

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**MAHAM  
JAVAID:**

Hi, everyone. Thanks so much for joining us. My name is Maham Javaid. And I'm a journalist, and I'm the current International Women's Media Foundation's Elizabeth Neuffer Fellow. I was based at MIT Center for International Studies until May, and now I'm working at the *New York Times*. So let's get into it.

TikTok, for me, is the app that I have deleted and reinstalled on my phone tens of times, and that's because I've just never come across a stickier app. So I want to learn from the panelists today what makes TikTok so-- such an addictive application.

In South Asia, TikTok is also one of the more controversial apps because it's been banned several times in India and Pakistan since its launch in 2016. And for today's discussion, we want to focus on the various ways in which South Asian women use TikTok. It varies from providing pure entertainment to teaching, to activism, to health messaging, to so much more. And we'll talk about the way TikTok supports this diversity, but also the ways in which it limits this diversity.

So before we begin, I just want to wake us all up, so I'm going to show us-- I'm going to show you all a few TikToks just for a few minutes. This is especially for the handful of us who have been blessed to never come across this very addictive app. And after I show you the apps, I'm going to introduce the panel. Then we're going to launch into a discussion, and then we're going to conclude with questions from the audience.

So let's start watching the TikToks. And we're going to start with my personal favorite TikTok genre, which I have personally named, and I like to call them Allegedly Romantic TikToks because as you see, when I share my screen, they're not actually romantic, but people would like you to believe otherwise. So let's start.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**NARRATOR:**

When you use Constant Contact, prepare accordingly.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

[END PLAYBACK]

**MAHAM**

So as you can see, I mean, yeah, it would be ideal if you could understand the lyrics of the songs in the back, but even without that, most of them work.

**JAVOID:**

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

[END PLAYBACK]

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[END PLAYBACK]

So already, you must be getting a small flavor of how diverse these can be.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

**SPEAKER:**

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

**MAHAM**

And then I'll move on to the final product.

**JAVOID:**

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

**SPEAKER:**

Thank you so much, and love for you.

[END PLAYBACK]

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

[END PLAYBACK]

**MAHAM**

Those two worked in really well direct contrast. And then we have-- sorry about that. OK.

**JAVOID:**

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

[END PLAYBACK]

So often it's important to watch a few TikToks of the same person to kind of get what collective theme they're trying to hit at, so I thought I'd show you a couple of covers.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**SPEAKER:** Slay!

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

Slay!

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

Slay!

[END PLAYBACK]

**MAHAM** And then we're going to end with this one.

**JAVOID:**

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[CHUCKLING]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**SPEAKER:** No, no, no, no.

[END PLAYBACK]

**MAHAM** So yeah. Let me come back to you. Hi. OK. So yeah. So that was just a small taste of what TikTok can offer. And  
**JAVOID:** yeah, as you could tell, there was a wide variety in there.

So now I'm going to introduce the panelists. We'll start with Ramsha. Ramsha Jahangir is a journalist and a researcher, and I'll let her introduce her research to you.

**RAMSHA** Hi, everyone. I am so, so excited and stoked to be here, not because I like talking about technology, but because  
**JAHANGIR:** TikTok is a platform that's very, very new to me. I'm very guilty of downloading it very late. Usually, I cover technology and human rights on Twitter and Facebook in Pakistan, and I cover digital politics, so TikTok has been something that I've been avoiding for a while.

But I'm thankful to Maham to push me and asked me to research for this panel specifically on how are women using TikTok in Pakistan specifically, and also across South Asia. And since I'm based abroad right now for my master's as an Erasmus Mundus scholar, I'm missing home, and I think that's why my For You page on TikTok took me to what I call the [INAUDIBLE] side of TikTok.

They're from moms to housewives to [INAUDIBLE]. They see life, culture, everything I think I found on TikTok. And of course, we'll talk more in detail about what specifically fascinated me.

But TikTok is fascinatingly where I'm going to stay at now because it's not only connected me to home, but also made me realize the diversity of content and the quality of content is not always-- always comes with sophistication, but also it's just who you are and what home is to you, what your culture is to you, what you find of interest.

So yeah, be it recipes, be it-- like some TikToks we recently saw, like your daily schedule, like you work all day, or you're cooking all day, or just basic culture in itself is what gets the numbers. So yeah, I'll like to talk about that more in detail, and also hopefully hear what other women have to share on the subject.

**MAHAM  
JAVAIID:**

Thanks, Ramsha. Now we're going to move to Sachini Perera. She is the Executive Coordinator of Research, and she's a researcher and an activist.

**SACHINI  
PERERA:**

Thanks, Maham, and hi, everyone. A bit early in the morning for me, but I'm here. So I'm a queer feminist activist and researcher from Sri Lanka, and I'm part of a feminist-- global feminist collective called Realizing Sexual and Reproductive Justice.

And I would say more than anything, I'm a TikTok enthusiast. I've been watching it since, I think, 2017 also, and then around 2018 to '19 I wrote a paper about it also, which really helped me one-- also channel my enthusiasm into something productive. But at the same time, I think also unpack some of my positioning as a feminist researcher, but also as a middle class woman, and how I approach the platform and the ways I engage with it.

And I'll just also make a disclaimer that some of what I'm talking about is specifically about Sinhala language TikTok in Sri Lanka. There is also Tamil language TikTok, but I don't-- I know very little Tamil. And so because of that, I'm not engaging with that part of TikTok in Sri Lanka.

And I'm also not sharing videos when I'm talking about the work because this is also a reflection we had after the press conference paper that me and another feminist researcher, [INAUDIBLE], that we presented in 2018, because I think one, me has a middle class woman interpreting the content of mostly working class creators, like you know, what are the power dynamics there, and then also do they intend for their videos to be shared in panel conference and for people to dissect them?

And then also, what it means to be public on the internet, and what that means for feminist research ethics, you know? Because I think it's very-- like, we can simplify it saying, it's in the public domain, or it's been publicly posted and we can share it and talk about it, but at the same time, I think we have to think about the fault lines around this where it's their informed consent for it to go beyond the platforms, or for us as researchers, what does it mean for us to take this and talk about them?

So I think I have a bit of time, right? Yeah? OK. So I'll just talk-- like, I'll share a few snapshots. So earlier this year, there was a TikTok of a teledrama, like a television actress, who was taking a break during shooting a teledrama. She's in costume dressed as a corpse-- so she's in a white sari with white gloves and white makeup-- and so she and the crew made a TikTok dance in that costume in a coffin, where she wakes up in the coffin, and there was a lot of outrage about this on Instagram and Twitter that this is not appropriate. And you know, it makes you wonder if she was doing this as part of her performance that she's being paid for, that she's doing as part of her work, would there be similar outrage?

Then last year, there is a TikTok influencer who is in Sinhala language TikTok who really built her profile on TikTok and is now a very popular streamer on Facebook Gaming, where she plays PUBG, and a lot of these-- her streams get, again, like, moved to TikTok, get cross-posted.

So the famous song "Akbar," which is trending on TikTok-- so while playing, people request her to dance to this. And when she dances, she gets more of the star donations that you get. So clearly this is an income generation, like an avenue of income generation for her, and her dancing to this-- and there was this one particular person who was giving her a lot of star donations, and this went viral for many reasons-- for her mannerisms, the way she talks, what she was dressed in, and then this got memed.

And you know, like, she was part of the [INAUDIBLE]-- she was also part of laughing at this. But then it went on national television with, like, child psychologists and doctors taking this video and analyzing it to talk about game addiction and to talk about-- going like, is she-- is someone making her do this? Like, all of these questions being asked, even though she has been a content creator for many years.

So when she went into this domain of gaming, and then when she was using this for-- when she was monetizing this, it suddenly became this larger conversation.

In 2020, I was watching this trans woman sex worker who shares her number and who solicits on TikTok, using TikTok, and she was on TikTok Live doing this unboxing video of sex toys, and I have never in my life seen someone do an unboxing of sex toys in similar. Like, this is the first time I saw it. And it was like the best-- like, I work in sexual and reproductive rights, and I have to say it's the best live sex ed video I have ever seen because she was taking out each toy, discussing the functions, trying them-- like, taking a harness out and saying which way does it go, and then the people in the comments are like, or try it this way, try it that way.

And at the same time, people are asking her-- sending transphobic comments in the chat. And so she's saying, your words are not how I earn a living. Like, in Sinhala, she's telling them this. And then when people are asking intrusive questions about her genitals, then she's like, I mean, if you want to know, come to my Pornhub Live and then you can find out for yourself. So that's another moment.

And then during the pandemic, we had a lot of women migrant workers in the Gulf who started joining TikTok to share their working conditions, to share this-- like, to find community because you are not able to come home. You can't leave the houses you were working in because of the pandemic restrictions. So they were doing videos debunking some myths about being abroad and working abroad, like sharing how a salary gets divided-- like someone taking a salary and making a TikTok to pile it up to say, this much goes to my family, this much goes to someone else, and this is what I'm left with.

Again, it was a lot of insight into what a migrant worker goes through that we really don't get through-- like, a lot of the time, we hear about it when someone has gone through violence, and that's how we hear about what the conditions are like, and this is them taking ownership of that narrative and talking about it themselves.

So I think I'll stop there for now, and then later I can talk about the paper that we did in 2018, 2019, about how-- going a little deeper into some of these things. Thank you.

**MAHAM  
JAVAID:**

Thanks so much, Sachini. And yeah, really interesting, and thank you for sharing that idea of when does public become too public, right? And I would love to talk further about that.

So next on the panel, we have Sidra Kamran. She's an incoming assistant professor at Lewis and Clark, and she's going to tell you a little bit more about herself and her research.

**SIDRA  
KAMRAN:**

Hi, everyone. Thanks for inviting me, Maham. I'll just talk a little bit about how I came to do this research, and then just give an overview of the broad things that I look at.

So I am not a social media enthusiast or anything, and it was quite accidental how I came upon it. I was doing research for my dissertation, which is basically an ethnography of women in Karachi who work in beauty salons and in department stores as retail workers, and I was doing ethnography at a women-only bazaar in Karachi called Meena Bazaar.

And at the end of 2018, TikTok sort of burst onto the scene, but only in Meena Bazaar. So I was teaching at a university. I was coming home to my friends who were from more privileged backgrounds, and they had not heard of TikTok, but all the women I was spending time with in Meena Bazaar were fascinated by TikTok. And I also downloaded it at the beginning of January 2019 I think.

And just to explain my fascination, which I then think became a national and global fascination with the app, is that I had been doing fieldwork for some months, and women had Facebook accounts and they used WhatsApp, but they did things that we know women in a lot of South Asian and Middle Eastern context do, right? They didn't put their faces on their Facebook profile photos, or they used a photo of their son, or they had a fake name or a fake account. And there is this censorship of women's visibility on social media that we're quite used to in Middle Eastern and South Asian contexts.

And on TikTok, I was going through it, and there was an endless stream of really beautiful women lip syncing to Bollywood songs, decked out, and quite a lot of display of sexualized femininity. So that is what immediately struck me, and I then began to research it independently.

And the other thing that struck me right away was-- so I started interviewing beauty workers, and also owners of beauty salons, or women who were middle class professionals. And when I asked them about TikTok, either they didn't know anything about it-- this is in the very beginning-- and then in 2020, when everyone kind of knew about TikTok, I asked them, oh, do you advertise your salon on TikTok? And they would say no, or they would laugh, or one woman was offended that I asked her that.

The other woman said, I hate TikTok, which I think is a bit of a strong reaction to a social media app, but I think we're all so familiar that TikTok in the beginning had a kind of reception in Pakistan, and I think in South Asia in general, that was refracted across class lines. So a retail worker who I spoke to described having a craze for that, and then the middle class professionals I'm speaking to are kind of cringing at the app or describing it as cheap. So then I started looking at this kind of class disruption of social media apps, and I think to some extent, [INAUDIBLE] is another example that suggests that.

So one of the main things I look at is how does this class association change over time? So now I think TikTok is quite mainstream, and I think partially it's because of the global popularity of TikTok in the West, or celebrity culture.

The second thing I look at is how TikTok enables women and sexual minorities to engage in a range of gender transgressions. So the first one that comes to mind, and you saw that in some of the TikToks, is a display of sexualized femininities. And I think TikTok is really the first time we're seeing this kind of sexual agency of ordinary women mainstreamed on such a large scale. Because of course, you might have celebrities, and of course you have women on Instagram also exhibiting sexualized femininity, but I think TikTok is really mainstream in an unprecedented way.

And the third thing that I looked at is that even though there is this gender transgressions happening on TikTok that we're familiar with, at the same time, women are also performing what we may call a digital purdah on TikTok, and other researchers have studied this.

So in Pakistan, in Azerbaijan, in the Middle East, in South Asia in general, there are a lot of ways women mediate their access to social media or how they perform their identity on social media. So as I mentioned before, you might not put your own photo, or you might specifically put a photo that shows you as respectable or demure or not sexually immodest-- so sexually modest photo-- or you might have restricted settings, or one study finds that women prefer to use WhatsApp rather than Facebook because it's more private.

So what I look at is what are the specific ways women are negotiating their entry into the digital public sphere through practices of digital purdah? And I can talk about that later. But one video we saw earlier of how women will not really show their face, but find really creative ways to show certain body parts or their disguised identity.

And relatedly, what I think about is that typically we think about digital purdah in relation to sexual modesty. So that's what studies are showing. Women are trying to maintain respectability by engaging in digital purdah. But what I think is happening on TikTok is that women are actually using digital purdah to simultaneously exhibit sexual agency, and I think that's something that we can get into later when maybe we have chance to talk about specific TikTok's [INAUDIBLE].

**MAHAM  
JAVAID:**

Yeah. Sidra, that was very tantalizing, placing a question there and then not giving us an answer. We'll definitely come back to talking more about digital purdah, which is the perfect term for what we've been seeing for years, right? Like, flowers as a Facebook profile picture.

OK, next we will-- I'm going to introduce Satveer Kaur-Gill. She is a postdoctoral research fellow with the Dartmouth Institute, and she's based in Singapore.

**SATVEER KAUR-GILL:** Thank you, Maham. Thank you, Maham, for the opportunity as well. So just to give you a bit of a background of how I came to be on TikTok. Again, it was pretty accidental. I'm actually a critical health communication scholar studying the relationship between structural conditions of precarious migrant labor and health marginalization. When I say precarious migrant labor in the context of sample, I'm referring to construction workers, as well as domestic workers. But for this presentation specifically, I'll be talking about South Asian migrant domestic workers.

So the ways in which I look at their health violence and how it's connected to the nested precarities of migrant living and working conditions in Singapore to understand how health is deeply interconnected with these precarious work and living conditions.

During the pandemic, migrant domestic workers and migrant construction workers, not just face immobility, they begin facing extreme immobility because now they are placed in-- migrant construction workers who are placed in extended lockdowns right up till now, they have restricted movements placed on them compared to the rest of the population.

And during the pandemic, in the [pre-pandemic, ?] migrant domestic workers were not allowed to take their one off day. They were not-- they had to work within their employer's home or within the confines of their employers whom they already work with from Monday to Saturday, but now on Sunday, they were not allowed to leave their employers home. They had to take their rest within the employer's home, which once again, poses a lot of problematic scenarios for their mental health and so on.

So while I was interviewing workers and doing my field work through various digital means, workers would send me TikTok videos of some of their precarious conditions. Some more extreme, some cases of abuse, physical abuse, mental abuse, verbal abuse that they were facing, and they were putting this on TikTok. They were using TikTok as a means to digitally record-- keep some of these precarious conditions that they faced while, of course, at other times, using it for entertainment.

But even in using TikTok for the purposes of entertainment, they sort of show and describe a lot of the conditions in which they work in. Again, because of the hyperinvisibility they faced in the Singapore context where they are erased from mainstream spaces, TikTok became such an important means in which they could socially construct some of their narratives whether it's, again, for entertainment or help-seeking behaviors. It became really important to look at the medium as a means to see the kinds of stories they were telling.

If you have more questions to ask about the nature of their work, I'm happy to answer them later. But I want to talk about the ways in which they live and work in precarity chains, such as debt traps, the limited rest days, around the clock labor, employer surveillance, and limited labor protections, make them visible on TikTok, or them using TikTok as a very important means for platform activism, and then enacting their agency in ways that are visible where they are erased in other contexts.

So for South Asian domestic workers in particular, in my previous study, what we find is that because the South Asian domestic workers form a much smaller population community in Singapore, and because they are so diverse coming from many different parts of South Asia, help seeking can often be challenging. So they might get into scenarios of deceptions and trafficking traps, where they come to Singapore thinking that they are here to perform migrant domestic work but end up in sex work.

So you have those sorts of trafficking traps that take place, again, without wider social network that other domestic workers have, such as from the Philippines and Indonesia where there's a much bigger community of migrant workers that they can receive information from, or retrieve the resources that they need. And then you have the communicative violence that South Asian domestic workers experience, often verbal abuse with a lot of [INAUDIBLE] scripts used by employers, agents, and gatekeepers in that process.

So this is particularly unique to South Asian domestic workers in Singapore. So for example, some of the domestic workers I've personally worked with are domestic workers that have run away from their employers' home in some way or another because of precarious conditions, and they only sort of run away at the very extreme moment where things have become extremely intense, and they just run without any help resources guiding them.

And in that process, what was interesting to find out was, for example, if it was a Sikh Punjabi domestic worker, she would know, OK, I need to go to Gurdwara. Gurdwara is a site where I can receive help. But a Punjabi Christian domestic worker, there's no real space in which-- that exists in Singapore where that social support might exist, or that idea of social support might exist for this domestic worker. So that's where you see a lot of cases of abuse that go completely hidden or erased from, again, a civil society organizing and so on.

So on TikTok, what has been interesting is that a lot of the cultural expressions, as well as the structural expressions of precarity, have been [? record ?] kept. So while they might not be able to post it in that moment, they post it at a later time. Especially during the pandemic where there were a lot of violations, they were also able to self represent, construct online identities and organize digitally for help seeking.

So you would see, for example, in some ephemeral videos that have been taken down, where migrant domestic workers are posted with some of the abuse that they face, and then find ways to seek help in those conditions. And the relevance of audio memes in the storytelling narratives of migrant domestic workers is also very interesting to pay attention to because these audio memes tell us-- give us the effect of the kinds of feelings and emotions they convey.

Another thing that has been interesting about TikTok is the vernacular nature in which migrant domestic workers were able to share their stories. So because it moves away from dominant forms of knowledge production to more textual-- moving away from more textual formats to adopting a whole variety of different formats to build your story, it has become a medium in which migrant workers are pretty active on.

So with that, I want to keep time. Feel free to ask me any further questions at the end of this talk. Yeah. Thank you.

**MAHAM  
JAVAID:**

Thank you, Satveer. Yeah, it was-- I mean, again, I'm just constantly blown away by the diverse ways in which women use TikTok. This is another way of-- resources, is another way in which TikTok is used to share resources.

And then our last but not the least, our final panelist is Sujatha Subramanian. She is a PhD candidate at Ohio State University.

**SUJATHA  
SUBRAMANIAN:**

OK, so like Maham introduced me, I'm Sujatha Subramanian and I am doing my PhD in the Department of Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies at the Ohio State University.

So my different research projects over the years have specifically focused on girls' expressions and practices of sexuality and how they express intimacy, friendship, and belonging. And it's part of this inquiry that I have also looked at how girls use technology and how they use social media.

And I think a lot of what I want to discuss and what I have found has resonances with what the other speakers have pointed out, and especially Sidra's work-- I think there are a lot of connections there-- because something that I have found in how young women's use of technology is understood is the pervasive sort of moral panic associated with the use of technology, regardless of which technology they use.

And I think my favorite example for this is how when bicycles first came about in the late 19th and early 20th century, there were moral panics around young women's use of cycles. And we saw the same thing happen with selfies, where selfies were believed to cause narcissism and low self-esteem in women-- in young women specifically. And so is the case with TikToks.

So I have to admit that I am not-- I think of all the social media platforms, I'm the least familiar with TikTok. I've never had an account on TikTok, and I think I mostly just have looked at the different videos. But even before I went on TikTok, I was getting to hear a lot about TikTok, and a lot of this was associated with the moral panic around young women's use of TikTok.

So they were politicians talking about how TikTok causes cultural degradation in society, how it leads to sexual perversity. A news agency described TikTok as showing scantily clad girls dancing to vulgar tunes, and of course, these girls are from the narrow dingy bylines of small towns. So again, connecting to Sidra's work around how a lot of the commentary around TikTok has also pointed out the class divide when it comes to who are the people who are using TikTok.

So I first went on TikTok after a friend of mine from [INAUDIBLE] which is an anti-caste organization based in India. He shared a TikTok that he was-- that he had created where he was celebrating Ambedkar Jaynti, and he had shared it with a number of hashtags like [INAUDIBLE].

And to me, this was really interesting because until then, I had heard of Twitter, Instagram, even Facebook being used for the creation of anti-caste content, for activism, but I hadn't really heard or read much about how TikTok was being used.

And so once he shared this video with me, I clicked on the hashtags and went down the rabbit hole of videos, so to speak. And to me, what was fascinating was the number of young women who were also creating such content and who were creating content around caste, and what was interesting was that the videos they were creating continued to have themes of romance and intimacy, right? So a number of them were using Bollywood songs that around [INAUDIBLE], for example.

But I'm thinking of what Maham said about the apparently romantic videos-- of the allegedly romantic videos. Because when you look at these videos, and when you go beyond just hearing the audio, and you also focus on how video is being used, you see that even though these songs are talking about [INAUDIBLE], these messages have gotten more but would be directed to anti-caste leaders like Dr. Ambedkar, or the head of the [INAUDIBLE] Krazad.

So again, I think we tend to focus so much on how young women are using social media platforms like TikTok for fun and pleasure, that we sometimes end up missing such use of social media to also-- we also end up missing how young women are using social media to create content around caste, right?

And I think my question is in a context where young people from oppressed caste communities, and specifically from [INAUDIBLE] communities, are being murdered for something as-- for something as small as having a ringtone on Dr. Ambedkar, what does it mean for young women to be using social media platforms, and for them to be using TikTok to not just talk about their caste identities, but to also assert pride in their oppressed caste identities, right? And why is it that such use of social media platforms and such use of TikTok by young women is not being recognized as anti-caste activism?

And again, I want to reiterate that that's not to say that young women are not using TikTok for fun and pleasure because the very young women who are creating content around Ambedkar or [INAUDIBLE] are also creating videos around makeup or are creating videos where they're dancing to Bollywood songs. But I guess what my research tries to do, and what I'm interested in, is to maybe explore a fuller range of how young women are using social media platforms, and also to maybe then ask the question of what actually constitutes activism, right? What are the expressions that we found as activism, or what are the expressions and actions that we define as activism? And who are the people who we recognize as activists?

So that is my work in brief. And like I said, I'm not really familiar with TikTok yet, and that is something I hope to remedy in the coming years and months. Thank you.

**MAHAM  
JAVAID:**

I mean, yeah. It's a-- thank you. Thank you so much, Sujatha. What I was going to say was it's also really interesting to kind of consider what all the panelists have said, and a bunch of them-- many of us have also said, oh, yeah, but we don't use TikTok.

And that's not-- I don't think any of us are saying it in a defensive way, but I think there is something along class lines. TikTok is not yet a necessity the way Facebook was a necessity, the way Twitter-- well, Twitter less, but Instagram and Facebook became necessities for certain classes. So TikTok has not yet crossed that boundary for certain classes.

OK. So thank you so much for that. Thanks, everyone, for introducing themselves and their work. And yeah, let's-- I'm going to just ask a question, and I think a lot of us are going to have a lot to say about it. So you know, let's just kind of-- OK.

So after hearing everyone's research topics and listening to all of the research that you've done, it's obvious that women in South Asia are using TikTok in various ways. But then, what I was thinking while I was listening to all of you is that a lot of social media is used in different ways.

So like, for example, YouTube is also used for everything from cooking recipes to technology, how-tos, to-- again, activism, right? So what is it about TikTok that makes it more addictive, more controversial, and more exciting? Like, why did TikTok become so much more of a rage than YouTube did in South Asia? Whoever wants to go.

**RAMSHA  
JAHANGIR:**

OK. I'll take the lead and hopefully keep it short. I think what fascinates me about TikTok is how different, like you said, but I don't think TikTok is social media. It's very personal. It's not like you see vacation photos or filtered photos or-- influencer culture is also very, very personal. Everyone is presenting, and true to who they are.

So on the For You page, you see all these different diverse types of women that we've talked about, and from all classes, all of them together in For You page, but as who they are. And that's what's very fascinating.

And I think this is-- another thing is the tech literacy aspect. So for YouTube, you need a nice camera. For Instagram, you need to understand how real-- not just reels, obviously, like TikTok, but just like the filter aspect. There is an aspect of tech literacy that's involved. But the short format of TikTok makes it so easy for anyone to just pick up their phone and convey whatever they want to show.

And you can be creative. You can just talk about your life. So for instance, the TikToks I've been looking at, women are basically just talking about OK, if they had a fight with their husband, they're talking about that. If they have a cooking recipe to share, they're talking about that. If they have-- one of the TikToks we saw earlier is a woman just sharing her schedule-- so she's tired, she thinks she's overworked, she's sharing that.

There's also a [INAUDIBLE] TikTok. So in the religious context as well, there are women just reciting [INAUDIBLE] because they think they're good at it, and then people are listening and then they're sharing. If someone's going for umrah, then they're praying on behalf of all their followers.

So it's just these tiny aspects of your personal life that TikTok allows you to share in a very, very short, quick, easy tech literate format, and you don't need a fancy camera or something that you would perhaps for a good YouTube video to do that. So I think that really, really sets TikTok apart from the rest of social media. But yeah, it's a very personal app, I think.

**SUJATHA** Can I add to this? I agree with Ramsha. And I think in addition to tech literacy, I think there's also language  
**SUBRAMANIAN:** literacy that comes into the picture. And I think the fact that TikTok doesn't really rely on a lot of text-based content, unlike something like Twitter, which is almost exclusively relying on text-based content means that users who are not maybe very familiar with English, or in general are not-- who don't express themselves through text, are using TikTok.

But I think-- I do sort of wonder if TikTok is exceptional in terms of social media, in terms of women adopting or women using TikTok, because I feel like women have been early adopters of most forms of technology, including social media. And like I said, I think-- my earlier research was looking at selfies, and it was the same set of fields that was associated with selfies being shared on Facebook and Instagram, et cetera.

And I think women also are able to adapt to the fact that now TikTok is banned in India. I was recently reading about how YouTube Shorts is apparently the next thing, and there are a number of users who have moved from TikTok to YouTube Shorts. So I'm curious to see how that platform will probably be used, and again, what sort of narratives that will give birth to, I guess.

**SACHINI** Is it OK if I also respond? Yes?

**PERERA:**

**MAHAM** Yes, please.

**JAVOID:**

**SACHINI** Yeah, I think I agree with a couple of the things around the design and tech part because the barriers for entry  
**PERERA:** are very low for TikTok, in terms of the design, the language, even the user experience. Because if you go through TikTok, there are very little distractions because it's basically just showing you the entire video, and you can't really bring other platforms into TikTok the same way you can on, for example, on Twitter, for example.

And I think TikTok, that app being available, which again, like where by default the usage of data is very low, and I think they are really looking at those who may use prepaid data plans and the kind of data consumption that might be around that.

And I don't know whether it's more exciting or more controversial. I think it's really like this-- like, a lot of the time the word you hear is cringe, right, because a lot of people said TikTok is very cringy. And this is a word that I hear a lot, and I think it says a lot more about the people who are watching than the people who are performing or who are creating content.

And I'll very quickly just share a quote by [INAUDIBLE] So he's a performer from South India, and one of the things he said about TikTok, which I thought was like a moment of clarity for me, because someone asked him, what makes TikTok different from other social media? And he said, everyone in India is on it-- this was before it was banned-- because it's very easy to use, very accessible, and even making videos on it is quite simple. But I think the main reason it is so popular with almost every generation is that even illiterate people can use the app and don't necessarily need to know how to speak English since it accommodates regional languages as well.

And other platforms, like Instagram and Twitter, are also important, but we don't get the same reach like we would on TikTok because the audience at the other places are more literate, sophisticated, and can't really understand us.

And I think the can't really understand us is really what drove it home for me because that's the point, right? Because a lot of the times when we say that, oh, TikTok doesn't have the same appeal, or isn't as important, we are really talking about it from a different perspective, whatever your privileges might be in terms of languages, the tech you use, your class-- you're talking about it in those terms, whereas I really like it when he [INAUDIBLE] words it. I don't think he means it in like a funny or sassy way, but he really says, yeah, people can't understand us, and that is why they are laughing at this all [INAUDIBLE]. Yeah.

**MAHAM  
JAVOID:**

OK. Actually, I'm going to stay here for a minute. And Sachini, I don't know, I would love to hear more about this idea of-- I don't know. Could you tell us a little bit more about, I guess perceptions of TikTok is one way to put it. You brought this up twice, this, again, this idea of can't really understand us.

I don't know. In terms of what Ramsha said, that TikTok is very personal and it's almost like a diary of sorts for some people, for some users, right? Like you're sharing something personal and something-- like, your innermost. You're expressing your innermost feelings or desires, or, you know.

And the reason you are doing it-- whenever you share something, when you put something out into the world, the idea is that you hope to connect to people, and that you hope that somebody will understand it, right? So the hope or the desire that's there when people launch these TikToks into the world is that someone will connect and understand. But of course, some people will also misunderstand.

What I'm trying to get at is, I guess, how do creators balance that in your view? And also this idea of-- even if we don't fully understand something the way it was meant to be understood, can we still keep consuming it ethically?

**SATVEER KAUR-**I'm going to chime in very quickly on this question because I have struggled with this immensely when doing this research, especially when migrant workers are telling stories that-- we don't know the intention, right? Whether is it to organize, is it to activate, or is it just to share within their own networks? And when I'm-- I've worked on a publication on talking about some of this content, and a big thing that gets to me is the ethics of gazing and what are the consequences?

So in Singapore yesterday, a migrant worker was deported back home because he had written a poem talking about the conditions of his precarity during the pandemic. The Ministry circulated a very strong statement to say he has overstayed his welcome, and the fact that we still allowed him to stay here for this long, despite his activism, was already kind enough.

When I saw that, the first thing that came to my mind was my own work with migrant workers where I am writing about their TikTok use, and what implications could that have for greater surveillance on migrant workers in Singapore by the State? And that's where I keep questioning whether maybe there isn't a place for me to do this research. Maybe talking about some of these stories through research might do much more harm broadly than good in talking about the precarious conditions.

So this is something I struggle with, and I agree with Sachini in her presentation where she talked about what are the consequences of our gazing? Are we putting our participants at risk? And those questions are part of the reflexivity I think we need to do when working with marginalized populations. Yeah. I don't have an answer, but yeah. That's something to-- that is quite important to think about.

**SIDRA**  
**KAMRAN:** Mm-hmm. I can also chime in just a link the first question you asked about the appeal of TikTok and this, which is not to answer directly, but to introduce another dimension. You're saying that people put TikToks because they want to connect with people. And what I find is part of the reason for TikTok's broad appeal is that TikTok actually isn't necessarily, doesn't need to be a public platform.

So when I was hanging out with the beauty workers, it's not that they were uploading their videos on TikTok every time. For a long time, especially when they first start, they're just making it and they're just consuming it for themselves.

So they'll go to their aunt's house and they'll use whatever location to make a bunch of videos, come home, watch them on repeat-- it's got nothing to do with the audience. And I think that's kind of why it became so popular, because there are so many modes of expressing your creativity in it that don't necessarily require an audience.

So one is this really private consumption of TikToks that I find, right? That I wouldn't have known about if I was just on the app. It's just that I happened to be with the women using TikTok like that.

And then the other way they use it is also cross-platforming. So they'll use TikTok to make the videos, but they won't put them on TikTok but just put them on WhatsApp statuses. So it creates another dimension of a mid-level public realm, and they can control who sees it, sort of straddling the line between wanting to be seen, but it's also something very much they're doing for themselves, or they might just send the videos to their boyfriends or to their friends or show them in real time.

So that's just another dimension that I think is kind of not really thought about when we think about TikTok. It's not just what's happening on the public realm.

**MAHAM** Interesting. Thanks for that. Does anyone have anything to add? Otherwise I want to move to one more dimension, and then we're going to move to questions from the audience.

**JAVAID:**

**SACHINI** If I can add something on this. Sujatha wants to speak. Yeah, I mean, I think also the fact that there are different ways of-- I feel as if we like TikTok really-- and also like reels and like, on it, I want to be like the other modes that are really used for this kind of content creation, it shifts the way we think about the personal, the private, and the public.

Because some of the TikTokers we talked to early on, before TikTok became so much bigger, you're filming something in your bedroom, your family doesn't know that you're filming this and putting it on the internet. So at the same time, what is very private for you within your family, you're putting it out for other people to see. And people had very, like-- the young women all had-- they knew that this was happening, and that there was a safety in that public that you wouldn't have in the privacy of your home.

And then there was also, like-- I don't think this happens anymore, but in the beginning, there were these things called TikTok Meetups where TikTokers would come together in a public space and then you perform and you filmed things together, and there are all these, like, you're doing collaborations, right? And this not only moves the performance from the privacy of your home to the public space, but it's also promoting women just performing in public spaces just for fun and not in a professional capacity, which is how it's usually more acceptable.

So I think that's also just something to remember in terms of how your family may be using technology. Then it creates these other pockets of privacy or personal spaces that may not be-- that may not fall into how we understand these spheres usually.

**MAHAM** Sorry. OK. Yeah. OK, so since we're out of time, we're still going to stay on just for 15 more minutes and take some questions from the audience.

Before I do that, in case people leave, I want to thank everyone. I want to thank all the panelists, and I especially want to thank Michelle English from CIS, from MIT's Center of International Studies, and Abigail from MIT India, who helped host this. And yeah, now I'm happy to take questions from the audience.

OK, so the first question is from Priyanka, and it is-- she says that-- OK. She's asking what is specifically TikTok enabling for women in South Asia that other social media applications such as Facebook and Instagram are not? I think we have a little bit covered this. If there's something that somebody says, she might have asked us-- yeah, she asked us way early on. So let's-- I think we've covered this to a fair degree.

OK. So this one's for Sujatha and Sidra. How did these women gain the confidence, and what enabled them to move from using flowers as their DPs on Facebook to lip syncing and dancing on music? How do you-- I guess they're asking, how did they make that transition? Yeah. If Sidra and Sujatha have some insight in this.

**SUJATHA** So I think the way I understand it is something that other speakers have brought up in terms of how young women are, in very sophisticated ways, kind of managing their audience, and they're managing who they consider as the public, who should be consuming these videos.

**SUBRAMANIAN:**

And like Sachini pointed out, I think a lot of that audience management is around their family, and making sure that their family doesn't know how they're using their phones or how they're using these apps. And again, that's something that I've seen even with other social media platforms.

So like for example, Facebook, a young woman might have a profile with the demure, like flower kissing display picture, and maybe that's the profile that she makes available to her family, and her family thinks that's her main profile, but she would also have another profile where she's maybe uploading pictures with her boyfriend, et cetera, but is more restricted, and the content of which can't be seen unless it's-- unless you're on the friend list.

So I believe that I haven't specifically interviewed young women who use TikTok, but I do understand that there are very sophisticated ways in which they started this line of public and private. And you know, I also feel like young women have always been taking risks as a way of asserting their need for pleasure, and I think that's something that happens both with technology and in offline spaces. And I believe that they're aware that the use of technology, like this comes with some sort of risk. It comes with surveillance. But it's a risk they take. So yeah.

**MAHAM  
JAVAID:**

Thanks. So when I said the question is for Sujatha and Sidra, this was not from me. It was from the person who asked the question. So Sidra, if you want to answer.

**SIDRA  
KAMRAN:**

I agree with everything Sujatha said. I think what we also have to confront is that TikTok is not just uniquely appealing to women or to working class people. I mean, it's uniquely appealing. There's something about the app that is just this the algorithm of the app. It is designed in such a way-- I mean, it's compelling to Maham, it's compelling to me when you're on there. So it's distinctive from other social media apps in general, not just for women, or South Asian women, or working class women. So that's one thing.

But the other thing also I think, related to the women I was spending time with, is that women have a real desire to express their creativity, to play with sound, and other apps just don't enable it in that same way, right? So Instagram, of course, you can have filters, and you can look beautiful, and it's adding on new features, but TikTok, in addition to the algorithm, which really knows what you're going to like, provides you with a forum to play with your identity and your creativity in really outstanding ways, I think, compared to other apps. So I think this is one thing that enabled-- women just are attracted to it more than they are to other apps.

And the other thing that I think is interesting to think about is that some apps don't allow you to be as invisible as other apps. So for example, Facebook, right? If you have a Facebook account, your brother's going to know about it. Your father's going to know about it. And sometimes, you'll be expected to add them to your account because social media can actually enhance the surveillance of women because it provides male family members, or any family members, to also surveil women in digital spaces.

So you may make a fake account, and you may have a second account, like Sujatha is saying, but then you might have the suggested friends function. So certain apps like TikTok actually allow you to be more invisible, and researchers have found the same thing for Twitter in other contexts. Like, young people prefer to use Twitter over Facebook because they can just hide in the crowds.

So I think that's another reason why TikTok, in comparison to Facebook and Instagram, has encouraged women to use it more, beyond, of course, the pure attraction of the app, I think. Though, I do think I'll caveat by saying we do need more research, and more comparative research specifically asks women about their attitude towards Facebook, and compare them to the attitude towards TikTok, which we don't have yet, or I haven't come across yet.

**MAHAM**

**JAVOID:**

Thanks, Sidra. OK, there's a question here that I'm actually super intrigued by, and I don't know who's the right person so I'm just going to put it out there. Is there any research on older people using TikTok in South Asia? And I'm actually going to invert that question a little bit, which is, you all, during your research, come across older people in South Asia using TikTok, and what has your-- like, what have you gleaned or learned from that?

**RAMSHA**

**JAHANGIR:**

I'll take this one. Actually, surprisingly, I found older people, especially in Pakistan, using TikTok just as much as the younger crowd, but for very different reasons. So like I said, Mom TikTok is a thing, and these are grandmothers, not just young mothers, but like people-- because, of course, women marry young in Pakistan, so they become grandmothers barely younger. But still, they're making a me TikTok kind of thing, where they're talking very homely, sharing [INAUDIBLE] they're sharing that they missed their daughters after they married off their kids and how they feel so lonely. So there's also that side of TikTok that I think deserves some attention.

And then obviously, this panel is about women generally, but I think there is a large, large, large presence of old men on TikTok as well. And these are our WhatsApp uncles who have translated to TikTok as well, and there's a lot of political commentary going on and just sharing all sorts of conspiracies on TikTok, and their opinion on developments, and very aggressive-- yeah, basically WhatsApp Uncle style TikToks, and then singing old Bollywood songs, poetry-- poetry TikTok is also very, very popular among older generation. So yeah, I think it's a very good comparison, but there's definitely a big presence of the older lot on TikTok as well.

**MAHAM**

**JAVOID:**

Would anyone else like to share? No? OK. Then we have-- this is interesting. So Pramila is asking-- she's saying that Instagram has been known to cause body image issues among young women. What kind of mental health issues came about with TikTok use among young women? And I guess I would add to that, which is not just mental health issues-- but I guess we didn't get to this at all, which is TikTok, the app, the way the infrastructure is built, the fact that you don't have to be literate, all of that-- so it gives you all of these options and diversity, right?

But I guess what we didn't talk about is the ways in which TikTok may limit people, maybe because of its infrastructure, or because of other reasons. So yeah, does anyone have any thoughts about the limitations, but also if it causes-- or if it's known or suspected to cause certain mental health issues more than others?

I guess no one wants to say anything bad about TikTok. There's no limitations to the app apparently. It's only all good.

**RAMSHA**

**JAHANGIR:**

I think we should definitely mention the censorship and harassment aspect of this, which I think is indirect-- but is very much related to mental health. So in Pakistan for instance, women TikTokers have faced a lot of harassment. Like recently, there was a TikTok controversy about a woman setting fire for the purpose of creating TikTok, and later she clarified that the bushes were already on fire, but the fact that she became an opportunist sort of, to use this opportunity to make a TikTok-- and she faced a lot of harassment in the past. We've seen [INAUDIBLE] and a lot of controversies.

So harassment is definitely big. The more popular you become, the more harassment you face, which is not very specific to TikTok only, but also other platforms. But this is one aspect where TikTok is also not doing much to protect these women.

And then also censorship aspect of things because in Pakistan specifically, morality-- immorality, you know-- obscenity has been a big theme for an reasoning behind banning TikTok. So do women feel pressured by these censorship moves to filter themselves, or cut down on the way, or-- yeah, basically restrict themselves on these platforms? Also, what does TikTok do again to protect-- because right now, they're complying full on with Pakistan government to be able to stay unbanned in Pakistan, but then how does that impact these women-- or gender, across genders, how does this impact how they exercise their rights on this platform? It's definitely something worth mentioning.

**SATVEER KAUR:** Just to add to what Ramsha is saying, I think the surveillance aspect of TikTok-- again, turning that question around, right-- the ways in which-- while wild migrant workers used TikTok to talk about their conditions, that can also result in therefore surveillance, access the structures of surveillance through other migrant workers, as well as employers and gatekeepers that sort of scold them for posting some of the content that they post. So I think that would be a dimension that is important to think about as well. Yeah.

**SUJATHA** I think this, specifically addressing the question of, I think, mental health issues among young women, I don't  
**SUBRAMANIAN:** actually know of research specifically on TikTok. I think what my question is more around how do we react to young women expressing sexual agency, even outside these social media platforms, right?

There are certain ideas we have about what is age specific sexuality. And anytime young women transgress those expectations, or express their sexuality in a certain way, we look for language that comes from-- that sounds like we are coming from a place of wanting to protect girls, right? And I feel like there is a certain way in which those fields is specific-- especially kind of coalesced around technology, coalesced around young women's use of technology.

So I don't want to discount that there may be specific kind of pressures that young women on social media face, but I think the larger question is, to me at least, is about how we think about young women sexuality. Yeah.

**SACHINI**  
**PERERA:** Yeah. And I think it's also important to think about it as an ecosystem because I think some of the harassment doesn't happen from TikTok, it's when videos get posted on other platforms, and that drives harassment towards it.

Because I mean, I was an early adopter of TikTok, and back in the day when we were studying it, one of the things that really surprised us was that the comment sections was so positive and wholesome back in the day, which was so unlike-- like, we would look at the same person's content on YouTube and the backlash we saw there.

So that has shifted now because the audience has expanded, of course. But I think a lot of the time what we see is that when something gets posted on a gossip website, or it's shared on national TV, or other influential people comment on things, that is when we see a lot of the harassment coming back to the platform.

And also the fact that a lot of content creators openly talk about this also. Like, they'll put-- the reply function on TikTok is often used to really hone in on some of these like comments to say OK, you're saying this to me, and do you know how I feel about it? Or like, to get more support from people who are supporting you in the comments. So I think that is also another way that people are navigating it within the platform itself some of the time. Yeah.

**MAHAM**

Yeah. I really like the reply function because I think it's such a good way to own your narrative. It's like oh, this is what you said? Well, this is my response. It's so neat.

**JAVOID:**

OK. With that, I think we're going to end here. Is there something that one of the panelists wants to see that they feel is important but they didn't get a chance to share? Now is your opportunity. No? OK.

Well, thank you so much, everyone, for attending. Thanks to all of the viewers, and thank you to all of the panelists. Thank you to Michelle. Thank you to MIT. And yeah, I hope this-- I hope everyone enjoyed it and learned something. And yeah, thanks for being here.

**SATVEER KAUR**-Thank you, Maham.

**GILL:**

**SIDRA** Thanks, Maham.

**KAMRAN:**

**SUJATHA** Thank you.

**SUBRAMANIAN:**

**SACHINI** Thank you.

**PERERA:**

[MUSIC PLAYING]