



## **Role of Tik Tok in Social Acceptability and Improved Socio-Economic Status (SES) of Transgender and Trans-sexual in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

In the context of existing and persistent discrimination against trans-community, Tik Tok has become a platform for establishing social ties and sharing of personal life events for the individuals living on the margin of the society. Tik Tok is currently the most prevalent short video app on Google Play Store and is one of the most popular social media platforms among the youth, especially teenagers, all over the world. The theoretical framework providing the initial guidance for this paper is found in intersectionality framework which provides an understanding of how aspects of a person's social and political identities (including race, gender, class, sexual abilities, socio-economic status) can be combined to create unique modes of discrimination. This qualitative research, examines the experiences of Trans-musers (transgender and transsexual using Tik Tok for creating videos) through five in-depth structured interviews. The study explores the utilities and affordances of Tik Tok and how Tik Tok has proved to be a platform for connectedness, self-recognition and social acceptability of Trans-musers. However, not all the trans-musers get enough monetary benefits out of this app.

**Keyword:** *Trans-community, Transgender, Transsexual, Trans-musers, Tik Tok, Social Media*

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**Introduction**

The trans-community, in particular, transgender in Pakistan are living below the poverty line and are seen begging and dancing on road signals and on wedding functions. The social divide in Pakistan forces them to struggle more with their due rights. Transgender are usually cast out by their families, and many of the estimated 500,000 in Pakistan end up as beggars or sex workers. Fifty-eight have been murdered in the past three years in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province alone.

Alisha, a transgender activist and her other friends included Adnan, Sameer, Komal and Ayesha, who were all members of the Trans Action Alliance (TAA), a group comprising civil society and trans people in the province, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, were targeted and shot in 2016 (Akbar, 2016).

However, it is observed that many transgender are using Tik Tok confidently and having a huge fan following on the app. They are often seen treated as celebrities in their videos and are found being followed as influencers at public places. Thus, we can see the Tik Tok app causing a shift in the changing perception and the acceptability of trans-community in the society. Yet, despite the transgender and transsexual excessive use of the app, a lack of research persists on their identity development and lived experiences as well as their socio-economic status after constantly using the app. Thus the researchers want to explore how social media, in particular Tik Tok, influences the lives of these minorities and help in their social acceptability.

**Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study are as follows;

RQ1. How do transgender view the concepts of social acceptability and do they feel socially accepted through Tik Tok?

RQ2. How does Tik Tok facilitate transgender to overcome poverty?

**Tik Tok and Its Popularity, Worldwide and in Pakistan**

ByteDance, a Chinese big technology firm, reached to a diverse and vast consumer market on a global and international level through a short video sharing platform currently known as Tik Tok and previously known as Musical.ly (Maher, 2019). The app is known as Douyin in its home market and was launched in 2016 there however, it was shared with the global audience in 2017. Since then the app is managing to break records of popularity (Iqbal, 2020). As of May 2020, there are 800 million active users of Tik Tok worldwide, and the app has been downloaded more than 1.5 billion times on the Google Play (for android phones) and the App Store (for iPhone users). With confirmed 33 million downloads, the app was ranked the top most downloaded app in Apple App Store for Q1 2019. Demographics of the app share the interesting fact that 41% of its users, commonly known as musers, age range between 16 - 24, showing that the app is quite popular with the teenagers and millennials. So far, India is the top most user of the app, as nearly one-third of the total downloads of Tik Tok i.e. 467 million, occurred in India. On average a person spends 52 minutes per day on the app and 90% of users access the app almost daily. Interestingly, this is available in 155 countries in 75 different languages. (Mohsin, 2020) The top 5 countries having the most users of Tik Tok in 2019 were; India 190.6 million; USA 41.0

million; Turkey 23.2 million; Russia 19.9 million and Pakistan 19.5 million

Pakistan is the fifth largest consumer of the app in the world. With 19.5 million downloads, Tik Tok was the most downloaded social media app in Pakistan in 2019, followed by Facebook with 17.6 million downloads. Tik Tok incorporates a versatile audience from different backgrounds belonging to various age, gender and social groups in Pakistan (Hayder, 2020)

All these demographics explain that this short video sharing platform is popular with the teenagers and millennials who can create 15 sec - 40 sec lasting video in which they clip feature fun music, lip-sync dialogues, do skits and even dance. Sometimes musers dwell in challenges and duets with split screens with other musers throughout the world. The Tik Tok app relies on Artificial Intelligence - AI in two ways, one on the consumer side and the other on the producer side. On the consumer end, it learns quickly what do the users prefer through their likes, comments and also through how long one user spend time to watch a video. However, on the producer side, it offers to create simplified editing options, suggests trending music, hashtags and filters. Because of this effective Artificial Intelligence, experts caution against Tik Tok addiction (Knowledge, 2019).

### **Intersectionality Framework and Tik Tok**

The theoretical framework providing the initial guidance for this paper is found in intersectionality framework, which provides an understanding of how aspects of a person's social and political identities (including race, gender, class, sexual abilities,

SES: Socio-Economic status) can may be combine and create unique modes of discrimination. In Pakistan, transgender and transsexual community face discrimination not only about their non-conformity of the gender and their gender orientation but also on social and cultural level because of which their socio-economic status remains below the poverty line (Collins, 2015; Brown, Ray, Summers, & Fraistat, 2017; Choo & Ferree, 2010). This qualitative analytical framework (intersectionality) identifies the power effects on the most marginalized segments of society hence, taking these interlocking systems in account and work to promote social and political equity which in other ways lack in the society. In this case, social media, Tik Tok in particular, seems to provide a safe place for these minorities (transgender and transsexual) to interact with each other and with other segments of the society to get a better social acceptance and also to improve their SES by multiple earning opportunities through Tik Tok platform.

### **Methodology**

The current study is qualitative in nature where in-depth interviews of famous transgender and transsexual, selected through purposive sampling were conducted. The study reached out to eight transgenders and transsexual who openly confirmed their gender orientation on social media out of those eight, only five responded and structured interviews were conducted with them. Some of the interviews were conducted in person and some over the telephone because of the proximal distances. The number of followers, likes and the user IDs of these participants are given

in Table 1. Out of these Minahil Jack and Chahat Baloch could not be reached out.

**Table 1:** Followership of Transgender and Transsexual on Tik Tok

Name	Tik Tok User ID	Follower s	Likes
Mehak Malik	@mehakmalikofficial578	4.3M	77.3M
Mis Chahat Baloch	@mischahatofficial	1.8M	12.5M
Ali Shan	@aalishann_	1.3M	14.3M
Shanaya Gul	@user140000651	98.2K	238.7K
Abid cute	@abidlahoria	674.2K	5.8M
Nayel Alee	@nayel.ali	527.4K	2.2M
Irzzi Alee Shah	@irzzialeeshah	349.1K	1.6M
Minahil Jack	@minahiljack	273.5K	621K

### Analysis and Discussion

This study identifies the benefits and deterrents of Tik Tok for trans-community in Pakistan. The researcher conducted structured interviews with the trans-musers of Tik Tok comprising different questions ranging from their joining of Tik Tok, preference of Tik Tok over other social media platforms, social acceptability, public response and improvement in economic status. Two main themes emerged out of the interviews: Tik Tok as a resource platform and Tik Tok as a path for social acceptance and self and authenticity for this marginalized segment.

### Class-difference, Self-Recognition and Social Acceptability

Almost all of them agreed that the app is helping to bridge class gaps. Mehak Malik is a popular transgender for her dance performance in Multan, a populous city in the province of Punjab, in Pakistan. She has the top most followership among her community on Tik Tok and an analysis of her Tik Tok posts

confirms that she is being treated as a celebrity on various family functions and people also invite her on the openings of their cafes and saloons. She strongly agreed that Tik Tok helped in bridging the class gaps.

“Educated, hifi people now look at us. Earlier they would not like transgender but now they know there is an artist by the name of Mehak. Tik Tok play a role in this.”

The themes emerged out of this discussion was the class-difference and self-recognition. She started her comment by acknowledging the educational and economic status of the elite class, which refers that in her perspective, the economic status and education makes people elite and this is what transgender lack. After then she mentioned about how the elite class would not like to look upon them in the past and this is only with the app that these people have started recognizing her talent. And lastly, she used the word Artist for her, which reflects on her self-recognition.

Likewise, Ali Shaan and Abid Lahoriya, also expressed their excitement about the fact that people recognize them publicly. When asked about social acceptability they said,

“Yes. Whenever, wherever we go, people spot us as Tik Tok stars. We really feel proud when we go outside in public and people ask for selfies. OMG... this feels so good.”

They also added, that because of some indecent content, their Tik Tok accounts were taken down but they made new profiles, and got followership again in no time. Which shows, they have made their way to the public and have gained enough

recognition and acceptability in society where masses want to hear from them and want to follow them on Tik Tok.

One of the transsexual commented about the Tik Tok being a safe space and a perfect platform to raise their voice. He said,

“Trans-community has always been neglected and humiliated on mainstream media and in stage and theaters. People have been making stereotypical jokes about us since ages. They only look us as cringy objects who are only involved in singing, begging, dancing and sex-work. Tik Tok is the first platform on which we could come out as we are. I applied makeup, got dressed up and expressed myself through Tik Tok videos.”

With this comment it is obvious that due to prevailing discrimination, transgender and transsexual never had a safe space where they could connect socially. It is also inferred here that before this platform, self-recognition and social acceptance both were lacking.

### **Monetary Benefits of Tik Tok**

One of the participants said that she logged on the app only because she was told that the company would send gifts for her if she will make videos however, she found out later that there was no such company and this disappointed her. This shows that it is not only the self-recognition and the urge of social acceptability for the trans-people which leads them to Tik Tok but also they are interested in getting monetary benefits, alleviating their poverty through this app. At the same time, Mehak Malik, is seen to be treated as a celebrity on openings of cafes and saloons.



The two other transsexual are found to be taking luxury trips abroad giving shout outs to their fans restaurants, which supports the fact that some of them get the economic uplift but not from the app but from their fans who recognize them as Tik Tok stars.

### **Countering Discrimination and Cyberbullying**

Almost all of them agreed that they receive discouraging and abusive comments on their videos in addition to getting appreciation from fans. As most of the participants of this study are sensed to be sensitive in nature, they expressed that these responses hurt them badly. Three of the five interviewees conversed that they had to take bold steps by making videos and talking about their non-conforming gender status and to request people to consider them as human beings before terming them as, 'she-males or khusra'. They also said that this society is dual faced as these are the same people who inbox us to make videos and when we do, they abuse us in public comments section. Ali Shaan and Abid Lahoriya also mentioned that,

"Though we have gained enough appreciation from public but still we find it hard to show up on Meet and Greet (MnG) gatherings of Tik Tokers so that those musers do not humiliate us. We are afraid that those musers will take out their phones and will shoot humiliating videos of us in those gatherings. Same goes for mainstream media. We just do not want to be criticized and shamed for who we are."

One of the transgender spoke about the ease to use Tik Tok app. She said,

"Tik Tok is easy to use, I do not need expensive drone cameras or editing software to create and edit my videos. I can

pick up my mobile phone and log in the app and start talking to a huge audience at once. Even those who are illiterate, can use the app easily.”

This comment reflects highly upon the affordance of this social media being easy to use. Treem and Leonardi (2012) allocate four affordances to social media including 1) visibility, 2) editability, 3) persistence and 4) association. This comment not only reinforces the affordance of ‘visibility’ and ‘editability’ of Tik Tok but also supports the ‘association’ affordance because of which literate and illiterate musers can use the app equally.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this qualitative study support the fact that Tik Tok has proved to be a platform for connectedness, self-recognition and social acceptability of Trans-musers. However, not all the trans-community musers get enough monetary benefits out of this app. The opportunities for the economic benefits have undoubtedly increased but has not tremendously improved their lifestyle. Trans-musers are more likely to use this app for the stardom which assures them social acceptability virtually, but there are still some fears of discrimination because of cyberbullying. Liking or disliking content posted by these musers is a subjective concept but undoubtedly, Tik Tok has proved to be an affordance for them where they can exhibit themselves of who they are. Tik Tok has proved to be a platform where minorities like transgender and transsexual can establish social ties, can get education and also can share resources which were not possible and available otherwise.

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Annexure-1

Structured Questions for the Interviews

1. When did you Join Tik Tok?
2. What led you join Tik Tok?
3. Were you using any other social media platform before?  
How Tik Tok is better than those platforms?
4. What kind of videos do you prefer to make on Tik Tok?
5. Do you use Tik Tok to raise social awareness about your community or various public issues?
6. Do you think Tik Tok has helped in your acceptability in the society?
7. What kind of public response do you get on TikTok? If it is encouraging or discouraging?
8. Is Tik Tok good for monetary benefits? Do you get financial stability using this platform?
9. What do you think about future of Tik Tok and your fame related to it?
10. Do you attend Meet and Greet (gatherings) with other Tik Tokers?