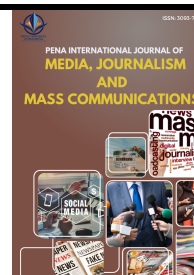




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Public Sentiment on TikTok and Its Impact on International Business: Youth Opinion, Virality, and Cross-Cultural Branding

Wan-Nurisma Ayu Wan-Ismail^{1,*}

¹ Department of International Business, School of International Studies (SoIS), Universiti Utara Malaysia

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received 18 August 2025 Received in revised form 30 September 2025 Accepted 8 October 2025 Available online 12 October 2025</p> <p>Keywords: Global branding; cross-cultural communication; marketing strategies</p>	<p>In the era of digital disruption, TikTok has emerged as a powerful platform influencing global public sentiment, particularly among youth. This paper explores how viral content on TikTok shapes youth opinion and its subsequent impact on international business, with a focus on global branding, marketing strategies, and cross-cultural communication. By analyzing key trends, hashtags, and influencer content, the study shows how TikTok's algorithm, youth participation, and user-created content are changing the way international businesses operate. The findings underscore the importance of digital media literacy and strategic cultural sensitivity for global companies targeting youth markets.</p>

1. Introduction

In less than a decade, TikTok has grown from a niche entertainment application into a global communication platform, boasting more than 1.5 billion active users across over 150 countries [11]. Unlike traditional social media platforms that privilege text-based content, TikTok thrives on short-form video storytelling powered by a sophisticated recommendation algorithm. This design not only personalizes user experiences but also accelerates the viral spread of cultural symbols, trends, and narratives.

Young people constitute the backbone of TikTok's user base. Generation Z, in particular, consumes and co-creates content that circulates across geographical and cultural boundaries, thereby shaping digital cultures and, increasingly, business landscapes. Unlike passive consumers of older media, these users are active participants in trend formation, brand appropriation, and political discourse. The sheer scale and speed at which youth-driven sentiment manifests on TikTok make it a powerful barometer of global opinion and a crucial determinant of business strategies. This paper will investigate how public sentiment on TikTok influences international business. Specifically, it addresses three interrelated questions: (1) How does youth opinion on TikTok shape global consumer trends? (2) What role do virality and influencers play in constructing brand

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: nurisma@uum.edu.my

meaning? (3) How can companies adapt to the dynamics of youth-driven digital sentiment in ways that respect cross-cultural sensitivities? By combining insights from media studies, marketing, and international business, the paper aims to contribute to scholarly discussions on the intersections of digital culture and global commerce.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Public Opinion and Social Media

The concept of public opinion has long been central to the fields of communication, political science, and sociology. Early theorists such as Lippmann [9] famously argued that citizens develop opinions not through direct experience but through mediated representations, which he described as the “pictures in their heads.” This perspective emphasized the pivotal role of media in shaping collective understandings of social and political realities. Similarly, Key [8] conceptualized public opinion as a critical force constraining political leaders, framing it as a stabilizing mechanism in democratic societies. While these foundational theories emerged in the context of mass media, the digital age has significantly altered the ways opinions are formed and disseminated.

Social media has transformed public opinion into a decentralized, participatory, and real-time phenomenon. Unlike traditional mass media, which maintained hierarchical control over information flows, platforms such as Twitter (now X), Instagram, and TikTok allow users to consume, produce, and circulate content simultaneously [10] highlights that digital platforms not only reflect public opinion but also construct it through algorithmically mediated interactions. This reflects what Benkler, Faris, and Roberts [1] call the “networked public sphere,” where discourse is distributed across digital nodes rather than concentrated in elite gatekeepers.

TikTok, in particular, amplifies these dynamics. Its features—hashtags, duets, stitches, and challenges—encourage users not just to watch but to create and remix content, enabling even resource-limited users to achieve visibility [7]. This democratization of participation allows marginalized or youth voices to resonate globally. Yet, as Gillespie [4] argues, virality is not necessarily representative of collective opinion but rather a product of algorithmic design and attention economies. Thus, while TikTok fosters inclusion and creativity, it also complicates the reliability of public opinion expressed through viral trends.

2.2 TikTok as a Business Communication Tool

Beyond entertainment, TikTok has emerged as a powerful business communication platform. Its participatory design makes it an ecosystem conducive to brand storytelling. Omar and Dequan [12] emphasize that users engage not only by watching but also by creating and sharing content, giving companies opportunities to foster deeper connections with audiences. Brands increasingly leverage interactive features—such as hashtag challenges, branded filters, and influencer collaborations—to enhance visibility and engagement. Zhang, Zhao, and Xu [16] demonstrate that interactive campaigns on TikTok often outperform static ads in fostering consumer-brand relationships, particularly among Gen Z.

However, TikTok’s potential comes with risks. Montag, Yang, and Elhai [11] caution that the algorithm can amplify extreme or misleading content, raising the risk of reputational damage. In international contexts, missteps can escalate into crises that spread across borders overnight. Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu [5] note that influencer-driven promotion heightens both authenticity and vulnerability, as consumer trust depends on perceived transparency. TikTok therefore represents

both a strategic asset and a reputational liability, requiring global firms to adopt agile communication strategies that combine proactive engagement with crisis management.

2.3 Cross-Cultural Branding in the Digital Age

Global brands face the dual challenge of maintaining consistent identity while adapting to local cultures. De Mooij [3] highlights that cultural paradoxes require balancing standardization with localization. TikTok accelerates this challenge because global trends are continually reinterpreted through local cultural lenses. For instance, a campaign designed in New York may be humorously adapted in Seoul, reframed in religious terms in Dubai, or recast around sustainability in Scandinavia. This dynamic reflects “glocalization” [13], where global campaigns are reconfigured in local contexts. TikTok serves as a cultural testing ground, with brands enabling localized creativity often achieving resonance. Jin and Ryu [6] illustrate how fashion brands collaborating with South Korean influencers successfully tapped into the K-style wave, reshaping their global image. By contrast, brands ignoring cultural nuance risk alienation or backlash. Chu, Kamal, and Kim (2020) show that youth consumers, in particular, reward cultural authenticity and inclusivity, while punishing insensitivity.

Thus, TikTok enriches cross-cultural branding by demanding agility and responsiveness. Success requires brands to treat campaigns not as fixed messages but as co-created cultural conversations with global youth audiences.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative content analysis with a quantitative survey. The rationale for this approach is to capture both the nuanced, context-rich insights from TikTok videos and the measurable, generalizable perceptions of youth consumers across diverse markets. By combining the two, the study not only explores how youth sentiment emerges and evolves on TikTok but also validates these insights with broader survey data. The design follows a sequential explanatory model, beginning with the qualitative phase to explore and categorize emerging patterns, followed by the quantitative phase to test the strength and significance of these patterns across different cultural settings. This form of triangulation enhances the reliability and validity of findings by drawing from complementary types of evidence.

3.2 Sampling Strategy

The study will employ purposive and convenience sampling strategies for the qualitative and quantitative phases, respectively. For the qualitative phase, 120 viral TikTok videos will be selected, covering on certain period. The inclusion criteria for video selection are: (1) achieving more than one million views with at least 50,000 interactions (likes, shares, or comments), (2) relevance to international brands, consumer practices, or global marketing campaigns, and (3) use of culturally resonant hashtags such as #TikTokMadeMeBuyIt, #sustainableliving, or #globalfashion.

For the quantitative phase, a sample of youth participants will be recruited. A non-probability convenience sampling method will be used due to practical constraints in accessing a globally representative sample. Eligibility criteria include being between the ages of 18 and 30, being an active TikTok user with at least three hours of use per week, and having familiarity with at least one international brand featured on the platform. Recruitment will take place through university networks, youth forums, and online TikTok communities.

3.3 Data Collection

The collection of qualitative data will focus on the content and context of viral TikTok videos. Each selected video will be saved with its accompanying metadata, including posting date, engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments), and hashtags. User comments will also be collected, with the top 200 comments per video extracted to capture the dominant sentiments and discourses. Where applicable, official brand responses or campaign-related materials will also be documented.

The quantitative phase will rely on a structured online survey distributed through platforms such as Google Forms or Qualtrics. The survey instrument will be divided into four sections. The first section will collect demographic information, including age, gender, country of residence, and frequency of TikTok use. The second section will assess perceptions of virality, with Likert-scale items measuring agreement with statements such as “TikTok trends influence my perception of international brands.” The third section will explore issues of trust and engagement with brands, including items on authenticity, influencer credibility, and purchase intention. The final section will evaluate cross-cultural branding, asking participants whether they feel international brands adapt effectively to their cultural context. Open-ended questions will also be included to capture richer insights beyond numerical data. A pilot study with 20 participants will be conducted to refine the instrument and ensure clarity.

4. Data Analysis

The qualitative data will be analyzed through a three-step content analysis process. First, open coding will be applied to identify recurring motifs, cultural narratives, and brand references within the videos and comments. Second, thematic categorization will be used to group these codes into broader analytical categories, such as influencer credibility, cultural localization, consumer empowerment, and sustainability. Third, a cross-cultural comparative analysis will be conducted to identify similarities and differences in branding narratives across the four selected countries. NVivo software will be used to manage coding and ensure transparency in the analytical process.

Quantitative data will be analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, will summarize the demographic characteristics and general perceptions of participants. Inferential statistical tests will be employed to examine relationships and differences across groups. Specifically, ANOVA tests will compare youth perceptions across the four countries, while regression analysis will test the relationships between TikTok usage, levels of trust in brands, and purchase intentions. This two-tiered analysis will allow the study to provide both descriptive and predictive insights.

4. Conclusions

TikTok embodies both disruption and opportunity for international business. Its youth-centered, participatory culture transforms brand communication into a collaborative process where public sentiment can elevate or undermine campaigns. Companies that thrive on TikTok are those that embrace dialogue, respect cultural nuance, and adapt strategies in real time. Moving forward, businesses must view TikTok not simply as a marketing tool but as a cultural space where identity, values, and commerce converge. Digital media literacy among both youth and corporate actors will be vital to sustaining credibility. Ultimately, TikTok demonstrates how international business is no longer solely about products and markets—it is about engaging authentically with global publics whose voices are amplified through digital media.

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