

# Introduction to the Media International Australia special issue on “TikTok cultures in the Asia Pacific”

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## Abstract

The editors of this Feature Topic are founding members of the TikTok Cultures Research Network that focuses on culturally-situated and qualitatively-grounded scholarship on TikTok in the Asia Pacific region. This Feature Topic collection for Media International Australia is our second in a string of Special Issues on TikTok, each primed to interrogate the platform from different scholarly vantage points while remaining committed to surfacing, highlighting, and strengthening research from, by, and about contexts in the margins. In this Feature Topic issue, we focus on the Asia Pacific region to understand the socio-cultural impacts, creative circumventions, and agentic employments of TikTok since its installation. Given the timing of symposium and intellectual inquiries, these studies have also naturally considered the cascading impacts and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on platform use, meaning making, and the habitable spaces we make for ourselves and for each other in times of crisis.

## Keywords

TikTok, Short video, Asia Pacific, COVID-19, Social media

## Global interest in TikTok

Since its global release in 2018, the short-video platform TikTok, owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, has become a global cultural phenomenon. Within the span of 5 years, the app was

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recorded as one of the most downloaded in the world, reaching 1.2 billion monthly active users in Q4 2021 (Iqbal, 2022). Its playful features like lip syncing and editing filters quickly attracted users, especially cohorts of social media-active young people (e.g. Kaye et al., 2022), spurring the development of new platform vernaculars across the world (Abidin, 2021). Its music-based platform features allow users to creatively engage in musical collaboration with other users and mix popular songs with their stories in the form of short choreography (Kaye, 2022; Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin, 2022). People often mobilize grassroots movements by casually creating videos on cooking and makeup tutorials, using them as a vehicle to echo messages of social awareness that other TikTokers collectively advocate, such as related to anti-racism, social caste, and climate activism (Abidin and Zeng, 2020; Hautea et al., 2021; Subramanian, 2021). COVID-19 related information and disinformation also popularly circulates on the platform in highly visualized forms like infographics and skits, evoking (dark) humor and raising concerns about digital literacy, but also presents opportunities for educating people on the unprecedented pandemic situation (Li et al., 2021). Alongside the global trends, local issues like politics and class discrimination are also popularly discussed and consumed in local TikTok spaces (e.g. Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2021; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Vijay and Gekker, 2021).

TikTok's powerful algorithmic recommender system delivers a feed of highly "personalized" short video content for users based on their digital footprints and "trending" content in local geographies (Cotter et al., 2022; TikTok, 2020). This uniqueness yields the emergence of highly localized TikTok spaces where global TikTok trends like 'challenges' and regional cultures like 'insider memes' are hybridized in creative forms, as avenues to discuss social issues that are particular to the local areas. Nevertheless, the current TikTok scholarship has often missed the lens of locality in the discussion. This is particularly noticeable as TikTok phenomena that are specific to the US culture and politics, such as TikTokers' anti-Trump messages and young Americans' conflicts with the old generations (e.g. #OkBoomer memes), are studied as exemplary aspects of TikTok culture, with the US-specific contexts being absent in the discussion or generalized as the universal aspects of TikTok (Zeng and Abidin, 2021). Alongside this, emerging scholarship on Douyin, TikTok's sister app only accessible in China, is often considered to be 'parallel' to the US-focused TikTok studies (e.g. Du et al., 2020; Wang, 2020; Yang and Ha, 2021), despite the two apps' disparate platform features, markets, and governance. This comparative approach towards the two sister apps and cultures is particularly concerning for two reasons. Firstly, it overlooks TikTok's unique platform algorithms that mediate localities to users based on the local trends and complicated processes of platformization throughout its entrance into, and accommodation of, local markets and cultures. Secondly, it reinforces the longstanding Euro-American dichotomous perspective that essentializes Asia as "Chinese culture" in contrast to the "West", while dismissing a multiplicity of socio-cultural and political differences between various countries and cultures in the broad Asia Pacific region.

## **TikTok Cultures Research Network and the "Asia Pacific" region**

The editors of this Feature Topic are founding members of the TikTok Cultures Research Network (TCRN). The TCRN was formed in October 2020 as a collective of scholars, predominantly early career researchers and research students, who work in or on the Asia Pacific region. The TCRN is committed to providing opportunities to junior, under-represented, and under-privileged scholars; to a decolonial perspective that prioritizes research from and by the margins/marginalized in the Asia Pacific and Global South; to fostering meaningful and impactful collaboration and networking opportunities that will result in innovative research perspectives. Since its founding, the TCRN has grown to include a core group of 50 scholars from around the world who advise and inform our

initiatives. We also work to aggregate scholarly publications on TikTok, produce Open Access scholarly resources, facilitate the communication of research to the general public, and host public-facing virtual events that focus on a variety of key socio-cultural issues and debates connected to TikTok.

Against this background, we hosted our first symposium in December 2020 to showcase various TikTok cultures in the Asia Pacific region, focusing on TikTok's potential to be a mediator of local and regional cultures. The symposium themes focused on "platforms and pedagogies," "gender and class," "popular culture," "regional cultures," and "anxieties and learnings," showcasing 20 papers from the region. This Feature Topic issue of *Media International Australia* presents a selection of papers from the Symposium, as an early attempt to return to the center of TikTok interrogations the geolocated-sensibilities, cultural-specificities, and local relevance of the app in everyday life in the Asia Pacific region. This takes inspiration from a longer legacy of research.

A growing number of scholars in media studies have emphasized an urgent need to "internationalize" (Downing, 1996; Thussu, 2009), "de-Westernize" (Curran and Park, 2000; Wang, 2010), and "decolonize" (Glück, 2018) academia by enriching "non-Western" studies and re-evaluating the existing "Western-driven" theories and concepts. Scholars like Chakrabarty (2009) and Spivak (1999) have long argued that the extant scholarly work has originated in the very local contexts of the Western Europe and the Anglo-Saxon America, and thus is limited in the capacity to explain phenomena outside of the "Western block," let alone speak on behalf of the subaltern(s). Indeed, while US- or UK-based studies are often considered "international" and "global" despite their "regional" focus on the electoral politics or celebrities, studies on non-US or non-UK contexts are considered "regional" and "local" by default, and often required by anonymous reviewers or even journal editors to provide rationale like "why we should care about this country and this culture among others?" in the peer review process.

Studies on Asia and Asian cultures are the primary examples of which values are not often fully recognized, having fallen into the trap of the "East-West" binary. The Asia Pacific is a vast region that includes four broad territorial blocks: East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific region. It is the world-most populated region with approximately 4.7 billion residents as of August 2022 (Worldometer, n.d.). Despite its vastness, this region is frequently grouped and reduced into a homogeneous monolithic cultural block of "Chinese culture" in contrast to the "West" (cf. Huntington, 2000). Due to the pervasive Euro-American orientalist lens that dichotomizes the world into White or Black, or West or East, a multiplicity of differences between different cultures in the Asian region are often dismissed, rather essentialized in the names of "Chinese identity," "Confucianism," and "Asian values." Think about the recent appraisal of a few Asian countries' successful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic as "Asian Confucianism" despite their different government regimes, economic developments, and socio-cultural norms (e.g. Escobar, 2020; Jennings, 2022; Rafferty, 2022). A concept like "cultural China" has been suggested by several scholars of Chinese descent as an attempt to decenter the culture and people of mainland China and embrace those in the periphery in Asia, such as various Chinese diasporic groups around the world, considering the notion of Chineseness in the global era (Wei-ming, 1991; Wu, 2008). However, the more this term is used in scholarship, the more it highlights the imagined dominance of "Chinese roots" in the broad Asian region, and essentializes Asia as "Chinese hegemony" as if it were an opponent of the Western hegemony—this risks conflations of heterogeneous cultures not only within the reality of complex "Chinese-ness" but also in the broader Asia Pacific region (Ang, 2001).

Several scholars from Asia have emphasized the importance of valuing diversity in Asian scholarship by, for example, inter-referencing (Iwabuchi, 2016) and developing new paradigms like "Asia as method" (Chen, 2010; Lo, 2014)—the paradigm initially proposed by Japanese scholar

Yoshimi Takeuchi in a 1960 lecture (Takeuchi, 2005). Through this paradigm, Takeuchi suggested insights to “find the ‘roots of the problem’ [...] to compare different patterns of modernization processes in Asia” (Chen, 2012: 321), rather than simply seeing ourselves through the East-West binary and “catching up with Euro-America” (Chen, 2012: 319). Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010: 212), a Taiwanese scholar of inter-Asia cultural studies, further developed Takeuchi’s paradigm and explains that “using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt.” Similarly, Japanese sociologist Iwabuchi (2020: 28) proposes a less academic but more general-public focused approach, viewing “trans-Asia as method” to “envision and actualize Asia as a dialogic communicative space in which people across borders collaborate to connect diverse voices, concerns, and problems in various, unevenly intersecting public sites.” It is their argument that Asia is not a monolithic entity countering the “West,” but a spectrum wherein different histories and cultures are actively interacting with each other and evolving. “Asia” should thus be approached as a unique methodological lens, to capture and understand these intersecting complexities.

While valuable, it needs to be noted that these rigorous attempts should be accompanied by clear understandings and appreciations of differences between different cultures and nation states within the Asia Pacific boundaries. While East Asia may look relatively homogenous in terms of ethnicity, language, and perhaps culture, as opposed to other multicultural countries in Southeast Asia, the economic models and government regimes of China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan and Hong Kong differ from one another. In the case of TikTok, the global version of the app is not available in China and its sister app Douyin, which is developed only for the mainland China market, is not (easily) accessible in the Japan and South Korea markets.

Southeast Asia, on the other hand, is known as a racially and religiously multicultural region. Cultures of Southeast Asia have often been overshadowed by the dominant attention to East Asia – as implied in “rosy” sayings to refer to the region like “the rise of Asia” – focused usually on its growing visibility in global economy and culture (Heryanto, 2013). However, a number of scholars have emphasized a need to build and enrich Southeast Asian studies with a focus on a unique characteristic of Southeast Asia—that is, plurality, or more specifically speaking, a plural society which was shaped by external forces like colonialism (Ang, 2001; Shamsul, 2007; Wang, 1999). With the similar but distinct histories of having been colonized by Spain, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Japan, many nation-states in Southeast Asia have struggled with ethnic conflicts, political turmoils, and financial crises. Against this backdrop, TikTok has risen to popularity in Southeast Asia as a platform where users discuss various socio-cultural political issues, including transnational migrant labor (Chua, 2020), ‘and political...’ activism against authoritarian regimes (Savitha, 2020). Further, TikTok itself seeks opportunities to expand its market and develop new business models in e-commerce (Feng, 2022).

Unlike East Asia and Southeast Asia which hold some vestiges of Chinese influence in their various histories and societies, South Asia is distinctive in terms of language, culture, religion, and history. Its unique media landscape is well encapsulated in the prominent Bollywood system and contents, wherein local social forces and systems like class, gender, and religion are manifesting, reinforced, challenged, and negotiated through its interaction with, and adaptation of, the Western-driven cultural systems like Hollywood (Kavoori and Punathambekar, 2008). Until the government(s) issued a decision to ban the app in 2020, TikTok was widely used in this region, being integrated into the rich mediascape, and giving rise to a new genre of memetic media content. For instance, popular Bollywood contents were creatively remixed by users to embed light-hearted fun but also serious messages concerning politics, society, and cultural pride (Sarma, 2022; Subramanian, 2021; Verma, 2021).

The Pacific region is perhaps perceived to be least “Asian like” in the popular imagination, perhaps in lieu of the “honorary Western” stance that Australia and New Zealand have been perceived to hold. Australia has had a fraught history with and as “Asia Pacific,” having been a British settler colony, and considering its historically systemic racism against People of Colour in its now-defunct “White Australia policy.” Yet, scholars have also observed that the country has taken an “Asian turn” since the mid-1990s, to meet growing demands of global economies and multiculturalism (Ang and Stratton, 1996). Despite the preeminence of Anglo-saxon heritage, Australia’s new attempt to position itself as “a part of Asia” has been noticeable in the media and in pop culture (Martin et al., 2020; Sun, 2019). However, understandings of Asia, or what Pan (2015) calls “Asia literacy,” are still limited, manifesting as a “paradox of modern Australia” (Wesley, 2011) and even as “anxieties” (Walker, 2013) among White Australians.

As such, even as we playfully introduce this Feature Topic issue as being focused on the “Asia Pacific” region, we wish to highlight the messiness in speaking of a coherent ethnic, national, racial culture on TikTok; instead, we offer just a glimpse of how research on “global” platforms can still be attentive to highly localized cultures and contexts, places and peoples, societies and systems.

## Papers in this Feature Topic issue

This Feature Topic collection for *Media International Australia* is our second in a string of Special Issues on TikTok, each primed to interrogate the platform from different scholarly vantage points while remaining committed to surfacing, highlighting, and strengthening research from, by, and about contexts in the margins. In this Feature Topic issue, we focus on the Asia Pacific region to understand the socio-cultural impacts, creative circumventions, and agentic employments of TikTok since its installation. Given the timing of symposium and intellectual inquiries, these studies have also naturally considered the cascading impacts and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on platform use, meaning making, and the habitable spaces we make for ourselves and for each other in times of crisis.

We begin with Petrovic’s article “From karaoke to lip-syncing: performance communities and TikTok use in Japan,” which examines how TikTok has been taken up during the period of extended self-isolation in Japan. The paper considers how lip-syncing alongside TikToks can be contextualized within the longer-standing karaoke culture, suggesting that TikTok serves as an alternative new space for intimate connections and communal belonging in an era of social distancing, with its creative and playful affordances and audio-centered functionality.

In Singapore, Kaur-Gill’s article “The cultural customization of TikTok: subaltern migrant workers and their digital cultures” seeks to make sense of migrant workers’ lived experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak via TikTok videos. By adopting digital ethnography, the paper provides an understanding of how TikTok storytelling narratives, facilitated by its unique communicative features including its memetic templates, reveal the structural conditions and cultural and contextual insights on migrant precarities. This offers that TikTok has the potential to be a political space for those in the margins, whose visibility and voice are limited in the host countries in the name of economic success and development of Asia.

Sarwatay, Lee, and Kaye’s article “Exploring children’s TikTok cultures in India: Negotiating access, uses, and experiences under restrictive parental mediation” focuses on how children in India consider TikTok as their new playground, as a space to resist surveillance from their parents and the government. Although TikTok was banned in India in June 2020 over concerns about data security and user privacy, the findings reveal some political potentials that are introduced by the nascent platform, wherein children can develop their own identity politics, creatively exhibit their desire for online fame, and negotiate norms among peer groups.

By paying heed to TikTok's specific communicative affordances and its capacity to facilitate reflexive encounters, "Situated Talk: A method for a reflexive encounter with #donorconceived on TikTok" authored by Newton and Southerton proposes a new methodological approach. They offer "situated talk" as a way of studying emergent complicated issues around identity politics, demonstrating that the TikTok platform itself—including its cultures, practices, and discourses—can be approached as a methodological tool that accommodates the extended self-reflections and dialogues among collaborators.

Finally, Hartung, Hendry, Albury, Johnston, and Welch explore TikTok's platform affordances by centering its playful, fun, and entertaining aspects, which they argue to have been particularly useful in the context of accelerated digitalization that emerged during the pandemic. Their article "Teachers of TikTok: Glimpses and gestures in the performance of professional identity" takes as its case study a South Australian teacher TikTok known as Mr Luke, considering how TikTok-driven engagements between teachers and their presumed students usher in a newly evolving landscape of digital learning.

We hope you enjoy our collection of papers that aim to confront, challenge, and complicate the "globality" of TikTok and its uptake, through the studies, stories, and sensibilities from our "region."


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