



Understudied Digital Platforms in the **Philippines**

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	5
Acknowledgments	7
List of Figures, Tables, and Box Texts	8
Foreword	9
Executive Summary	11
Chapter 1. Mainstream Media Platforms in the Philippines	13
Chapter Previews	17
Chapter 2. Methodology	18
Chapter 3. TikTok as an Understudied and Emerging Platform in the Philippines	24
3.1. Affordances	24
3.1.1. Content Creation	26
3.1.2. Content Engagement	29
3.1.3. User Experiences	34
3.2. User Demographics	35
3.3. Information Supply	38
3.4. Information Demand	45
3.5. Disinformative Potential	46
3.6. Summary	49
Chapter 4. WeChat as an Understudied and Emerging Platform in the Philippines	50
4.1. Affordances	51
4.2. User Demographics	57
4.3. Information Supply	62
4.4. Information Demand	66
4.5. Disinformative Potential	70

4.6. Summary	73
Chapter 5. Placing Emerging Platforms in the Philippine Media System	74
5.1. Recommendations for Platforms	78
5.2. Recommendations for Policymakers	80
5.3. Recommendations for Public Stakeholders	80
Bibliography	82

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List of Figures, Tables, and Box Texts

Figure 1. Interest over time on TikTok in the Philippines

Figure 2. User interface of TikTok

Figure 3. Video from the broadsheet Manila Bulletin with a link to the article

Figure 4. Geotagging feature as a new affordance in TikTok

Figure 5. Percentage of use of TikTok features in interacting with content.

Figure 6. Options for reporting content/account on TikTok

Figure 7. The Discover tab on TikTok and the suggested searches

Figure 8. Screenshot of the now-defunct TikTok account of Jam Magno

Figure 9. Ads personalization and digital wellbeing options on TikTok

Figure 10. Sample videos on Philippine politics and elections

Figure 11. Categories of hashtags (259 TikTok videos)

Figure 12. Sample videos on health

Figure 13. A screenshot of Gibo Teodoro's sponsored video

Figure 14. Videos in support of presidential candidates Leni Robredo and Bongbong Marcos

Figure 15. Sample live videos from 24 Oras

Figure 16. Level of trust on specific groups on TikTok

Figure 17. WeChat's user interface

Figure 18. WeChat's Moments page

Figure 19. Sample subscriptions interface and public account

Figure 20. Sample WeChat news article

Figure 21. Word cloud of translated topics and article headlines

Figure 22. Types of news articles associated with top topics

Figure 23. Sample foreign affairs news articles

Figure 24. Sample posts of buying, selling, and renting accounts on Facebook groups

Figure 25. Level of trust on specific groups on WeChat

Table 1. Data collection methods and objectives

Table 2. Categories and examples from coded hashtags

Table 3. Mis/Disinformation encountered on TikTok

Table 4. Familiarity and use of WeChat features

Table 5. Top ten sources of news

Table 6. Categories of news sought on WeChat

Table 7. Mis/Disinformation encountered on WeChat

Box Text 1. Community guidelines on TikTok

Box Text 2. Political information on TikTok

Box Text 3. Health information on TikTok

Box Text 4. Gibo Teodoro's sponsored video

Box Text 5. Live streaming on TikTok

Box Text 6. The anatomy of WeChat articles

Box Text 7. Foreign affairs news on WeChat

Box Text 8. Buy-and-sell of WeChat accounts

Box Text 9. Disinformation in the Philippines

Foreword

In the past decade, the world has witnessed the phenomenon of online disinformation growing in intensity.

Far from being limited to authoritarian regimes, disinformation has been disrupting political processes in young and old democracies alike, and undermining trust in elections and in the democratic model of governance and its institutions.

Of course, disinformation has always been part of political processes, but the volume of disinformation has exponentially increased since the emergence of social media as a major, and sometimes the main, source of information for the citizenry.

Disinformation online has major consequences offline. Disinformation can kill, for example by triggering electoral violence, or by influencing people toward not protecting their health in a time of pandemic.

The Philippines is one of the first countries where the potential for online disinformation to undermine democratic processes was noticed.

In 2018, the public policy director for global elections of Facebook, explained, commenting on disinformation during the 2016 Philippine presidential elections, that “the Philippines was definitely patient zero for the war on disinformation.” She added: “we need to make sure that what happened in 2016 doesn’t happen again, but we also need to stay one step ahead.”

The status of the Philippines as the test lab of disinformation operators seemed further confirmed in 2019 by the claim of Cambridge Analytica’s whistleblower Christopher Wylie that for Cambridge Analytica and its parent companies, the Philippines was “an ideal petri dish situation [to] experiment on tactics and techniques.”

The past decade has also shown that there is no silver bullet to address disinformation, and that tackling the pollution of the public discourse by online disinformation requires a multi-pronged, multi-stakeholder approach.

Internews' work on disinformation in the Philippines aims at uniting the strengths of all goodwill stakeholders in the media community, civil society, academia, private sector, and social media companies, along six axes: factchecking and myth busting, media and information literacy, public policy advocacy, disinformation investigation, investment in trustworthy news and media, and algorithm accountability.

The latter requires to understand the role each social media platform plays in the information ecosystem, to tailor specific strategies of engagement on and with these platforms.

In that context, the “Understudied Digital Platforms in the Philippines” research project was designed with one main objective: to help Internews, its partners, and the vast community of Filipino stakeholders engaged in the battle against disinformation better understand the role of less studied social media platforms in the Philippine information ecosystem, ahead of 2022 Philippine general elections.

Internews hopes that the fascinating findings of the dynamic team of researchers who conducted this study will be useful to the frontliners of the struggle for Philippine democracy, help them adapt their strategies, and may also inform social media platforms in their efforts to prevent the misuse of their services and tools by toxic actors.

Greg Kehailia
Country Director
Internews Philippines



Executive Summary

Increased digital access in the Philippines holds the promise of democratized communication and information, but also brings about the danger of the weaponization of social media. It is with this lens that we look at emerging platforms. An examination of the quality and volume of information flows on these platforms should be complemented by how much potential they hold to be weaponized by bad actors. Analyzing emerging platforms in this manner enables us to provide sober views that highlight and enhance the good aspects and affordances of such platforms, and at the same time call out and minimize, if not begin to alter or remove completely, its bad aspects and affordances.

This information ecosystem assessment report focuses on two emerging and understudied digital platforms in the Philippines: TikTok and WeChat. We explore these platforms by placing them in the context of the Philippine media system, examining their affordances, information flows, user demographics, and disinformative potential. We then provide preliminary recommendations that aim to maintain regulated but still democratic online public spheres within these platforms.

We have five key findings:

1. In the Philippines, TikTok and WeChat are relevant social media platforms not owned and operated by states from the Global North, unlike most of the popular platforms Filipinos use. In addition, they are the seventh and sixth most popular social networking apps worldwide as of July 2021, ranking only behind Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger. In the Philippines, TikTok was the top downloaded mobile app in 2020. Meanwhile, WeChat's position as both an alternative to other mobile instant messaging platforms like Viber and Telegram, and a multifunctional app offering other services like WeChat Pay in the country, makes it an interesting but understudied platform.
2. TikTok's media content centers on entertaining and sometimes informative content in short form. While mostly seen as a leisure app, TikTok has launched educational campaigns and has collaborated with government institutions to encourage users and influencers to produce educational content meant to popularize science communication on the platform. TikTok's information demand reflects the information supply. Users mostly engage with videos that are short and entertaining. The most subscribed users tend to be celebrities and public personalities whose content focus mostly on entertainment and leisure.

3. WeChat's media content mostly comes from two primary sources: (a) user-generated content primarily through Moments and Chats, and (b) information from Public Accounts in the form of articles and videos published via the Search and Subscription tabs. Users in the Philippines have a limited awareness of the full features of the app and rarely use it to seek news on the platform, instead using it almost exclusively as a messaging app. Public accounts present users with content that primarily cater to the audiences in mainland China, with very few news that are of relevance to the Philippines.
4. Both platforms demonstrate disinformative potential, albeit uneven in volume and reach. We observed misinformation and disinformation on TikTok videos, particularly on COVID-19 and the upcoming 2022 Philippine general elections, with fairly huge engagements, although it is difficult to discern how extensive the reach of such content is. Such content is created, spread, or engaged with by both anonymous and identified accounts, indicating the likelihood that disinformation here is more organic and authentic relative to other platforms. On WeChat, we found evidence that users were exposed to misinformation/disinformation related to COVID-19. Disinformation is more likely to come from public accounts with relatively more anonymous controllers rather than organic actors, meaning the disinformation process may be more subjected to profits of logic or hidden agenda. However, WeChat in the Philippines is relatively less disinformative than TikTok, due to differences in user base size and platform affordances. Differences in platform governance contribute to their disinformative potential as well, as both platforms are relatively less transparent in their content moderation operations compared to other mainstream digital platforms.
5. Increased transparency, as well as dialogues and collaborations with civil society organizations, academics, and governments, can minimize this potential for disinformation. Moreover, such interventions need to reflect a paradigm shift on two levels: first from *content* regulation to *process* regulation, and second from *individual-level* disinformation to *media systems-level* disinformation. Employing these paradigms allow us to view the platforms as part of a bigger media environment, thus allowing for more comprehensive and complete solutions.



Chapter 1

Mainstream Media Platforms in the Philippines

Much has changed in the Philippine media landscape since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020. In the last year and a half, the country has seen the shutdown of its major television network over political disputes with the government, an increase in internet connectivity and consumption driven by the shift to working and studying from homes, and an increase in the number of hours Filipinos spend online, a persistent trend as the country continues to log the most hours on the Internet globally. A quick examination of the mainstream media platforms shows old trends persisting, but the emergence of social media is changing the Filipino media diet as well.

Television remains the most dominant traditional media outlet for most Filipinos. It is also seen as the most used and most trustworthy source of political information. In 2013, 81% of all Filipinos watched television, with 65% of Filipinos aged 10-64 doing so every day (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015; Media Ownership Monitor, 2017). By 2019 these figures jumped to 96% for television exposure overall, and 66.3% daily (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021). Since the 1990s, Philippine television has been ruled by two networks: Alto Broadcasting System-Chronicle Broadcasting Network (ABS-CBN) and Global Media Arts (GMA) Network. The two dominate the Philippine media market with a whopping 79.44% media share.

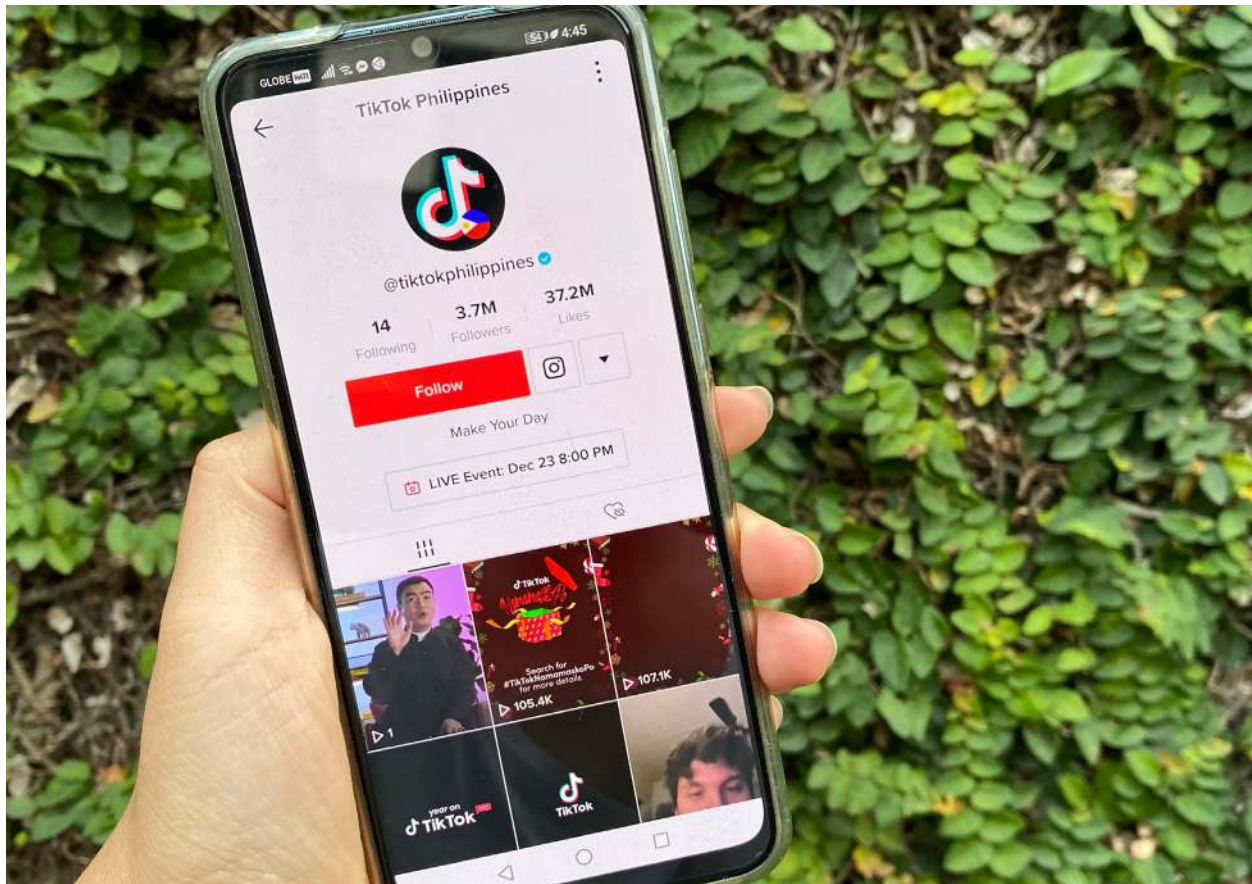
Nationwide, they are able to reach 77.31% of the total audiences for television (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017). However, in the wake of the Philippine government's shutdown of ABS-CBN, then the leading broadcasting network, a decline in television viewership has been observed (Chua, 2020) despite the world's longest pandemic lockdown.

Radio also remains an important part of the Philippine media ecosystem, as it reaches even the most remote areas untouched by television and the internet (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017). In 2019 75.2% of Filipinos aged 10-64 listened to the radio, up from 65.6% in 2013. However, there were less daily listeners in 2019 at 19% of the population, compared to 26.3% in 2013 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015; 2021). Similar to television, radio in the Philippines is primarily privately owned and connected to ABS-CBN and GMA Network. They command sizable radio groups, even if the biggest radio group belongs to the Manila Broadcasting Company (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017). Other major radio groups include Radyo Mindanao Network, Bombo Radyo, Catholic Radio Network, and the government-owned Philippine Broadcasting Service (Infoasaid, 2014).

Newsprint is the least utilized traditional media platform. In 2013, newspapers and magazines had a population exposure of only 9.8% of total Filipinos and 12.3% of Filipinos aged 10-64. These numbers further dropped to 4.3% and 10.9% in 2019 (Philippine Statistics Authority 2015, 2021). The pandemic put even more pressure on the newspaper industry, leading many big community papers to cease publications or rebrand and reduce their pages (Chua, 2020). As with radio, newspapers and other publications are mostly privately owned and tied to major broadcasting companies: 14 of the biggest newspapers in the country are published by only seven companies (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017).

In contrast with the declining numbers of mainstream media, the Philippines has seen a rise in internet connectivity. In 2013, only 16.2% of the population were exposed to the internet for social media or emails and 13.9% for research work, respectively; These jumped up to 73.9% and 63.6% in 2019, with a combined 67.7% of the population using the internet daily (Philippine Statistics Authority 2015, 2021). The Philippines is also consistently at the top of internet usage and social media usage worldwide, logging in the most hours for six straight years (We Are Social, 2021; Chua, 2021) despite, and possibly because of, having one of the slowest internet speeds in Asia (Porcalla, 2020; Mercurio, 2019; Barreiro, 2017). Among all online platforms Facebook has the highest market share with 80.85%, followed by YouTube with 8.55% and Twitter with 7.46% (Statista, 2021). Unsurprisingly, these platforms have become a source of news for Filipinos, with 73% seeking news on Facebook, 53% on YouTube, and 19% on TikTok (Chua, 2020).

Even if Filipinos are increasingly turning to social media, they seemingly do not trust online sources as much as mainstream media. For instance, only roughly 10% of those who are online trust information



about the government received from social media (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017). This may partially be explained by the generational gap in internet access in the Philippines. As studies show, the more affluent, more educated, and younger Filipinos are also relatively more connected online and are more likely to own a smartphone (Schumacher & Kent, 2020; Estella & Löffelholz, n.d.), thus more likely to question what they see online. What we see then is a more discerning, more connected younger and more privileged Filipino population highly attuned to social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram.

The prominence of these platforms can be partly explained by prepaid phone plans that offer free (limited) access to the four platforms (Pagulong & Desiderio, 2015). While this can be seen as enabling “good enough access” (Uy-Tioco, 2019), it also reinforces digital divides and validates the experience for most Filipinos where Facebook *is* the internet. The numbers these platforms command in usage also translates to academic attention. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram have dominated contemporary studies on Filipino online activities. Influence operations studies on these platforms have touched on the performative authenticity of Instagram content creators and YouTube vloggers (Shtern, Hill, & Chan, 2019), the disinformative activities of Facebook nano-

influencers (Ong, Tapsell, & Curato, 2019), and the use of bots to shape online discourses on Twitter (Uyheng & Carley, 2019). Studies have also shown the various ways these platforms have been used, such as the use of YouTube to justify right-wing and exclusionary politics in the Philippines (Jereza & Perrino, 2020), the use of Facebook to either spread electoral disinformation (Alba, 2018; Harbath, 2018; Silverman, 2019) or political information that shape political behavior offline (Gainous, Abbott, & Wagner, 2020), the use of Twitter as a medium for civic engagement amidst disasters (Takahashi, Tandoc, & Carmichael, 2015; Soriano, Roldan, Cheng, & Oco, 2016), and the protective potential of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as communication outlets between the government and overseas Filipino workers (Katigbak & Roldan, 2021), among others.

Noticeably absent here are some emerging media platforms in the Philippines that have the same affordances and have considerable users locally: TikTok and WeChat. The latest government data shows 58,806 Filipinos aged 10-64 are exposed to social media (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021) and We Are Social (2021) shows 48.8% of Filipino Internet users aged 16-64 using TikTok, and 21.3% using WeChat. These two platforms deserve greater attention as the seventh and sixth most popular social networking apps worldwide as of July 2021, ranking only behind Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger based on monthly active users (Statista Research Department, 2021).

TikTok, a short video-sharing app with an emerging popularity worldwide, has yet to be studied as both a platform for communication and disinformation in the Philippines despite being the most downloaded entertainment app in the country (Mateo, 2020). Similarly, WeChat has yet to be investigated in light of existing literature on other mobile instant messaging platforms¹ (MIMs) such as Viber, WhatsApp, and Messenger. This is particularly important in the Philippine context, where disinformation operations during elections were prominent in relatively closed platforms such as MIMs (Ong, Tapsell, & Curato, 2019).

In addition to its rising popularity, TikTok and WeChat deserve greater scrutiny in the Philippines due to three factors. The first relates to how Southeast Asia, and the Philippines particularly, has been seen as a disinformation laboratory since 2016. This means that understudied platforms in the country need to be analyzed along this lens. The second factor is the world-leading volume of social media use in the country. Finally, there are concerns on whether TikTok and WeChat conduct surveillance and censorship (Cuthbertson, 2019; Hern, 2019; O'Neill, 2019; Doffman, 2020; Kenyon, 2020; Ruan, Knockel, & Crete-Nishihata, 2020).

1 See Pasquetto, Jahani, Baranovsky, and Baum (2020).

This paper aims to contribute to the conversation by providing an information ecosystem assessment (IEA) on these understudied digital media platforms in the Philippines and discerning the role and impact these platforms have in the Philippine media ecosystem. The IEA will contribute to this endeavor by providing a preliminary descriptive analysis of the platforms' functions, affordances, and information environment vis-a-vis the Philippines' media system. IEAs, a framework developed by Internews to better understand mediated and contextualized information-seeking and information-sharing behaviors, rely on a two-pronged approach to analyzing information production and consumption in a certain area. The supply side of the information covers the overall informational context within which actors operate. This includes ascertaining the reach of media platforms and grasping the legal frameworks regulating media systems. Meanwhile, the demand side of the information covers how audiences receive and perceive information circulated in the ecosystem.

This report uses a sequential mixed methods approach to explore the information supply and information demands within these platforms and outline their disinformative potential.

Chapter Previews

Chapter 2 provides our methodological approach and justification in designing an exploratory research on understudied digital platforms in the Philippines. The chapter explains in detail how a mixed methods approach and the specific data collection methods we employed contributes to the overall aims of an information ecosystem assessment.

Chapters 3 and 4 spotlight TikTok and Wechat, respectively, as understudied platforms by first discussing the background of their operations in the Philippines. This includes a detailed description of the platforms' affordances to show what can be done on the app, a preliminary description of the users' demographic profiles to map out who are the information consumers and producers on these platforms, and the information and content profiles to show what kinds of information supply and demand exist in these platforms and to highlight who supplies and demands what kind of information. Both chapters also discuss the disinformative potential of these platforms by drawing on misinformative and disinformative content, and comparing how they are presented and spread relative to disinformation from the more mainstream platforms like Facebook.

Chapter 5 discusses platform governance measures to show how internal and external actors regulate the information supply within these platforms, situates TikTok and WeChat in the context of the Philippine media system, and provides recommendations for the platforms, the government, and civil society to ensure the quality of information in these digital public spheres.



Chapter 2

Methodology

Our study utilized a sequential mixed methods design in performing the information ecosystem assessment. We first began with a qualitative phase composed of digital ethnography and key informant interviews, the insights of which informed the design of the survey questionnaire on TikTok and WeChat use. Since TikTok and WeChat are understudied platforms, starting the study with digital ethnography and interviews allowed us to initially establish the platforms' informational contexts by looking at what is actually present (information supply) and sought (information demand) within both platforms. We then attempted to test whether or not initial observations applied to a broader range of users in Metro Manila by conducting a survey that also aimed at defining the user base of these platforms in the Philippines, among others. Through this sequential mixed methods research design, we were able to explore the TikTok and WeChat usage of the average Filipino in Metro Manila, the most digitally connected region in the country.

The first phase of the information ecosystem assessment (IEA) began with digital ethnography, consisting of technological walkthroughs and content analyses of media observation. Digital ethnography and media observation allowed us to sketch the bigger picture of networked content flows and user preferences in social media consumption. As digital ethnography is an iterative process, our engagement with both platforms was continuously guided and informed by the data we were able to collect from interviews and online surveys. We dedicated at least one hour of digital ethnography everyday from August 14 to October 14, 2021.

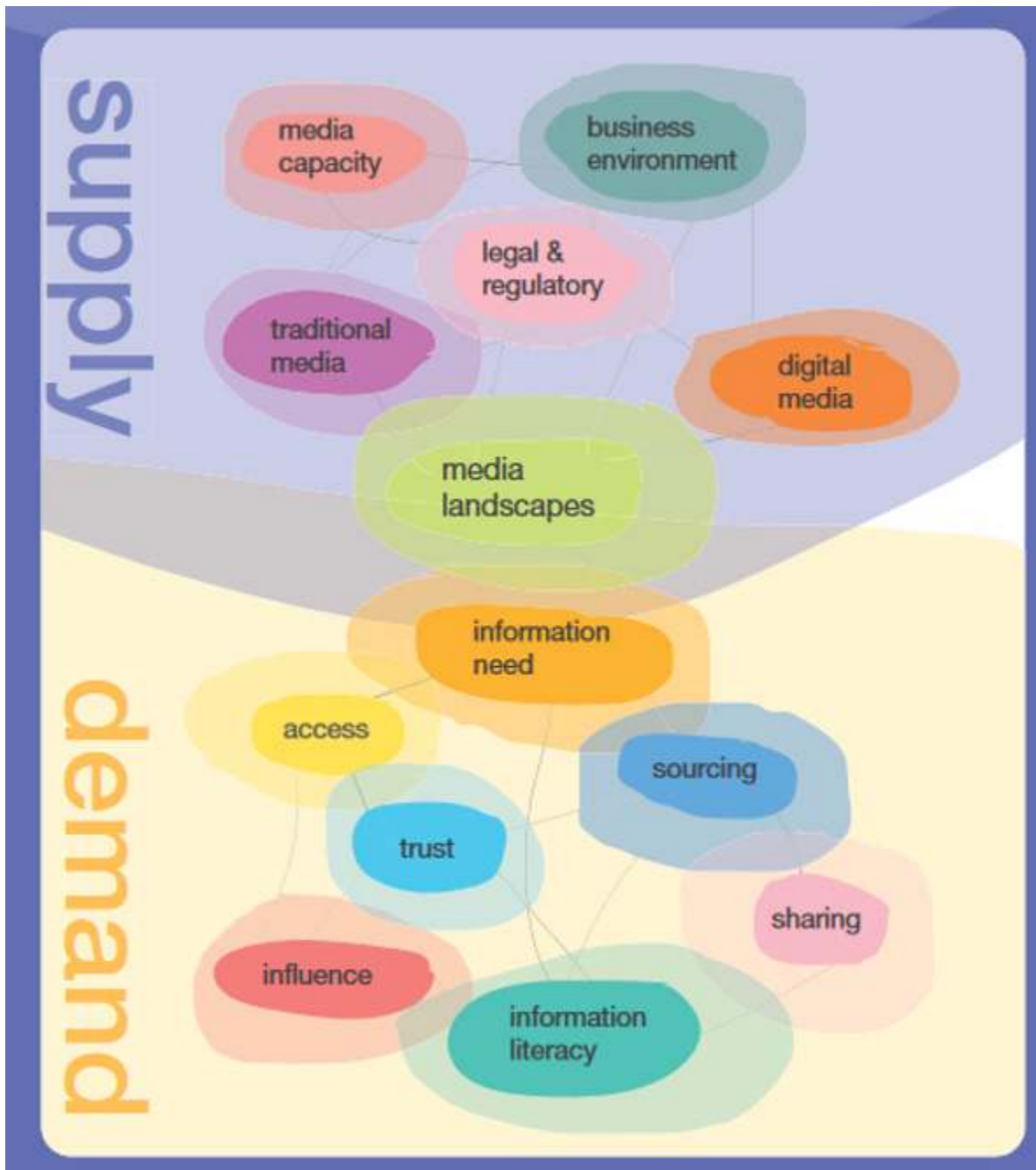
Table 1. Data collection methods and objectives

Digital Ethnography	<p>From August 14 to October 14, 2021, we performed a technological walkthrough by exploring the apps' features, interacting with other users, determining the information supply and demand, among others to determine how users in the Philippines experience the platform.</p> <p>In addition to our walkthroughs, we coded a selection of content designed to map out the information supply within the platforms.</p> <p>For TikTok, 259 videos were coded from August 14 to October 14, 2021 according to their relevance to topics related to health and the 2022 Philippine national elections. From these videos, hashtags were coded to five categories: persons, issues, events, places, and others.</p> <p>For WeChat, we collected the WeChat Top Topics from August 14 to October 14, 2021, the corresponding news article associated with each topic, the headline of each article, the public account that published the content, the category of the public account, as well as the number of reads, likes, and favorites of each article. We yielded 620 distinct topics and over 440 news articles.</p>
Qualitative Interviews	<p>From August to October 2021, we interviewed a total of 24 respondents (11 TikTok users and 13 WeChat users) of various backgrounds, gender, age, and geographical location to learn more about their motivations for and actual experiences with using the app. Interviews served to validate our initial observations from our digital ethnography and were used as basis in constructing the survey questionnaire.</p>
Online survey	<p>We constructed an original survey questionnaire to establish demographic characteristics of users for both apps in the Philippines, as well their user experiences in using the app, including that of misinformation/disinformation. Eligible respondents were limited to those who have downloaded the app, was recently active (i.e., used the app in the last 30 days for TikTok and the last 6 months for WeChat), and resided in Metro Manila. The surveys were deployed from October 9 to December 1, 2021. We gathered 137 eligible responses for TikTok and 34 for WeChat.</p>

We first conducted technological walkthroughs, which included three main stages: (1) the registration and entry stage or the means of opening up an account in the app, (2) the everyday use stage or the activities the users engage in, and (3) the suspension, closure, and leaving stage which refers to the ways users can either temporarily or permanently leave the app (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2016). Walkthroughs (Light et al., 2016) allowed us to critically examine the app both as users and as researchers. The walkthrough includes exploring all the features (boyd & Ellison, 2007) that the app affords such as the menu page, the different buttons available, including the overall feel or tone of the app (Light et al., 2016).² Second, we then conducted participant observation by viewing TikTok videos, liking and unliking videos, following and unfollowing users, and searching for various hashtags and sounds to examine how it affects the recommendation of videos. Similarly for WeChat, we explored features such as Chats/Messaging, Moments, People Nearby, among others, with particular attention to the news articles being distributed in the Discover page of the app. Third, we recorded our observations and noted how the platform affordances shaped information consumption and production behavior. Lastly, we examined how our observations compared to the experiences of our interview respondents to determine alignments between the in-app experiences of new and old users.

The media observation phase involves looking for content that is potentially or fully disinformative. Specifically, we looked for disinformative content on either COVID-19 or Philippine politics because of two reasons. First, the pandemic has produced a disinformative dimension that has made the actual pandemic worse, and scholars are recognizing the value of identifying and combating the infodemic online (Cinelli et al., 2020; Donovan, 2020). Second, we expect electoral and political disinformation and influence operations to ramp up in lieu of the 2022 Philippine general elections. We determined a selection of disinformative content by identifying themes and topics previously identified by other studies as widespread disinformation online, with actual official and/or scientific studies done to disprove their claims. We then looked for disinformative content about these topics by identifying and monitoring accounts, hashtags, and content format that usually accompanied misinformation or disinformation. For TikTok, this was primarily done by a systematic search of health and political information in a span of two months, which were then collected, coded, and analyzed in order to provide meaningful analysis. For WeChat, we focused our attention on the news articles associated with WeChat Top Topics updated by the app real time as it provides an accurate picture of the quality of information made available to users within the platform. From August 14 to October 14, 2021, we collected the WeChat Top Topics, the corresponding news article associated with each topic, the headline of each article, the public account that published the content, the category of the

2 We borrow the definition of affordance from James Gibson (1966; 2014) as the connection between materiality and human agency (see also Treem and Leonardi, 2013; Hutchby, 2001; Davis, 2020).



Internews Framework for the Information Ecosystem Assessment

public account, as well as the number of reads, likes, and favorites of each article. At the end of the data collection period, we gathered 620 distinct topics and over 440 news articles.

The second phase of the IEA involved conducting key informant interviews with users and influencers nationwide to gather more in-depth insights as to practices of typical users, including the kinds of content prevalent in the personal feeds of users from various backgrounds and usage styles. Using nonprobability sampling whereby we considered various characteristics (frequency of use of the platform, background, age, geographic location, etc.) in the selection of respondents, we recruited a total of 11 respondents for TikTok (including users and content creators/influencers) and 13 for WeChat. While we also sought the participation of platform executives and representatives to learn more about the apps from the perspective of their parent companies and in the interest of providing a fair and nuanced report, we were unable to secure the interviews. We were met with a nonresponse for WeChat while regional executives from TikTok declined our request for an interview without providing any explanation.

We first secured the free and prior informed consent of each respondent before proceeding with our semi-structured interviews, which were primarily conducted via Zoom and recorded with consent. Respondents were informed of the interview's purpose in the project, as well as the project's details, goals, and objectives. Respondents were also informed of what their participation entailed, what their rights were as respondents, and what they could gain from their participation. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from participating at any point in the project.

We structured our interviews according to three main themes: motivations for using the app, actual use of the app, and experiences with misinformation/disinformation³ within the platform. Each respondent was provided a token for their participation in the research. Interview recordings were then transcribed and coded according to how the platforms were used, how interactions in the platforms were perceived, what kinds of content were encountered and sought in the platforms, and how users interacted with the platform itself.

The third phase of the project involved the use of online surveys for a couple of reasons. First, surveys contributed to our aims of describing and generalizing the demographic characteristics of TikTok and WeChat users in the Philippines in light of the absence of studies presenting such information.

3 For both key informant interviews and surveys, we define misinformation and disinformation as such: *Misinformation* is false and harmful information that is unintentional, and may or may not have been retracted by the author. *Disinformation* is false and harmful information that is intentional, which authors usually do not retract but platforms may take it down. For a discussion on these definitions, refer to Wardle & Derakhshan (2018).

Insights from interviews and our experience with digital ethnography were used in designing our survey questionnaire. However, while our digital ethnography and key informant interviews provided in-depth insights on actual user experiences, survey data captured the breadth or the full extent to which users experience the application, including behaviors within the app, as well as assessments and evaluations. Second, online surveys proved to be a viable alternative form of conducting surveys due to its low-cost and convenience, especially given existing quarantine restrictions and potential threats to exposure from COVID-19.

We designed the 43-item TikTok and 46-item WeChat surveys using Qualtrics XM with three primary sections: use of the platform, experience with misinformation/disinformation, and demographic questions. Both surveys were deployed from October 9 to December 1, 2021 and were distributed through our personal networks, social media accounts, Facebook groups (e.g., groups dedicated for survey/research, local communities, WeChat verification, Filipino-Chinese communities, POGO workers, etc.) and relevant organizations, among others. For WeChat we also used the platform's People Nearby feature to recruit survey respondents by messaging users tagged by the app as located nearby.

While the report attempted to broaden the sample, the nonprobabilistic and purposive nature of the sampling technique for both the interviews and the surveys limits the generalizability of the report's findings. Nonetheless, purposive sampling serves to provide the necessary data to demonstrate the informational supply and informational demand aspects of this IEA. We had to intentionally approach government accounts and prominent content creators on the platform to ascertain the platform's informational supply contexts, and heavy users from the average Filipino social media cohort to outline the platform's informational demand contexts.

We recruited participants based on three inclusion criteria: respondents must have a TikTok/WeChat account, must have used the platform in the 30 days (for TikTok) or 6 months (for WeChat), and must reside in Metro Manila. The survey on TikTok yielded a total of 137 eligible responses, while the WeChat survey yielded 34.



Chapter 3

TikTok as an Understudied and Emerging Platform in the Philippines

There has been an increase in interest on TikTok since it was launched in 2017 as the global counterpart of Chinese app Douyin (Zeng, Abidin, & Schäfer, 2021), as shown in Figure 1. Over the past five years, the Philippines has been second only to Indonesia in terms of searching for TikTok on Google, and there has been a steady increase in interest since 2019. This is also corroborated by We Are Social's digital report for the Philippines which identifies TikTok as the top downloaded mobile app in 2020 (Kemp, 2021). The pandemic has also contributed to increased interest in the platform, with prolonged quarantines forcing people to download and explore the app (Escobar, 2020).

3.1. Affordances

Affordances are the connection between materiality and human agency (Gibson, 1966; 2014; see also Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Hutchby, 2001; Davis, 2020). TikTok offers a plethora of options to register on the app, such as linking it with existing accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Apple, Google, email address, and mobile number (Figure 2). Upon signing up, TikTok asks new users to choose their interests to “get better video recommendations”. After finishing the set-up, users are immediately brought to the For You Page (FYP).

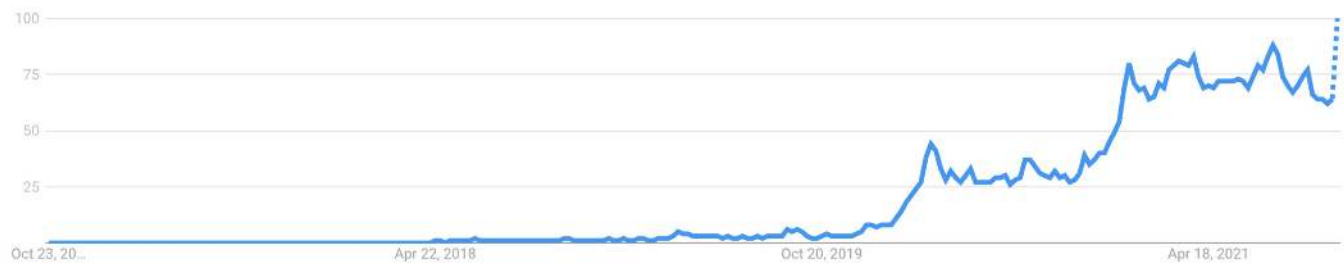


Figure 1. Interest over time on TikTok in the Philippines with a drastic increase in interest in March 2020, the start of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) or lockdown (Source: Google Trends as of October 23, 2021)

Compared to traditional platforms, TikTok's user interface is more inviting in terms of content consumption and creation. Unlike other platforms, the homepage of a TikTok account is the For You Page (FYP), a feed of endless videos recommended by TikTok's algorithm. In other platforms such as YouTube or Facebook users have the freedom to choose between passively browsing and actively consuming content since you first encounter captions and video thumbnails, not the video content itself. In TikTok, the immediate interface is content engagement. Videos are automatically playing and take up most of the screen, and interacting with the content is made easy by the engagement affordances overlaid on the video content itself. One can (1) create their own by pressing the + icon, (2) like by either pressing the heart icon or double-clicking on the main screen area, (3) comment by pressing the speech balloon icon, (4) share to others by using the arrow icon, (5) access one's own creation toolbar by swiping right, (6) access the account of the post they are currently viewing by swiping left, or (7) switch between content by swiping up or down. On other platforms like YouTube or Facebook, a user can actively choose from a menu of content first before they engage more; on TikTok, users become more of a passive consumer first as the platform feeds them a never ending stream of content, and the ease of engaging simplifies interaction processes. This makes a paradox of being a passive content consumer while simultaneously allowing users to be active users in the app to engage with content, curate content, and engage with other users. The architecture of the platform through the FYP makes users passive content consumers as users do not have to actively search for content but on the other hand, the mimesis of new trends and new effects makes users active in participation by enticing them to join and create content (see Zulli & Zulli, 2020).

To further analyze the relationship between TikTok's affordances and user behaviors, we look at three key affordances: (1) content creation, (2) content engagement, and (3) user experience.

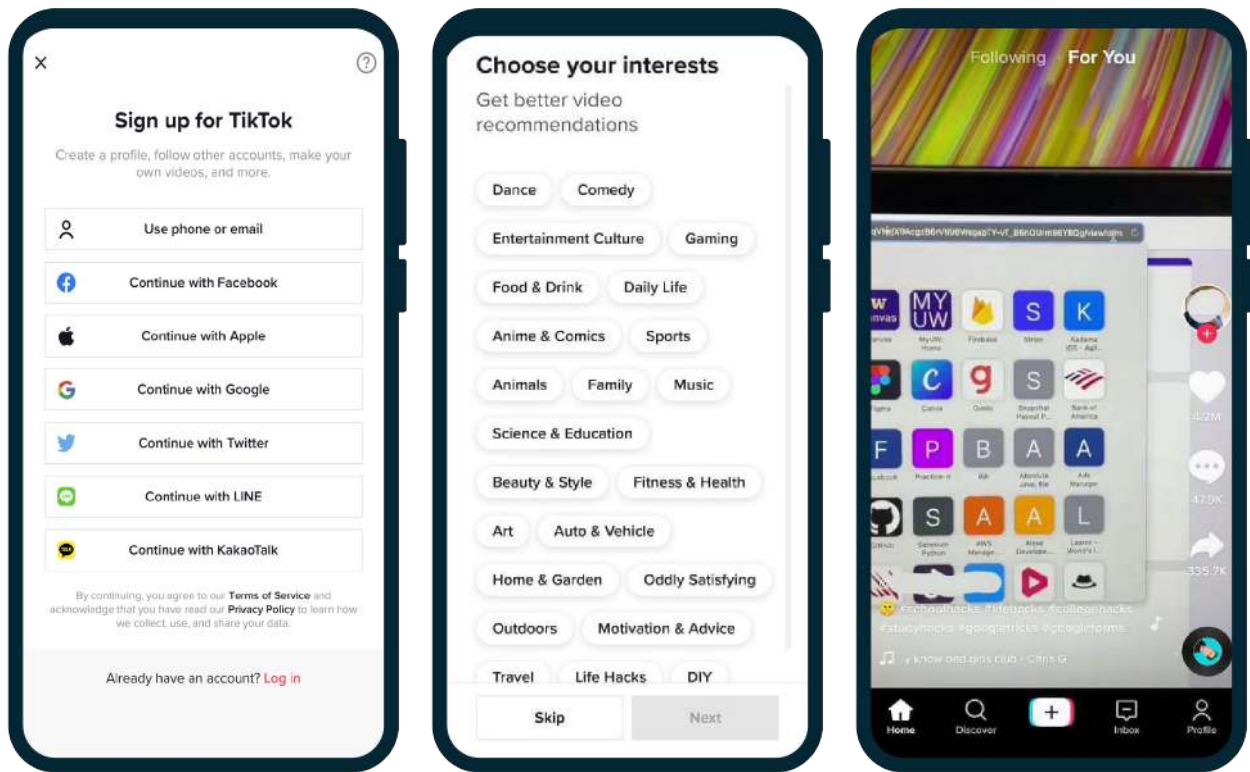


Figure 2. User interface of TikTok

3.1.1. Content Creation

TikTok makes content creation more appealing by allowing the average user access to video production features not commonly present in other platforms. Users can include audio - whether songs or soundbites - in their own content, create textual overlays on the video, add other visual aids like polls, stickers, and emojis, and even directly engage with or reply to other's posts with one's own post using the stitch function. This makes content creation easier and more entertaining, thus encouraging users to be more than lurkers.

In addition, the platform rewards virality as much as, if not more than, originality, as users can gain views and engagements by simply doing their own version of a trendy post, such as particular dance challenges or particular pranks. Abidin (2021, p. 79) argued that TikTok's affordances shifted the nature of virality and fame from persona-based fame to post-based virality, since TikTok's algorithm is different from other platforms like YouTube and Instagram where there is a "coherent persona or online identity." With this, TikTok users, aspiring influencers, and established influencers are all subjected to the volatility of the algorithm and work to game this situation by either attempting to set their own trends or bandwagoning on existing ones. This means they are subjected to algorithmic

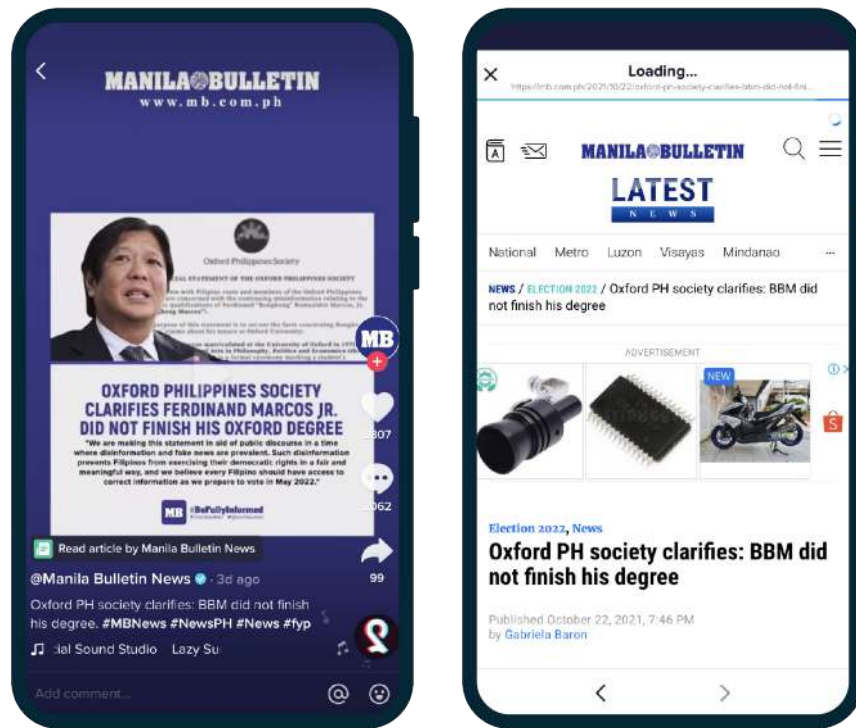


Figure 3. Video from the broadsheet Manila Bulletin (left) with a link to the article (right)

pressures and end up trying new trends, using trending filters and sounds, and even adopting popular video formats (e.g. particular transition effects that are trendy at any given point in time) since all of these feed into other users' FYPs. Abidin (2021) also argued that hashtags, sounds and visual filters are arranged into a stream according to their engagement, thus making videos more traceable and this is helpful in getting more engagements.

Our interview and survey data support these claims. In our survey, participants always use sounds (73%), hashtags (42%), and filters (25%) in creating content on TikTok. Influencers seem to consider trends and try to forecast how to approach their content.

Trends are what TikTok wants. I can't do that because I want something I can call my own. But again that is not for TikTok. You have to go with the flow with what the trending is. Use the trending music. Whatever is trending, you have to use it. Social media changes so I ride with the trends now.

In addition, cross-posting and cross-referencing other media content is also encouraged. We observed posts where cross-linking, geotagging, and live link sharing were used to boost audience reach and user engagement. Figure 3 shows the new features for users to link articles to their videos.

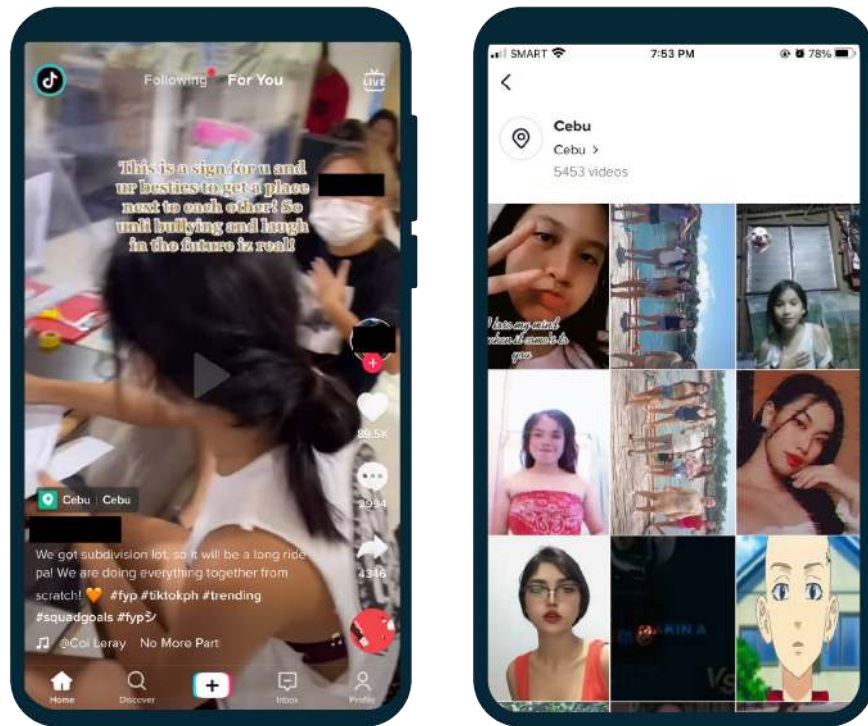


Figure 4. Geotagging feature as a new affordance in TikTok

This is particularly helpful for news media which either link their Tiktok post to their actual news articles on their website similar to what they are doing in other platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. It is also noteworthy that these news agencies also follow the trendsetting features of TikTok, like the use of specific trendy hashtags and sounds, to widen audience reach and have their content appear on users' FYPs.

We also observed that users can now tag locations to their videos, as seen in Figure 4. Once clicked, it shows all videos tagged on that location. This feature further urges users to follow trends by allowing them to display their activities in locations considered to be trendy at present. This also makes searching for videos easier not just by hashtags or Search Engine Optimization (SEO) terms but also by searching for the location.

We also observed links to live events from a local band inviting viewers to their upcoming live event for that day. The link shows a pop-up of other information for that live event. This makes live events easier to navigate aside from looking at the live video tab above the interface of the FYP. It provides a notice of users' upcoming live events so their followers can anticipate future content.

The app now affords users to make content creation easier especially in the context of analytics through its Creator Tools menu. This analytics feature is important for content creators to monitor their

engagement without the need to engage with third party social media analytics tools. The analytics menu provides the users with data on the overall engagement rates, analytics for content, analytics on followers, as well as analytics for live videos, which is an important tool for remuneration through the use of gifts and stickers which users can exchange for money. Our influencer⁴ respondents mentioned that engagement is important to negotiate the pay from brands when making sponsored content.

3.1.2. Content Engagement

The platform curates FYP feeds by catering to one's interests and activities. When a new user opens an account, they are asked to identify categories which might fit their interests and the algorithm then relies on this preliminary set of interests for immediate recommendations. However, the algorithm also includes content which it thinks the average user likes, even if it does not readily reflect users' pre-identified interests. This is again different from other platforms, where watching one video immediately configures the recommendations to include other videos from the video's publisher along with other similarly-tagged content. Thus, there is an element of randomness in the content you are allowed to engage with from the beginning. This random algorithm somewhat narrows down as you continue engaging with particular kinds of content. In TikTok, watching a certain kind of video format, visiting a certain user's profile, or watching all the videos of the user, does not immediately dramatically alter the algorithm's recommendations, but liking, commenting, or following particular users does. However, the volatility of the algorithm prevents your feed from being a purely closed information bubble. Continuously engaging certain kinds of content or certain accounts exclusively also does not make the FYP immune to random videos recommended by the platform. What this means is that for content consumers, the algorithm is less intrusive and aggressive than other platforms, thus making the platform different from the stereotypical digital "rabbit hole" (Woolley & Sharif, 2021).

However, the immediate presence of content also means that the user is forced to interact with and consume content upon logging in, exposing them to potentially-endless scrolling. For content creators, this means virality is more volatile than usual. Since the algorithm still recommends videos from outside the audience's interests, videos can be chanced upon and become popular. Similarly, videos can be easily buried beneath a plethora of other unrelated content. Thus sustaining a following entails more effort into riding and gaming the recommendation system.

4 In this report, we use Crystal Abidin's (2018) operationalization of *influencers* as anyone who gains fame on the internet.

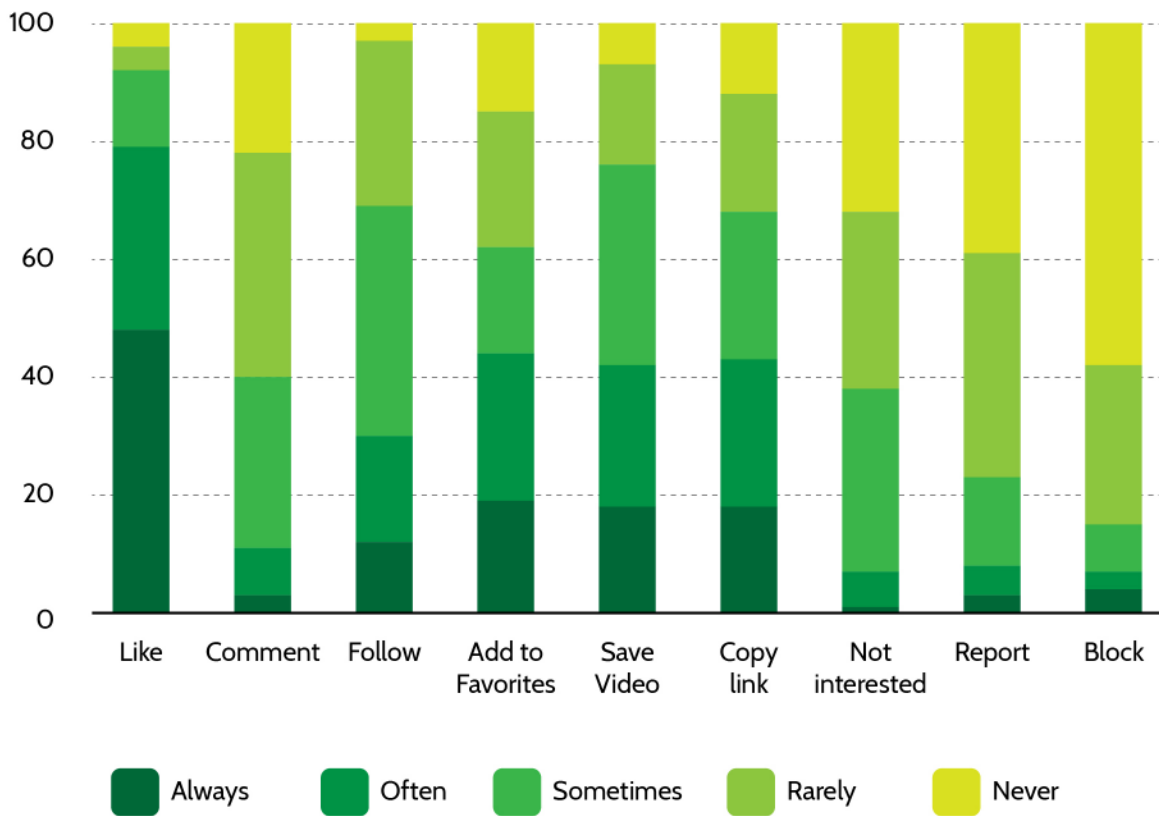


Figure 5. Percentage of use of TikTok features in interacting with content. (Source: Online survey)

To further understand how users engage with content in the platform, we asked our survey respondents how frequently some of the main features in interacting with content are used (see Figure 5). Most of the respondents use the “like” (47%), “add to favorites” (19%), and “save video” (16%) features more frequently than others. We also asked about features used in creating content for those that post content on the app. Most of the respondents always use the sound feature (75%), hashtag (43%), and filter (26%) - the same features we most commonly observed during our digital ethnography. TikTok users also crosspost or share TikTok videos on other platforms, whether it is in the form of a link, a screenshot, or actual videos from the app (80%). Our respondents mainly crosspost on Messenger (35%), Instagram (29%), Facebook (13%), and Twitter (13%).

TikTok also encourages user-user interactions, as affordances allowing users to respond to videos, either by commenting, liking and sharing, and even reporting and blocking (Figure 6), are abundant and commonly known. One of the new features we observed included replying with video from

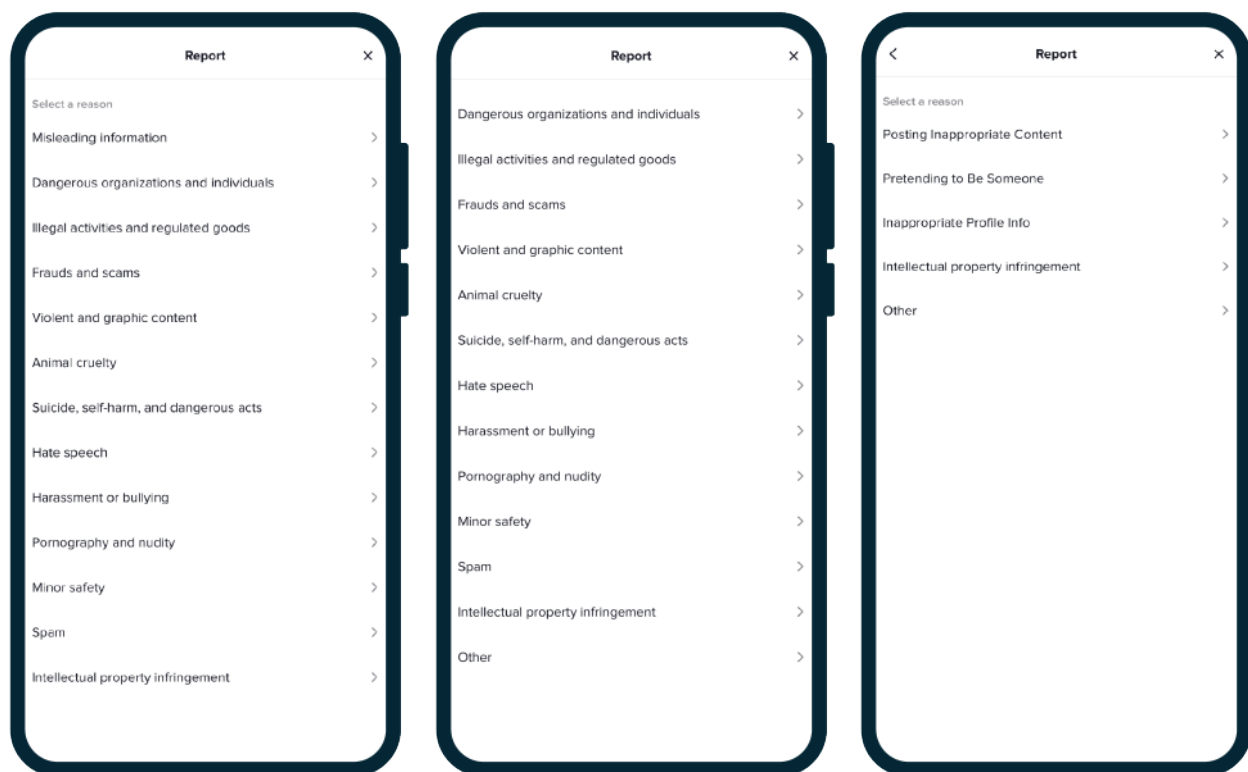


Figure 6. Options for reporting content/account on TikTok

other user's comments whereas previously only the users can reply to the comments using a video. Now, anyone can reply to any comment using a video. This fosters more open and community-like interactions online, allowing users to affirm, contest, or simply express their ambivalence about any content or any comments on any content. Aside from interacting with other users and their content, TikTok also affords its users to report and block content and even report accounts.

To provide users the means to intentionally search for particular content, TikTok provides a Discover tab. This shows current trending filters, trending challenges, trending hashtags, and trending sounds so users can follow through and create their own versions (see Figure 6). But what makes this tab more interesting are the suggested search terms it provides to its users upon clicking the search bar on the Discover tab. Users can already see the top suggested search term on the search bar and in the figure below, it shows that the top search term is "JenDen are engaged!" which refers to the news that Filipino celebrities Jennilyn Mercado and Dennis Trilo are now engaged (see Figure 7). These suggested searches and lists of trendings increase the discoverability of content in the app (McKelvy & Hunt, 2019).

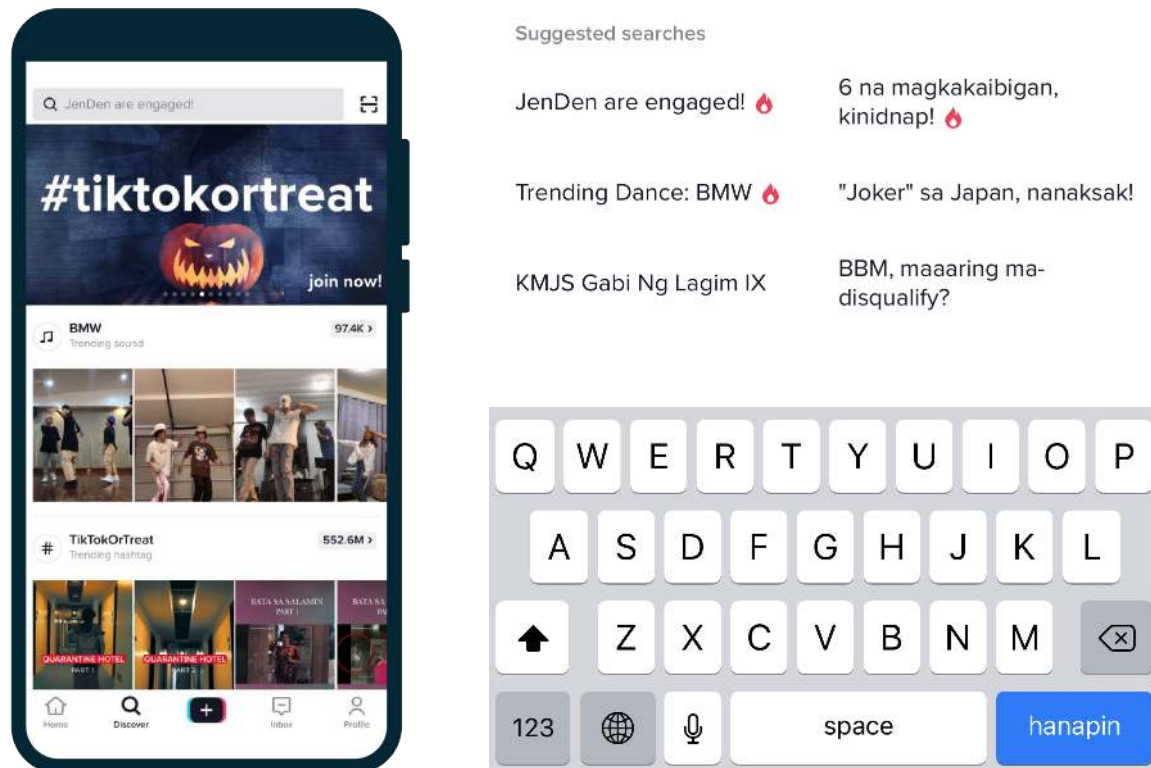


Figure 7. The Discover tab on TikTok (left) and the suggested searches showing the hot trending search terms related to the fire emoji (right)

Box Text 1. Community Guidelines on TikTok

TikTok's community guidelines classify violations into 10 categories: violent extremism; hateful behavior; illegal activities and regulated goods; violent and graphic content; suicide, self-harm, and dangerous acts; harassment and bullying; adult nudity and sexual activities; minor safety; integrity and authenticity; and platform security. According to their community guidelines, posts are already screened with a mix of technology and human moderation before any content is reported. Any published content in violation

of any of these guidelines are taken down, and users are notified and given the chance to appeal this decision. Repeat offenders may either be suspended or banned, and TikTok claims that activities inside and outside the platforms are considered in these decisions. The same outcomes apply to users who create content that violate copyright policies.

TikTok's community guidelines also acknowledge what users refer to as shadow banning, or the

reduced discoverability or distribution to For You feeds of any content thought of as “spam, videos under review, or videos that could be considered upsetting or depict things that may be shocking to a general audience.” At the same time, TikTok recognizes that some potentially offensive content are necessary if they can be seen as “educational, documentary, scientific, or artistic content, satirical content, content in fictional settings, counterspeech, and content in the public interest that is newsworthy or otherwise enables individual expression on topics of social importance.” As such, these kinds of content are granted exceptions from takedowns.

As TikTok allows room for adjustments and developments, their community guidelines are continuously updated. However, as with other digital platforms, these guidelines are not able to perfectly prevent all misinformation and disinformation. This is equally true in the Philippines. As of this writing, TikTok has partnered with French news outlet Agence France-Presse to combat misinformation on the platform in several countries, including the Philippines (Agence France-Presse, 2020). TikTok Philippines has also partnered with the Philippine Commission on Elections (COMELEC) in October 2021 to help promote voter registration and publicize credible electoral information (Embudo, 2021). However, these efforts only barely scrape the minimal effort necessary to ensure quality information.

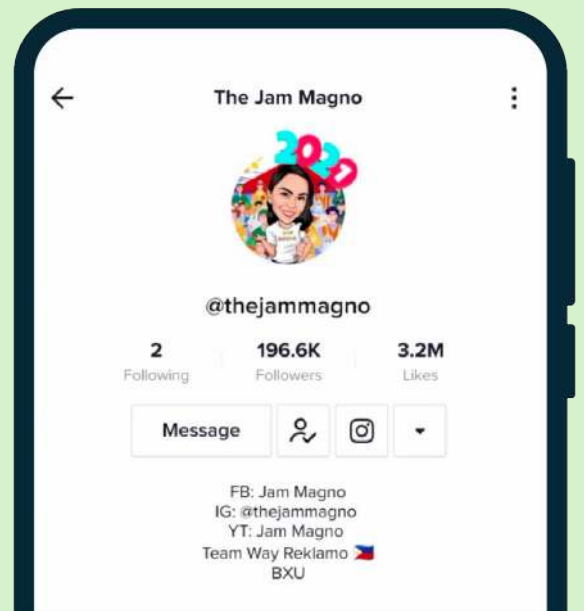


Figure 8. Screenshot of the now-defunct TikTok account of Jam Magno. Magno’s account was subject to multiple takedowns due to multiple violations of the community guidelines (Biong, 2021). Screenshot from Bacayo Entertainment (2021).

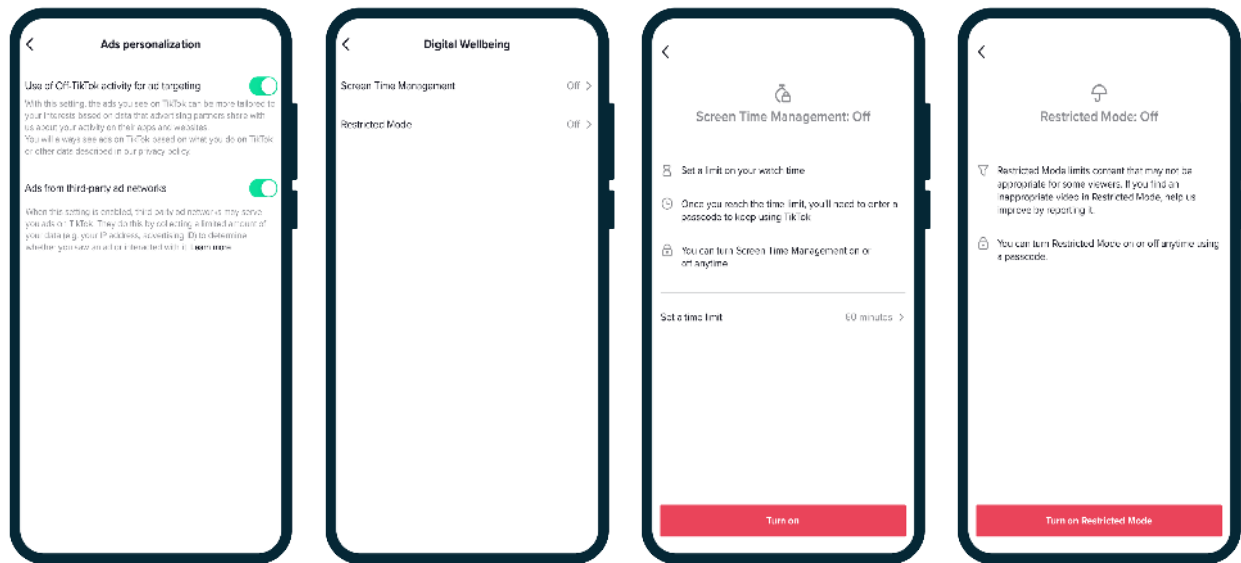


Figure 9. Ads personalization and digital wellbeing options on TikTok

3.1.3. User Experiences

Lastly, TikTok affords users to “personalize” their app usage. We highlight two features: ads personalization and digital wellbeing features (see Figure 9). The ads personalization has two items: the first allows TikTok to use off-TikTok activity to tailor the ads while the second one allows third party ads. This provides users some means of control to edit the already volatile algorithm of the platform.

The second feature is digital wellbeing, which enables users to manage their screen time and restrict content. For the first option, users can put a time limit of their usage on TikTok (from 40 minutes up to 120 minutes); once the limit is reached they will need to enter a passcode to keep using TikTok. This interesting feature has the potential to address doom scrolling (i.e., endless scrolling on the app) which is essentially what the app is doing--constantly feeding content to its users. On the other hand, the restriction mode limits content that may not be suitable to all audiences. Interestingly, TikTok already does this even if users do not click on the restriction option as some videos we see on our FYPs or on the profile pages of some users have a sensitive video warning from the app that asks the users to either “Skip video” or “Watch anyway.”

In this section, we presented an overview of TikTok’s affordances using our app walkthroughs, digital ethnography, and survey. Specifically, we highlighted three main strands of affordances: content creation, content engagement, and user experiences. These features shape user behavior the most, urging trends to crystallize and encouraging users to bandwagon while at the same time providing

them means to control their experience with TikTok's relatively more unpredictable algorithm. We believe that there will be new developments in the coming days as from what we have observed in TikTok is similar to what its sister app Douyin has done (Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2021).

3.2. User Demographics

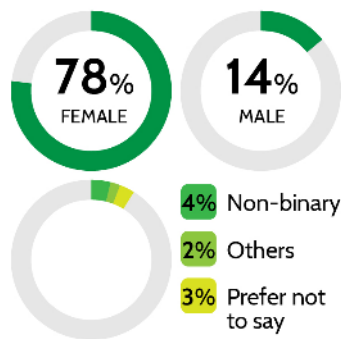
Here we discuss the profiles of our survey respondents, Metro Manila-based TikTok users active in the past 30 days. Since our respondents were gathered through convenience sampling, we do not claim that they are representative of the average Filipino TikTok user. However, our stratification of Metro Manila respondents allowed us to somewhat provide a rough sketch of the average Metro Manila user, and provides us a glimpse of Metro Manila-based TikTok users and their experiences on the app in general.

Our survey respondents had more females (85%) than males (15%) in terms of sex at birth. Almost all of them (91%) connect to the internet via broadband while 54% of them connect via mobile data. There were more female respondents (78%) in terms of gender, more respondents from the 18-24 years old age group (74%), more university diploma holders (45%), either studying or not seeking employment (53%), and belonging to the lower middle-income class (19%). Majority of them use social media (94%), search engines like Google (80%), news websites and apps (72%), conversations with friends and colleagues (56%), mobile phones and SMS (51%), and television (43%), on a daily basis to get information. Majority of our respondents use the app daily (77%), average 1-2 hours (53%) of daily app use, and are most active in the evenings (50%). The rest of the demographic data are shown in the tables below:

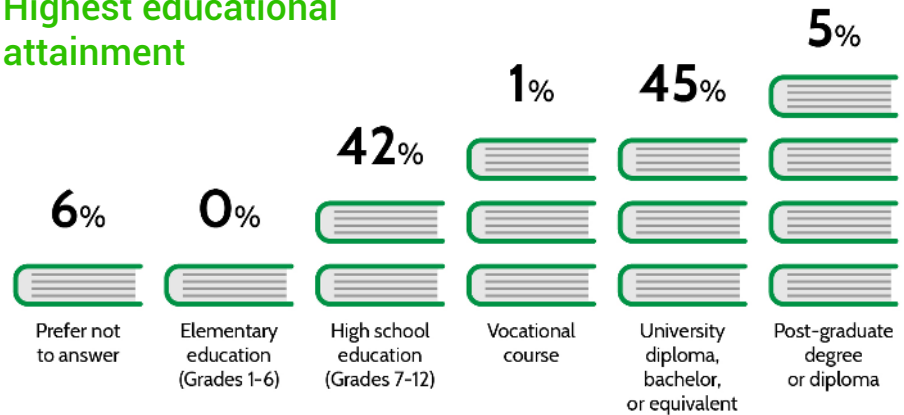
We asked respondents their reasons for using social media. Most of our respondents report "Fill up spare time and general browsing" (88%) as the main reason for social media use, followed by a tie between "Stay in touch with friends and family", "Keep up to date with news and current events", "Look up information (on how to do things, places to travel, products/brands, etc.)", and "Watch videos, tv shows, and movies", all at 85%. Meanwhile, they report that the reasons for using TikTok is mostly to "Fill up spare time and general browsing" (86%), followed by "Watch videos, tv shows, and movies" (64%), "Look up information (on how to do things, places to travel, products/brands, etc.)" (61%), "Education and study-related activities" (35%), and "Keep up to date with news and current events" (27%). Clearly, users use TikTok more for leisure than communication or research.

Focusing on TikTok, our respondents are a mix of casual users (62%) and those that post content (38%) are a combination of both for personal entertainment (92% of those that post content) and for personal income (8% of those that post content).

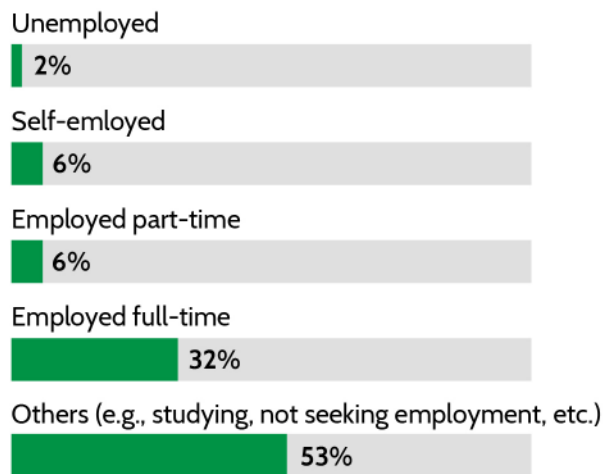
Gender



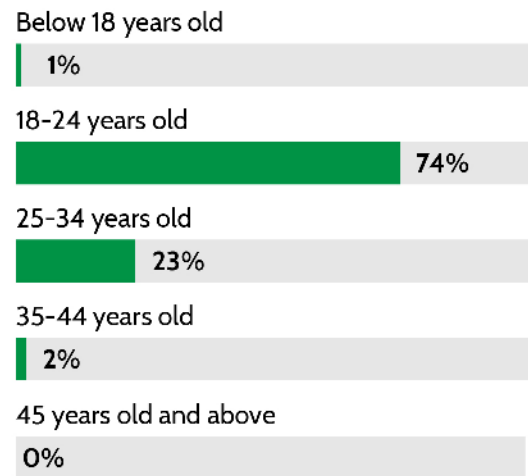
Highest educational attainment



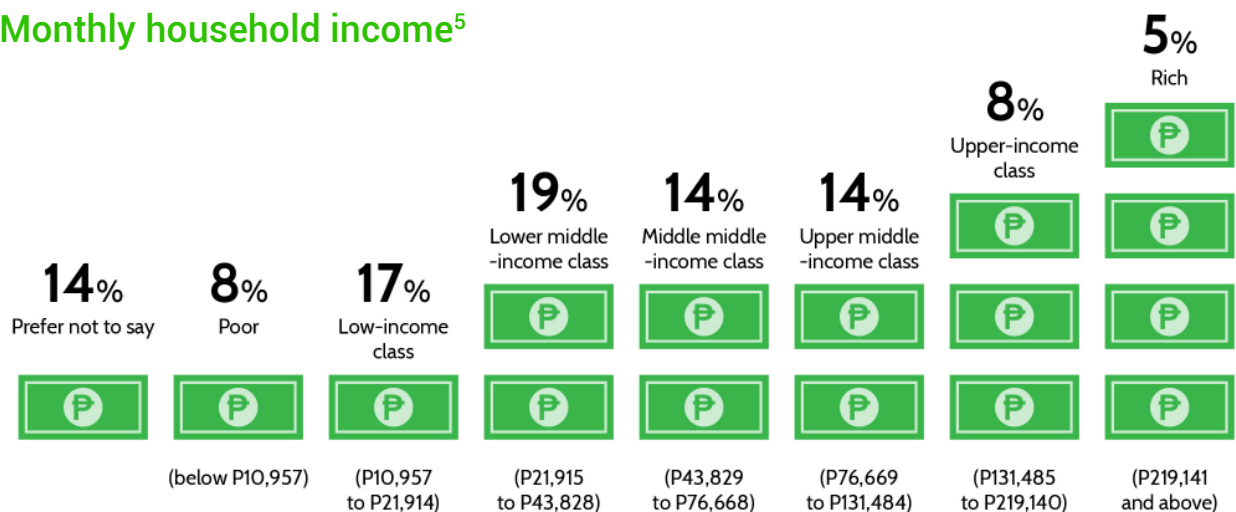
Employment status in the last three months



Age



Monthly household income⁵



5 We based the categories for socioeconomic status from Albert, Santos, and Vizmanos (2018).

Box Text 2. Political information on TikTok

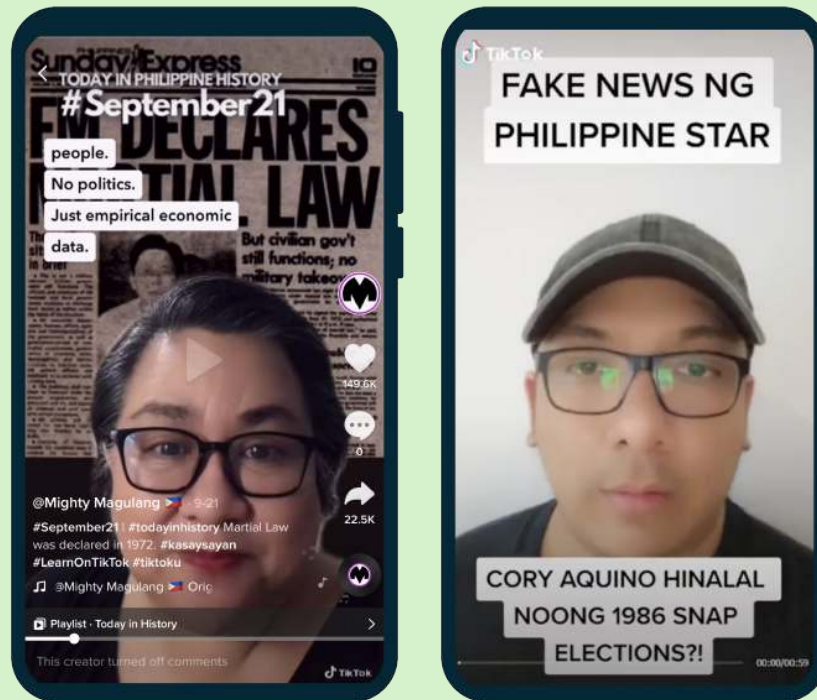


Figure 10. Sample videos on Philippine politics and elections

Information on Philippine politics and elections are available on TikTok and a cursory search of political keywords on the Discover page show content like the top liked content, top used hashtag, among others.

For politics and elections, we found both informative and misinformative content. The first image shows a viral video from Mona Mano Veluz, more known as Mighty Magulang, an account dedicated to discussing historical trivia and issues. This viral video, which was also featured in Rappler, was about the macroeconomic effects of the Martial Law in the lives of Filipinos (Barreiro, 2021). On the other hand, the second image shows a video from YouTuber Coach Jarett, a partisan content creator whose TikTok account is no longer available as of time of writing. We were able to take screenshots and recordings from our walkthroughs. In this video (shown right), he argued that the broadsheet Philippine Star posted misinformation in their post showing Cory Aquino winning the 1986 Snap Elections. This misinformation that Marcos won the snap elections has already been debunked and that Aquino's victory is constitutional (see Vera Files, 2021; Bueza, 2015).

3.3. Information Supply

To examine the information ecosystem of the platform, we look at the information present in the platform. In our survey, the majority of the respondents encountered content on their FYPs from strangers with viral content (87%), influencers or content creators (84%), and professionals (doctors, lawyers, scientists, etc., 70%). Only 38% received content from reliable media personalities and organizations such as journalists, newscasters, news anchors, among others. This complements our data on users' purpose for TikTok use, since leisure content comes more from influencers or content creators more than professionals or journalists and news outlets. While the platform has spaces for verified information and reliable sources, the platform is still generally used for entertainment. This is exploited by disinformative actors who produce content which are packaged in an entertaining manner.

Over the course of two months of data gathering, we coded 259 videos pertaining to health and elections. We monitored specific prominent political hashtags like #bbm, #dds, #duterte, and #covid19; sought videos through the Discover tab with the keywords “leni”, “marcos”, “duterte”, “covid”, “suob”⁶, among others; and coded videos that appeared in our FYPs as our accounts' algorithms

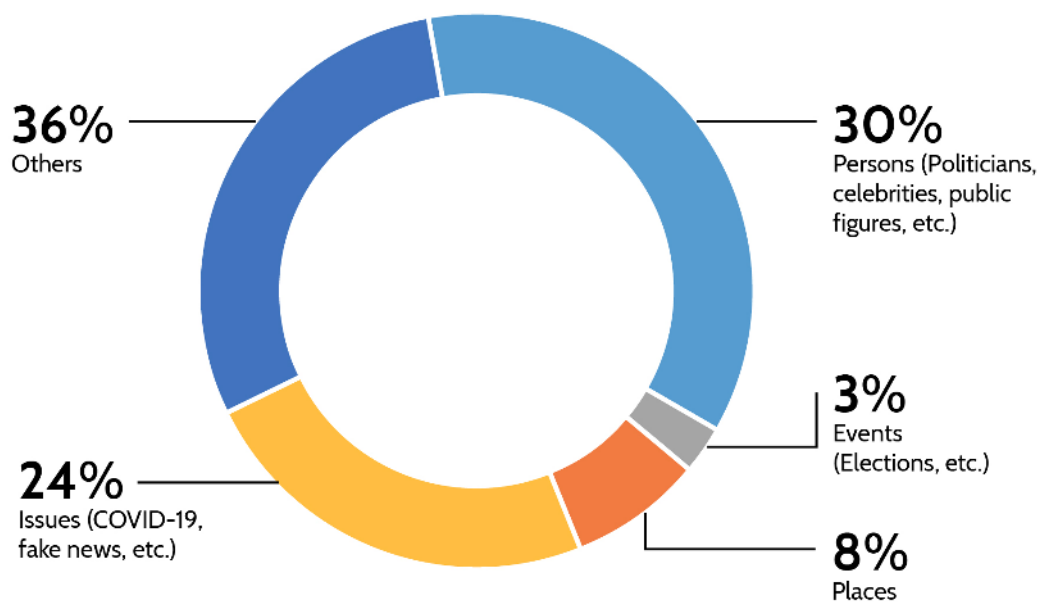


Figure 11. Categories of hashtags (259 TikTok videos)

6 Also known as *tuob* or inhaling steam, falsely considered as a home remedy for COVID-19 (Salterio, 2020).

adjusted to include such content with our activity. We chose these keywords to observe what kinds of content are related to these keywords. We wanted to see videos pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines and issues pertaining to vaccines, as well as videos pertaining to these selected politicians. We posit that the increase in election posts or posts pertaining to prominent politicians, especially presidential aspirants, was due to the filing of the certificates of candidacy (COCs) last October 1-8, 2021 (Rappler, 2021).

Table 2. Categories and examples from coded hashtags

Category	General Examples	Specific Examples	Hashtags
Persons	Public figures, politicians, medical practitioners	Sara Duterte-Carpio, Bongbong Marcos, Diehard Duterte Supporters, Dr. Kilimanguru, Dr. Krizzle Luna	#duterte; #dutertelangmalakas👊; #Marcos; #bbm; #learnfromkrizzy
Issues	Public issues in the Philippines	COVID-19 pandemic	#COVID19; #COVID; #vaccine
Places ⁷	Locations	Philippines	#tiktokph; #tiktokphilippines; #philippines
Events	Elections, campaigns	Philippine 2022 national elections; TikTok's Educational campaign	#Halalan2022; #Election2022; #edusgottalent2021 ⁸
Others	Miscellaneous	Hashtags pertaining to the For You Page	#fyp; #fyp👉; #foryoupage; #foryou

7 These hashtags can be referred to hashtags used prior to the creation of the geotagging feature. Same with the geotagging, once a hashtag has been clicked, it will show all the videos that used the same hashtag.

8 We observed #edusgottalent2021 which refers to videos for the anniversary of TikTok Philippines' educational campaign that went from July 11 to August 29, 2021 and videos using this specific hashtag had a total of 378.4M views on TikTok (see Inquirer, 2021).

Box Text 3. Health information on TikTok

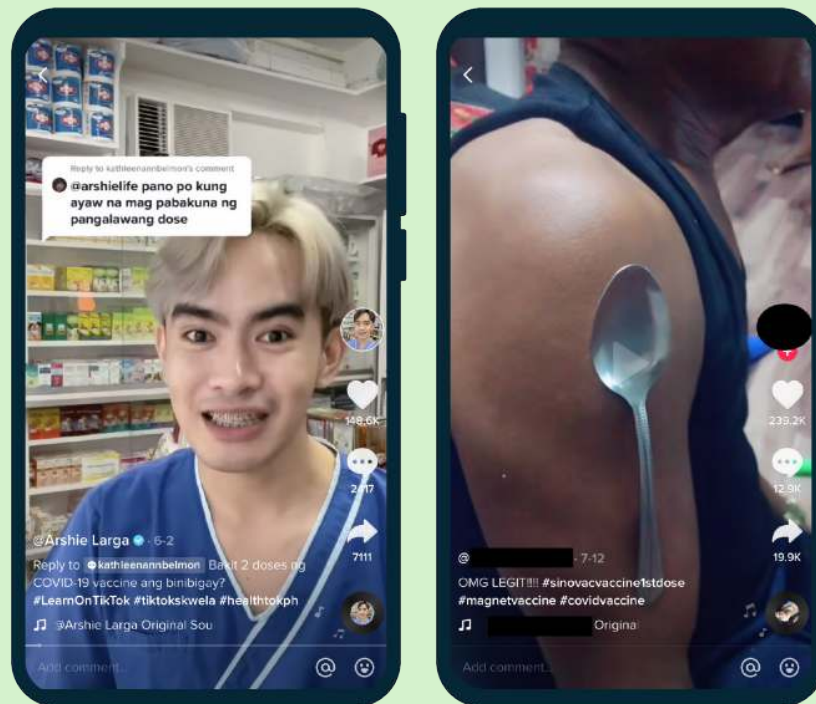


Figure 12. Sample videos on health

Medical practitioners post informative content on the platform. Aside from content on their specializations, these medical practitioners also post COVID-19 related videos. In the image above, real-life pharmacist and influencer Arshie Larga, a mega influencer on TikTok with around 2.2M followers and is known for his explanations on medicine and health and his stories as a pharmacist in their shop - answered a comment asking why a second dose of a vaccine is needed and he cited sources supporting the claims for a 2nd dose. This video has over 2 million views, 148.6 thousand likes, 2.4 thousand comments, and 7.1 thousand shares.

We encountered videos claiming that the COVID-19 vaccine causes one's arm to be magnetic, and showing different users sticking metallic objects on their arms. The example in the left image has over 9M views, 239k likes, 12.5k comments, and over 19.9k shares and it shows that the spoon stuck to his grandfather's arm after getting the first dose of the Sinovac vaccine. This post received mixed comments from users who agree, users who oppose, and users who simply made fun of the content.

Box Text 4. Gibo Teodoro's sponsored video

Around late September to early October 2021, sponsored videos of Gilbert “Gibo” Teodoro Jr. were shown in our For You Pages. This is particularly interesting because Teodoro filed his certificate of candidacy (COC) for senator last October 7, 2021 (Cupin, 2021) and earlier, he was reportedly posting hints and asking his followers on social media which post should he run for (Lalu, 2021). On the screenshot above, a tag showing that the video is a sponsored one can be seen just above the sound portion. Teodoro Jr.’s first video was September 8, 2021 and his top viewed post was the sponsored video posted on September 25, 2021 that we saw in our FYPs with more than 2M views, 14.6k likes, 741 comments, and 180 shares. In this sponsored video, Gibo Teodoro discusses why the national and local elections are separate. TikTok allows users to create an ad manager account in creating ads (TikTok, 2021) and according to the updated Global Digital report October edition, over 825 million users aged 18 and above can be reached by TikTok ads and TikTok offers different types of ads including Spark ads that is native to TikTok (Newberry, 2021). While Gibo Teodoro Jr. is the only politician we observed who has a sponsored video on the platform, it is also noteworthy that some TikTok influencers have posted announcements that they are running for positions like Vilma Caluag, who is running for Mayor of San Fernando, Pampanga, and Rosmar Tan, who is running for councilor in Manila City. This case shows how social media continues to change the game in Philippine politics as politicians expand their reach online (Cabbuag & Fallorina, 2019; Buenaobra, 2016).



Figure 13. A screenshot of Gibo Teodoro's sponsored video



Figure 14. Videos in support of presidential candidates Leni Robredo (left) and Bongbong Marcos (right)

We also coded 438 out of 1190 hashtags coded from these videos and categorized them as follows: persons (30%), issues (24%), places (8%), events (3%), and others (36%) (see Figure 11 and Table 2). Mainly, we observed hashtags referring to the For You Page or FYP (*#fyp*, *#fyp*, *#foryoupage*, *#foryou*) and *#fyp* and *#foryou* are one of the most used hashtags on TikTok (McLachlan, 2021). These indicate that the users wanted their content to appear on the average person's For You Page (FYP). By October 2021, we observed an increase of TikTok live videos either supporting Robredo and Bongbong Marcos and Sara Duterte (see Figure 14). This is particularly interesting as these live videos showed how users were using the technological affordances of TikTok to spread their content and messages to a wider audience (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). This highlights organic support to these politicians aiming for the presidential election as they are showing their faces to these live videos. It is difficult to establish whether accounts are bots, but the fact that they are open with showing their faces on live videos and interact normally imply organic support.

Lastly, we highlight TikTok's corrective potential for disinformation. TikTok Philippines collaborated with the Department of Science and Technology - Philippine Council for Industry, Energy, and Emerging Technology Research and Development (DOST-PCIEERD) to publicize Filipino scientists and their work, and promote popular science communication in general. According to DOST-

Box Text 5. Live streaming on TikTok

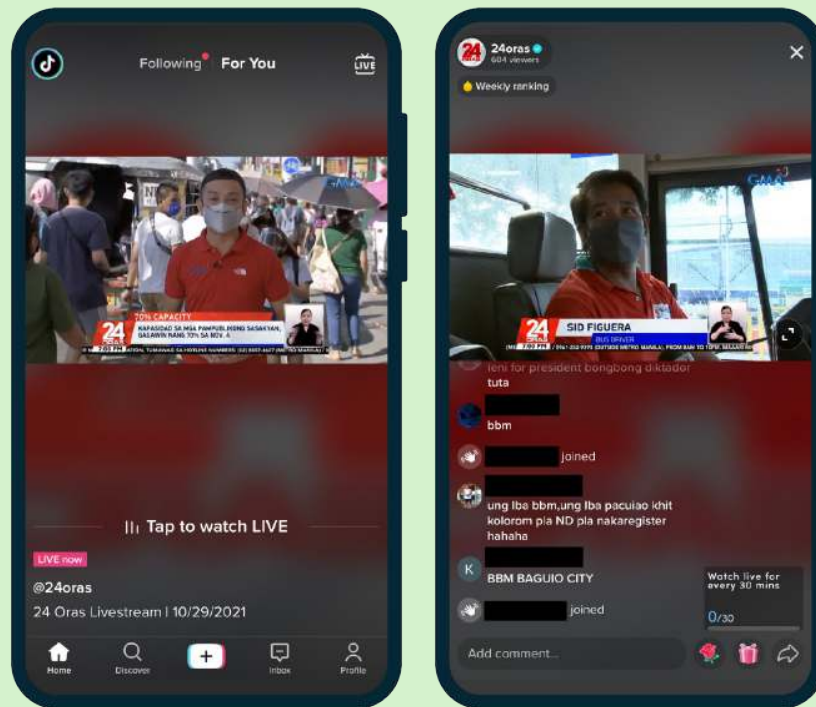


Figure 15. Sample live videos from 24 Oras

Aside from the live videos from Leni supporters and BBM supporters, the team observed that TikTok is now being used by news media to stream a live telecast of their show. Particularly, we observed GMA News' evening news program 24 Oras (24 hours) streaming their episode on TikTok (see right). This feature now makes news more accessible as computers or televisions can now be replaced by mobile phones in accessing information from both traditional and online sources. Users are also able to comment in real time on the live videos of accounts. TikTok aside, 24 Oras also has livestreams on YouTube and Facebook, making them widespread even more, not just on traditional television. In this particular post, we see demeaning and insulting comments that mirror polarized content engagement previously observed on other platforms like Facebook. We observed users commenting "BBM + location" while other comments are snide remarks to Robredo as in the case of "Leni Lugaw" which was used by trolls to mock Robredo when images of her team selling rice porridge went viral (see Cepeda, 2018).

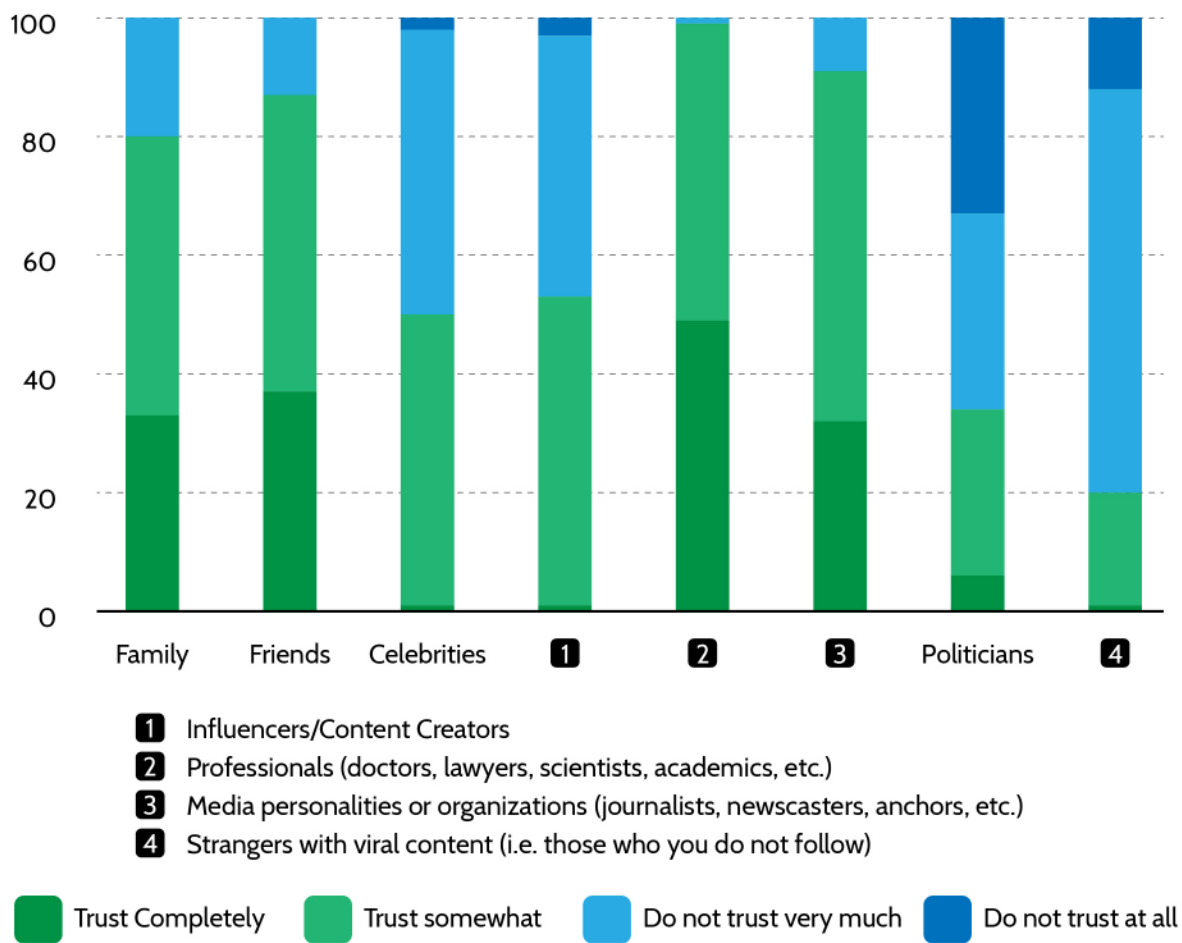


Figure 16. Level of trust on specific groups on TikTok. (Source: online survey)

PCIEERD, TikTok Philippines approached them to create an account for Pinoy Science in order to have a science communication program on the platform. The agreement was that they will create content and TikTok will be boosting their content and TikTok also verified their account. DOST-PCIEERD also conducted a contest called #PinoyInnovator which invites people to showcase their homemade innovations. DOST-PCIEERD mentioned they observed traction as their views increased but they do not know the extent of these traction. What is important is that they were given a platform to share the initiatives of their office on TikTok. Overall, this partnership is interesting because it shows that, similar to the educational campaign previously mentioned, TikTok has a goal of spreading informative content to its users. We also observed through our digital ethnography live videos of Commission of Election (COMELEC) Spokesperson James Jimenez, who is also active in other social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, to popularize election information like voter registration information.

3.4. Information Demand

In this section, we look at the demands for information on TikTok. Our survey data show that the most preferred types of content are entertainment (84%), food (73%), comedy (72%), daily life (59%), and DIY and life hacks (57%). Interestingly, 46% answered the Learning content, indicating platform content space dedicated to educational and informative content. However, this does not mean that the average user finds TikTok completely reliable. Our interview respondents have mixed observations when it comes to information and content shown in their FYPs. Majority of the respondents mentioned that majority of the videos in their FYPs are entertainment videos where videos of dancing, singing, humorous skits, and lifestyle vlogs. One content creator narrated about her experience in finding a niche:

I saw that there were diverse talents and styles on TikTok. I came across Coach Lyqa Marilla, an education content creator. I thought to myself, “There seems to be a lot of interest in educational content?” Wow, this is really interesting. And at the time, I was struggling in trying to find my niche. And I was like, “Oh, since this is something of interest to them, like what Teacher Lyqa is doing, maybe I can contribute to the Tiktok community with the health side of things.”

While the majority of our respondents had some experience seeing informative content on their FYPs, some of our respondents rarely see informative content. Interestingly, some of them prefer to not see any informative content on their FYPs as they prefer to see only entertaining content. One respondent mentioned that they do not want to see any “political” content as it affects their mental health and the reason they use TikTok is to avoid political posts from other platforms such as Facebook and Twitter:

Actually it's really for the sole purpose of entertainment, it's also a way to focus on the light side for my mental health. There's a lot of content that's about comedic stuff, paradise and it's just a way to lighten up your day just to have a laugh, to forget about work and with the current situation. I think it's also a big help that even if you do not talk with your friends, if you just want to laugh for a second or a minute, TikTok has a lot to offer.

This preference from the respondents can also be juxtaposed with the remarks from our influencer respondents who create informative content. They have to make their content not just informative and entertaining for the audience to like their content, but also condensed as adjusting to the former video length limit of the platform to make it palatable to regular users. One of our influencer-responses explained:

I will select the topics there. And then once I select the topics, I will review the entire script, especially if you're a professional, everything needs to be evidence-based and based on facts so as to not spread false or fake news. So you must review it first. And then, I conceptualize it, the terms and wording, the script, and how to deliver it without being condescending and complicated for the people.

Our survey data reflect the users' ambivalence towards the app as a verified information source instead of an entertainment source. We asked our respondents how much they trust specific groups on TikTok (see Figure 16). Among different TikTok groups, professionals, which include doctors, lawyers, scientists, academics, among others (49%), were the most trusted by the respondents, followed by friends (37%), and family (32%).

In this section, we presented the information ecosystem in TikTok, both the information supply and the information demand, through a combination of survey data, digital ethnography, and interviews with both regular users and influencer respondents. It is worth noting that information, both good or bad information, is available on the app and the platform itself actively engaged with informational content with their educational campaign and this provides a new angle for a platform seemingly used for entertainment and memes.

3.5. Disinformative Potential

For TikTok, we posit that disinformative actors are more organic since content creation is more personalized, less convoluted and filtered, and not anonymous because users are showing their real faces without any filters in their videos. This is also shown in the case of live videos observed expressing support to certain candidates and in the case of the comments section of the live stream of 24 Oras (see Box Text 5). If so, the disinformation we observed on the platform might be more organic than in other platforms.

We observed historical revisionism, COVID-19 misinformation, and anti-establishment narratives through our observations on videos related to health and elections. We observed that aside from manipulated photos and decontextualized soundbites and texts and even posting from accounts devoid of any personal information as in the case of Twitter, users who post misinformation also maximize TikTok's features (turning off their comments sections, turning off the options for duet and stitch, and even turning off the option to download the video) that disable public engagement and enable them to get away with their content. Thus, it makes correcting these contents difficult. Some opt to screen record and re-uploading just to post their correction. However, there are cases where people are publicly posting their faces while sharing misinformation and hate speech as in the case of YouTuber Sangkay Janjan TV, who is a verified mega influencer on YouTube with more

Table 3. Mis/Disinformation encountered on TikTok (percentage)

Statement	% of respondents who encountered the statement
The Philippines was the “richest country in Asia” during the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos.	33
ABS-CBN has not been paying its taxes properly.	24
Vice President Leni Robredo cheated in the 2016 national elections.	18
The late senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr. was a key organizer of the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army (CPP-NPA) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).	14
Hidilyn Diaz was part of a plot to oust President Rodrigo Duterte.	12
Covid-19 can be cured with tuob/suob or other home remedies.	26
Covid-19 was made by a lab in China.	19
Covid-19 can be treated with ivermectin.	19
Covid-19 vaccines make people magnetic.	19
Covid-19 vaccines are toxic.	17

than 700,000 followers. On his now-defunct TikTok account, he had around 300k followers. Upon writing this report,⁹ we found that he has a new account with around 600 followers. His content on TikTok includes the use of green screens, video clips, text, and even vlog type content.

In our survey, we asked our respondents about disinformation they encountered on their For You Pages, specifically on Philippine politics and on COVID-19. The frequency of observing misinformation related to Philippine politics on their FYPs are as follows: always (29%), often (31%), sometimes (27%), rarely (6%), and never (6%). The frequency of observing misinformation related to COVID-19 on their FYPs are as follows: always (15%), often (29%), sometimes (37%), rarely (15%), and never (4%). We also asked which of the following statements related to Philippine politics and to COVID-19 the respondents have encountered on TikTok. Table 3 shows the percentage of these statements.

⁹ October 31, 2021

Most of the respondents observed “The Philippines was the ‘richest country in Asia’ during the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos” (33%) for Philippine politics and “Covid-19 can be cured with tuob/suob or other home remedies” (26%) for COVID-19.

More often than not our respondents did encounter disinformation on the app. Among our predetermined disinformative topics, the most encountered was about the state of the Philippine economy under the Marcos regime, followed by home remedies for COVID. We also asked our respondents what actions they did to the disinformation they encountered on their FYPs. Forty-seven percent (47%) of the respondents fact check the encountered information, 29% report either the content or the account, 12% call out or comment on the video, 8% do nothing, and 5% block the account.

Aside from encountering disinformation on TikTok, we also asked our respondents for any potential incidence of them sharing misinformation on TikTok, with 28% stating they have shared information they originally thought was true but later realized was false or misleading. They learned mainly by encountering correct information outside of the platform (59%) and through other TikTok users correcting them through the platform’s affordances such as a comment, stitched video, duet, private message, among others (33%). This means that while there is mis/disinformative potential for TikTok, there is also corrective potential for the platform as users create corrections and broadcast it on the platform or delete the false information. After receiving correct information, around half of the participants (48%) who previously posted false or misleading information delete their previous posts. Others shared outside TikTok that they posted misinformation either publicly or privately (28%), some kept to themselves (20%), and few posted the correction either publicly or privately on TikTok (5%).

Our interviews showed comparable insights. The respondents talked about the videos they saw about COVID-19 vaccines like the so-called magnetic side effect of the vaccine. Respondents also mentioned old videos from social media personality Jam Magno whose TikTok account is now permanently banned since May 2021 due to multiple violations to the community guidelines of the platform (Gonzales, 2021; Biong, 2021). One respondent expressed their frustration because of the repeated violations of Magno:

Yes, I was irritated because I reported Jam Magno a few times already but she still has alternative accounts that showed up on my feed. I also reported those, and there are those from other creators with the same content showing on my feed.

Aside from the respondents’ experiences with the app, our own observations also yielded similar results. More than half of the videos we coded (54%) were politically charged, and maximized TikTok’s affordances to create catch videos. Among the videos we coded, 46% utilized the voice over

sound feature of TikTok, 28% used sound (such as songs) and voice over, 22% used soundtracks, and 2% used sound and AI voice. 67% of the videos coded did not use any platform-specific features (e.g. green screen) while 25% used the green screen feature. Around 7% used a filter and roughly 1% made use of TikTok's duet feature. The disinformative cases we highlighted earlier used these features as well.

3.6. Summary

In this chapter, we discussed TikTok as an understudied and emerging media platform in the Philippines and assessed the information ecosystem of the platform. We presented this by discussing the affordances, user demographics, and the information ecosystem by discussing the information supply and information demand and the disinformative potential of the platform. We have presented that there exists both good and bad actors and good and bad information exists inside the platform and dynamics continue to develop with how the platform continues to evolve with the new features it provides to users. We also showed what kinds of disinformation proliferated in the platform, and who disseminated them. While in general users do not completely trust the platform and disinformative actors seem to be more organic, the platform's affordances and partnerships do demonstrate the potential for corrective measures. That said, the presence of viral disinformation not only in the FYP feeds of willing users but also unwilling users does provide us enough reason to call caution to the platform and its users.



Chapter 4

WeChat as an Understudied and Emerging Media Platform in the Philippines

In 2014, a report by GlobalWebIndex showed that WeChat was the most widely used messaging application in the Asia-Pacific region (Mander, 2014). Since then, WeChat has evolved into a “mega app,” having added essential in-app features over the years such as Moments, WeChat Pay, Mini Programs, and others (Eggsist, n.d.) ahead of other social media applications since the app’s first launch in 2011. The addition of these features has cemented the dominance of the app worldwide, especially in China. In 2021, Tencent, the Chinese company that owns the platform, boasted having 1.24 billion monthly active users of WeChat, triple its user base in 2014. Reports indicate that WeChat holds 900 million WeChat Pay users in 2021, 3.2 million mini programs within the app as of 2020, and over 45 billion messages sent daily as of 2019, demonstrating the dominance of the platform on a global scale (Iqbal, 2021; CIW Team, 2021).

In the Philippines, WeChat was launched in 2013 as a messaging app to capitalize on the country as “the texting capital of the world” (Marketing Interactive, 2013). As part of their initiative in establishing

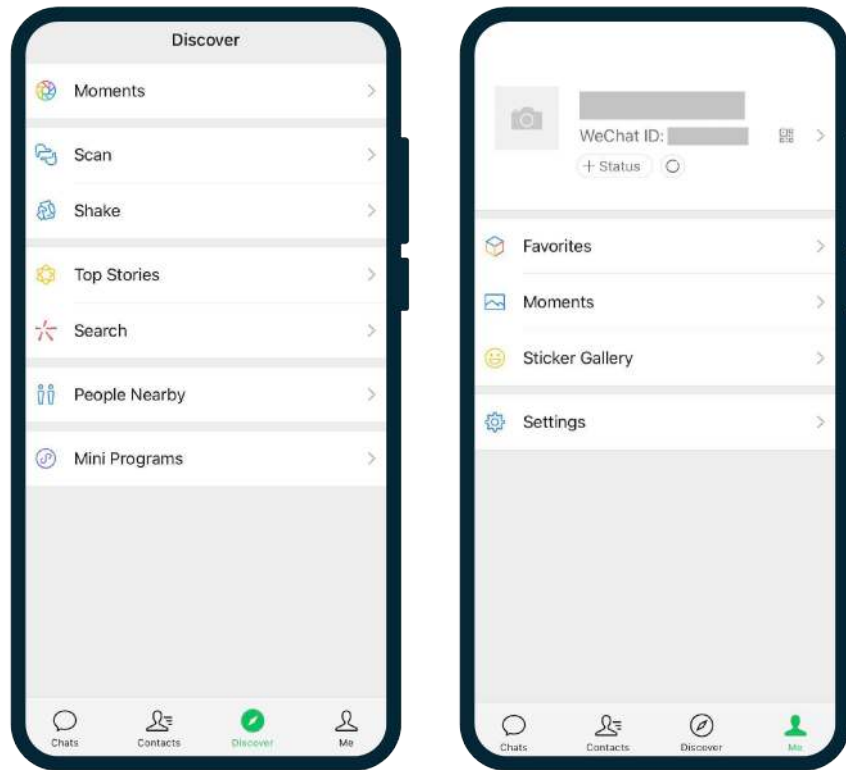


Figure 17. WeChat's user interface

their presence in the Philippines, social media accounts of WeChat Philippines in [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#) were set up in the same year (These accounts have remained inactive since 2014-2017, suggesting discontinued interest in the company's investment in the country). In 2017, Tencent expanded the services of the app by partnering with a local bank to offer WeChat Pay. It is difficult to describe the scale of users of the app in the Philippines as there is no existing data providing any detail on the user base of the app in the Philippines. Our report contributes to current gaps in the literature through an exploratory study of the affordances, user profiles, and information supply and demand within the platform.

4.1. Affordances

Compared to other social media applications that provide a limited set of utility, WeChat stands as one of the most useful social media applications by offering a wide range of services. The role of the app in the day-to-day lives of people in China cannot be overstated, as the app can be used to book rides, buy train or plane tickets, do online shopping, and even transact with government offices

(Sapra, 2019). In fact, the use of WeChat (i.e., Weixin) is synonymous with social life in China as it caters to one's personal and professional needs. The centrality of the app in China was narrated by one of our respondents who was able to observe how the app evolved over the years:

WeChat was amazing, at that time I remember in 2014, during our visit to rural China, we just really used WeChat for the class, group chat, when sending files... In 2016 it became even more useful because it had WeChat Pay. I was able to unlock the full functionality of WeChat... It's a super app with little apps inside the app. It really is super convenient. Like some people buy their groceries on WeChat... I mean, in China, even in the wet market, they use WeChat Pay. The QR code is on display and you just need to show the vendor that the transaction went through. It's completely cashless. I can go out of my house without cash, just my phone and internet connection.

In the Philippines, messaging/chats is the most widely used function of WeChat (all our survey respondents reported using messaging in the past six months). Similar to other messaging apps, WeChat allows text, hold-to-talk, group, and broadcast messaging as well as photo and video sharing and video conferencing. The app also converts audio messages into Chinese text and translates text. 63% of respondents reported having used the app to contact friends in China, 46% use the app to keep in touch with friends in the Philippines, while 30% for business partners/office mates/etc. based in China.

The Scan feature which allows users to scan QR codes, barcodes, mini program codes, providing ease for users to verify other people's accounts, join groups within the app via QR code invitation, make payment in establishments, and the like. The feature also allows users to scan items that would direct users into products being sold by companies of the same item. However, the products being sold appear in Chinese and involve companies based in China. Finally, the feature allows users to take photos of text that could be translated either into English or Chinese.

People Nearby enables the user to locate the first 100 nearby users within the immediate vicinity. The app provides an option to filter profiles according to gender (i.e., "females only" or "males only"), suggesting that such a more social function such as dating, similar to location-based apps such as Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, etc. Users can view the profiles of nearby users, exchange greetings, contact them via messages/video call, and add them into one's contact list. We found that while there are users who provided their real names and actual photos, most profiles allude to the use of the app for dating and hookups as evidenced by usernames such as "sweet kisser," "Heavenly_Touch," and "hotdaddy." Intentions of users range from professional to personal needs: "condo unit for sale," "need service? Grab driver," "friends anyone?" "wanted: top bf," and "LF: top trippers or daddies."

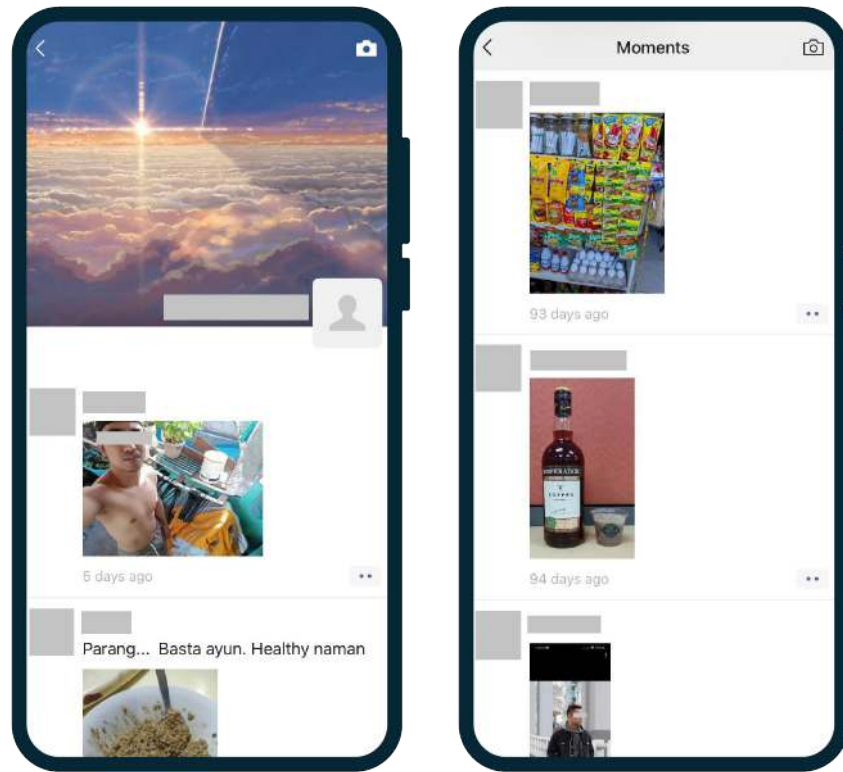


Figure 18. WeChat's Moments Page

The Shake feature is another location-based function that allows users to interact with strangers also using Shake from across the world. Similar to People Nearby, users can view the other people's distance and location and are able to send greetings and make friends. We encountered users located in South Korea, Iraq, and China, among others.

Mini Programs (sub-applications that can be downloaded via WeChat provide a wide range of services to users) are a unique feature of WeChat. Online reports show that as of 2020, 2.4 million programs have been made available to the public, with as many as 829 million monthly active users. In 2019 alone, transactions within Mini Programs have amounted to USD 115 billion. According to China Internet Watch (2021), an average user has 5.6 programs used as of late 2020. Popular categories of programs include lifestyle services, business, shopping, and education.

Although mini programs offer a variety of services such as translation, video and audio streaming, and the like, the default language setting of Chinese acts as barriers for users in the Philippines to explore and maximize the function. Based on our interviews, only a small minority of users are aware of the mini program function. These were limited to respondents who studied in China and used mini

programs for transportation (e.g., ride sharing, bike renting, train/plane tickets), discounts/coupons by fast food restaurants, and education, that is, university portals that provide timely information to its students, among others.

The more social aspect of WeChat comes from its Moments feature, which enables users to post status updates, pictures, videos, and links to their contact/friends list. Although this may seem similar to Facebook's timeline/newsfeed or Instagram's feed, Moments are not accessible to the general public. Unlike Facebook that provides users an option for posts to be viewed and shared by the public, content published as Moments can only be viewed by users who are directly connected to the user or those who are in their contact list. Our respondents cited using the Moments feature to post day-to-day updates but refrain from posting anything political or controversial so as to avoid unwanted attention or criticism. One respondent described the content she observed in the Moments feed from her colleagues in China:

They normally post about their day to day life, similar to how we use Facebook or even Instagram. Mundane things about their life and even their achievements, they post it there. Sometimes they post news articles not about heightened issues, about their city, etc.

Another interesting feature of the platform are Public Accounts or registered accounts on the platform that can publish articles, post videos, and even provide service. The types of accounts vary from established business corporations and media organizations to personal accounts of users. Public accounts can be broadly categorized as (1) subscription or service accounts (with implications on the features the account can offer) and (2) verified (similar to Facebook and Twitter account verification) or unverified accounts (can be further categorized into personal, media, company entities). These accounts can be manually searched under the Discover button and subscribed to/followed by WeChat users. Subscriptions would then appear as a separate Subscriptions tab under Chats, which presents users with an array of recently published articles by the public accounts they follow. One of our respondents recounted the benefit of subscribing to a public account of a fast food restaurant as a student in China:

So companies like McDonald's or Uniqlo or basically stores, can have public accounts where the interface is unique. In WeChat, it's more advanced, it has more options, like a mini info page, where you can gather information quickly, just by looking through their public account, and that account also allows them to put push notices to you such as promos and vouchers.

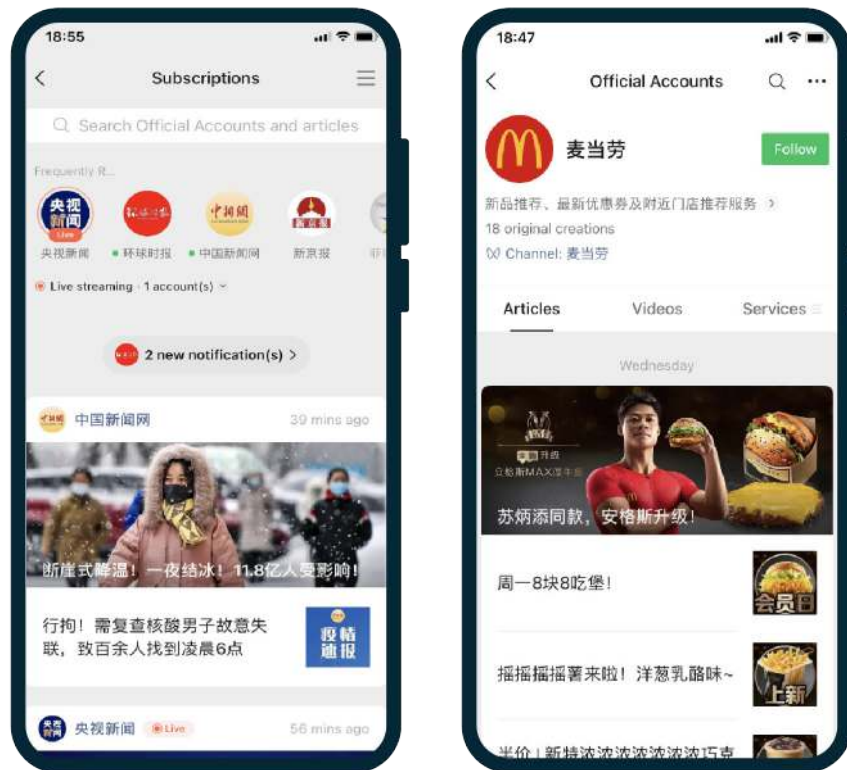


Figure 19. Sample subscriptions interface (left) and public account (right)

Two other features of the app that warrant the attention of scholars and policymakers are: Top Stories and Search. Whereas the former presents users a variety of news articles, the latter allows users to view the WeChat Top Topics (updated real time) and to directly search for relevant and timely information. In the succeeding paragraphs, we briefly narrate these features while a more in-depth exploration is found in the succeeding sections.

The Top Stories button contains two sections: Wow and Top. Under Wow, users are presented with a bulletin of COVID-19 related information, with daily updates on the number of confirmed cases, deaths, and vaccinations across the globe based on government data. More useful to readers are the breakdown of figures according to domestic (i.e., China) and international cases, that are further categorized into cities/provinces (locally) and countries (internationally), as well as the current count of confirmed cases and the area's level of risk. The section also provides readers local and international news related to the pandemic published by Chinese official accounts such as the China News Service website, Xinhua News Agency, and Beijing Youth Daily, among others. The section also presents users immediate access to services such as travel policy, risk area, vaccination, and others. Meanwhile, the Top section offers users a variety of articles and videos of different categories (local

Box Text 6. The Anatomy of WeChat Articles

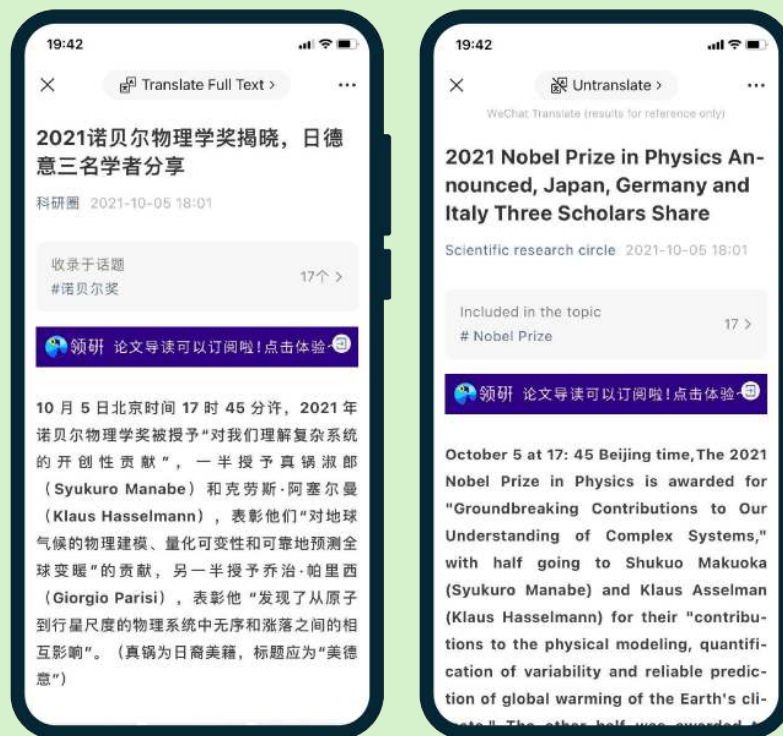


Figure 20. Sample WeChat News Article in original text (left) and translated in English (right)

News articles in WeChat can be presented in Chinese or English by default. Text in Chinese can be translated using an in-app translation option (for iPhone users, the translate button is located above the article while android users can find the button at the upper right portion of the page.)

The anatomy of news articles in WeChat are not any different from content by media organizations. Headlines are located at the topmost portion, often using exclamation points and words such as “sudden” to provide emphasis and capture the reader’s attention.

Below each article is the byline wherein the name of the publisher (i.e., the official account that published the content), the date of publication, and sometimes the writer of the article are located. Users can visit the page of the official account and view the other articles the account has published. WeChat also makes available information such as the WeChat ID, account entity, organization code, which give the users an idea of the companies associated with the account and whether the account has been verified or not.

The body of the article follows the byline, with the exact form of the content ranging from pure text to a combination of graphics and text to just infographics alone (especially for content related to entertainment or advertising). News articles are usually brief and can be read within minutes.

At the end of each article, one can often find promotions such as advertisements, links to recommended articles, and even QR codes of the official account. Some articles indicate the original source of the news (CCTV, Surging News, etc.) and other information such as contributors and editors. The bottommost portion of each article contains the comments section and buttons for users to share, favorite, and comment on the article.

politics, entertainment, education, sports, foreign affairs, etc.) published as far back as a week ago. We observed that articles featured in this section could have viewers as high as 100,000+ and as low as a few thousands. Although many of the articles are published by reputable media organizations, we observed that a number of content are created by unverified (personal) accounts. While we have yet to directly observe news content that could be considered misinformation/disinformation, reports over the years have revealed the risk of featuring content from unverified accounts due to the lack of oversight and editorial processes, unlike public accounts (Yu, 2018).

The features of WeChat prioritize interactions between and among one's personal and direct network. Although People Nearby and Shake give users an opportunity to meet strangers, we found very limited interest in using these features for users in the Philippines. Unlike the algorithms of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram that incentivize liking, commenting, and sharing user-generated content to drive up virality and engagement, user-generated content in WeChat is only accessible to the user's direct contacts. This bears implications as to the potential spread of disinformation within the platform. On the one hand, the platform does not provide an incentive for user-generated disinformation, that is, the spread of such content does not have the potential to scale in terms of virality. On the other hand, because the proliferation of disinformation is limited within one's networks via group chats and direct messages, such content may prove difficult to detect and regulate (see Lu, 2020; Sun, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2020).

4.2. User Demographics

How exactly do users in the Philippines use the app? Based on key informant interviews, we learned that there is a stark difference between how users in the Philippines engage with the app, compared to those in China. A few of our respondents who studied in China noted a significant decline in the

Table 4. Familiarity and use of WeChat features (percentage)

Features	Awareness (Percentage)	Actual use in the last 6 months (Percentage)
Messaging	80	100
Moments	53	88
People Nearby	47	73
WeChat Pay	32	45
Shake	32	55
Scan	29	90
Official/Public Accounts	29	78
Mini Programs	23	86
Search	23	75

Source: Online survey

actual use of the platform upon returning to the Philippines. We also learned that a number of our respondents were unfamiliar with several features of the app.

Based on our survey, we found that users have limited awareness of many of the apps' features. Almost all of our respondents were familiar with Messaging/Chats, over half of them are familiar with Moments, and less than half are familiar with People Nearby. The least familiar features include Mini Programs (23%) and Search (29%). Among users who are aware of the Messaging/Chats function, all respondents reported having used the feature in the last six months. Other widely used features of the app in the last six months include the Scan (90%), Moments (88%), and Mini Programs (86%).

Survey respondents downloaded the app as early as 2012 and as late as 2021. When asked how they were introduced to the application, about a third (32%) mentioned being introduced by their friends, while over a quarter (29%) by their family members. 15% of respondents were introduced by their coworker/employer and by social media. A few of our respondents reported having downloaded the app either as a requirement for their studies in China or as a recommendation by a friend/relative prior to their visit in China.

As for the use of the app, half of our survey respondents reported using the app daily, while only less than a quarter of respondents use it weekly. When asked how long they use the app in a typical day, 66% of respondents expressed spending less than an hour in the app. These figures complement our interview data where respondents indicated spending only minutes in the app to check for any messages or updates from existing contacts.

When asked about their motivations for using the app, 53% of respondents indicated using WeChat to stay in touch with friends and family, over a quarter (26%) for business-related purposes, about a quarter (24%) for educational purposes, and one-fifth to meet new people. Other less widely recognized motivations included keeping up-to-date with news/current events, buying/selling products, video/audio streaming, and gaming, among others. These statistics are consistent with our data from interview respondents who primarily expressed having maintained their use of the app for communication (with friends/relatives in China) and educational purposes.

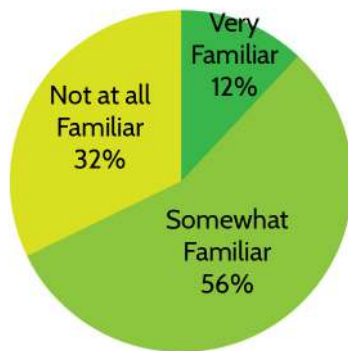
Based on our survey, we found a balanced user distribution according to sex: less than half of the respondents were male while the other half were female. As for gender, over half identified as female, 40% as male, while 8% considered themselves as non-binary. Over a third of the respondents belong to the age groups of 18-24 and 25-34, 20% belong to the 35-44 age group, while 4% belong to the age groups of 45-54 and 55-64. The sex and age distribution for WeChat are similar to those of other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

68% of the respondents identified as Filipinos while 32% considered themselves as Filipino-Chinese. Surprisingly, none of the respondents identified as Chinese. (We can attribute this to the distribution of the survey.)

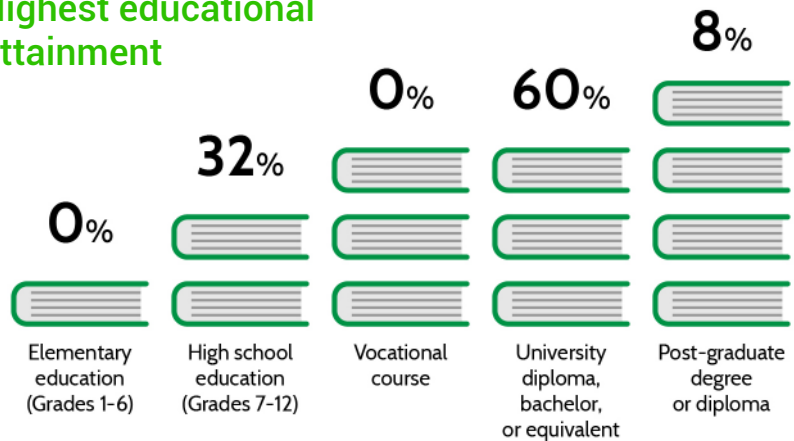
Since WeChat features content that are typically presented in Mandarin, we asked our respondents how familiar they are with the language. Only 12% of respondents were “very familiar,” over half of the respondents expressed being “somewhat familiar,” while about a third of them were “not at all familiar” with Mandarin. Familiarity with Mandarin is an important factor as to how users are able to fully navigate the app: as a number of functions, such as Mini Programs and news articles, are presented in Mandarin by default, Filipino users without any knowledge of the language are discouraged to maximize these features and services.

As for their highest educational attainment, we found that respondents are generally educated: 8% of respondents completed postgraduate education, over half of them finished a university degree (diploma, bachelor's, etc.), while a third of them completed only high school.

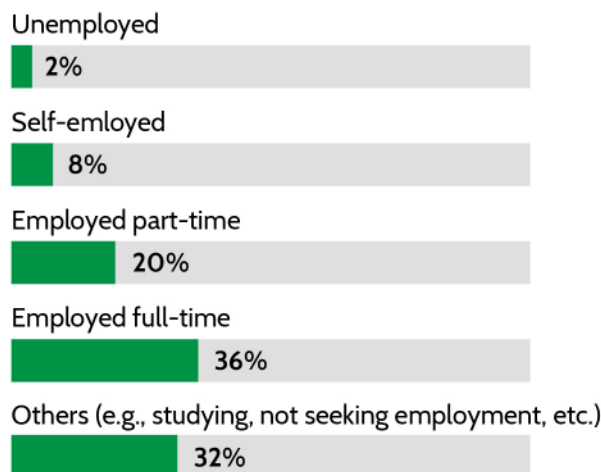
Familiarity with Mandarin



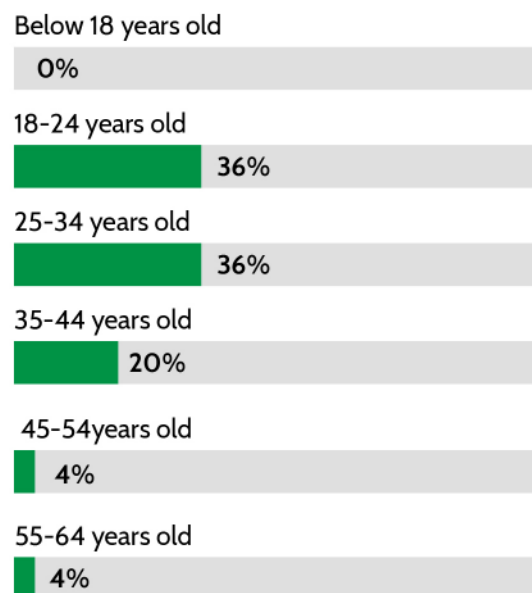
Highest educational attainment



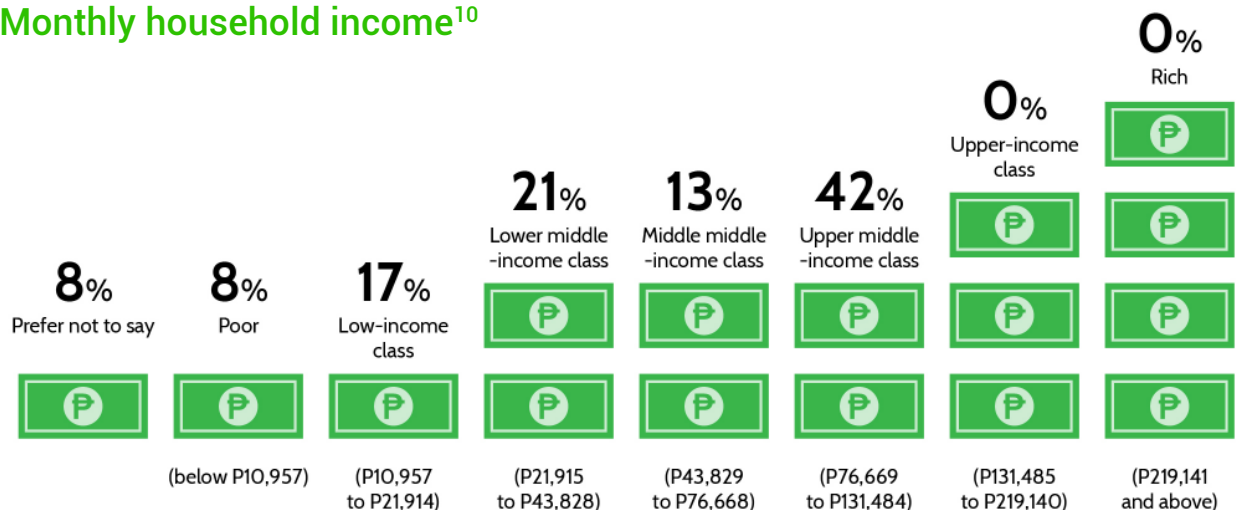
Employment status in the last three months



Age



Monthly household income¹⁰



¹⁰ We based the categories for socioeconomic status from Albert, Santos, and Vizmanos (2018).

Over a third of the respondents were employed full-time, a fifth of them were employed part-time, 8% were self-employed, 4% were unemployed, while about a third were studying, not seeking employment, etc. Of those who are either employed full-time or part-time, 92% were working in the private sector and only 8% were employed by the government. None of the respondents who were employed either full-time or part-time worked for a non-government organization.

As for monthly household income, we found that although respondents belonged to a diverse set of socioeconomic status, many of them, that is, less than half, belonged to the upper middle-income class (P76,669 to P131,484). Meanwhile, 17% of respondents belonged to the low-income class (P10,957 to P21,914), over a fifth as lower middle-income class (P21,915 to P43,828), and 13% middle middle-income class (P43,829 to P76,668). The remaining 8% preferred not to answer the question.

We found that our respondents were generally active in using social media, as demonstrated by their use of other applications. 92% of respondents used Facebook and YouTube, 83% used Viber, 79% used Instagram, while 50-60% used Twitter, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Reddit. Only 21% of respondents expressed having used TikTok. Among these applications, respondents assessed Telegram and Reddit as being the most reliable (57 and 46% of respondents indicated that the app is “often” reliable, respectively). Users found Instagram (61%), Twitter (58%), Facebook (48%), YouTube (38%), and WhatsApp (30%) as “sometimes” reliable.

Finally, we asked respondents for their sources of news. A majority of respondents largely rely on new media as their source for daily news: 81% use Google/other search engines and social media as their daily source of news, 71% rely on their friends and colleagues, and 62% use news websites or apps. By contrast, 38-42% of respondents indicated “never” having used traditional media sources (television, print publication, and radio) to seek news.

Overall, we found that WeChat users in the Philippines have limited awareness of the variety of platform features, with Messaging/Chats as the most familiar and widely used. This is consistent with the primary motivation of users in using WeChat: to stay in touch with friends and family. Compared to social media apps such as Facebook that have an average daily use of an hour, WeChat users access the platform for less than an hour, often spending mere minutes to check for messages or updates from their contacts. WeChat users can be characterized as educated, belonging to younger age groups and the upper-middle class, and active on other social media applications.

4.3. Information Supply

In exploring the content profile of the platform, we collected WeChat Top Topics and associated news articles as a proxy for the default information supply within the platform from August 14 to October 14, 2021.¹¹ A total of 620 top ten topics were included in the analysis. Each topic was translated from Chinese into English, which were then categorized according to the type of topic/news and scope (international or national, i.e., relevant only to China). In order to examine the actual articles, we gathered data from articles that are most associated with the topic. The headlines of each article were translated using the in-app translate function. A total of 443 news articles were coded according to the official account, the category of official account (verified vs. unverified), and number of engagements (reads, likes, and favorites) associated with each article. In this section, we describe the categories of news content made available under the Search feature, the public/official accounts as sources of content, and the engagement of the news articles based on our WeChat Top Topics to determine the information supply within WeChat.



Figure 21. Word cloud of translated topics (left) and article headlines (right)

11 Another method of assessing the information supply in the platform is by collecting articles that appear as Top Stories. Unfortunately, this feature only appeared in the latest version of the app during the late stage of the data collection. We proceeded to examine the articles associated with the Top Topics instead.

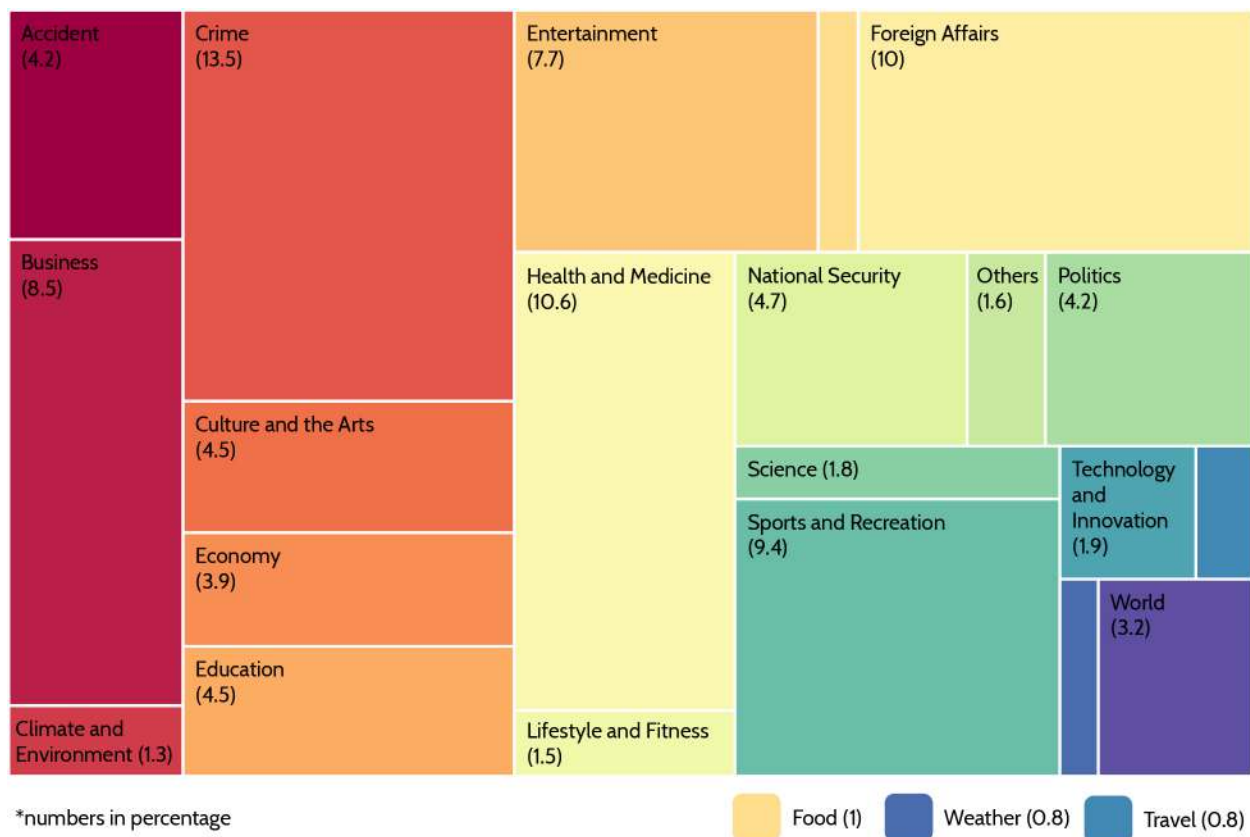


Figure 22. Types of news articles associated with top topics

A word cloud of 75 keywords of top topics and article headlines reveal the quality of information supplied to WeChat users. The word clouds suggest that there is a mix of interest for news that are related to China and those that are relevant to the international scene; based on our coding of news articles, 82% of topics were relevant to China while only 18% pertained to news articles outside of China. On one end, users are typically presented by issues in China such as crime (i.e., police, sentenced, investigation), education (i.e., children, university, students), and most especially the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., epidemic, cases, deaths, new, died, confirmed). On the other end are news articles related to foreign affairs (i.e., international in scope, usually involving foreign governments) as evidenced by the keywords US, Korea, Afghanistan, Taliban, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, etc. Of the 620 topics we observed, only two were relevant to the Philippines: “Duterte announced that he would withdraw from politics” and “Duterte’s daughter will run for the president of the Philippines” on October 2 and 3, respectively.

Table 5. Top ten sources of news

Official Account	Number of Articles in Top Topics
Beijing News	25
Global Network	20
Surging News	20
Observer Network	15
China News Service Website	12
CCTV News	11
Governor of Chang'an Avenue	11
CCTV	9
Reference News	7
Beijing Daily	6

Source: Authors' data on WeChat Top Topics

We complement this data by presenting the breakdown of the categories of the 620 topics collected. We found that 13.3% of the overall content pertained to reports on domestic crimes against persons such as rape, molestation, infidelity/indecency and crimes against the state such as bribery. A tenth of the content were related to health and medicine or more specifically about the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the increase of cases, developments on vaccines, and policies to curb the spread of the virus. Foreign affairs comprised another 10% of overall content, such as the US' withdrawal from Afghanistan, the cordial relations between the Chinese and Taliban governments, the strained relations between the French and US governments, and the like. This is followed by sports and recreation (8.8%), largely due to the Tokyo Summer Olympics and Paralympics and the anticipation of the public to the opening of Universal Studios in Beijing.

Where do these articles come from? Our analysis indicates that 94.9% of articles most associated with the top topics come from verified accounts while only 5.1% are published by unverified accounts. Of these sources, we ranked the top ten official/public accounts that contributed the most articles associated with each topic. It should be noted that all these accounts are verified and consider themselves as news organizations. Among them are Beijing News, Global Network, Surging

Box Text 7. Foreign Affairs on WeChat Top Topics

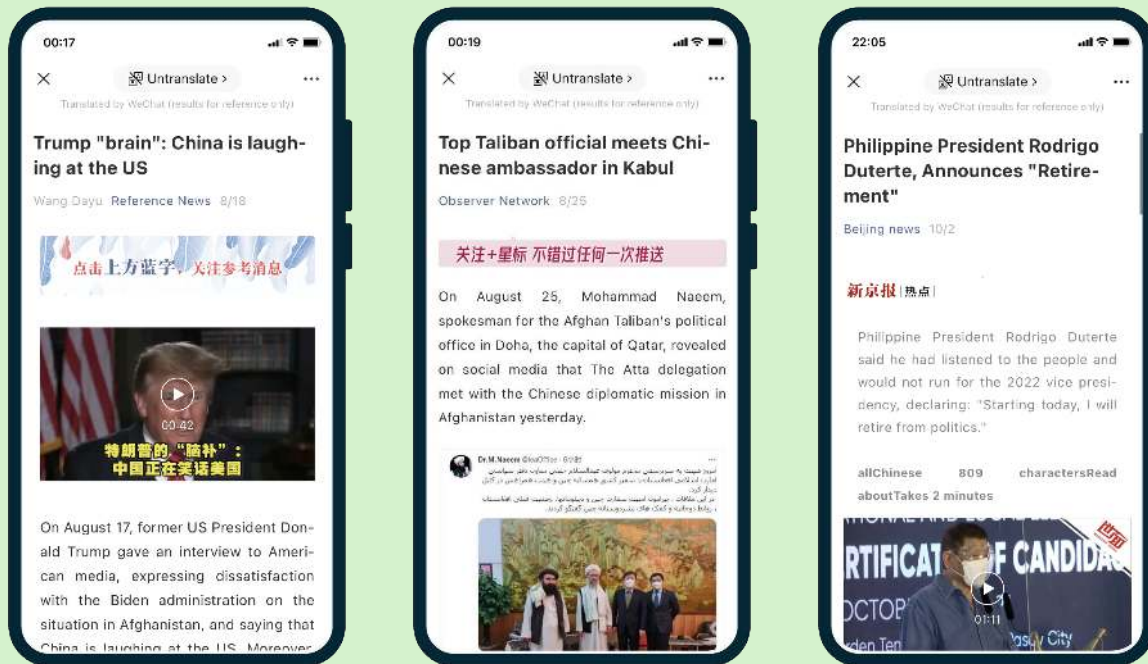


Figure 23. Sample foreign affairs news articles

Among the controversial international news that broke during our data collection period were the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, the return of Huawei's CEO Meng Wanzhou to China after her extradition and detention in the US, and the presence of American troops in Taiwan that led to increased tensions between Taiwan and China.

While most of the topics (translated from Mandarin into English) appeared impartial, we found limited evidence of topics that put China in a positive light and at the forefront of foreign policy.

In relation to Afghanistan and the Taliban government, Top Topics highlighted the provision of humanitarian assistance to Afghans ("China provides 200 million aid to Afghanistan") and bilateral talks with the Taliban government ("China responds to Taliban's establishment of a new government" and "Taliban high-level meeting with Chinese ambassador"). In an article published by the Observer Network on September 8, 2021, it was reported that China would provide materials and technical assistance for pandemic relief while emphasizing China's trade interests and the responsibility of the US government to solve the migrant and refugee problem that ensued. The article entitled "China

provides 200 million yuan of emergency aid to Afghanistan” garnered over 100,000 views, 1,485 likes, and 679 favorites, with positive comments from users on the platform.

While Top Topics present a wide array of foreign affairs news from governments such as France (“France recalls ambassador to US Australia”), Russia (“Russian University gun case caused 8 deaths”) and Japan (“Japan may have its first female prime minister”), two countries have a significant amount of attention: the US and Taiwan.

A number of topics are dedicated to US counterterrorism efforts (“U.S. forces killed 2 important figures in extremist organizations”), the country’s withdrawal from Afghanistan (“Biden speaks on ending military operations in Afghanistan”), and the 20th commemoration anniversary of September 11. Amidst growing tensions between China and Taiwan due to the presence of US military troops in Taiwan (“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to the US military’s secret training of Taiwan troops in Taiwan”), the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated its position regarding Taiwan’s independence (“Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Taiwan is not eligible to join the United Nations”).

News, Observer Network, and China News Service. These accounts are able to draw in a considerable amount of readership as most of their content garner more than 100,000 reads, compared to average engagements of top news articles with 64,200 reads, 933 likes, and 459 favorites.

4.4. Information Demand

While 60-70% of our respondents indicated having used social media or news websites and apps daily to obtain news, we found that over a third of them (38%) never used WeChat to find news in general. Almost a quarter of respondents (23%) indicated using the platform “rarely” and “sometimes,” while only 8% use the app to “always” and “often” seek news. These results are consistent with our interview data where most, if not all, of our respondents expressed not using the platform to read news. However, one respondent particularly stood out as she subscribed to Xinhua News Daily, China People’s Daily, and CCTV News Network to keep herself up-to-date with developments in China:

I followed the news before because when I started grad school a lot of my papers are on Chinese foreign policy so in order to update myself with the current events, I had to follow these accounts and these are usually the accounts that are being shared by our Chinese counterparts so might as well keep myself up to date with relevant news.

Table 6. Categories of news sought on WeChat

Category of News	Percentage
Entertainment	38
Business	31
Economy	31
Education	31
Food	31
Fashion	25
Culture and the Arts	19
Foreign Affairs	19
Science	19
Travel	19
Climate and the Environment	13
Lifestyle and Fitness	13
National Security	13
Technology and Innovation	13
Weather	13
World	13
Health and Medicine	6
Politics	6
Crime	0
Religion	0
Sports and Recreation	0

Source: Online survey

For users who utilized the platform to obtain news, we then asked what categories of news they usually search for in the platform. Entertainment was the most sought news category, accounting for over a third of respondents. Less than a third of respondents searched for news related to business, economy, education, and food. One-fourth of respondents looked for news on fashion, while less than a fourth were interested in culture and the arts, foreign affairs, science, and travel. 13% of respondents searched for news on climate and the environment, lifestyle and fitness, national security, technology and innovation, weather, and food. 6% were interested in health and medicine, as well as that of politics. None of the respondents searched for news regarding crime, religion, and sports and recreation.

Asked how our respondents engage with news on the platform, we found that users are generally skeptical of the information the platform provides. Almost half of respondents stated that they researched the information online and 28% withhold their judgment and opt to wait for more details. Only 16% of users share the information on their social media accounts while only 4% discuss the

Box Text 8. Buy-and-sell of WeChat accounts

While not exactly a demand for information, we found evidence of a demand for accessing the platform within and outside the Philippines. Compared to other social media accounts that provide prospective users utmost ease in registering, WeChat requires users to submit a phone number to be associated with the new account and have the registration verified via scan by other existing users with the following criteria: an account that is at least 6 months, has activated WeChat Pay, and has not verified other accounts in the past month.

The strict criteria has posed difficulty in accessibility, especially to new users in the Philippines. In our attempt to identify existing user bases in the Philippines, we found private groups on Facebook have been created solely

for verifying other users's accounts. Aside from providing services for verification in exchange for monetary compensation, a black market for WeChat accounts has emerged.

We spoke with James (not his real name), a 29-year-old seller of WeChat accounts who we met in one private Facebook group. He first learned about the market when he was offered by another member of the group if he was willing to sell his WeChat account for a thousand pesos. Since this transaction, his curiosity as to why such a market exists grew.

James has maintained three WeChat accounts, whose mobile numbers belong to his family members. Since 2018, he has offered verification services to other users and has earned 3,000

pesos by selling 3 accounts. Posts within the private Facebook group indicate that prices could go as high as 4,000 pesos for a 9-10 year account. A 2019 report published by the South China Morning Post detailed that accounts in China could be sold for as low as 55 yuan (400 pesos); the older the account, the higher the selling price (Chen, 2019).

When asked why there is an interest in buying existing WeChat accounts, James explained: “Others use it for personal use. Meanwhile others use it in their company to teach, for example, through an online tutor--a Chinese kid wants to learn English.” He added that based on his experience of the application, accounts could also be used to market products in China.

His observations led him to believe that a majority of the interested buyers he encountered were Chinese, while some were Filipino. His interactions were limited to what he considers as Filipino “middlemen” who would eventually sell the accounts to the Chinese for a higher price. James hints that the exact motivations as to why there are buyers of such accounts still remains unknown: “I want to learn exactly that because when I speak to someone who is into that business, they don’t tell me why. I also want to know why there’s a huge demand for WeChat.”

The same report by South China Morning Post (Chen, 2019) raises the possibility that accounts on WeChat could be used to scam other users into bogus investment opportunities and to

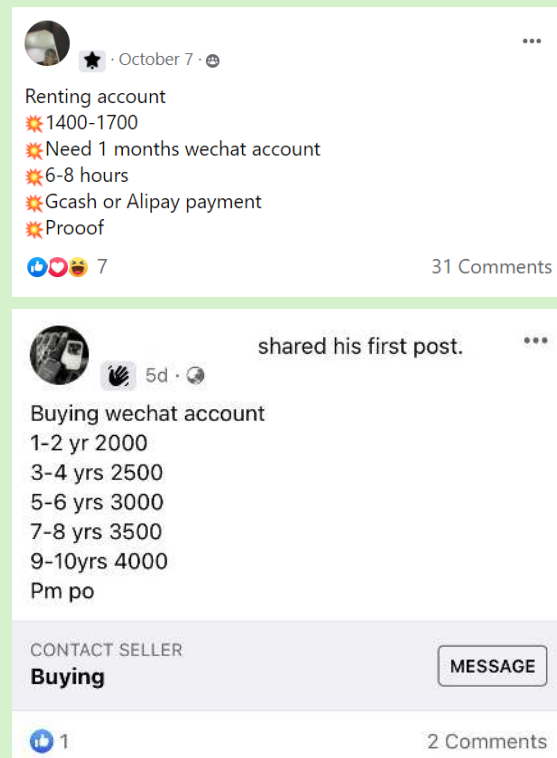


Figure 24. Sample posts of buying, selling, and renting accounts on Facebook groups

drive up engagements of stories (and therefore advertising) published by official accounts in the platform. We recommend that further studies be conducted on the black market of buying and selling WeChat accounts and furthermore why such transactions occur in social media applications such as Facebook. This will entail performing ethnographies of online communities, specifically with black market middlemen who have direct contact to end-buyers of WeChat accounts, as well as taking a digital labor approach in exploring the conditions that give rise to the selling of accounts despite risks in security and safety of users.

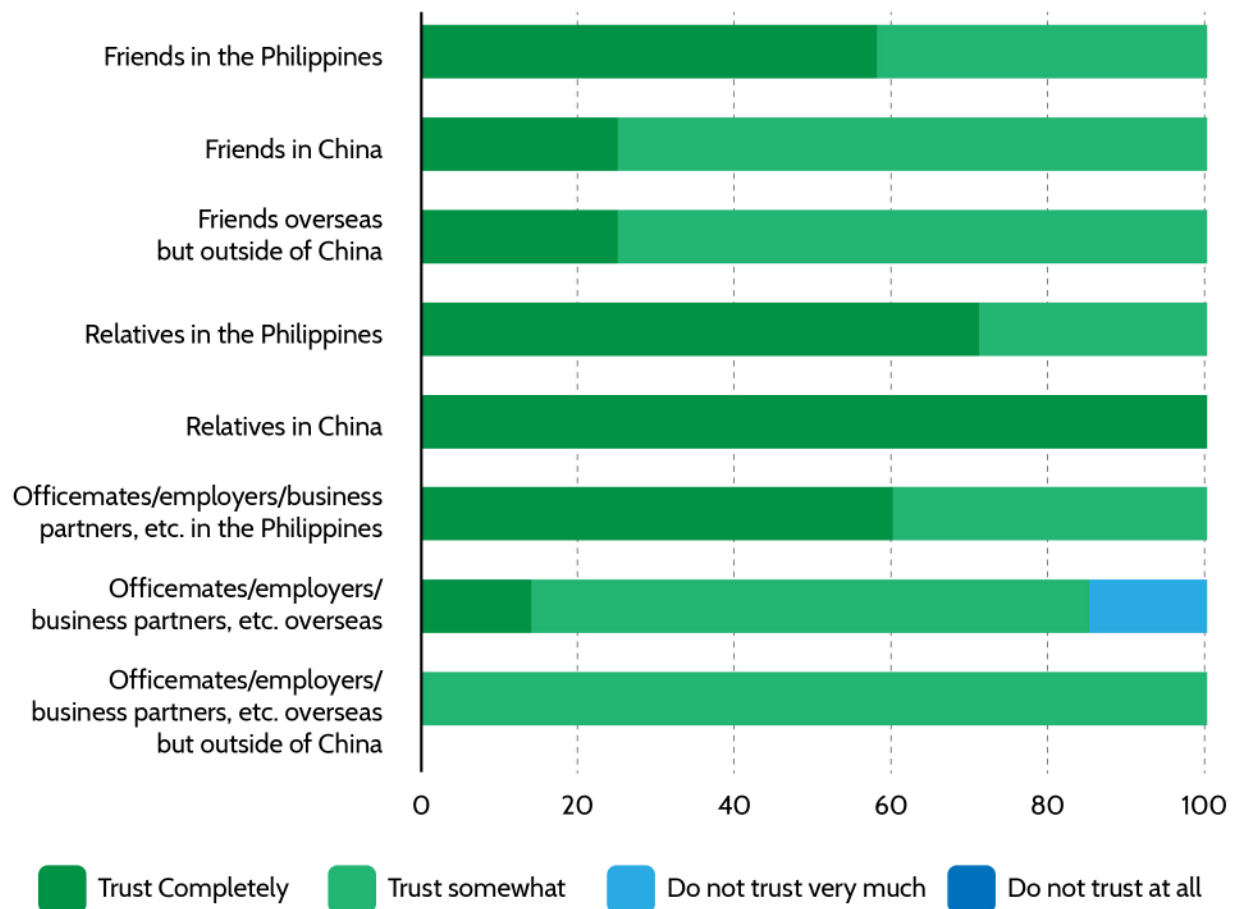


Figure 25. Level of trust on specific groups on WeChat

information with their family and friends, and readily believe that the information is accurate. We found that users in WeChat engage in limited practices of cross-posting: over a quarter of respondents (77%) reported not having reposted content from the app to other social media platforms, while only 23% reported engaging in cross posting to other social media applications.

4.5. Disinformative Potential

In comparison to TikTok, we found limited evidence on the proliferation of disinformation within WeChat based on survey data. We recognize however that disinformation in the platform can come in the form of news articles published by public/official accounts as previously reported (Zhang, 2017; Lawson, 2020). Public accounts are crucial in that it provides a more direct line to users through subscriptions, top stories, and top topics. What is worth noting however is that WeChat provides

transparency by requiring users to register public accounts with the platform and declare the account entity, service hotline, and associated service providers (for verified accounts). While a majority of public accounts that published articles that appeared in the Top Topics list were verified, we did find a minority of public accounts that were unverified. The preponderance of verified accounts is an indicator of the quality of information supply as unverified accounts may publish dubious content with limited repercussions.

Table 7. Mis/Disinformation encountered on WeChat (percentage)

Statement	% of respondents who encountered the statement
The Philippines was the “richest country in Asia” during the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos.	45
ABS-CBN has not been paying its taxes properly.	45
Vice President Leni Robredo cheated in the 2016 national elections.	36
Hidilyn Diaz was part of a plot to oust President Rodrigo Duterte.	18
The late senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr. was a key organizer of the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army (CPP-NPA) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).	0
Covid-19 was made by a lab in China.	62
Covid-19 can be treated with ivermectin.	31
Covid-19 can be cured with tuob/suob or other home remedies.	23
Covid-19 vaccines are toxic.	23
Covid-19 vaccines make people magnetic.	15

Disinformation/misinformation may also come in the form of user-generated content in the form of updates in Moments as well as the sharing of incorrect information via chats, especially group chats. Our interview respondents expressed not having directly encountered fake news/disinformation in the platform. Nonetheless, we found that our respondents have a relatively high level of trust with different actors within the platform. All respondents completely trust their relatives in China;

less than a quarter of them completely trust their relatives in the Philippines, while over half (58%) completely trust their friends in the Philippines. Only the officemates/employers/business partners located overseas (but not in China) received responses indicating that these actors are not very much trusted (14%).

Compared to TikTok, we found limited evidence of the proliferation of disinformation regarding Philippine politics and COVID-19 based on our survey data, which speaks to the quality of information supply within the app. Over half of survey respondents (52%) expressed having “never” encountered misinformation/disinformation related to Philippine politics in the app in the last 12 months; 16% answered “rarely,” about a quarter answered “sometimes,” while only 8% indicated “often.” None of the respondents indicated “always” in terms of the frequency of encountering misinformation/disinformation in the past year.

Among the five statements we tested, the statements “the Philippines was the ‘richest country in Asia’ during the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos” and “ABS-CBN has not been paying its taxes properly” were the most widely encountered as 45% of those who encountered political mis/disinformation came across the particular information. Meanwhile, over a third of respondents encountered information suggesting that Vice President Leni Rodredo “cheated in the 2016 national elections,” while 18% encountered information that Hidilyn Diaz was part of a plot to oust President Rodrigo Duterte. None of our respondents reported having read disinformation regarding Ninoy Aquino and his alleged connections with the CPP-NPA and MNLF.

Regarding COVID-19-related information, 48% of respondents “never” encountered any mis/disinformation in the platform. 30% of respondents expressed having come across COVID-19-related mis/disinformation “sometimes,” 17% “rarely,” while only 4% answered “often.” None of the respondents answered “always” to the question.

We then determined which of the COVID-19-related mis/disinformation were the most prevalent in the platform. Nearly a third of respondents encountered information suggesting that COVID-19 originated from a lab in China, 31% encountered information suggesting that the virus can be treated with Ivermectin, less than a quarter read content suggesting that the virus (1) can be treated by home remedies and (2) make people magnetic. Around 15% of respondents encountered information that the vaccines are toxic.

We asked our survey respondents if they have ever shared information they later on realized was false or misleading. A majority of them (86%) said “no” while only 14% said “yes.” Of the 14% of respondents, all of them found out that the information was incorrect as they were exposed to correct information outside the platform. However, only 33% of respondents indicated that they

were informed by other users that the post they shared was incorrect. Upon learning the correct information, users in the platform engage in a limited practice of self-correction: while 66% of respondents deleted the misleading/false content, 66% kept the correct information to themselves and only 33% of respondents shared the correction either publicly or privately in the platform.

4.6. Summary

This chapter explored WeChat as an understudied and emerging platform in the Philippines by assessing the platform's information ecosystem. We presented this by outlining the affordances, user demographics, the information supply and demand, and the disinformative potential of the platform. We found that users have limited awareness of the platform's various features, with Messaging/Chats the most widely used with implications on the disinformation potential of the app. Finally, we emphasized WeChat Top Topics as indicators of the quality of information demand and the role public accounts that publish news articles in creating the information supply within WeChat.



Chapter 5

Placing Emerging Platforms in the Philippine Media System

The affordances of mainstream digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube more or less allow actors to offer similar and overlapping disinformation content. The use of manipulated photos, decontextualized soundbites and text, and false comments and engagements packaged and disseminated by relatable actors online allow not only for virality but also for cross-posting, enabling the spread of disinformation across platforms. However, understudied digital platforms have distinct affordances that enable not only new breeds of disinformative actors but also disinformation innovations. Simply put, we cannot yet ascertain how similar or different misinformation and disinformation is on TikTok and WeChat, at least for the Philippines specifically. Our information ecosystem assessment partly aims to contribute to this endeavor by outlining what health and political disinformation and misinformation looks like on these platforms.

To fully understand these platforms, we also need to situate TikTok and WeChat within the media system context they are embedded in. These contexts dictate the logics and rules with which media

platforms and information sources navigate the information ecosystem. Media ownership in the Philippines is dominated by big businesses (Teodoro, 2014). Media freedom has been generally free, relative to its neighbors in the Southeast Asian region, but recently the Philippines has continuously seen a decline in its media freedom ranking from 134th in 2019, to 136th in 2020, to 138th in 2021 (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). Regulation has generally been lax and weak outside of the shutdown of media giant ABS-CBN, but democratic backsliding has affected the quality of journalism in the country. There have been political attacks against critical media outlets, and other media outlets have been forced to tone down to avoid the same treatment (Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 2021). As discussed earlier, online regulation has become more difficult and the country has observed a rampant increase in misinformation and disinformation online. It is within this media context that TikTok and WeChat find themselves embedded in.

Despite being “patient zero” in the disinformation battle worldwide, the Philippines has generally struggled with developing creative solutions. Indeed, political actors have capitalized on the relatively free and market-driven media system to even innovate disinformation operations (Ong, Tapsell, & Curato, 2019; Ong & Cabanes, 2019; Lanuza & Arguelles, forthcoming). Any regulation that exists can generally be categorized into either supply-side or demand-side solutions (Schiffrin, 2019). Supply-side answers include

Box Text 9. Disinformation in the Philippines

In the Philippines much of online influence operations using disinformation are found on Facebook and, to a lesser extent, Twitter (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019) and YouTube (Dagle & Fallorina, 2019; Soriano & Gaw, 2021). Indeed, the use of Facebook for online electoral campaigns in 2016 were accompanied by the use of trolls facilitated by public relations firms (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017; Ong & Cabanes, 2018) to dominate public conversations and hack public attention. Investigative reports have documented how Duterte won the elections in 2016 with the help of influence operations on Facebook (Williams, 2017; Alba, 2018; Chua & Labiste, 2018). The use of disinformation to influence online conversations leveled up in 2019, when the Philippine midterm elections saw the rise of disinformation innovations online, expanding with new account and content formats from Facebook to Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (Ong, Tapsell, & Curato, 2019).

How is disinformation done in the Philippines? Most of the disinformative influence operations employ human trolls and automated bots (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Uyheng & Carley, 2019) who either create or spread content which can be seen as divisive, incendiary, offensive, or even violent in form and substance

regulations that look into algorithms, speech laws, and advertising laws and those that encourage counterspeech by opening more avenues for communication and broadcasting more perspectives. Demand-side answers include civil society-driven solutions like media literacy and fact-checking initiatives, as well as strengthening journalism and community trust. Platforms, governments, and civil society all hope that solutions from both categories can successfully curb disinformation online. However, the challenge in regulating disinformation online lies in three elements: the definition of disinformation, the proof of showing intent, and the proof of showing harm (Pielemeier, 2020). Generally we can define disinformation as deliberately published false information that can cause harm (Humprecht, Esser, & Van Aelst, 2020) or is used for political gains (Donovan, 2020), but there is difficulty in regulating since this potentially harms the right to free speech. Despite these difficulties, the most common response from both the government and platforms is some form of content regulation or moderation (Taylor, Walsh, & Bradshaw, 2018; Bradshaw, Neudert, & Howard, 2018).

This focus on content regulation is complemented by community-reporting and fact-checking initiatives. In the Philippines, third-party fact-checkers have been the go-to response of civil society, particularly journalists and media professionals, to the disinformation problem (Ong, 2021). Platforms themselves have adapted: Facebook takedowns are now more common, Twitter allows some users

(Ong, Tapsell, & Curato, 2019). Such content is usually spread on Facebook comment sections, but advertising and public relations firms have also relied on influencers with varying degrees of follower size to seed disinformative content and sway public opinion (Chua & Labiste, 2018). These are complemented by meme accounts, pop culture accounts, hyperpartisan YouTube pages, thirst trap Instagram pages, and even closed and private Facebook groups (Ong, Tapsell, & Curato, 2019; Ong & Tapsell, 2020), all of which exploit the same regulatory loopholes in electoral influence operations.

Who are the disinformative actors? Although the contexts have evolved, the actors of disinformation have remained the same for the most part: the state, politicians and their staff, algorithm-reliant profit-driven technopreneurs, and the ad and PR industry (Ong & Cabañes, 2019). For example, the incumbent majority party Partido Demokratiko Pilipino - Lakas ng Bayan (PDP-Laban) was found to have benefited from coordinated inauthentic behavior via Facebook in the 2016 elections (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). Facebook later on removed hundreds of pages which were found to be disseminating disinformation in favor of Duterte and his administration (Lalu, 2019). To a certain extent, foreign intervention played a part in some of the coordinated inauthentic behavior (Gleicher, 2020), but for the most part it is state-sponsored or state-allied actors that engage in the dissemination of disinformation.

to flag misleading content and notifies users who share content they themselves have not read, and YouTube bans users who violate community standards. Understandably, new and emerging platforms adopt similar frameworks as part of the industry's best practices and default operations (Gillespie, 2018).

TikTok has recently done similar actions to regulate its information environment. Last year in the US, TikTok had enlisted the help of third-party fact-checkers to combat deceptive and misinformative electoral content on its platform (Pappas, 2020), boosting its community standards monitoring (TikTok, 2020). But despite the overlaps in content regulation measures, our data shows that disinformative content still thrives on the platform. Moreover, TikTok is less transparent about its platform governance compared to other platforms. It does not allow access to its data for scraping the same way Facebook and Twitter do with CrowdTangle and Twitter Developers, respectively. In our interviews with influencers and DOST-PCIEERD, they were informed that TikTok can boost their content, but were made unaware of the exact process of boosting. The influencers we interviewed have a group chat on Facebook with a person from TikTok asking for their posts' links so TikTok can boost the posts, but our respondents were unsure whether or not their posts were indeed boosted.

For WeChat, the platform had partnered with the Chinese government to develop a rumor-reporting and refutation mechanism (Rodrigues & Xu, 2020) but censorship and outright content removals have been observed by some of our respondents as well. What is notable is that these features are more readily observable in Mainland China; in the Philippines, since the platform is less about many-to-many communication akin to broadcasting content on other platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and even TikTok, there are less experiences with these regulations. In the wake of rumors surrounding COVID-19, it has been reported that Tencent has worked with medical professionals as in-house fact checkers to develop mini programs (e.g., Jiaozhen) that would flag questionable content (Shen, 2020; see also Panda!Yoo, 2020).

As a result of these contextual and administrative factors, user trust for the platforms are more pessimistic than usual. On TikTok, we observed lower levels of feeling secure on the platform as 36% of respondents disagree with the statement "I feel more secure in TikTok than in other social media platforms." A higher number of respondents feel ambivalent towards how the platform handles personal (38%) and public (48%) information. Such ambivalence is less on WeChat: 38% of respondents are ambivalent towards feeling secure in the platform compared to other social media apps, a third of respondents feel secure with how the platform handles personal information (versus 29% who are ambivalent), and 38% neither agree nor disagree with the statement "I feel secure about how WeChat handles what I share in public."

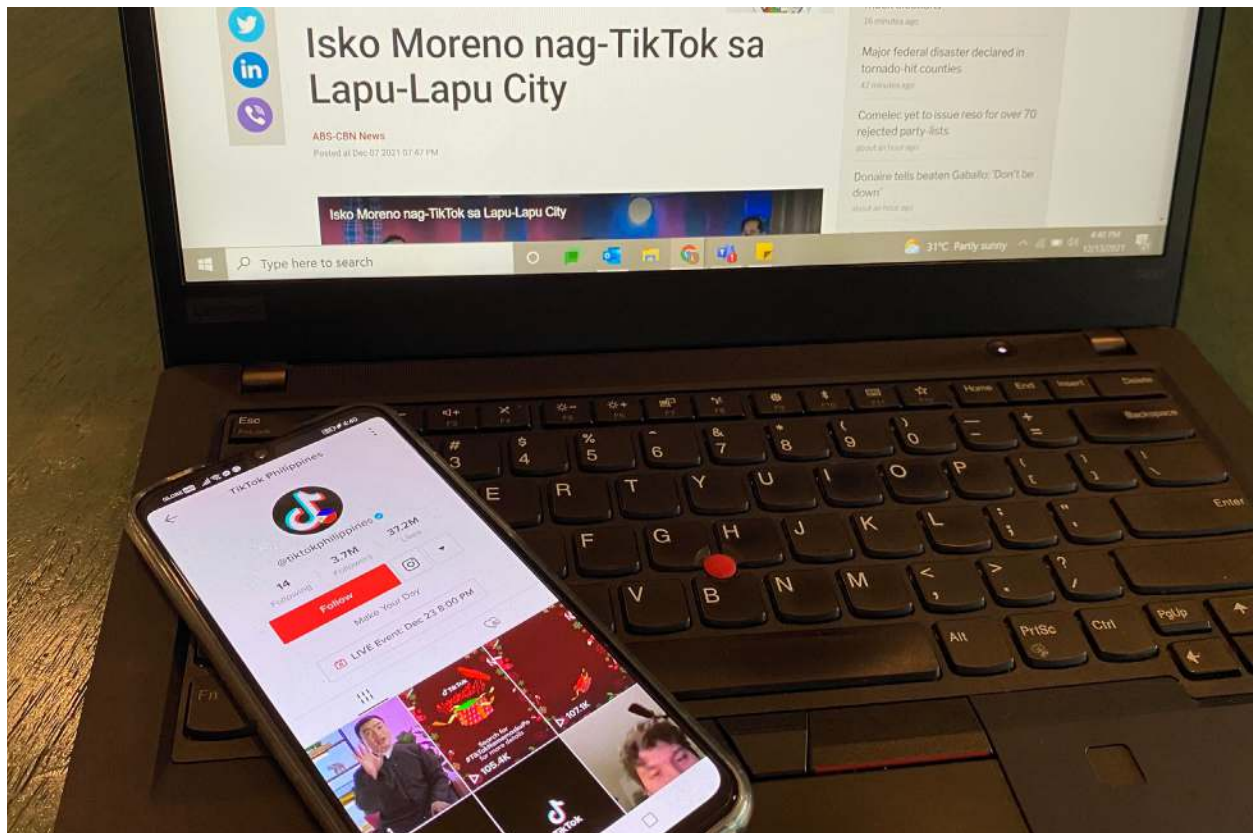
Evidently, mainstream solutions generally focus on regulating the content. But focusing only on content is dangerous and misses the point: that disinformative actions are anxiety-driven and systematically encouraged. Disinformation does not exist only because of a few bad actors whose silence holds the key to clean digital platforms. Platform governance, media systems, advertising and public relations firms, and predatory technopreneurs are also contributory variables to the disinformation problem. This means disinformation has more than one source, and is produced systematically, not individually.

Thus, **we echo the call to shift the attention from content regulation to process regulation**, because content regulation is more reactive and treats only the symptoms of the disinformation disorder. Meanwhile, process regulation spotlights the systemically-produced mechanisms that enable this in the first place (Ong, 2021). **We likewise echo the call to shift from an individualistic approach to critical disinformation studies to a media systems approach** (Lanuza & Arguelles, forthcoming), given that media platforms and their affordances do not shape information supply and demand in a vacuum; rather, institutional settings define what media platforms can and cannot do in information environments. When regulatory institutions are too weak and slow, we are faced with lax information regulation systems that are prone to either disinformation-for-profit operations or widespread misinformation due to virality. When regulatory institutions are too stringent or controlling, we get opaque, unaccountable, problematic moderation which impinges on free speech.

A shift to process regulation entails creating windows of transparency and protocols of accountability in both the information production and content moderation process, taking prudent care to account for both the demand-side and the supply-side of information circulated online. This means increasing transparency and accountability measures for both platforms and governments by involving academics and civil society in “decision-making around campaign finance regulation, platform bans, and fact checks” (Ong, Tapsell, & Curato, 2019, p. 5). Thus, to improve the information environment of TikTok and WeChat in the Philippines, we extend the following recommendations to concerned stakeholders.

5.1. Recommendations for Platforms

TikTok and WeChat should explore more transparency and accountability partnerships with civil society organizations, academics, and the government to ensure the high quality of content circulating in the platform. Middleware initiatives, like working with and/or hiring third-party librarians and information professionals to curate and examine content (Faris & Donovan, 2021) is one way of promoting open and transparent regulation of both the content in the platform and the processes by



which content is evaluated. Increasing platform collaborations that promote legitimate information with either government agencies or civil society organizations allow these platforms to democratize knowledge by providing an alternative but reliable information source. To ensure the democratic and public-oriented nature of moderation processes, broader access to platform application programming interface (API) and other data can allow civil society actors to validate the quality assurance of mediated content.

Furthermore, TikTok and WeChat should open opportunities for independent researchers to work closer with them so future studies can delve deeper into how these platforms actually weigh their options and formulate decisions that shape not only our informational contexts but also our collective experiences with digital media. Future studies should also expand survey samples and digital ethnographies to paint more regional pictures of their experiences with TikTok and WeChat. By producing more localized and context-specific studies, we can get a more accurate image of how these emerging platforms influence, and possibly alter, media diets and information-seeking behaviors.

5.2. Recommendations for Policymakers

For political actors and the government, policymakers can popularize publicly accessible science communication initiatives online and offline to provide counterspeech to online disinformation. Strengthening initiatives like the existing partnerships between TikTok and COMELEC, or TikTok and DOST-PCIEERD, are good examples of this. This can be done by continuing to engage platforms and civil society organizations in grassroots development programs and mass communication channels on-air and online aimed at informing the public about government initiatives and providing avenues for bottom-up feedback loops. By targeting the process of socialization and information supply on the ground, such activities can lead to greater political efficacy and institutional trust in media and the government in the long run, while also providing corrective measures to potentially misinformative or disinformative content in the media as well.

In addition, robust regulatory frameworks that center around ensuring clean processes instead of censorship should be taken under consideration. Such a framework will touch on campaign finance regulations to constrain electoral disinformation online.

5.3. Recommendations for Public Stakeholders

Civil society organizations, journalists and media outlets, and advertising and public relations firms should all cooperate for self-regulation and reimagine existing regulatory commissions such as the Ad Standards Council, which does not regulate political marketing consultancies and influencer promotions online - aspects that have been found to facilitate disinformation operations (Ong & Cabanes, 2018). Scholars have also recommended shifting away from strategic silence and going for strategic amplification instead (Donovan & boyd, 2021), which entails a paradigm shift from covering and airing content that sells - regardless of its information quality - to selectively airing content that does not contribute to the infodemic.

We also urge public stakeholders to enable and empower more studies on platform moderations and influence operations. Such studies require huge amounts of resources that individual researchers and academics simply cannot afford or engage with. Supporting independent research enables us to objectively assess platform processes and user behaviors, which in turn produces more robust recommendations for both public and private policies.

While it is certainly enticing to advise users to be more circumspect in their information consumption and to fact-check all of the posts they encounter, this is simply unlikely for two reasons. First, the short form nature of content on TikTok and the almost-secondary nature of information seeking by Filipino users on WeChat means it is unlikely, troublesome even, for users to momentarily detach from the

user interface and verify the content. Second, the evolving nature of disinformation coupled with the immense volume of disinformative content digital media hosts, advertently or inadvertently, makes it difficult for regular users to even differentiate “real” content from “fabricated” content. Instead, while we encourage users to double-check any strange or unlikely content they encounter, we recommend placing more attention in ensuring good quality of information in the environment by looking at institutional factors allowing misinformation or disinformation to exist, if not flourish.

Other recommendations centered on penalties and disincentives like disinformation taxation and punitive legislation assume that we already have a well-defined strategy for defining all the actors and mechanisms in the disinformation process. In reality, a huge part of the disinformation production process remains hidden and obscured, allowing it to proliferate and innovate faster than regulations. This obscurity is also partly by design: content moderation is guided by morals, norms and values, but it is also guided by profits of logic. If particular content can generate capital, then it can find a home in digital media. This push-and-pull between common informational welfare on the one hand, and profit driven by platforms’ data collection on the other hand, is a vulnerability exploited by disinformative actors. Disinformation thus finds space for evasion.

Therefore, the focus should first be on spotlighting the process by creating more channels for transparency and accountability. By shedding light on the shadows and bringing to the public these previously hidden spaces through a delicate checks-and-balance system between and among platforms, governments, and civil society, we disincentivize disinformative actors from creating and innovating. This is not only a small part of pursuing a fairer and more democratic information environment; it is the first step for us all.

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