INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES BULLETIN
ISSN: (E) 3007-1917 (P) 3007-1909
Volume 4, Issue 3, 2026

SOCIAL MEDIA DIPLOMACY: HOW TIKTOK SHAPES YOUTH POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Dr. Muhammad Nawaz Shahzad[1], Wajiha Saleem[2], Muhammad Zohaib[3], Muhammad Asif[*4]

[1]*Lecturer, Pakistan Studies, NUML Faisalabad Campus, Pakistan.*
[2]*Lecturer, NUML Faisalabad Campus, Pakistan.*
[3]*Lecturer, Department History & Pakistan Studies, University of Agriculture Faisalabad, Pakistan*
[*4]*Visiting Lecturer, Department History & Pakistan Studies, University of Agriculture Faisalabad, Pakistan*

[1]nawaz.shazad@numl.edu.pk , [2]wajihasaleem@numl.edu.pk, [3]zohaib0421@gmail.com,
[*4]muhammadasif33370@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: *
Muhammad Asif
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23829191

Received	Accepted	Published
01 January 2026	17 March 2026	31 March 2026

ABSTRACT

Envoys, treaties and press briefings were the means of diplomacy. It also occurs with 15-second video clips and borrowed sounds today. The current article explores the impact of the short video platform TikTok on two spheres that tend to be studied separately, namely, among young people the political engagement of young people and the behaviour of international relations. Based on digital diplomacy research, the study of youth civic participation, and recent journalism and survey research, I contend that TikTok functions as a common political space where citizens, governments and platform owners all strive to influence. Three findings emerge. First, TikTok makes it easier for youth to express themselves politically, yet it encourages an emotional, humorous, and imitative approach to politics over one that is more deliberative. Second, from an international perspective, states and other actors use the platform as a space for public diplomacy, propaganda, and covert influence, as witnessed by the Ukraine and Gaza wars and by the annulled 2024 Romanian election. Third, the platform has itself become a diplomatic issue: who owns it, who controls it and how it is regulated is now subject to negotiation between governments. Implications for diplomats, educators and regulators are presented, and future research is suggested at the end of the article.

Keywords: *Digital diplomacy, tiktok, youth political engagement, soft power, platform governance, connective action, information warfare*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nepal's government on 1st August 2025 banned 26 unregistered social media platforms for the first week of September. Thousands of young people, some as young as teenagers, filled the streets of Kathmandu, within days. A prime minister resigned on 9 September, and there was a minimum of 22 deaths during the disturbances (CNN, 2025). The ban was the spark, but the journalists on the spot were well aware that it was not the whole fire. The protesters were upset by corruption and by a political elite that appeared to have access to all the privileges, while such grievances had been simmering for weeks on social media, where people pointed out the "nepo kids" of the ruling elite, mocking them (Rest of World, 2025).

The episode is a timely reminder of a fact that has been drummed into the heads of researchers for the past ten years: For many of the world's

younger generations, social media isn't a channel for politics. It's the place where politics is met, talked about and, increasingly, acted upon. This time, when the government attempts to turn off that channel, the impact can extend beyond the screen.

TikTok is at the heart of this change. It was launched worldwide in 2018 on the back of ByteDance's acquisition of the app Musical.ly and has emerged as a unique culture of short-video creativity hinged on imitation, remixing, and the ability to view content from strangers as easily as from friends, according to Kaye et al. (2022). According to a new Pew Research Centre (2025a) survey, 20 percent of U.S. adults say they now follow news regularly on the TikTok app, compared with 3 percent in 2020, and 43 percent of adults younger than 30 say they do so, up from 9 percent. The numbers refer to one country. The platform's scope is worldwide, as are the political issues it asks.

The following article presents two related questions: In what ways does TikTok influence youth's relationship with politics? So how are governments and other international actors reacting to, using and contesting such a platform for those very young people? They are linked by the argument, which is the same in both cases. The link between the two is the argument, which in both cases is the same. Youth political engagement on TikTok is NOT taking place in a neutral space. It occurs within a setting that states try to shape and within a setting that states try to regulate and/or ban. In order to comprehend one, we must comprehend the other.

The remainder of the article goes on. In Section 2, three conceptual tools are introduced: the concept of digital diplomacy, the concept of soft power, and the concept of connective action. In Section 3, you will learn what makes TikTok a distinctive environment for communication. The evidence on youth political engagement is summarised in Section 4. In Section 5, international relations are explored, such as public diplomacy, conflict communication, and election interference. The platform as a geopolitical object is explored in Section 6. The conclusions on what the evidence means are explored in Section 7, and the final section is Section 8.

A note on method. This is a conceptual and integrative article, not an original empirical study. It incorporates peer-reviewed research and books, survey data from Pew Research Center, and reporting from trusted news organisations. I say that if something is journalism without research, or the facts are disputed, they are journalism.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 From public diplomacy to digital diplomacy

The beginning is soft power. As Nye (2004) defined it, it is the ability to attract what you want without forcing or paying for it, and Nye went on to say that public diplomacy is one of the key tools states use to turn their culture, values, and policies into attraction (Nye, 2008). Cull (2008) was helpful in distinguishing between various activities in public diplomacy: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange and international broadcasting. There is a social media "counterpart" to each of these. With listening, it goes into sentiment monitoring. Advocacy is an embassy account responding to critics. Cultural diplomacy turns into a national tourism board made viral.

According to the editors of the Digital Diplomacy field, as it is widely accepted, "diplomatic diplomacy" is the term used for "the use of digital tools by diplomats and foreign ministries to serve diplomatic aims" (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). Going even further, Manor (2019) suggests that digitalisation does not simply create a new tool for an existing profession, but that the very logic of the profession is altered, meaning that ministries have to consider other elements when they think about their audiences, engagement, and narrative, which digitalisation does not need to consider.

The following section of the literature cautions against social media serving as a megaphone. Public diplomacy has shifted from an information approach, characterised as a state broadcasting information message, to a relational approach, in which influence requires developing relations with and among publics, according to Zaharna (2010). In his earlier work on the role of Twitter in the dynamics of U.S.-Iranian relations,

Duncombe (2017) showed that new channels do not necessarily lead to a new level of hostility, because the dynamics of traditional foreign policy identities and commitments limit speech and reception. This is a watchout that is worth keeping in mind. A video does not constitute a policy shift.

2.2 Youth engagement and connective action

The second area of theory is that of citizen engagement, and engagement of young citizens, in politics online. Connective action is a concept introduced by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) that questions the notion of joining organisations based on collective identity, instead asking that people share content that is personal to them through their personal networks, and coordination will ultimately emerge from the sharing. This could be one of the reasons people espouse so much youth political expression that looks nothing like traditional participation. No membership card and no meeting. There's a video, there's a sound, there's a hashtag, and there's a wave of people adding their own version. Vromen et al. (2015), however, used the framework with young people and found that they used social media to engage in both personal and more traditional political action rather than supplanting them. Networked protest offers a sobering counterpoint to Tufekci (2017), who studies the way online tools enable "rapid, at-scale formation of movements" but can also result in "loss of organising ability" because of this speed. As mentioned, large audiences are vulnerable.

2.3 Bringing the two together

Most scholarship deals with these two subjects in isolation. Digital diplomacy scholars research the foreign landscape of the state and its audiences. Youth participation scholars are scholars who study citizens and their own governments. Yet on TikTok, it's a different story. An image of a young person's friend's comment on a local election, an official ministry's breakdown of a foreign policy, a meme in favour of a war from a land she has never been to and a firsthand video from a war zone can all be the same feed. Domestic and international are both in one swipe. This article sees the collapse as the key phenomenon.

3. What Makes TikTok Different

While it's easy to view TikTok as the latest social media platform, scholars have pointed out that its features impact political communication in particular ways. An algorithm, and not the social graph, is responsible for the feed. In previous platforms, visibility largely was dependent on who you followed. The "For You" page algorithm on TikTok picks up content based on the feedback it gets from the user, and even a new account with no followers can get millions of views if the algorithm thinks the video is engaging. Coordinated campaigns can make themselves heard, as can voices of politeness where no other voice could be heard.

The mother tongue is imitation. Zulli and Zulli (2022) suggest that the relationship between people on TikTok is one of "imitation publics," and people join a platform not to share the same content, but to replicate the same format, sound or dance, but in a unique, personal way. This logic takes up politics. A political message which can be replicated as a template goes far; one that cannot will come to a halt. Audio is as important as visuals. Bösch and Divon (2024) conducted a content analysis of Ukrainian-invasion-related videos on TikTok, and concluded that the function of attaching and replaying sounds on the platform enables "soft" propaganda to thrive. A sound can have a story or a feeling go around throughout thousands of videos, well after folks ask if it's true or not. Moderation is all about visibility. Zeng and Kaye (2022) contend that in addition to removing content, TikTok is now moderating visibility by making small adjustments to the ways in which content is displayed. It's important politically, because that makes it easier to change the parameters of acceptable speech without users or governments notifying them of a formal takedown decision. The arrival of politics is untimely. Fewer than one-quarter (23%) of U.S. adults under 30 report that they seek out political news, and about three-quarters say they mostly come across political news when they stumble on it (Pew Research Centre, 2025b). The analysis of the accounts people follow revealed that just 5 per cent of people featured news-related material in their five latest posts, and 10 per cent of their five last posts

were about politics. People do NOT browse politics; they are found by politics, between humour and food preparation. Combined, these features make TikTok a very open and very malleable political environment.

4. Youth Political Engagement on TikTok

4.1 What the evidence says about social media and participation

The larger question, of course, is whether young people are becoming more politically active because of their use of social media, and it has been explored for years. Boulianne's (2015) meta-analysis of the existing research found a positive but modest relationship between social media use and civic and political participation. Her subsequent review of 20 years of research came to a similar conclusion: While most estimates are positive, the effects are typically small and context and the method of measuring "participation" matter (Boulianne, 2020). So, the honest scientific response is: "Social media has not revolutionised youth politics" and "It is all empty clicktivism." That there is a real, but limited connection.

4.2 Expression as the main event

Studies specifically for TikTok are most notable for their insights into how youth interact with the platform. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2019) explored youth political expression on Musical.ly's predecessor and found a style of expression that is distinctly collective, relying on common symbols, sounds, and formats to communicate a political stance collectively, often injected with humour. In their later reflections on this research, they suggest that TikTok has emerged as an important platform for young people to voice their politics, one that presents opportunities and challenges, such as its affordances for making certain types of political speech feel natural (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023). This kind of involvement is of value. It provides young people who are too young to vote, or who feel excluded from formal politics, a public voice. It humanises the political identity rather than institutionalizing it. And it can draw attention to issues not covered by the mainstream media. For example, Litera and colleagues' work on TikTok and protest has explored the ways that creators critique the coverage of protests by news media, an activity that would have been challenging for teenagers a generation ago (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023).

4.3 Campaigns come to the platform

Politicians noticed. Initial research into political communication on TikTok revealed that the platform was soon becoming a space for political messaging through entertainment conventions, not just an apolitical space (Medina Serrano et al., 2020). By 2024, reporting said that Trump, who at the time was the Republican presidential nominee, Vice President Harris, and then-President Biden were each on TikTok during their campaigns, though the app had been criticised earlier in the year by The Hill (2024). The irony was keen as the very same officials were threatening to keep the platform from being used as a national security threat, while also using the platform to appeal to young voters.

4.4 Limits and risks

There are good reasons for caution.

Depth. Short video rewards compression. Complex issues, whether monetary policy or a border dispute, must be reduced to a few seconds and a punchline. Some creators do this brilliantly. But the format makes nuance expensive.

Passive exposure. Because so much political content is encountered incidentally (Pew Research Center, 2025b), exposure does not necessarily translate into understanding, let alone action. A young person may "know" a political claim only as a sound she has heard a hundred times.

Feedback loops. Recommender systems reward what holds attention. There is a live debate in the field about how far this pushes users toward emotional or extreme content, and the evidence is mixed. What is clear is that the incentives favor emotion.

Inequality of voice. The platform is not equally open to everyone. Creators with existing visibility, funding, or organizational support can shape narratives more easily than isolated users. The Romanian case, discussed below, shows how paid

influence can masquerade as grassroots enthusiasm.

The ghost of "slacktivism." Tufekci's (2017) warning applies here: participation that is easy to start is often easy to abandon. A viral video is a different thing from years of organising.

The balanced conclusion is that TikTok is neither a democratic renaissance nor a civic wasteland. It is a powerful amplifier of whichever political impulses are already present, and its design gives some impulses more amplification than others.

5. TikTok and International Relations

If the platform shapes what young citizens think about politics at home, it also shapes what they think about the world. This section considers three arenas: state public diplomacy, wartime communication, and election interference.

5.1 Public diplomacy in short video

TikTok is a challenge and an opportunity for foreign ministries & embassies. The opportunity is reach: one of the very few venues where a diplomatic institution can engage with under-30s, on a scale. The issue: Register. Communication official is formal, cautious and slow. TikTok's culture is casual, intimate, and fast, and audiences are ready to dole out justice on content that feels like a press release with a filter.

There is literature that reflects the reasons for this. Influence, as Zaharna (2010) asserts, is now about relationships and networks— "and not about broadcast"—and the diplomat's role on TikTok is to be a part of a conversation, not the one making an announcement. In terms of the 'digitalisation' of the profession, Manor (2019) makes a similar point: legitimacy in this context is gained through engagement and 'felt authenticity'. States that simply post talking points on the platform but have no interest in the issue really are not going to get too much soft power (Nye, 2004) from this. It's also a less comfortable aspect. States don't just talk on TikTok, they share it too. Creators may be recruited, sponsored or encouraged. That distinction between a 'true ambassador' and a 'paid amplifier' is not apparent to the viewer, and that is exactly what makes the platform appealing to influence ops, which is explored further below.

5.2 War on the feed: Ukraine and Gaza

The cameras have been used to mediate wars for 100 years, but TikTok coverage is new. As pointed out by Bösch and Divon (2024), #Ukraine received 36.9 billion views on the videos in the first three months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022; some of these had tens of millions of views. They used video analysis by Ukrainian and Russian creators to show how audio elements and memes were used to convey contrasting stories, and how the algorithm behind the recommendation system helped them go viral beyond the accounts that created them. The consequence is a new type of propaganda, they argue, one that is 'diffuse, participatory, semi-automated': 'ordinary users, sometimes without intending to, bear the state's narratives''.

The importance for diplomacy is that today, competition takes place at a narrative level rather than at an official level. It is possible for a communiqué to come from a foreign ministry, but what an audience of young people absorbs might be warped by a soldier's video or a viral sound, or a combination of both and a creator's reinterpretation.

It's been the same thing in the Gaza war. Cervi and Divon (2023) explored Palestinian challenges on TikTok, and reported on the phenomenon of "playful activism"—TikTok memetic performances that utilize humor, dance, and popular formats to articulate resistance and assert visibility to the occupation. The analytical question is whether, whatever one's views on the politics, these creative, personal formats might be the first through which a conflict is encountered in the eyes of young audiences abroad, as opposed to the diplomatic or journalistic frames through which older generations learned about a conflict. That turns the table on governments, making it necessary to explain and defend their positions.

There are two warnings to go with this. Viral engagement alone is not persuasive evidence; views are a measure of attention, not attitude change. Second, there is limited causal evidence

of the relationship between exposure to war content on TikTok to shifts in foreign policy preferences. The studies to date trace the movement of narratives, but not necessarily whether the narratives affect minds.

5.3 The Romanian election: a test case for platform vulnerability

The most striking recent incident of TikTok's involvement in international affairs is Romania's 2024 presidential election. In the first round, which was held on 24 November, a previously unknown candidate, Călin Georgescu, defeated the other two candidates. On 6 December, the Constitutional Court of Romania declared the entire process unconstitutional, following the declassification of intelligence documents that accuse paid social media influencers of a coordinated campaign that supported his candidacy (Voice of America, 2024). In addition, financing irregularities were also reported, and Georgescu had officially declared that he spent no money on his campaign (Swissinfo, 2025).

The European Commission has initiated formal proceedings under the Digital Services Act against TikTok, alleging that the platform's recommender systems, the threat of "coordinated inauthentic manipulation or automated exploitation," and its policies on political advertising and paid-for political content violate the regulations. (Voice of America, 2024; Regulation (EU) 2022/2065). TikTok claimed to have made a lot of information available to the Commission and also responded with strong action. The case is complex, and it is a mistake to simplify it. Early reports suggested meddling from Russia.

Later, the situation was complicated by the coverage of a report by Euronews (2024) stating that some of the promotional activity was orchestrated with the money from a Romanian party's TikTok campaign, which was supposed to benefit Georgescu. The annulment itself was denounced by Georgescu as a "formalised coup." Romanian and foreign critics asked why a court could ever cancel an election, and some experts characterised the ruling as unprecedented and procedurally unusual. The rerun in May 2025 was a victory for the pro-European candidate Nicuşor Dan, who was not allowed to stand for office by Georgescu (Swissinfo, 2025).

Three lessons stand out. First, a platform algorithm can be a vector for foreign or domestic manipulation and an object of geopolitical suspicion at the same time; the same event can be read as a Russian operation, a domestic scandal, or both. Second, transparency failures matter: reports that the candidate's account was not labelled as a political one show how weak labelling can leave voters unable to tell paid promotion from enthusiasm. Third, the case shows that governments now treat recommendation systems as matters of national and regional security, not just consumer protection.

5.4 When governments respond by shutting things down

In Nepal, that was the opposite: at the opening of this article, we saw that in a crisis, the government was attempting to use the platform to influence others, rather than to be influenced by them. A claim by officials that the platforms had to register to fight misinformation and to ensure national security was met with criticism as people pointed out that it was an attempt to squelch dissent (Rest of World, 2025). The ban was removed due to violence, but at that time the movement had already passed the point of the ban (CNN, 2025).

First, it is a domestic story but, for two reasons, it is very much an international relations article. It was responded to by regional powers, such as India, which expressed its condolences and called for restraint. And it shows that efforts to gain control of platforms are themselves a political source of instability. A platform shutdown is not experienced as regulation by young people who have been used to organizing their social lives, their politics online. It is felt as not being included. As detailed in the broader global trend in Freedom House's (2023) documentation, governments which tighten the screws on online space can have their policies turned upside down when the population they wish to silence is young, connected and already angry, as is the case in Nepal.

6. The Platform as a Geopolitical Object

Up until this point, TikTok has been a platform for others to show off on. The platform is also an actor, or at least a prize. TikTok is one such software product that has been the topic of a bargain between two great powers.

6.1 The U.S. divest-or-ban saga

The Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act passed by the U.S. Congress in April 2024 mandated ByteDance to either sell off TikTok's U.S. business or be banned from selling it. L. No. 118-50, div. H, 2024). The concerns mentioned were data protection and that a foreign government could be influencing what Americans see. In January 2025, TikTok tried to challenge the law on free speech grounds, but the U.S. Supreme Court did not rule on the case in TikTok Inc. v. Garland, 145 S. Ct. 57 (2025) concluded that the government's national security interest outweighed the measure. The enforcement was put on hold for several years, and a deal was struck on 22 January 2026, letting the TikTok USDS Joint Venture LLC come into existence, with Oracle, Silver Lake and MGX investing, while ByteDance maintains a minority stake in TikTok. Oracle would serve as the security partner, and the partnership would involve retraining the recommendation algorithm on U.S. data, per Axios (2026) and Bloomberg (2026).

Regardless of opinions about the deal, it's an unprecedented occasion in the annals of international relations. A recommendation algorithm, and the cultural and political power, which it carries, was negotiated among governments and companies. The understated message for other states is that the role of the platforms used by young people to get a glimpse of politics is a strategic issue.

6.2 Two regulatory models

The European approach is different from the U.S. approach by focusing on restructuring ownership. The Digital Services Act does not pose any questions about who is the owner of a platform; it poses the question of whether the platform evaluates and reduces systemic risks, including risks to Electoral processes (Regulation (EU) 2022/2065). It would seem the Romanian proceedings against TikTok were an early test of that model.

This is a real philosophical difference. One solution attempts to fix the issue by changing the owner. The other tries to solve it by changing the behaviour, whoever its owner is. Each has weaknesses. A change of ownership does not dissolve the incentives that make manipulation a profitable endeavor and the retrained algorithm introduces new questions on whose decisions determine what young Americans see. Systemic-risk regulation requires technical capacity and access to data on what platforms are actually doing – the capacity to assess risk – and it requires that "risk" be not a smoke-screen for "control" of political speech, as it was stridently claimed to be in Romania.

6.3 What it means for young users

These skirmishes are distant for the youngsters, who represent TikTok's core customers. But they matter. But if the U.S. version of the algorithm proves to be different from the global version, then a Romanian teenager, a Nepali student, and an American undergraduate may find themselves confronting significantly different political worlds in the near future. One of the most-quoted soft power tools of the platform age could be the notion of a global youth culture, which is likely to be divided by national rules. The sum of its parts paints a picture of a three-sided struggle.

7. Discussion

7.1 A three-sided contest

• The platform is used by young citizens to express themselves, connect with communities, and get news, often incidentally (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2025b). States and political actors leverage it to persuade, mobilize, and even deceive; it is regulated, banned, or claimed by actors as their ownership (Bösch & Divon, 2024; Axios, 2026).

The terms of the contest are set by the platform and its owners, usually by the algorithm used and the moderation policies adopted, which are often not obvious to the other two parties (Zeng & Kaye, 2022). There is typically a single player

from one extreme or another that is the main focus of public debate: the vulnerable youth, the malicious state or the powerful platform. The interaction is the more useful frame. The algorithm must be used in conjunction with a state's influence, and youth must consume it. Expressive creativity is only heard by a young user if there is a platform for it. Only states and citizens act in a platform, so its design is only relevant for politics.

7.2 Revisiting the concepts

The structure of the frame in Section 2 is basically acceptable with modifications. While Nye's (2004) soft power lens remains a valuable one, TikTok challenges the notion that attraction can be directed from a country's culture toward foreign publics. TikTok's attraction is created by ordinary users, and a state can't control or reliably claim it. More than ever before, creators and recommenders are the key to the traditional soft power that culture and values bring.

The youth data aligns with Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) description of connective action: personalised, format -led and self-organizing. But Tufekci's (2017) message about fragility is also applicable in this context. The protests in Nepal were not only successful in ousting the government within days, but also large and rapid, and yet, as reporters remarked, the issues were far from settled (The New Humanitarian, 2025).

The message about the dangers of blanket social media transformation remains. Duncombe's (2017) warning about the boundaries of social media transformation lives on. In Ukraine and Gaza, platforms have proved successful in disseminating narratives efficiently, but not obviously in resolving the underlying conflicts or the geopolitical interests that underpin these conflicts.

7.3 Implications

For diplomats. It's not just about having an institutional presence on TikTok. However, the research on relational public diplomacy (Zaharna, 2010; Manor, 2019) indicates that the key elements of credibility are participation, transparency and consistency between the tone in the online and offline environment and policies. The next rule for diplomats is that both sides are culling the same feeds and that they must take that into account.

For educators. When most young people learn about political news as a result of a chance encounter or while browsing through their social media, then the concept of "how to evaluate an article" is not enough to count as media literacy (Pew Research Centre, 2025b). It should teach about the nature of recommendation systems, the meaning that sounds and formats can have, and how paid promotion can appear natural.

For regulators. The Romanian experience calls for transparency in labelling, for allowing meaningful access by researchers to platform data, and for independent auditing. It also calls for humility: overly drastic measures like cancelling an election are costly to the confidence in democracy and should be based on proof that is open to public examination.

For platforms. The openness of the way content is ranked and labelled in relation to politics should not only be viewed as a compliance matter. TikTok's going to have to keep young users on its platform in a broken regulatory landscape.

7.4 Limitations

These conclusions are qualified by a number of restrictions. First, it is an integrative review, not a new empirical study, and thus has its limitations from the studies included. Secondly, the majority of the survey data is from the United States, and generalization to other national settings must be undertaken with caution. Thirdly, the data on TikTok is difficult to obtain, making it difficult to verify claims regarding algorithmic amplification, as several of the cases discussed in this document are based on intelligence claims and press reporting that have not been sufficiently tested in the public domain. Fourth, there is a rapid evolution in the situation. Ownership of TikTok's content operations in the U.S. is relatively new, and its impact on content and user engagement remains uncertain. Last, but not least, there is a lack of research on the causal chain between exposure and political attitudes to foreign policy outcomes.

8. Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I painted a picture of young Nepalis protesting their government's attempt to remove their platforms of life, their homes, from them. This is a scene not properly reflected a decade ago by diplomacy or youth studies: political life is being played out, in part, in algorithmically structured, privately owned, border-crossing spaces, where the videos they bring along wander just as freely.

Here is the evidence leading to four conclusions. While not necessarily in depth of discussion, TikTok has opened the door for young people to express themselves politically, particularly through collective, creative and funny ways to express themselves. Today, states and others battle for narrative control on the platform, with the suite of tools employed ranging from official accounts to paid creators to sound-based propaganda – and they're not always easy to tell apart from grassroots activity. The 'architecture of participation'—who is getting to see what, who's not—is a form of political power that is not often apparent to the people concerned. Last but not least, the platform has itself turned into a focal point of the high-level geopolitical games, with governments negotiating ownership and control. All this does not make TikTok specifically harmful or specifically empowering. Each of the previous communication technologies (such as the printing press, radio) was celebrated and feared, and each has proved to change politics in ways that were unexpected by its inventors. The world's youth are now in the same room, the tempo is faster, and the scale is larger.

Empirical research is the best next step. We require new evidence of the effects of TikTok viewing on the political views and actual actions of young people, cross-country comparisons of the effects of platforms operating under various regimes, and independent access to platform data to test claims of manipulation. For now, a sensible attitude – a posture of reason – must be adopted by diplomats, teachers and regulators, as well as young users: a stance of informed skepticism, of treating the platform as a political space, but not as the total of public opinion.

REFERENCES

Axios. (2026, January 23). TikTok divestiture deal closes. https://axios.com/2026/01/23/tiktok-deal-trump-app-ban

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalisation of contentious politics. Information, Communication & Society, 15(5), 739–768. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661

Bjola, C., & Holmes, M. (Eds.). (2015). Digital diplomacy: Theory and practice. Routledge.

Bloomberg. (2026, January 23). What the TikTok deal means for the app's future in the US. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-01-23/tiktok-s-us-venture-deal-ownership-structure-valuation-algorithm-s-future

Bösch, M., & Divon, T. (2024). The sound of disinformation: TikTok, computational propaganda, and the invasion of Ukraine. New Media & Society, 26(9), 5081–5106. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241251804

Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. Information, Communication & Society, 18(5), 524–538. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1008542

Boulianne, S. (2020). Twenty years of digital media effects on civic and political participation. Communication Research, 47(7), 947–966. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218808186

Cervi, L., & Divon, T. (2023). Playful activism: Memetic performances of Palestinian resistance in TikTok #challenges. Social Media + Society, 9(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157607

CNN. (2025, September 9). A social media ban, corruption and 'nepo kids': What we know about the deadly protests that ousted Nepal's leader. https://www.cnn.com/2025/09/09/asia/nepal-protests-social-media-ban-explainer-intl-hnk

Cull, N. J. (2008). Public diplomacy: Taxonomies and histories. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 616(1), 31–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311952

Duncombe, C. (2017). Twitter and transformative diplomacy: Social media and Iran–US relations. International Affairs, 93(3), 545–562. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix048

Euronews. (2024, December 23). Romanian centre-right party's TikTok campaign used for far-right win — report. https://www.euronews.com/next/2024/12/23/romanian-centre-right-partys-tiktok-campaign-used-for-far-right-win-report

Freedom House. (2023). Freedom on the Net 2023: The repressive power of artificial intelligence. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2023/repressive-power-artificial-intelligence

Kaye, D. B. V., Zeng, J., & Wikström, P. (2022). TikTok: Creativity and culture in short video. Polity Press.

Literat, I., & Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2019). Youth collective political expression on social media: The role of affordances and memetic dimensions for voicing political views. New Media & Society, 21(9), 1988–2009. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819837571

Literat, I., & Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2023). TikTok as a key platform for youth political expression: Reflecting on the opportunities and stakes involved. Social Media + Society, 9(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157595

Manor, I. (2019). The digitalization of public diplomacy. Palgrave Macmillan.

Medina Serrano, J. C., Papakyriakopoulos, O., & Hegelich, S. (2020). Dancing to the partisan beat: A first analysis of political communication on TikTok. In Proceedings of the 12th ACM Conference on Web Science (pp. 257–266). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/3394231.3397916

Nye, J. S., Jr. (2004). Soft power: The means to success in world politics. PublicAffairs.

Nye, J. S., Jr. (2008). Public diplomacy and soft power. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 616(1), 94–109. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699

Pew Research Center. (2025a, September 25). 1 in 5 Americans now regularly get news on TikTok, up sharply from 2020. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/09/25/1-in-5-americans-now-regularly-get-news-on-tiktok-up-sharply-from-2020/

Pew Research Center. (2025b, January 17). Americans' experiences with news on TikTok: A closer look. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/01/17/a-closer-look-at-americans-experiences-with-news-on-tiktok/

Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, Pub. L. No. 118-50, div. H, 138 Stat. 955 (2024).

Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a single market for digital services (Digital Services Act). Official Journal of the European Union, L 277, 1–102.

Rest of World. (2025). How a movement against corruption on Nepali social media triggered unrest and death. https://restofworld.org/2025/nepal-gen-z-protest/

Swissinfo. (2025). What Romania's election turmoil reveals about TikTok's political influence. https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/information-wars/what-romanias-election-turmoil-reveals-about-tiktoks-political-influence/91200280

The Hill. (2024, September 17). More Americans getting their news from TikTok: Research. https://thehill.com/policy/technology/4886250-americans-news-tiktok-instagram-youtube/

The New Humanitarian. (2025, September 18). Deadly Gen Z protests expose decades of systemic rot in Nepal. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2025/09/18/deadly-gen-z-protests-expose-decades-systemic-rot-nepal

TikTok Inc. v. Garland, 145 S. Ct. 57 (2025).

Tufekci, Z. (2017). Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest. Yale University Press.

Voice of America. (2024, December 17). EU investigates TikTok over Romanian presidential election. https://www.voanews.com/a/eu-investigates-tiktok-over-romanian-presidential-election/7904485.html

Vromen, A., Xenos, M. A., & Loader, B. (2015). Young people, social media and connective action: From organisational maintenance to everyday political talk. Journal of Youth Studies, 18(1), 80–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2014.933198

Zaharna, R. S. (2010). Battles to bridges: U.S. strategic communication and public diplomacy after 9/11. Palgrave Macmillan.

Zeng, J., & Kaye, D. B. V. (2022). From content moderation to visibility moderation: A case study of platform governance on TikTok. Policy & Internet, 14(1), 79–95. https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.287

Zulli, D., & Zulli, D. J. (2022). Extending the Internet meme: Conceptualizing technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform. New Media & Society, 24(8), 1872–1890. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820983603

IEER
Institute for Excellence in Education & Research