

TikTok Ban in Pakistan

Policy in Review

November 2021

Policy Issue

The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) on July 21, 2021 blocked access to TikTok, for the fourth time, for its failure to take down "inappropriate content".

TikTok was first banned in October 2020 over complaints regarding indecent content and the ban was uplifted 10 days later. On March 11, 2021, PTA once again banned the application on the orders of Peshawar High Court. This ban was reversed after 3 weeks. On June 28, 2021, the app was blocked for the third time and this time on the orders of Sindh High Court; however, ban was uplifted just after 4 days.

TikTok and Pakistan

TikTok captured attention in 2019 and by 2020 it surpassed Facebook to become most downloadable app worldwide. For developing countries like Pakistan with huge youth bulge, TikTok played a vital role in providing zero-investment **earning & recognition** opportunity to the individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and especially the youth in Pakistan.

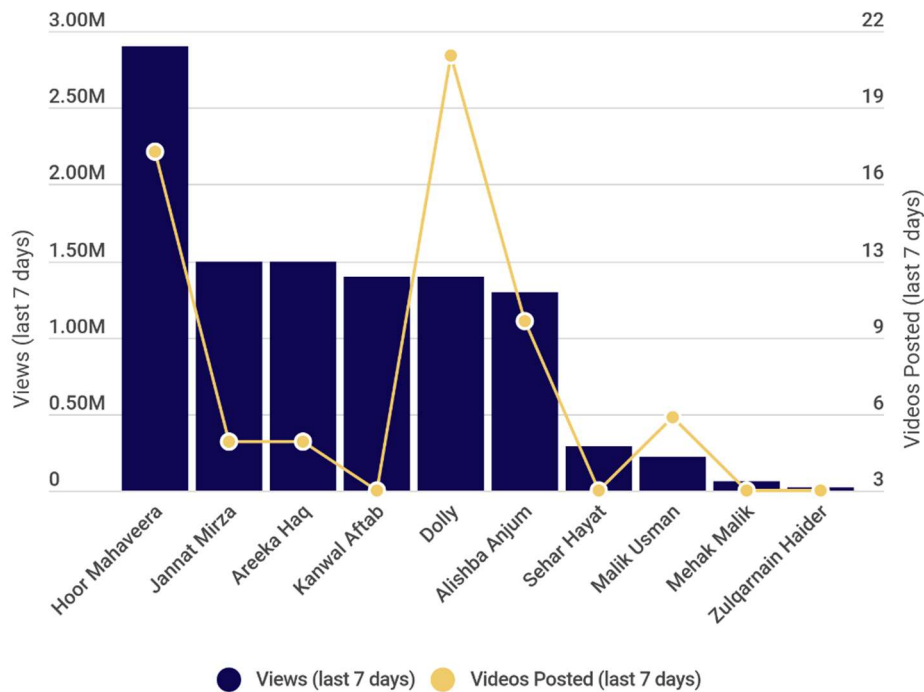
TikTok's short video based and user-friendly platform made it viral around the country, especially in towns and villages of Pakistan's most marginalized areas. Its promise of fame and monetization is changing the society at an unprecedented speed, which is also one of the reasons why there is so much negativity towards TikTok.

While there is no doubt in presence of indecent content on TikTok, the frequency is very low and the TikTok's compliance rate is very high, especially when compared to other social media platforms like Twitter. According to PTA, only 1% of the content on TikTok is indecent and TikTok's Transparency Report published in October 2021 shows that 9.85 million videos from Pakistan in Q2 (April – June) of 2021 were removed from the platform and their algorithms are optimized to remove up to 70% of indecent content at zero views. Despite of this active response and facilitation from TikTok, the ban continues.

Impact of Ban

The pushback against the ban came from all sectors of Pakistani society. Journalists, digital media consumers, and rights activities all took part in online campaigns to protest the policing of their online activities. In addition to the internal outrage, these bans were considered censorship and violation of human rights by media and organizations from around the world. Although these bans are not permanent and, in most cases, last for few days but are enough to damage the perception of country internationally. In the long term, bans lead to poor status of Pakistan in international rankings.

Apart from delegitimizing Pakistan in the global tech and digital industry, ban is ineffective as the app is still accessible via VPNs. Top 10 TikTok content creators from Pakistan, having average follower count at 12 million gained more than 10.6 million views on 68 videos in 7 days (see the graph below). In addition to this, most of them have established strong presence on SnackVideo, Instagram and other social media platforms which act as an alternate when TikTok is banned.



Views & Videos posted by Top 10 TikTokers from Pakistan (21 Oct – 27 Oct, 2021)

Recommendations

Uplift the Ban

Pakistan is a market with limitless potential where internet penetration is still at 54%, a plethora of entrepreneurs developing new solutions to local challenges, and millions of young people using platforms like TikTok to be heard and seen.

When other platforms like TikTok gained traction, they faced similar issues in handling the indecent/harmful content and over the past few years, their policies and compliance rates have drastically improved. Therefore, it is highly recommended that the ban must be uplifted for being ineffective and regressive.

Awareness Campaign on Ethical Social Media Use

Instead of a blanket ban, the government in collaboration with civil society and digital advocates may run a national campaign on the ethical use of social media. This would constitute a targeted messaging against cyber harassment, nudity, pornography and other social media related issues to ensure a safe and healthy digital environment for the users.

Investment in Alternate Avenues

Multiple studies show that excessive use of social media create a negative and self-perpetuating cycle, therefore, attention must be given to the provision of alternate offline and online avenues to the youth which includes: promotion of and inexpensive tourism, investment in sports, public gyms, debates, libraries, arts & crafts and competitions at a local level.