

TikTok Ban in the US: Between Cybersecurity Issues and Control of Global Tech Markets

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Abstract

The U.S. government's decision to ban TikTok has sparked considerable concern among the public, particularly among individual users and entrepreneurs who rely on the platform for personal expression and business growth. This study employs a mixed-method approach, incorporating a literature review of existing scholarly articles and journals alongside a Likert-scale-based survey to explore Indonesian public perceptions of the potential implications of the TikTok ban in the United States. The origin of the controversy lies in the U.S. government's concerns over data security, with fears that American citizens' personal data could be accessed or exploited by the Chinese government through the platform's parent company. Despite these national security justifications, the ban has faced strong resistance from users and small business owners in the U.S., many of whom argue that it undermines livelihoods and restricts access to a vital digital tool for economic empowerment. While the protection of national security remains a valid concern, the broader social and economic repercussions of the ban warrant careful consideration. Moreover, the policy appears to be influenced not only by cybersecurity considerations but also by broader geopolitical and economic tensions—particularly those stemming from the ongoing U.S.–China trade conflict. The analysis reveals that the uncertainty surrounding TikTok's future in the U.S. encapsulates a broader tension between safeguarding national interests and upholding economic freedoms. Ultimately, the ban can be seen as part of a wider geopolitical struggle for technological dominance and digital sovereignty between the United States and China.

Keywords: *China; Geopolitics; National Security; Technological Competition; TikTok; United States*

Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, social media has become an integral part of everyday life, particularly for millennials and Generation Z. Platforms ranging from photo-sharing applications to instant messaging services have profoundly transformed how individuals and communities communicate. However, the influence of social media extends beyond personal interactions; it holds considerable sway over national dynamics, including economic development, public policy, and civic engagement.

Social media functions as a powerful communication bridge, connecting individuals to information, ideas, and movements across the globe. It has emerged as a key driver in shaping public opinion, influencing governmental decision-making, and enhancing democratic participation. The accessibility of global information and the opportunities for collaboration facilitated by social media serve as critical enablers of national development.

In the United States - home to global social media giants such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube - the role of social media is particularly significant. According to national data, approximately 85% of U.S. police departments utilize social media tools to assist in criminal

investigations, demonstrating its utility in enhancing public safety through suspect identification and case resolution.

Despite the dominance of American platforms, user preferences are shifting. A Pew Research Centre survey revealed that U.S. teenagers increasingly favour video-based platforms like YouTube and TikTok over Facebook, whose teen user base declined sharply from 71% in 2015 to just 32% in 2022 (Wibowo, 2022). This shift presents both a challenge and an opportunity for businesses, which are now leveraging short-form video content to more effectively engage younger audiences.

Beyond communication and security, social media has also become a catalyst for economic growth. Platforms like TikTok offer robust business opportunities by enabling small and medium-sized enterprises to access broader markets. TikTok, a Chinese-owned application that has gained massive traction globally, has introduced features such as TikTok Shop in the United States, streamlining everything from marketing to after-sales service for Chinese-manufactured products. With the growing popularity of social commerce, global sales via social media are projected to reach approximately USD 2.9 trillion by 2026.

In the U.S., many small business owners have reported substantial revenue growth through TikTok. For instance, the founder of the skincare brand Love and Pebble stated that 90% of their revenue stems from the platform. These figures underscore the platform's role not only as a marketing tool but also as a driver of entrepreneurial success and local economic development.

Nevertheless, the growing influence of foreign-owned platforms like TikTok presents new challenges - particularly in the context of data privacy, national security, and geopolitical rivalry. With approximately 170 million U.S. users—roughly 51% of the national population (based on 2021 data) - TikTok has sparked concern among U.S. policymakers who fear the potential expansion of Chinese influence during critical periods, such as the 2024 presidential election (Rahmawati, 2022).

While a potential ban on TikTok could result in significant short-term economic losses - especially for businesses heavily reliant on the platform - some argue that it may ultimately yield long-term strategic gains by revitalizing domestic social media enterprises and reasserting technological dominance in the face of global competition with China.

Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative approach with an infinite population framework, reflecting the vast number of TikTok users globally. A purposive sampling technique was applied, aligned with the study's objective—to explore the perceptions of Indonesian TikTok users regarding the potential ban of the platform in the United States. A total of 100 respondents were selected based on their relevance to the research focus.

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in International Trade Theory, with particular emphasis on the economic implications of the proposed TikTok ban on U.S.–China trade relations. While the United States often champions the principle of free trade in its international engagements, the move to restrict TikTok—a Chinese-owned platform—appears to contradict this stance, suggesting a shift toward protectionist policies. The ban can be interpreted as an attempt to shield domestic markets from foreign competition. Given that

TikTok has approximately 170 million users in the U.S. (Permana & Aurellie, 2024), and that many small businesses utilize the platform for marketing and sales, such a policy could adversely impact those enterprises that depend on TikTok for business growth.

Research Findings and Discussions

Following the approval of a legislative measure by the United States House of Representatives, ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok, may be compelled to divest its ownership of the platform to prevent its removal from U.S. app stores. The measure, which passed with a strong bipartisan majority (352 votes in favor and 65 against), is framed as a national security initiative aimed at protecting American users from potential risks associated with foreign-controlled applications. U.S. lawmakers argue that TikTok's algorithm may enable the Chinese government to access user data and influence American public opinion (Wang, 2021).

Should the bill secure Senate approval, it is expected that President Joe Biden will sign it into law. However, this move has sparked significant controversy, as many civil liberties and digital rights organizations—as well as TikTok's 170 million U.S. users—claim that such a ban infringes upon constitutional rights to free expression. This controversy reflects broader tensions in the ongoing U.S.–China geopolitical rivalry and Washington's increasing efforts to curtail perceived foreign influence in domestic affairs.

Concerns center around the possibility that ByteDance is under the influence or control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—a claim the company has consistently denied. TikTok CEO Shou Chew has testified before Congress, affirming that ByteDance is privately owned and not subject to Chinese state control. Nevertheless, skepticism remains high among U.S. officials, particularly given China's history of exerting strict oversight over domestic tech firms, censoring politically sensitive content, and operating an expansive internet firewall that blocks foreign platforms (Wang, 2020).

During the annual “global threat assessment” hearings, Senator Marco Rubio reiterated that the CCP exercises control over all Chinese enterprises, including those developing advanced AI technologies. He warned that TikTok could be used to harvest sensitive U.S. user data and manipulate public behavior. The White House and several senators argue that selling TikTok to a vetted U.S. buyer would reduce China's leverage over American digital ecosystems (Wang, 2023).

Despite these concerns, multiple investigations have failed to establish conclusive links between TikTok and the CCP. A 2021 study by Pellaeon Lin from the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab revealed that TikTok collects a volume of user data comparable to that of platforms like Facebook and Twitter. This includes data on user interactions, private messages, precise geolocation, and contact lists. The platform's privacy policy confirms the collection of users' email addresses, phone numbers, search histories, and multimedia content.

Lin also highlighted the potential for “hidden privacy features” within TikTok's code that could be toggled through server-side configuration—though no conclusive evidence has been found. Furthermore, while the app's in-app browser logs keystrokes, privacy researcher Felix Krause (2022) noted that such practices, though controversial, may not constitute malicious behavior. TikTok claims that keystroke logging is limited to diagnostic purposes such as debugging, performance monitoring, and bot detection. To date, no public evidence confirms that the

platform captures sensitive data such as passwords or financial information for malicious use.

The Role of TikTok Social Media in National Economic Development

Social media has become a pivotal tool in facilitating global communication, breaking geographical barriers, and enabling interactions across diverse regions. As a result, it plays an increasingly important role in business and marketing activities by offering broad and borderless access to the public. This reach contributes significantly to a nation's economic growth. TikTok, in particular, has emerged as a prominent platform that generates income opportunities for individuals and businesses alike. The platform allows users to engage in business promotion and marketing at a lower cost compared to traditional advertising methods such as television commercials, billboards, or print media. Clausius (2022) notes that social media platforms like TikTok provide affordable marketing avenues with extensive reach, especially benefiting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by facilitating access to global markets.

Despite these advantages, the effective use of TikTok for economic gain requires high levels of creativity and video content innovation. Given the saturation of content on the platform, users must continuously produce distinctive and engaging materials to capture public attention. The economic impact of TikTok is multifaceted, with both positive and negative implications for national economies.

On the positive side, the platform contributes to:

1. *Digital Economy Growth*

TikTok fosters increased online transactions and market expansion for businesses, contributing to the broader digital economy.

2. *Job Creation*

The digital transformation has generated new employment opportunities, such as roles in digital marketing and e-commerce. Companies are increasingly hiring social media specialists to manage campaigns, representing a new career pathway for digitally active individuals.

3. *Entrepreneurial Empowerment*

TikTok offers cost-effective marketing channels that enable entrepreneurs, especially those with limited resources, to reach international audiences without substantial financial investment.

However, the platform also presents several economic challenges:

1. *Intensified Market Competition*

While offering new business opportunities, TikTok also increases market competition. Small enterprises may struggle to compete with larger firms that possess more substantial marketing budgets.

2. *Spread of Misinformation*

The open nature of social media permits the dissemination of unverified or false information, potentially harming business reputations and influencing consumer behavior.

3. *Digital Divide*

Not all communities have equal access to digital infrastructure, creating disparities in participation and potentially limiting economic benefits in underdeveloped areas.

In short, TikTok and similar social media platforms have a complex but increasingly influential role in national economic development. While they present numerous opportunities for

innovation, job creation, and entrepreneurship, they also introduce risks related to market competition, misinformation, and technological inequality. It is essential for governments and stakeholders to formulate policies that support the digital economy's growth while addressing these challenges to fully harness the platform's economic potential.

Indonesian Society's Perspective on the Use of TikTok

To examine the Indonesian public's perspective on the proposed ban of TikTok in the United States, a survey was conducted involving 100 randomly selected respondents. The aim was to gather insights regarding public responses to the policy enacted by the U.S. government.

Age of Respondents and Tik Tok Social Media Users

The survey participants ranged in age from under 18 to over 55 years old. Among the 100 respondents, 85% reported being active TikTok users. The age distribution of these users revealed that the majority belonged to the 18–24-year-old age group, accounting for 42 individuals. This was followed by the 25–30-year-old age group, comprising 31 respondents. These findings suggest that TikTok is predominantly used by young adults in Indonesia, aligning with global trends of high platform engagement among younger demographics.

Frequency of TikTok Usage and TikTok User Status

To assess respondents' awareness of the policy enacted by the United States government regarding the potential ban of TikTok, participants were asked to indicate their level of knowledge on the issue. Survey results revealed that 34% of respondents were entirely unaware of the U.S. government's policy prohibiting the use of TikTok. In contrast, only 13% reported having a high level of awareness regarding the ban. These findings suggest a significant gap in public knowledge among Indonesian TikTok users concerning international digital policy developments, particularly those originating from the United States.

Policy Knowledge

Respondents were also asked about their reactions to the U.S. government's policy to ban the use of TikTok. The responses reflected a range of opinions. A majority of 51% expressed uncertainty or doubt about the policy, indicating hesitation in forming a definitive stance. Meanwhile, 38% of respondents agreed with the ban, suggesting a level of support for the policy. In contrast, 5% disagreed with the implementation of the ban, and only 1% strongly opposed it. These results illustrate a predominance of ambivalence among Indonesian respondents, although a notable proportion supports the ban, potentially reflecting concerns over data security or international political tensions.

Reaction to Policy

The next question aimed to gather respondents' perspectives on the issue of the U.S. government's proposed ban on TikTok. The results revealed that 58% of respondents supported the policy, agreeing with the decision to ban the platform in the United States. In contrast, 30% expressed hesitancy, citing a lack of sufficient information or understanding regarding the implications of the ban. This suggests that while a majority of Indonesian respondents align with the policy, a significant portion remains uncertain, likely due to limited awareness or comprehension of the broader context surrounding the U.S. government's stance on TikTok.

Indonesian Society's Perspectives and Views on the Issue of the Ban on the Use of TikTok in the United States

The following question sought to understand Indonesian society's views on the U.S.

government's proposed TikTok ban. The survey results showed that 58% of respondents supported the policy of banning TikTok in the United States. Additionally, 30% expressed hesitation, citing a lack of sufficient information or awareness regarding the specifics of the ban. This indicates that while a majority of respondents are in favor of the ban, a significant portion remains uncertain, possibly due to insufficient knowledge about the policy's broader implications.

The Possibility of a Trade and Technology War Between America and China

To further refine the previous question, a follow-up was asked regarding other potential reasons for the proposed TikTok ban in the United States, specifically considering the ongoing trade and technology tensions between the U.S. and China. The response revealed that 61% of respondents believed the ban was primarily motivated by the trade war between the two nations. This view aligns with the broader context of longstanding trade competition and geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China, making it a plausible factor influencing the decision to target TikTok.

Economic Impact on Micro-Businesses in the United States

The next question explored the potential economic impact of the TikTok ban on micro-businesses in the United States. The results showed that 52% of respondents believed that the ban would undoubtedly affect micro-business owners, as they would likely be disadvantaged by the policy. This reflects concerns that the prohibition could disrupt business operations, particularly for small enterprises that heavily rely on TikTok for marketing and customer engagement.

The Impact of the Policy of Banning the Use of TikTok in America on the Economy of the United States

A follow-up question was posed to respondents regarding the broader economic impact of the proposed TikTok ban on the United States. The results revealed that 52% of respondents believed the ban could negatively affect the U.S. economy, particularly by leading to job losses among small business owners who rely on TikTok for marketing and customer engagement. This suggests concerns that the policy could disrupt local economies, especially in sectors that have become increasingly dependent on digital platforms for their business operations.

The Impact of the Plan to Ban the Use of TikTok in the United States on China

Building on the previous question, the researcher sought to understand how the proposed TikTok ban in the United States might impact China. The responses revealed that 39% of respondents agreed that the ban would likely harm China, while 35% expressed uncertainty, indicating a lack of clarity or information on the matter. In contrast, 22% disagreed with the notion that the policy would negatively affect China. These results suggest a division of opinion, with a significant portion recognizing potential economic or diplomatic consequences for China, while others remain unsure or unconvinced of its impact.

Based on the survey results, it is evident that China plays a significant role in the global economy. Despite the United States considering a ban on the widely popular TikTok app, respondents acknowledge that China remains a formidable competitor to the U.S. (Clausius 2022). The survey also highlights that the policy to ban TikTok stems from concerns over the security of user data, signaling growing awareness of the implications of differing algorithms between countries. Particularly in the U.S., there is increasing concern that China's algorithm could be leveraged to spread misinformation, especially in the context of ongoing issues like the Hamas-Israel conflict and the upcoming presidential election (Maheshwari & Holpuch,

2024, Mar 12). This reflects the broader anxieties surrounding the potential geopolitical and social influence of Chinese algorithms on American society.

Analysis with Theory

One of the primary reasons TikTok has come under scrutiny in the United States is the issue of data security. The platform collects a significant amount of personal user data, including browsing history and location information, which has raised concerns among U.S. policymakers about the possibility of the Chinese government accessing this data. Although both TikTok and its parent company, ByteDance, have denied such claims, skepticism remains high. In response, TikTok launched an initiative known as “Project Texas,” which aims to separate U.S. user data from that of other countries. However, this initiative has not entirely alleviated U.S. concerns, as the platform’s core infrastructure and algorithmic development still originate from China. Many U.S. officials argue that Chinese companies are subject to government influence, thereby posing a potential threat in terms of public opinion manipulation and election interference (Rinehart, 2024).

From the perspective of international trade theory and its economic implications, TikTok’s popularity among American users—particularly small business owners who rely on the platform to market and grow their ventures—means that banning the app could lead to substantial economic disruption. Many micro-businesses in the U.S. depend on TikTok as a low-cost and effective digital marketing tool. Furthermore, given the U.S.’s strong commitment to freedom of expression, banning TikTok may be seen as contradictory to these values, especially when viewed through the lens of geopolitical competition and trade relations with China. Based on our findings, the economic implications of banning TikTok appear to outweigh national security concerns, especially considering the U.S. government’s strong interest in acquiring TikTok. Nevertheless, this issue warrants further investigation to fully understand the motivations behind the U.S. stance and its broader implications on trade, governance, and civil liberties.

Conclusion

This study highlights that the uncertainty surrounding TikTok’s future in the United States stems from a complex tension between national security concerns and the principle of economic freedom. The proposed ban on TikTok carries significant economic implications, particularly given the platform’s widespread use among Americans as a source of income and a tool for business development. Moreover, the policy reflects broader geopolitical and technological competition between the United States and China, especially in light of the U.S. government’s push to either acquire TikTok through an American company or enforce a total ban. However, China has shown no intention of relinquishing control of TikTok, signaling that the platform’s future remains a point of contention in U.S.–China relations. Based on the findings of this study, it can be argued that economic considerations play a more dominant role in driving the U.S. policy discourse surrounding TikTok than national security or political rivalry. The economic stakes involved - particularly for American entrepreneurs and micro-businesses - underscore the need for further critical evaluation of the true motivations and potential consequences behind the proposed ban.

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