions? Results highlight TikTok's role in promoting digital inclusion, strengthening community connections, enabling cultural expression, and fostering entrepreneurial initiatives in rural Pakistan. The study demonstrates TikTok's potential as a platform for youth empowerment, enabling rural users to reshape their social realities, achieve financial independence, and drive positive change in their communities.

### Introduction

According to Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2021), social media platforms have emerged as crucial research areas for studying empowerment through individuals' negotiation of their identities and as a platform for users to express themselves through interactions with and for one another. Positive feedback, reflecting the community's motivational and belongingness-enhancing potential, is experienced by users in this "post-Internet" setting that combines digital

networks, portable devices, and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange (Vaugh, 2017). To rephrase, it is through social expectations and perceptions that individuals engage in various online networks to portray themselves in a participatory culture (Literat et al., 2021). Underrepresented groups can utilize social media to come together and find their voice, which can help them challenge dominant narratives and obtain respect in society (Hubert & Wagner, 2023). Here, TikTok plays a significant role.

TikTok also plays an important role in dispelling myths and giving a voice to marginalized communities (Vizcaino-Verdú & Aguaded, 2022). The platform, an algorithm-driven app available on all major smartphone brands globally since 2018, lets users access short films through various navigation and engagement options, likes, followers, and views. Users can see one video at a time by swiping up or down to see previous or new uploads; the app's "For You Page" video feed also includes a vast music and audio collection to match each video. Literacy is not necessary, contributing to its popularity among the illiterate as well, as each video features a spinning circle at the bottom where you may access related videos, the song, or the option to like it (Anderson, et al., 2020). Many audio and video memes—repeated recordings that acquire and convey connotations of belonging to the user community—have arisen from this practice of sound appropriation, along with numerous popular content and challenges (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). According to Fang et al. (Fang, Wang, & Hao, 2019), who studied the concept of "anesthesia" in short video apps, communication scholars, and journalists, this dynamic consumption of content leads to an "anesthetic effect" that makes people curious and makes them watch TikTok posts for long periods. This effect is like YouTube's algorithmic system.

One intriguing aspect of TikTok is that, as pointed out by Internet anthropologist Abidin (Abidin, 2021) in her platform mapping study focusing on communities, celebrities, and topic thresholds within the app, controversy and content removal have ensued when users, known as TikTokers, achieve popularity on the platform. This phenomenon is attributed to issues of social (in)justice. The goal of this social media platform has always been to attract a younger audience by means of crude, uncensored content.

Consequently, the app stays away from Instagram's ideal array of filters, Snapchat's 24/7 content, and Twitter's heated debates (Kennedy, 2020). TikTok blocks styles that encourage users to cover up the harmful nature of harassment and other social media conflicts in films they make under the pretense of being creative, normal, and

authentic. So, governments prohibit certain types of activity in public spaces by hiding the Internet's "aggressive architecture" based on urban studies (Harvey, 2019). What we call "aggressive architecture" online is a collection of hostile inventions that limit the types of publics that producers think are desirable, make it harder for people who aren't already valued to participate, and generally hurt people online. Given this, other platforms' digital material has portrayed minority groups according to expectations, biases, or standards. Various communities, such as immigrants, LGBTIAQ+, and disabled individuals, have been studied (Civila, Romero-Rodríguez, & Civila, 2020; Jaramillo-Dent, Contreras-Pulido, & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2021). However, surrounding oneself with like-minded people and sharing a more accurate self can help people overcome social media and online attitudes (Sachs, Wise, & Karell, 2021). Media and culture professor Kilvington's (2021) research on online hate sentiments shows a belief system that oppresses internet users. Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) suggests that sharing content on social media platforms like TikTok enables individuals and communities to express themselves freely, develop diverse identities, and seek positive emotions.

### Research Gap

Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2021) refer to existing research that emphasizes the importance of social media platforms in studying empowerment, specifically in relation to the negotiation of identities. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research on how TikTok empowers youth, particularly those from rural areas who are economically, socially, and educationally challenged in Pakistan. This study seeks to address this knowledge vacuum by investigating the distinct ways in which this population finds empowerment on TikTok.

The affordances of content consumption have been largely disregarded by social media studies, which has instead concentrated on user involvement and innovation (Livingstone, 2003). This research aims to fill that void by investigating how certain features of TikTok's

content consumption relate to social media culture and user engagement. Insights about the distinctive aspects that influence TikTok user experiences can be gleaned from this.

Although the popularity of TikTok among rural Pakistani youth is well-known, nothing is known about the app's actual effects on rural residents. To fill this knowledge gap, this study will examine rural youths' reasons for using TikTok, their patterns of usage, and the app's overall impact on their life. It will add to the ongoing conversation about how social media affects marginalized communities.

The study highlights a lack of knowledge regarding the factors that motivate young adults from rural areas to use TikTok, specifically when it comes to making, watching, and sharing videos. The study's overarching goal is to fill this knowledge vacuum by investigating how rural, underprivileged communities use social media—and TikTok in particular—as a means of self-determination.

### Statement of the Problem

TikTok's appeal among young adults in the rural Pakistan and became a vital part of their everyday lives, particularly the habit of perusing the For You Page, an algorithmically personalized content stream TikTok is different from other applications in way it engages users with its algorithm to tailor their content stream and emphasizes the platform's social features, such as content sharing and peer interaction.

TikTok as a platform enables both creativity and consumption, supported by studies that highlight its focus on entertainment (Burgess, 2015; Jang, 2021; Omar & Dequan, 2020; Scherr & Wang, 2021). Research by Jang (2021) reveals that TikTok users who actively create content exhibit stronger desires for interaction and community compared to those who primarily consume the app. Similarly, Omar and Dequan's study (2020) found shared escapist and entertainment motivations among different user groups. These findings are in line with those of Scherr and Wang (2021), who emphasize the importance of contextual determinants such as time of day in influencing motivations and usage patterns on

TikTok.

TikTok relies on an algorithm that curate videos based on users' interests, tastes, and identity. This algorithmic curation, as highlighted by Simpson and Semaan (2021), Karizat et al. (2021), and Siles and Melendez-Moran (Siles & Melendez-Moran, 2021), can potentially silence certain aspects of individuals' identities, and people's relationship with algorithms like TikTok is contingent and subject to change over time, as emphasized by Siles et al.'s study on the Spotify algorithm.

The active role of individuals in algorithm-user relationships, emphasizing that algorithmic systems, including TikTok's algorithm, have varying consequences depending on how users imagine and engage with them. The author adopts an affordances lens to understand the TikTok algorithm, recognizing its influence on user behavior while acknowledging that user engagement with the platform is not solely driven by personal relaxation and entertainment.

Instead, the author employs an ethnographic audience studies perspective to examine and contextualize these interactions through an analytical double focus. The affordances of content consumption on TikTok. have received less attention in social media scholarship, as the emphasis has been on user participation and creativity (Livingstone, 2003). However, TikTok aligns with the tradition of social media culture that emphasizes user engagement and creativity (Jenkins H & J., 2013; Boffone, 2021; Kaye, Zeng, & Wikstrom, 2022; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Zulli & Zulli, 2020).

The term "affordances" refers to the features and properties of social media apps that shape how people engage with them, rather than dictating their usage. Affordances are seen as relational properties, meaning that the same feature of an app can have different meanings and offer different possibilities depending on the individual, context, and settings. Furthermore, affordances are not fixed but rather emerge through people's perceptions and interpretations of technologies, as well as their understanding of what they enable and limit. TikTok is a social media sharing platform that allows users to share

short multimedia films with their personal network as well as the rest of the world. To interact with others, users blend video clips, audio, music, and text, and certain audio snippets, video formats, hashtags, or music tracks are utilized to establish 'trends' in content production. Some of these trends are open and universal to all users, regardless of demography or subculture, while others are subculture or demographic specific. These trends, as well as the networks and communities that grow from them, promote a feeling of public realm or community conversation that other social media platforms do not.

Because of the fluidity of these trends and networks, as well as the adaptive and real-time reactions users receive from one another, this is the case. TikTok has established itself as a one-of-a-kind content consumption platform, since users no longer must search for material they want, owing to the 'for you' page, an algorithm-generated feed of content for users to consume based on data collected about users.

*“What does the experience of using TikTok app look like for the individuals belonging to educationally, economically, and socially disadvantaged common rural youth of Pakistan?”*

### Research Questions

To further our understanding of the TikTok empowerment phenomena in relation to enjoyment, this study set out to investigate the mechanisms that drive rural young adults' participation in the creation, viewing, and sharing of TikTok videos. The study aimed to address three specific research questions:

1. What motivates people in rural areas to use TikTok for video consumption, creation, and sharing?
2. What, if any, impact does this platform have on the lives of rural adults who use it?
3. How might social media, and more specifically, TikTok videos, contribute to empowering encounters?

### Significance of the Study

This study is critical because it shows how TikTok affects the lives of rural young adults by elucidating the reasons behind their interaction with the platform. By concentrating on rural youth who face educational, economic, and social challenges, this study adds to our knowledge of the phenomenon of empowerment in underprivileged communities. The research aims to fill a void in social media studies by analyzing the features of content consumption on TikTok. This will enhance our comprehension of the capabilities and opportunities provided by the platform. Moreover, understanding the dynamics between algorithms and users and the platform's influence on marginalized rural communities can provide valuable input for policy-making and interventions that attempt to maximize the benefits of social media. In summary, this study offers significant insights that benefit both the academic community and practical efforts in utilizing TikTok's potential for empowerment and societal advancement.

### Methodology

The study delved into the social dynamics and meaning-making processes of rural teenagers utilizing TikTok, employing a phenomenological research technique (Van Manen, 2016). Using convenience and snowball sampling, we followed the phenomenological concepts given by Creswell (2013) and the saturation concept of Saunders et al. (2017) to pick thirty TikTok users from rural Lahore. This was done because of cultural limits on women's involvement.

To gain a thorough grasp of participants' viewpoints on TikTok, we conducted 20-30 minute semi-structured interviews in an ethical manner, ensuring anonymity and informed permission. Following transcription, data was analysed by categorising replies according to themes using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step technique. Golafshani (2003) states that in order to guarantee credibility and dependability, validity tests, consistent methodology, and peer review were utilised. To further reduce bias and increase confirmability, reflective diaries and triangulation were employed (Baxter & Eyles,

1997; Koch, 2006; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Although these findings are exclusive to rural Punjabi users, they do shed light on the relevance of TikTok in rural areas and lay the framework for future regional studies. However, cultural variations may limit the generalizability of the findings.

### Data Analysis and Findings

This section presents the findings from thirty in-depth interviews with rural youth in Pakistan, focusing on young men employed in urban settings. The analysis explores how TikTok shapes their daily lives, self-perceptions, and social connections within a distinct cultural context. The themes identified highlight the platform's role in negotiating identity, community, and technology in rural Pakistan.

### Personal Transformations

Findings reveal that TikTok use has led to notable personal transformations among rural youth. Many participants described the platform as addictive, explaining how casual interest quickly developed into habitual engagement. As one noted, "*TikTok becomes an addiction; you can't leave it once you start.*" This points to the app's growing significance in their daily routines.

Alongside this, respondents reported becoming more self-conscious about their appearance. The platform encouraged them to pay greater attention to personal presentation, as expressed by one participant: "*I started caring more about how I look because of TikTok.*" Such comments highlight TikTok's influence on identity formation and the pursuit of an idealized self-image.

TikTok also emerged as an important medium for sustaining social ties. Young men working in urban areas described it as a bridge to their families and villages, with one saying, "*Through TikTok, I can show where I am and keep in touch with my village.*" The app shaped everyday practices, from hygiene routines to how users signaled their return home. Together, these experiences illustrate how TikTok has become woven into personal habits, self-presentation, and

community connections, underscoring its powerful role in reshaping both individual and social life.

### Video Content Creation

Participants described TikTok content creation as largely spontaneous and unplanned. Videos were often recorded in the moment, without preparation or scripting. One respondent explained, "It is just for fun... when I get dressed and feel that I look good, I just pick up my phone and make a little TikTok, that's it!" This emphasis on immediacy reflects the casual nature of participation and helps explain the platform's popularity among users with limited literacy, who find it accessible and easy to use.

Music played a central role in shaping content, with participants expressing preferences that reflected cultural and educational backgrounds. Many favored Siraiki songs, while those with higher education leaned toward Indian Punjabi tracks. One participant noted, "Siraiki songs are good, but those with higher education levels prefer Indian Punjabi songs." These choices highlight how cultural and regional factors influence media production. Lip-syncing was less common, though some participants acknowledged it as a way for skilled performers to showcase creativity: "We rarely use lip-syncing, but some who are good at acting make such videos." Beyond entertainment, music also carried symbolic meaning. One participant recounted recognizing grief in a friend's video through its soundtrack: "I stumbled into a video featuring our mutual acquaintance... I could tell something was wrong because of the music in the background. Later, I learned he had died of a heart attack." These accounts suggest that TikTok music not only enhances performance but also communicates emotions and cultural identity in ways that transcend words.

Interviews revealed that most participants began using TikTok with little knowledge of its features but gradually developed technological literacy. As one explained, "I didn't know much about filters when I started, but now I enjoy experimenting with them to enhance my videos." This shows users' ability to adapt and learn new tools, even

with limited formal education. The quality of smartphones also shaped engagement: videos recorded on high-end devices, particularly iPhones, tended to attract more likes due to better clarity and sound. Participants noted that poor resolution or unclear audio often resulted in muted or less visible content, reflecting an understanding of how TikTok's algorithm favors technically polished videos.

Together, these findings illustrate how rural Pakistani users navigate TikTok's creative landscape. They combine spontaneous content creation with emerging technological skills, leveraging music, cultural references, and device quality to optimize both expression and visibility on the platform.

### **Informative and Social Content**

TikTok is not just an entertainment platform; participants highlighted its utility for sharing practical and culturally meaningful content. Users often leverage it to disseminate useful information, such as mandi rates for fruits and vegetables, demonstrating its role in providing insights relevant to everyday life. This practical usage shows TikTok's potential as a conduit for knowledge sharing and community engagement. Beyond utilitarian information, TikTok serves as a space for cultural and personal celebrations. Participants frequently post about festivals, personal achievements, and other milestones, positioning the platform as a venue for both cultural expression and social engagement. By enabling users to share celebrations and accomplishments, TikTok fosters a sense of community and solidarity, contributing to the richness of its content and interactions.

Interaction on TikTok is also highly social and collaborative. Many users support each other through likes, comments, and views, cultivating community and preserving social connections. As one participant explained, "We typically show our support for each other's content by liking and commenting... but I do not give likes or comments to those who do not reciprocate." This practice not only maintains social bonds but also increases visibility within the platform. Non-verbal communication, particularly through

emojis—hearts, roses, and playful expressions—is a common and expressive form of interaction, emphasizing the platform's focus on visual and succinct communication.

Participants also noted engagement with users from other countries, highlighting TikTok's global reach. However, cross-cultural interactions were sometimes limited by language barriers and literacy challenges, underscoring the need for enhanced accessibility and multilingual support to enable more meaningful international connections.

Collectively, these findings show that TikTok functions as both an informational and social hub. It allows users to exchange practical knowledge, celebrate culture and personal milestones, and maintain dynamic social interactions, thereby fostering a lively and connected community.

### **Economic Mobility and Success**

TikTok has emerged as a platform that can influence economic mobility for rural users, though such success stories remain rare. Participants highlighted entrepreneurial examples that illustrate this potential. One brick maker shared, "I used to make TikToks just for fun after work... now I earn enough to buy a new house and multiple vehicles." While this level of achievement is uncommon, many rural youth aspire to reach similar heights, viewing TikTok as a pathway to financial independence.

Team collaboration also played a key role in these successes. The brick maker explained, "I brought my friends from the brick kiln along with me... we help each other create content and grow together." This highlights the importance of teamwork and shared goals in navigating the digital space. Participants further emphasized the value of consistency in content genre, noting, "I stick to one type of content... my followers know what to expect, and that keeps them coming back." Maintaining a clear focus helps creators build and retain a loyal audience over time.

Monetization through practical information sharing is another avenue for economic gain. A highway driver shared, "I post about stopovers, road conditions, and facilities... people find it

useful, and now it brings me income.” Such examples show that TikTok offers opportunities beyond entertainment, enabling individuals with limited formal education to achieve financial independence by producing content that is instructive, practical, and relevant to their communities.

### **Cultural Norms and Restrictions**

Interviews revealed that societal norms in rural communities place significant restrictions on women’s use of TikTok. Many young participants expressed concerns about the potential risks and negative influences associated with the platform, particularly on women’s morality and behavior. Some went so far as to suggest limiting women’s access to smartphones entirely to prevent exposure. One participant noted, “I don’t feel comfortable if my sister or cousin starts using TikTok... it could affect her behavior.”

The majority of young males were reluctant to allow women to participate actively on TikTok, citing social consequences and the platform’s perceived negative influence. Even while acknowledging the popularity and visibility of female TikTokers, many maintained that women should not engage with the platform freely. However, views were more nuanced among participants with higher education. Some supported women’s access but preferred it be directed toward more serious or educational content rather than lighthearted entertainment. As one respondent explained, “Women can use TikTok, but it should be for learning or religious content, not just for fun videos.”

These findings highlight a tension between traditional notions of gender roles and emerging ideas about women’s rights and digital empowerment. The conflict reflects the broader struggle rural communities face in reconciling conservative cultural norms with the opportunities and freedoms enabled by new technologies like TikTok.

### **Discussion**

The impact of TikTok extends far beyond amusement; it shapes users’ personal growth, social connections, and sense of community.

Participant accounts demonstrate how TikTok influences habits, perspectives, and social dynamics, affecting daily routines, self-presentation, and belonging. The platform fosters personal development by encouraging introspection and the pursuit of idealized selves, while also serving as a space for social engagement across diverse users.

### **Spontaneous and Unplanned Video Content**

Rural TikTok users value immediacy and in-the-moment expression over careful preparation. As one participant explained, “When I feel good and dressed up, I grab my phone and make a little TikTok.” This casual approach underscores the platform’s accessibility, enabling users of all literacy levels to create content with simplicity and flexibility. Music and lip-syncing serve as both expressive and cultural tools; preferences for Siraiki or Indian Punjabi songs reflect social, regional, and educational influences, while background music often conveys emotion, reinforcing TikTok as a multimodal communication platform.

### **Creativity and Adaptability**

Beyond entertainment, rural users leverage TikTok to share practical knowledge, such as mandi prices, and to celebrate cultural traditions and personal milestones. These practices highlight rural users’ creativity and adaptability, disproving assumptions that they lack technological competence or cultural awareness. By contributing to the platform’s content ecosystem, they cultivate resilience, express cultural identity, and foster online social connections.

### **Technological Literacy and Content Quality**

Participants noted that technological literacy grows with use, even among those with limited formal education: “I didn’t know much about filters when I started, but now I enjoy experimenting with them to enhance my videos.” Smartphone quality also affects visibility, as higher-end devices attract more engagement. Users’ awareness of TikTok’s algorithmic preferences motivates them to produce higher-

quality content, reflecting the platform's capacity to encourage skill development and optimize interaction regardless of economic resources.

### Easy TikTok Interactions

TikTok's collaborative features facilitate social support through likes, comments, and views, fostering community even among users with low literacy. Emoji-based communication provides a non-verbal, expressive mode of interaction, making engagement accessible and inclusive. Participants' attempts to engage internationally highlighted language barriers, suggesting the need for improved multilingual support to foster cross-cultural connections and global community integration.

### Entrepreneurship and Economic Mobility

TikTok offers avenues for entrepreneurship and economic advancement, though such successes remain rare. One brick maker described, "I used to make TikToks just for fun after work... now I earn enough to buy a new house and multiple vehicles." His story illustrates the potential for rural users to leverage the platform for financial independence. Collaborative strategies, consistent content creation, and monetization of useful information—such as a highway driver sharing travel updates—demonstrate how TikTok supports income generation. These findings underscore the platform's transformative potential for economic and social empowerment.

### Societal Limits on Women's TikTok Usage

Interviews revealed persistent socio-cultural constraints on women's participation in TikTok. Many young men expressed concern over the platform's influence on women's morality and behavior, prioritizing traditional norms over female agency: "I don't feel comfortable if my sister or cousin starts using TikTok... it could affect her behavior." Educated respondents showed more nuanced perspectives, supporting women's use within boundaries such as educational or religious content. These insights highlight tensions between conservative gender norms and progressive ideals of empowerment, demonstrating the ongoing negotiation of digital

engagement and gender equality in rural contexts.

Overall, TikTok functions as a multidimensional platform in rural Pakistan, fostering personal growth, creative expression, social connections, and economic opportunity. At the same time, cultural and societal norms shape access and participation, particularly for women. The findings illustrate how digital platforms can empower marginalized communities while reflecting broader socio-cultural dynamics, emphasizing the need for inclusive policies, technological support, and culturally sensitive interventions to enhance participation, equity, and development in the digital age.

### Conclusions

This study concludes that TikTok plays a significant role in empowering rural adolescents, helping them overcome social, economic, and educational disadvantages through innovation, creativity, and resilience. Despite numerous challenges, rural youth leverage TikTok's features to enhance their lives, demonstrating skills in spontaneous content creation, cultural expression, and economic entrepreneurship.

Through TikTok, users in remote areas can express themselves, connect globally, and make their voices heard. Algorithmic incentives for high-quality content encourage skill development and provide pathways for economic mobility. Rural youth are breaking barriers and seizing opportunities for personal and professional growth.

However, the study also reveals persistent cultural and societal limitations, particularly around gender roles and technological access. Despite these constraints, rural users exhibit remarkable adaptability, using TikTok to challenge norms, foster inclusive communities, and promote social engagement. Overall, TikTok represents a powerful platform for personal development, social connection, and financial independence, allowing rural youth to rewrite their narratives and positively impact their communities.

### Recommendations

To maximize TikTok's potential for rural youth,

targeted actions are needed. Digital literacy programs should equip users with skills for safe and effective platform use. Promoting indigenous languages and traditions can enrich cultural diversity and foster social cohesion. Training and resources in content creation, marketing, and partnerships can support rural entrepreneurship and economic growth. Gender equality campaigns are essential to challenge stereotypes and enable women's active participation. Finally, fostering community-driven projects and collaborative content can strengthen social ties and inclusion. Together, these strategies can enhance digital inclusion and empower rural communities.

### Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into TikTok use in rural Pakistan, several limitations should be noted. The research focused on selected villages, which may limit generalizability to other rural communities with different socio-economic, cultural, or technological contexts. Reliance on self-reported data from interviews may introduce response bias, as participants could provide socially desirable answers or misremember experiences. Certain aspects of TikTok use—such as engagement patterns, content-specific impacts, and the role of local social networks—may not have been fully captured. Finally, the cross-sectional design prevents analysis of how perceptions and behaviors evolve over time, limiting understanding of TikTok's long-term effects. Future research could address these gaps through longitudinal studies and broader, more diverse sampling.

### Disclosure statement

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